

## NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

22 July 2020

## COUNTY COUNCILLOR CARL LES

I am concentrating on only two topics this time. That is not to say that there aren't other issues I could report on, including our regular report on progress on climate change, but these two appear to be all encompassing at this time.

**Covid -19**

Colleagues will cover in more detail the impact of the virus on their portfolio areas, and the immense efforts undertaken by staff to minimise the impact. All have played their part. Very many of our staff, and Members, have gone way above the call of duty to serve our residents to the best of our ability.

I want to say a huge thank you to all our staff, from the most senior to the most junior, to the staff of our partners, to the blue light services, to the NHS rightly recognised in other places as well, to the Army and other MoD units, to business for doing their job and sometimes changing their jobs to assist, and of course to volunteers in our communities, both in organised settings like our 23 supported CSO's, and informal groups who set themselves up.

At every opportunity I say I am pleased I live in North Yorkshire, and I couldn't be more proud of our Council.

We must continue the fight against Covid, and it isn't over yet, but we can also start to look towards actions we need to take about recovery.

We will work with businesses, our Local Resilience Forum, and partners such as the LEP and Welcome to Yorkshire to implement recovery plans for both economic recovery and community recovery.

We must also be aware of the huge financial pressures we are facing. Our monthly Delta financial returns to Government estimate our exposure to Covid related costs to the present timeframe will be £75m. I am very grateful to the support received so far from Government (around £30m) and for our MP's who regularly take up issues on our behalf. The Minister has said this is a journey we are on, and we will continue to press for further funding support, backed up by evidence so it is not a request for a blank cheque.

**Devolution**

I have said at every Council meeting that devolution is the right path to follow, if only for two main reasons.

Firstly it must make sense to transfer decision making from Whitehall to the town hall. Secondly, with the devolution of powers and the relevant spending comes a sum of money called gainshare, and this could be at least £25 m a year for the next 30 years of unfettered money to spend in our region.

I have also said that as government is being asked to give up powers, it is only right that they set some conditions.

We have been painfully slow at getting to where we are today. Over 5 years we have had numerous false starts, with Greater Yorkshire, One Yorkshire and others. Other places have had devolution and the benefits for some years, whilst we fall behind. Close to hand I look at the progress being made in the Tees Valley, helped along by a very energetic and able Mayor.

The Local Government Minister Simon Clarke visited York and North Yorkshire Leaders last week. He emphasised that he is also a Minister for Recovery, and that devolution is a key part of recovery, and that it is also part of the Prime Minister's levelling up agenda, especially in Yorkshire.

He emphasised that there was a willingness and a capacity in government to progress devolution deals. Our "asks" drawn up over a number of months benefit all parts of the County and York, and run to some 40 pages. I'd like to recognise the cooperation of the Directors of Development, and CEX's of all the councils in Y&NY, and the National Parks for their inputs, and James Farrah from the LEP for holding the ring.

Leaders were unanimous that these asks should now be put through each Councils decision-making process so that they can be submitted to MHCLG and HM Treasury so that negotiations can begin. We will take these to Executive on 28<sup>th</sup> July. I must emphasise that this is only the start of the process, not the end. We will circulate the document to all as part of the Executive report.

The Minister reaffirmed the Government's requirement for devolution to be accompanied by the introduction of an Elected Mayor and a Combined Authority. He also stated that previously there had been a request for local government reorganisation. This is now a requirement. We must consider what options we have in this, and I will work with any council, any group, any group leader to try to arrive at a consensus position.

This is not about self-preservation. Far from it. Even if we were to argue successfully that it should be a single unitary Council within the County's boundaries, it will still be a new authority that will be formed with elections in 2022.

What we must preserve are the outputs and the outcomes of the many high value and personal services that we deliver to the residents of North Yorkshire, often at very local level. We must seek to protect local decision-making and accountability, whilst at the same time getting the best solution for our residents and our tax payers.

If there are competing proposals, we must ensure that the Secretary of State has a viable and sustainable choice to make, and on which to consult our communities.

CARL LES