

A better city and better lives

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Speech by Cllr Philippa Roe, Leader of Westminster City Council to the meeting of the Council, Wednesday 7th March 2012, Marylebone, W1.

Public Service

Lord Mayor,

It is an honour and privilege to accept this role.

I do so with both humility and trepidation.

There have been 11 leaders of the City Council since its creation in 1965. I know that I am following in auspicious footsteps.

This is a city that attracts those willing and keen to devote their time to public life. Willing to improving the lives of others.

From Group Captain Pirie, who in 1965 brought together the three separate boroughs of Paddington, Marylebone and Westminster to form one new City Council, to more recently Melvyn Caplan, who remains the youngest ever Leader of the Council, then the man who gave me my first executive role on this authority, Sir Simon Milton and for the last four years, Colin Barrow.

This council has been blessed with leaders who have shown vision, commitment and skill. I am determined to build on their service and set new standards for the people of Westminster.

Colin Barrow

Lord Mayor, I want to speak tonight about five things.

First. Westminster's role during the Olympics.

Second, about a new approach to governing.

Third, about the Civic Contract and my ambitions for Westminster.

Fourth, the budget for 2012 and finally about our priorities for the year ahead.

And I course my Cabinet colleagues will set out policies in their areas of responsibility.

But before that I would like to say a few words about my immediate predecessor, Colin Barrow

Colin led the council through what will be seen as the most challenging economic times in the last 60 years. He sustained services and made necessary savings, which would be achievement enough for many.

But he will also have a lasting legacy in the physical improvements that we see in the city today.

The innovative Oxford St Crossing.

The renewal of Marble Arch.

The improvements around Piccadilly recognised by Her Majesty only last week – the first act of her Jubilee year which speaks volumes in itself.

But if Colin oversaw improvements in the physical infrastructure he did the same for the city's social policies.

Under the Living City Banner he led a record improvement in levels of school attainment, in the number of adults able to benefit from personalisation and in housing, he gave me the opportunity to build the first new council housing in a generation and to lay the foundations of renewal for our most deprived areas.

And recognising that difficult times called for different approaches, Colin led new ways of operating that pushed the boundaries across the public sector

Family Recovery – now adopted by government and rolled out across the country, can be attributed to Colin's foresight and perseverance.

And Tri-borough shared service - now bringing tangible improvements to people's lives across central London, from wider access to libraries to the extension of Family Recovery across the three boroughs which will enable up to 2,500 troubled families to benefit from focused help over the next three years.

And throughout his time he was true to his belief in the benefits of low taxation on those on low and medium incomes with a freeze in council tax in each year of his administration

Colin, this is a record to be proud of and on behalf of the council I thank you for everything that you have done for this city

The Olympic challenge: listening and responding

Lord Mayor, I understand the challenges that come with this role.

They come because of the uniqueness of the city, which represents the best of Britain.

From the vitality and talent of new communities around the Harrow Road to the grandeur of Palace and Parliament, to the world's most famous shopping street. Theatre which attracts a global audience to London, and the creative enterprise of Soho.

These few things only highlight the exceptionalism of a city that demands a unique approach to governing.

But Lord Mayor with the Olympics and Jubilee, the spotlight of the world will be on Westminster.

We have a golden opportunity to showcase everything that is great about our city.

We will play our part by making sure that Westminster is clean and well kept for the celebrations and the Games. Our officers will help keep Westminster safe, assist visitors, support event organisations, co-ordinate operations and manage the traffic. We are the foundation upon which London presents its case to the world.

Listening to Westminster

To meet this challenge we must work with our partners, listen to resident concerns and take on board the views of business.

This week I start that process and I will meet the Secretary of State, London Mayor, and other borough Leader's as well as community and business groups. We have much to learn from them but we also have much to offer them.

We have to balance competing interests but I hope that this summer will show that we have learnt the lessons of our recent experience of public debate on parking.

We have listened and learnt. We understand more clearly than ever that strong relationships, real consultation and supportive partners are crucial to our success.

