

## **NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**05 May 2021**

### **STATEMENT FROM PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR STRONGER COMMUNITIES, LEGAL AND DEMOCRATIC SERVICES, CORPORATE DEVELOPMENT, SCRUTINY, AREA COMMITTEES, PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND LOCALITY BUDGETS**

#### **COUNTY COUNCILLOR DAVID CHANCE**

#### **Stronger Communities**

##### **Covid-19 Pandemic Response**

As we have recently passed the 12 month anniversary of the first lockdown, it is interesting to reflect on the work of Stronger Communities over the past 12 months. Members are aware that Community Support Organisations (CSOs) in conjunction with their volunteers and partners have delivered support to our most vulnerable residents. This has included the collection and delivery of shopping and prescriptions, caring for pets, offering regular social contact by telephone, and acting as a local agent for the COVID-19 Self Isolation Grant. The CSOs have also provided support to local networks and action groups (for example Mutual Aid Groups) that had come together to assist in their communities, providing information, advice and guidance to ensure that all activity was delivered as safely as possible for both the volunteer and the beneficiary.

Despite the ever-changing landscape, community support infrastructure through the CSO network has remained in place throughout the last 12-month period, and in this quarter, the team has confirmed that the model will continue to be in place until at least September 2021.

With the publication of the recovery roadmap by Government, the CSOs have been mindful of the need to support those who have been self-isolating and / or shielding over a prolonged period of time. Stronger Communities are working closely with CSOs to discuss and develop recovery activity over the next 6 months that will help build people's independence and confidence to re-engage in their communities.

Since the start of the pandemic, they have collectively supported nearly 90,000 people with regular support to an average of 3000 people every week. They have clocked up around 100,000 hours of volunteering, delivered 70,000 bags of shopping or hot meals and made just short of 50,000 welfare and befriending calls.

Financial hardship also continues to be addressed using an adaptation of the Local Assistance Fund grants. This will continue to the end of September. To date 1260 applications have been approved of which 705 were repeat applications with the average award being £92. This award is emergency support for things such as food or energy top ups.

##### **Community and Recovery Grants**

IN addition to the support for CSOs the programme has also had in place small grants programmes to support the wider voluntary sector to adapt their activities as we navigate our way through the changing restrictions. Covid Response, Recovery and Community Grants have been available throughout 2020 for projects such as digital delivery of sports and arts activities, virtual walks, adaptation of buildings or community transport vehicles and innovative food projects. 237 projects have been supported to date seeing over £165k of investment into small grass roots and community groups.

## **Holiday Activities and Food Programme**

Following on from the national covid winter grant scheme supporting families with food over school holidays, the government announced a new programme for families with children eligible for free school meals that combines food and enriching activities. Stronger Communities are leading on the delivery of this programme, which has been launched with the branding of FEAST (Food, Entertainment, Arts & Sport Together) in partnership with Children's Services and the voluntary and community sector. The programme will provide activities and nutritious food and advice to nearly 12,000 children across the county over Easter, summer and Christmas school holidays. Due to national restrictions, the programme for Easter was delivered through a mix of food vouchers and activity packs; however, planning for the summer is for face to face provision. Coordination of the programme is being undertaken by three countywide charities working as North Yorkshire Together (North Yorkshire Youth, North Yorkshire Sport and Rural Arts). They will manage the programme of local delivery by inviting local clubs and community organisations to submit their proposals over the coming weeks. This not only ensures that a breadth of provision can be made across the county, but it also enables the funding to be invested directly into communities and local assets.

## **Broader work**

Although the focus of the team has continued to be community response to the pandemic, in this quarter, we have seen the gradual re-introduction of business-as-usual projects and work-streams. This has included the forging of new partnerships and collaborative working models, learning, capacity building, mental health, transport, and food related activity.

## **Legal and Democratic Services**

By mid-April 2021, we had held 102 live broadcast meetings of the Council's formal, public committees. The way in which the team works and in which our councillors' work has radically changed and it is remarkable how we have moved so quickly and effectively from holding meetings in person to remote access live broadcast meetings. A way of doing business that would once have been exceptional, has now become the norm. The benefits of these remote accesses, live broadcast meetings in a county as large and rural as North Yorkshire are significant, with reduced travel costs and travel time, reduced carbon dioxide emissions and more openness and transparency. I am hopeful that the Government will allow lawful, remote access meetings to continue in the longer term and give local authorities the discretion to decide when to hold meetings in person and when to hold them remotely.

The School Admissions Appeals Team are starting a second bulk appeals season using remote hearings, as opposed to meeting in person. Earlier in the year, the Government Regulations enabling this were extended through to September. Early indications are that this will be another busy bulk appeals season with appeals being heard through to the end of July for secondary and primary school places. The appeals hearings would not be able to take place without our volunteer panel members whose commitment and support is hugely valued. They have made the transition from meeting in person, to remote meetings using MS Teams and spend many a long day hearing the appeals.

