

NORTH YORKSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

21 JULY 2021

COUNTY COUNCILLOR CARL LES

Covid

Just when we thought that the light at the end of the tunnel was in fact the end of the tunnel, the new Delta variant sees greatly increasing rates of transmission, and transmissions in cohorts that previously seemed less affected. The high levels of vaccine take up in the county are reducing the link between the virus and hospitalisations and deaths. The number of people in hospital at the moment, given the level of transmission is comparatively low but it is rising and we cannot be complacent at this important time.

However as both the Prime Minister and the new Secretary of State Sajid Javid have stated we need to learn how to live with Covid, and the roadmap out of lockdown has been amended and as I write this we await confirmation of the next steps.

As I said at the very start of this pandemic, and have often repeated, I'm very pleased that I live in North Yorkshire, with the strong spirit of working together, and within the county I recognise again the work that our officers are doing, the health professionals, the emergency services, businesses, the military and especially our volunteers. We are grateful to them all.

Covid scams

One of the saddest things about the pandemic is the ingenuity of criminals to take advantage of people in distress. I would urge all of us, if we haven't done so already, to get our parish councillors, and residents in general to sign up to North Yorkshire Community Messaging at alert@neighbourhoodalert.co.uk where warnings about the many scams are posted.

Climate Change

The Executive will be considering a draft carbon reduction plan for the Council on 13 July. Progress on development of the plan was slowed by the Covid response but work has now been undertaken on understanding our carbon footprint, developing a pathway tool and identifying realistic potential options to significantly reduce our footprint. These have all informed the content of the draft plan. We have also established a measure of cost-effectiveness (£ per ktCO₂e removed) to enable business cases to be assessed.

A Beyond Carbon programme within the Council's change management governance structure has been established to oversee the main strands of the plan and a one-off £1m fund for pump-priming and development of business cases has been committed in the Council's 2021-22 budget.

We have developed and incorporated a climate change impact assessment tool into the council's decision making process, so that carbon emissions and other environmental considerations are taken into account when decisions are made.

Whilst the actions identified in the plan focus on the County Council, we and other local authorities will not be able to tackle every aspect of carbon reduction nor achieve net carbon neutrality without government support and action through legislation and fiscal

measures. Significant changes in national infrastructure will also be required, for example increases in generation, distribution and/or storage of electricity.

With regard to the emissions we have direct control over, we are not starting from scratch. We continually explore opportunities to reduce emissions and we have a track record of taking appropriate opportunities within existing budgets and additional investments where there is a business case, for example our programme of installing LED street lighting. However, it is likely that future work will be more complex and expensive.

We recognise that actions that reduce carbon emissions in one area can result in increased emissions in other areas, for example having more staff working at home may reduce our direct carbon footprint, but the net impact will depend on individual circumstances including changed energy consumption at home and reduced travel. These can be complex issues and the net impact of a decision should be explored in the relevant climate change impact assessments.

Rural Commission

An innovative approach, set up by the County Council, supported by the County Council, but independent of the County Council.

Can I thank the Dean of Ripon, the Very Reverend John Dobson DL, and his fellow Commissioners - Sir William Worsley, Professor Sally Shortall, Martin Booth, Chris Clark, Dr Debbie Trebilco, Jean MacQuarrie, and Heather Hancock - for the work they have undertaken to gather opinions and evidence, to distil it, and come up with recommendations to tackle numerous problems that have troubled rural communities for years. It has been most useful to have fresh eyes look at these problems, and join up the thinking into one report.

We should also recognise and thank the many people and organisations that provided the evidence, and The Yorkshire Post for covering the issues so comprehensively. This report isn't just for the County Council to consider – it includes organisations within the County like our District Councils, and National Parks – and organisations that are outside the County, often nationwide, and including central Government.

Some of the recommendations will be challenging – this was not set up to give us or anyone a pat on the back, although it is pleasing to see that the Commission does recognise work that the County Council has done, and that the pursuit of devolution is the right thing to do - and we need to play our part in evaluating them, and deciding how best to deliver the desired outcomes. There is a clear role for Overview & Scrutiny here, and I have invited Scrutiny Board to meet with the Executive and Management Board to progress this at pace.

Future meetings

This issue will be discussed elsewhere on this agenda. Our dilemma is that both face to face and virtual meetings have advantages and disadvantages, in equal measure. Virtual gives us savings, in cost, travel time, and carbon. F2F is what we are more used to, and gives us more personal interaction, and importantly allows us to exercise our duty to make decisions ourselves. The SoS, Robert Jenrick said at the recent LGA conference that the call for evidence seemed to show that overwhelmingly councils wanted decision making powers to extend to virtual meetings, and if his officials concluded that following scrutiny of the evidence, he would seek Parliamentary time to debate this. Clearly that won't happen before Parliament returns from summer recess.

CARL LES