We'll demonstrate that when the Olympics finishes by convening our West End Commission to identify ways we can strengthen business and support residential communities in the heart of London. And the Commission will publish its report in time for this meeting in 2013.

As a council we will get out and talk but, more importantly, we will listen and respond to our communities.

At every stage the council and Cabinet will consult as they develop ideas that matter to Westminster.

We will mount a major public consultation exercise on priorities as soon as the Olympics are concluded and renew our Area Forums to ensure that they connect with people and business.

I will ensure that the Council makes decisions on the basis of credible evidence and in open and frank debate.

Our Scrutiny Committee's will be a vital part of this process. Cllr Richardson and the Scrutiny Commission will lead a review of Policy and Scrutiny work, which will report to the Council in May with a view to strengthening the valuable and effective work that Scrutiny undertakes.

New Localism

Lord Mayor, it is right that people can influence the public services that they receive and the neighbourhoods in which they live

The Localism Act represents a massive and welcome shift of power from the centre to the town hall and to the neighbourhood.

I want us to make use of the new general power of competence to innovate in service delivery.

I want us to use the Act to strengthen neighbourhoods where we can show that it is cost effective and doesn't duplicate existing service provision.

So next month Cabinet will consider the Community Governance Review, from which I hope that we will be able to put imaginative and thoughtful proposals to Full Council to devolve powers to our neighbourhoods, building on our ward budget programme.

Civic Contract

Lord Mayor, I know that the council does not exist in isolation. That's why I believe that we need a new partnership with the city. A new direction for how services are delivered. We have made a start with the Civic Contract, which is the right approach and direction for the Council.

I can tell Council that the public consultation on the Civic Contract endorsed our general approach and offered new and thoughtful ideas on the ways we should implement it from employment support for young people to ways to reduce waste in public spending.

Let no one think that this consultation has been a paper exercise. I can announce tonight that we have established a new Work and Skills Board to train young people for employment. It has a £1million budget, pooling existing funds and external grants and is a direct response to what people have told us needs to be done to break the cycle of youth unemployment.

Lord Mayor,

The Civic Contract means that everyone does their bit for the good of the city.

We will work over the coming weeks and months to bring this vision to life and to move it into practical and sensible policies.

And in doing so we will talk, and listen. I look forward to meeting Cllr Taylor and Cllr Dimoldenberg soon, as I do anyone who wants to play their part in improving our city.

My ambition for Westminster

Lord Mayor, I will sum up my goal for Westminster as wanting to create ladders of opportunity for people to achieve what they want for themselves and their families.

My experience in business, in politics and in my personal life is that if you help people and work with their aspirations, then the vast majority will grasp the opportunities they are offered.

By doing so we can help people become more self reliant and allow them to take more responsibility for their neighbourhoods, which I think will strengthen our city.

But Westminster won't forget the basics. We'll have an absolute focus on clean streets, and low tax.

But these things are not an end in themselves. Our policies have to be judged as to how far they enable people to better their lives.

For many that does mean clean and safe streets and decent schools.

We've made immense strides in improving education standards in recent years with pupils grasping the opportunities that our drive to improve schools offers to them. And we will welcome applications for more Free Schools and Academy Schools in Westminster.

And our streets and squares remain attractive places to live and work through the ceaseless work of our officers.

All that helps create the sort of neighbourhoods where people respect one another.

But for some we need to do more. We must give to those who need it a pathway out of poverty and dependency. This is something I learned from my time running our housing department and speaking to people living on our council estates. Too many families were overcrowded and their homes needed refurbishment.

That's why we'll start work this year on a major programme to renew our council estates – creating better homes, more jobs and greener neighbourhoods. By this time next year we will have started work on the renewal of Tollgate and expect to have started work on the Church Street renewal area.

We'll work with the police to tackle gang culture. Our Your Choice programme addresses this directly, and we'll support the community to deter children from a life in gangs.

