

COUNCIL – MEETING CANCELLED

13 MAY 2021

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL OVERVIEW

Council's Continued Response to COVID19

1. As lockdown eases, the Council's focus has shifted in terms of its overall response from the previous focus on containing the spread of the virus; through locally supporting Track and Trace and Testing, to a shared focus of facilitating a safe opening of the economy, together with continued efforts to suppress the spread of the virus.
2. Great efforts have been made by our teams to support businesses, whilst at the same time, ensuring guidance is applied by a mixture of support, engagement and where needed enforcement. Support such as road closures to facilitate outdoor hospitality is much appreciated by our businesses.
3. Work continues however on testing and keeping track of new cases, and we will be watching carefully to understand the impact of the relaxation of lockdown in the coming weeks.
4. Once again can I put on record my sincere thanks to all the workforce who have kept services operating, whilst at the same time, responding to the vast and many demands of the pandemic.

Strategic Transport

5. A national bus strategy for England was published in March "Bus Back Better". The strategy is ambitious and linked to long-term funding. The Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA), local authorities and bus operators are currently working through the implications. The priority is to deliver bus service improvements across Tees Valley by building on the existing partnerships. I will provide more information as this work progresses.
6. The Department for Transport announced a new Capability Fund in March focused on active travel. The 2021/22 allocation to the TVCA is £1,362,012 of revenue funding, but the Spending Review later this year is expected to provide a multi-year settlement through to 2024/25. The funding will deliver a programme of activity to facilitate and encourage walking and cycling for everyday journeys across the Tees Valley. It will be delivered alongside the ambitious improvements in cycling and walking infrastructure being funded through the TVCA's Transport Programme.

Climate Change

7. The strategy and funds mentioned above will continue investment and behaviour change programmes to influence moves to sustainable travel choices.

8. The Cross-Party Climate Change Working Group has met twice under the Chairmanship of Cllr Snedker. The next meeting is on 14th June. The Working Group continues to support the Sustainability and Climate Change Lead Officer in developing the climate change action plan and has suggested the development of Medium-Term Carbon Plan to sit alongside the Medium Term Financial Plan.
9. The Working Group is particularly keen to ensure that a wider engagement plan on climate change, potentially through task and finish groups, is developed. Positive engagement with the public is increasingly important as public interest is rising with the forthcoming COP26 event later this year and the recent commitment from Central Government to cut carbon emissions by 78% by 2035.

Youth Unemployment

10. The 18-24-year-old claimant count rose from 12.0% (885 young people – figures revised by the Office for National Statistics) in December 2020 to 13.0% (955 young people) in February 2021. This is above the North East average of 10.1% and the Great Britain average of 9.0%, both of which also saw rises. This now puts Darlington as the second highest in the Tees Valley, where claimant counts range from 12.5% to 14.5%.
11. Young people continue to be supported by a range of employability programmes, including the Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) and now Routes to Work, which has had its remit extended to support those 16-29 year olds who are no longer eligible for YEI (European funding rules mean that a young person can only access the YEI programme once).

Towns Fund

12. The Towns Fund Investment Plan continues to progress. Works to improve the environment of both Buckton's Yard and Clark's Yard have commenced with new doors and general improvements finalised. New planters and benches will be supplied in the forthcoming weeks. The installation of free public Wi-Fi has been completed and new lighting has been installed to light up the Pease Statue, Town Hall Clock and St. Cuthbert's Church. New benches together with up lighting will be installed over the next few weeks.
13. The business cases for the remaining 9 interventions are being completed and will be submitted to government for funding over the forthcoming months. As part of the Towns Fund, the Council received £575,000 to part fund the acquisition of the Northern Echo building which will host the Adult Skills Hub.

Councillor Mrs Heather Scott OBE
Leader of the Council Portfolio