## **North Yorkshire Refugee Resettlement**

Resettlement in the UK has tentatively recommenced, following a freeze on resettlement throughout most of 2020. During that time, the conditions for refugees living in their countries of first asylum deteriorated further, particularly in Lebanon due to its political and economic turmoil.

North Yorkshire has done its bit recently by resettling five families (24 persons) across Hambleton and Richmondshire districts. Thorough preparations were put in place by the international, regional and local resettlement agencies in the weeks leading up to the families arriving, to ensure that their arrival in the UK, their subsequent 10 days quarantine period and the weeks to follow would be as safe and smooth as possible. Thanks in part to County Council staff in our EAL team, nearly all the school-aged children were in school within six days after their quarantine period. In common with the more established adults, our Adult Learning and Skills Service is providing Zoom based English language classes for the new adult learners. This will continue to be the case until the classes can go back to face-to-face teaching.

We have seen a new dynamic of existing refugee families helping to support the new arrivals. This has not only allowed the new arrivals to feel more settled, but in turn has led the existing families to reflect on how far they themselves have progressed since arriving in the UK.

In relation to employment, for the refugee adults who have lived in North Yorkshire for longer, there has been a net increase of five part-time jobs and three full-time jobs between March 2020 and March 2021. This is despite the challenging economic situation. Of those in full-time jobs, three clients are self-employed. They have managed to continue to operate their businesses (barbers shops and a food shop) in between the various lockdowns.

A number of the adults not yet in employment have done further training, chiefly online courses. Some have previous experience of working in the construction industry, but an issue has arisen because of the COVID-19 restrictions, due to a number of training providers related to this sector of the economy, remaining closed over the past year. However, links will be re-established as soon as practicable with a view to commencing these courses.

For the children, because of the prolonged closures of schools and settings during the past year, opportunities to consolidate their understanding of the English language reduced substantially and there is now a lot of catching up for them to do. More of the children were in school during the third lockdown however and some have achieved special commendation awards over the past year. In addition, a child who arrived in North Yorkshire in 2016, with no English, has secured a university place to study Pharmacy from September.

July 2021 will mark the fifth anniversary of the first Syrian refugee arrivals in North Yorkshire. A qualified adviser employed by the Refugee Council is helping those families to complete the application form for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) in the UK. Indefinite Leave to Remain is currently not an automatic right for refugees that we have resettled to date. Instead, the Home Office will review each case before making a decision as to whether an individual has a right to permanent residency in the UK or not. The conditions in the refugee's home country will be taken into account amongst other factors.

### **County Councillor Locality Budgets**

This year, Members will be able to make recommendations from Monday 17 May 2021, with the closing date for recommendations being 31 January 2022. Each Member will be able to make recommendations totalling £10,000 and the arrangements are as in previous years. I will write to Members with further information shortly.

A report on the operation of Locality Budgets in 2020/21 will be presented to the Corporate and Partnerships Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 7 June 2021.

## **NYCC equality and diversity statement**

As one of the largest employers in the county and one of the main providers of local services, we are committed to providing equality of opportunity and tackling discrimination, harassment, intimidation and disadvantage. We are also committed to achieving the highest standards in service delivery, decision-making and employment practice.

Diversity in our communities and workforce brings many strengths to the county and to the council, and we welcome and celebrate this.

Over the last few months, as part of work to increase the visibility and profile of these important subjects, we have set up a number of staff networks and started some really productive conversations about diversity and inclusion.

We are now reviewing our corporate equality and diversity policy statement and would really like to hear your views. We are inviting everyone, including all Members, to read our draft equality and diversity policy statement and complete a short survey at <https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/consultation-our-draft-equality-and-diversity-statement>. The consultation started in early April and will run until 10 May. The final draft will be brought to the full Council meeting in July for decision.

## **Hong Kong British National (Overseas) Citizens**

The Government has announced a bespoke immigration route for BN(O) status holders from Hong Kong follows the imposition by the Chinese Government of a national security law on Hong Kong that restricts the rights and freedoms of the people in Hong Kong and constitutes a clear and serious breach of the Sino-British Joint Declaration. Broadly, once living in the UK, they will have a right to work and study, with their children (under age 19) having the same rights as those with permanent residence in the UK, to attend school and further education. We do not know how many people will choose to take advantage of the opportunity and they will be free to settle anywhere in the UK.

We do want to welcome and support those who choose to settle in the North Yorkshire. The Government funded welcome hub for the Yorkshire region will be managed by Migration Yorkshire, a long established partnership of local authorities in Yorkshire and the Humber including the County Council. As an upper tier local authority we will also have access to funding to provide targeted support to BN(O) status holders who need additional English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and/or destitution support.

DAVID CHANCE