

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNCIL

12 November 2025

STATEMENT OF COUNCILLOR CARL LES

AI and Co-pilot

The first part of my statement, that below in italics, was prepared by AI by my asking our council software Co-Pilot, with no prompting or direction from me “What should be in the Leader’s statement to the next Council meeting”. This shows the initial intuitive capability of the software I am not sure I agree with everything Co-Pilot is saying but it is an example of its capacity. We need a seminar to better understand where AI can support our information generation and understanding, and assist in areas where our capacity to recruit is limited, eg handling planning applications or EHCP’s.

Local Government Reorganisation and Community Empowerment

North Yorkshire Council has undergone a significant transformation through local government reorganisation. The establishment of new town councils in Harrogate and Scarborough is a key step in our commitment to strengthening local democracy. This change allows us to deliver services more efficiently and ensure that local voices are heard and respected.

Financial Challenges and Advocacy for Fair Funding

We are currently facing a funding shortfall of nearly £22 million(?), driven by rising costs and the withdrawal of essential government grants. I have personally met with the Minister for Local Government to advocate for fairer funding for rural councils. It is crucial that national efforts to address deprivation do not disadvantage areas like ours, where service delivery is more complex and costly due to geography.

Council Plan 2025–2029: Vision for the Future

Our upcoming Council Plan for 2025–2029 outlines our strategic priorities: supporting thriving communities, investing in sustainable infrastructure, and promoting health and wellbeing. We aim to be the most local large council in England, with services that are responsive, customer-led, and rooted in local needs.

Leadership and Accountability

To ensure strong leadership and fresh perspectives, I have appointed new executive members responsible for highways and environmental management. These appointments reflect our commitment to transparency, innovation, and continuous improvement in service delivery.

Commitment to Residents

Despite the challenges, our focus remains on delivering value, protecting essential services, and preparing responsibly for the future. Through collaboration and strong leadership, North Yorkshire Council will continue to serve with integrity and ambition.

Now to my own statement

The following items are those that I would want to add to those of the AI assistant

SEND

This is a major issue for our performance in supporting vulnerable children, and a major budgetary consideration. It has been recognised as such by the government, so it is extremely disappointing that the Department for Education has delayed the publication of the SEND White Paper until 2026. This reform package is expected to address systemic challenges in the SEND system, including rising demand for EHCPs, inconsistent provision, and financial sustainability. The DfE has admitted the need for decisive, long-term change in the SEND system focussing on early support and local mainstream provision.

The National Audit Office said last year that the SEND system in England as a whole "wasn't financially sustainable" and was not delivering better outcomes for children and young people, despite big increases in high-needs funding over the last 10 years

Cllrs Sanderson and Wilkinson are best placed to deal with questions about the implications of this delay but a point I have made through our lobbying with other colleagues in the County Councils Network is that North Yorkshire's SEND Strategy (2023–2026) is mid-implementation. This delay creates some uncertainty around how local priorities will align with future national policy, potentially requiring adjustments in 2026. More worrying, the council continues to face escalating costs related to EHCPs, specialist placements, and transport. Without clarity on future funding models, budget pressures are likely to continue to rise.

Scarborough - Water Quality Summit:

The fourth Scarborough South Bay Water Quality Summit took place on the 27th of October, bringing together senior representatives from the council, Yorkshire Water, the Environment Agency (EA), DEFRA, McCains and the local MP and ward councillors, to discuss water quality concerns in Scarborough South Bay and North Bay.

The meeting heard the early findings from the EA's Intensive Study, and the separate study led by Professor Darren Grocke from Durham University. The Council helped to fund both studies in a bid to better understand the factors contributing to poor water quality in both bays. Over previous years, there have been a number of investigations looking at this issue, and I am pleased to say that both studies, which individually use different methodologies, have identified pollution emanating from Scalby Beck significantly impacting both bays. Whilst there are also a variety of other contributing factors which impact the bays to varying degrees, Scalby Beck was highlighted as containing concerning levels of pollution, with both human and agricultural bacterial markers present. Therefore, it was agreed that further examination of Scalby Beck is required, along with investment into assets that discharge into the Beck.

It was pleasing to hear from the EA that year-on-year improvements in water quality were being seen in the data taken from Scarborough South Bay, and that recent work had been completed by McCains in their waste water treatment plant, and by Yorkshire Water at the Wheatcroft Combined Storm Overflow. Both projects were discussed at the first Summit meeting, and it is positive to see those upgrades completed.

The full reports from both the EA and Durham University are due to be finalised over the coming months, with further meetings planned to identify targeted actions in Scalby Beck.

Virtual meetings

The government is consulting on virtual meetings and proxy voting. As the LGA says “In-person attendance remains important, but it must be balanced against the advantages remote attendance can provide in removing barriers to participating in the democratic process”. It is my view that individual councils should be allowed to make their own decisions on which meetings to hold virtually, and how votes can be cast and recorded, balancing up the clear savings in time and cost to be gained with the need for democratic accountability and transparency, and any investment that will be needed to ensure that the systems work well consistently.

Appointments

I am very pleased to confirm that, after a rigorous recruitment process El Mayhew is appointed the position of Corporate Director of Children’s Services. El is presently Director Children & Families at Hertfordshire County Council, who has extensive leadership experience across a variety of children’s service disciplines and council’s including large rural authorities. I look forward to welcoming her to Team North Yorkshire in January 2026.

At the same time can I congratulate Richard Webb on being the proposed candidate to become the Chief Executive at City of York Council. Our loss is York’s gain, and he is leaving just as he announces our Good rating in the CQC inspection, ranking us 3rd best in the country. As you would expect we have started the recruitment process to replace Richard straightaway.

COUNCILLOR CARL LES