

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

16 FEBRUARY 2022

STATEMENT OF THE LEADER CLLR CARL LES

Covid

The latest pandemic variant has been more virulent, but the impact on most individuals' health has been significantly less. This has still put great pressure on the NHS and we must encourage our residents, even though we are ahead of national averages, to participate in the vaccination programme for booster jabs and for some, second or even first jabs. Vaccinations can help us to cope with the impact of infection, but the only way to reduce transmissions is to exercise caution about contacts, maintain sensible distancing, use masks where appropriate, and all follow those simple but sensible rules we introduced months ago about hand washing etc.

Exercising that caution, and until transmission rates fall dramatically, I hope Members will support our stance on continuing with virtual meetings, whilst saving on time, cost and carbon emissions, with more discretion given to the Chairman of each meeting to decide the format, subject to suitable meeting rooms being available within our estate. We will continue to support the LGA's lobbying of government to allow Councils to decide what format to use, with decision-making being allowed in virtual settings.

Care

The pandemic is creating absences in the work force as staff have to self-isolate. However, even before the pandemic we had many vacancies in the sector, and I hope we can all support and promote our recruitment campaign Make Care Matter. This is both for our own care work force, but also for our private sector partners, promoting jobs that are hugely satisfying in looking after those who need it, offering people careers with opportunities for progression, and offering jobs that are immediately available.

I was pleased that by using Govt funding to match-fund a contribution from our two ICS's, we were able to make bonus payments of around £300 to some 16000 care workers in regulated services in January, to say thank you, and also to indicate our commitment to Care Matters.

Climate change

We are continuing to develop our approach to climate change and deliver low carbon projects for our operational activity. More information in Cllr White's statement but I particularly wanted to highlight our work with the seven district councils to ensure that Local Government Reorganisation workstreams have climate change agenda considerations included in their 'business as usual' as well as transformational services plans. Climate Emergency UK (an independent campaign group) has reviewed and scored climate change plans published by all councils before mid-September 2021 (see <https://councilclimatescorecards.uk>). The County Council's carbon reduction plan scored 48%, which puts us 7th out of 24 county councils. The average score for county councils in England 40%, the average score for all councils in UK is 50%. I am pleased that we are making progress in this area, but also recognise that there is still more to do.

LGR

Local Government Reform continues apace, with numerous work streams preparing options for the 90 councillors post May to decide. Feedback from these groups confirms that officers from both tiers are seeing opportunities rather than threats

The informal Implementation Board made up of our Executive and all District Council Leaders meets monthly to oversee progress.

The Structural Change Order, that piece of essential government legality, is now in Parliament, and should be passed by March.

We have hosted numerous webinars for parish and town councils, the voluntary sector, and recently for all elected Members, to advise on progress, and answer further questions. Clearly the role of elected Members becomes more impactful post the election.

Levelling Up and Devolution

After a number of delays the Levelling Up White Paper has been published and we will be working hard in the coming weeks to understand the implications for North Yorkshire and York. Part of the reasoning for LGR was because we believed it is the right thing to do, but also because Devolution, that essential part of unlocking increased wealth for our region, was made conditional on LGR.

We and York have been referenced in the White Paper and have been invited to negotiate with Government with a view to formalising a devolution deal based on a Mayoral Combined Authority and we look forward to playing our part in those negotiations for the benefit of our residents and businesses.

The whole Council needs to look at this White Paper – Executive, O&S and Area Constituency Committees to draw down the opportunities and benefits this will bring.

Local Enterprise Partnership

The LEP will also play a major part in assisting us with this. There is a review of LEP's underway nationally. Early indications are positive – there is a clear role for public and private sectors to work together for the benefit of the economy – and I hope the outcome will support the excellent work done by the officers attached and seconded to the LEP, and also the leadership shown by the late Barry Dodd CBE, David Kerfoot CBE and presently Helen Simpson. North Yorkshire has been well served, and this continues.

Budget and Council Tax

The main agenda item today is agreeing a Budget, and setting a Council Tax level. This is always a difficult choice, deciding what the council needs to do its work in looking after our communities and residents, especially vulnerable ones, but also deciding what it is fair to ask the tax payer to pay, and what they can afford. This is especially true this year, with rising costs and inflation facing residents and council alike, and a huge demand for our essential services.

As always, I want to thank the finance team led by Gary Fielding, and all senior officers led by the Chief Executive, for their diligence in getting Members as prepared as possible for the decisions that need to be taken.

COUNTY COUNCILLOR CARL LES