

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNCIL

21 February 2024

STATEMENT OF CLLR CARL LES

Elections, Significant by size

For the first time ever, over half the world's population will participate in a significant election this year. In North Yorkshire and York, the first significant one for our residents is for an Elected Mayor. All the main parties have chosen candidates, the majority in this Chamber, and we await with interest their manifestos, and the result in early May. In preparation for that event, and as part of the devolution journey we are on, the Mayoral Combined Authority has been set up, and has met to agree an evolving constitution, an outline budget, arrangements for Overview & Scrutiny, and Audit, and a calendar of meetings. All meetings will be broadcast. The meetings will be chaired by the Mayor.

Policing and Fire

The elected Mayor will take on powers for policing and fire from the present Police, Fire & Crime Commissioner. I would like to express my appreciation of the work done by the outgoing PFCC Zoe Metcalfe, especially with regard to the safety of women and girls. The PFC Panel which I have chaired for a number of years will now look at the work of the Mayor, and any appointed Deputy Mayor for Policing, in this regard. It is not possible to sit on both the MCA and the PFCP, so I will be standing aside from the Panel before the May election.

Medium Term Financial Strategy

The main focus of business for this Council meeting will be agreeing a budget and medium term financial strategy for the Council. We all know that the financial challenges in local government at the moment are very considerable. A number of councils have issued statutory notices declaring that they do not have sufficient funds to meet their statutory obligations. Through a cost of living crisis, demand for services for some of the most vulnerable people in our communities have risen at the same time as the cost of providing those services have also risen steeply. This double whammy is leading to some considerable anxiety in town halls around the country but also some much regretted cuts to front line services too.

In North Yorkshire we have felt the same head winds and the chill of financial austerity blows across our broad county too. However, we have a number of advantages for which at this particular point in time I am very grateful. The first is a relatively strong financial position that we have inherited from our predecessor Council that has been built on good maxims of financial grip and careful management. Secondly services are well run, and we are working hard to manage the demand and cost challenges that they face. However, the third advantage that we have of major significance is that of having taken the bold decision to move to a single unitary council and to seize the opportunity of streamlining management costs, removing duplication and seizing efficiencies of scale. The major part of the savings that are set out in the proposed budget before us today come from the reorganisation of local government. Without these savings any one of the eight predecessor Councils would have been facing a very significantly different situation to that that is in front of us today.

I do however recognise that the budget proposals that we have still contain difficult decisions, actions that in other circumstances we would rather not have to take. The budget also sets out a series of difficult projects and hard yards that are yet to be walked. However, in the context of local government around the country today it represents a pathway to financial sustainability that I would recommend to the chamber.

Building the New Council

It is still hard to believe that we are only just over ten months old as a Council. I am aware of an enormous amount of work that has been done in that period to bring the organisation together. The creation of the new North Yorkshire Council is an extremely large merger of eight significant predecessor councils encompassing a wide range of services and many thousands of staff. New ways of work and our democratic structures along with many new strategies and policies have been put in place. We have formed the management structures of the new council and are currently working through a range of significant service restructures to create single teams able to operate across the whole council area. Undertaking this scale of change and still delivering business as usual services is a significant challenge. I am sure that there will be issues that have fallen through the cracks and from a service point of view things that we could have done better but on the whole service performance has been good and to my mind it is a remarkable achievement to have worked through so much change whilst at the same time maintaining good service provision and, in some cases, delivering ongoing service improvements.

Building a new council, no straight forward and easy task, our work will continue for some time yet. We have more ambitions that we want to realise, more improvements to make but I do want to take this opportunity to recognise the enormous hard work from our employees who have managed both the ongoing transition from within the new council and to maintain good service delivery for the residents and businesses of North Yorkshire.

King Charles III

I'm sure all Members wish the King a speedy return to good health, and our thoughts are with his family at such a time.

COUNCILLOR CARL LES