It also means enabling people to start and grow their businesses. We've helped many people into jobs and training and we're funding a brilliant new centre for start up businesses near Piccadilly, which can house 1,000 new businesses, pioneered by Cllr Connell.

Westminster's Staff

And Lord Mayor, I recognise that our staff are crucial to making this happen.

We have some of the most dedicated, talented and committed staff in either the public or private sectors .

It is our staff who ultimately make this council run and who ensure that the services that we exist to provide are delivered to a high standard.

But I recognise that we have been through a number of tough years.

Understandably morale is not what it could be.

My job, will be to provide a clear vision and strong leadership for this council .

I am also keen to get out and speak to as many of our staff as possible to listen to them and their ideas and will start this from next week.

The Budget

Lord Mayor, This budget will set out how this council will manage its finances for the coming year despite the toughest financial climate in living memory

I am proud that this budget proposes no increase in Council Tax for the fifth consecutive year.

This will help low and middle income families who are struggling at this time

This is no accident. This is what happens when talented councillors and able officers work together to make our money go further.

The evidence for that is all around this chamber.

I commend and welcome the news that we can look forward to an improved street cleansing because of the diligent work undertaken by Cllr Argar who has negotiated with Veolia so that 22 extra street sweepers are being put back into local communities at no extra cost to the taxpayer.

And we'll do more if we need to ensure, we keep Westminster clean.

We welcome the news that our innovative "Your Choice" programme to help young people led by Cllr Aiken which has secured £600,000 of external funding in less than six months.

And in social services we have increased the numbers of adults receiving personalised services so that they have greater freedom. We have reduced the number of rough sleepers by around 75% and created a modern dementia centre at Westbourne Park Road, fulfilling our duty to the most vulnerable members of our community. All this led by Cllr Astaire and delivered within a smaller budget.

And we should all salute the unceasing anti fraud work undertaken by Cllr Lindsey Hall. Working with the Department for Work and Pensions she has helped uncover benefit fraud saving the taxpayer nearly £500,000.

Those four initiatives illustrate how those on this side of the chamber can make public money go further for the benefit of everyone.

And I can tell council tonight that we have just revised upwards the predicted savings from Tri-borough by £7m to £40m a year by 2016, creating the resources to improve services and keep council tax affordable.

Next year

Lord Mayor, those are some of the things we are already delivering. But we have plenty of plans for the coming year, which I hope will enable us to live up to the accolade offered by our friends at the Evening Standard of "the most important council in Britain" – we must try not to disappoint them!

So, by March 2013 we will have launched

- Many of our new Tri Borough services.
- A new pedestrian friendly junction at the Strand and Aldwych
- Our new initiative to combat Domestic Abuse
- A Fresh Start programme – helping 100 young people into sustained employment over 2 years
- One of the first employee mutuals in the country, providing services to schools across the three boroughs
- The Sir Simon Milton Foundation, led by Cllr Flight which will inspire a new generation through the memory of one of our greatest public servants.

These are all significant new initiatives and I welcome further ideas from member's during this debate, but finally I want to highlight that we must play our role in getting the economy going.

I've talked about our focus on skills and training tonight but we will also work with business to create the conditions where they grow. One new initiative I can announce is our 2012 employment pledge we are making with businesses to offer over 2,000 job and training

opportunities to young people across Westminster. Employers doing their bit for the good of the city, creating ladders of opportunity.

Conclusion

Lord Mayor,

We have a substantial programme.

We have much to do and I recognise that I have much to learn.

I would ask those in this chamber tonight and those outside of it for their support, advice and forbearance over the coming weeks and months.

But I will tackle head on those challenges that this city and its people face.

And I'm looking forward to the opportunities we create, starting this summer with the opening of the new Leicester Square and what I am sure will be a stunning West End Live, both choreographed by Cllr Davis.

For I am committed to making Westminster a better city. A place where we create new opportunities for young and old alike to lead better lives, using the history, imagination and lessons of Westminster's past and present to serve as inspiration for our future.

Thank you.