

COUNCIL
15 JULY 2021

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL OVERVIEW

Council's Continued Response to COVID19

1. The situation in relation to COVID – 19 in Darlington has been dynamic and changeable in recent weeks. The Delta variant is now the dominant variant found in all new infections in Darlington. With the Delta variant being more easily transmitted we have seen a rise in cases in Darlington after a sustained period of low rates of infection. This rise in cases has been largely concentrated on younger people in the community and particularly those people under 25 years old. This group has not been offered a vaccination as part of the routine programme until recently, and therefore have not had the benefit of the protection that vaccination provides.
2. The recent rise in infections did have an impact on local schools, colleges and nurseries, with large numbers of pupils and students having to isolate before the end of term. Schools, nurseries and colleges continued to work extremely hard to minimise the spread of the virus and keep their students and staff safe and protect their education.
3. The Authority continues to work with NHS and other partners to actively support the NHS in their efforts to ensure that those younger people are able to easily get vaccinated. The most recent vaccination data is very encouraging in showing a good response amongst the young people of Darlington.
4. Although we did see a rise in the rates of infection there was not a similar rise in the numbers of those who were ill in hospital and reports of deaths from COVID-19 remain very low.

Strategic Transport

5. There is a significant programme of Strategic Transport Projects being developed to deliver the ambition in the Tees Valley Strategic Transport Plan. The current budget is £246m.
6. A Transport Investment Prospectus identified an ambitious future programme of £344m across the Tees Valley over five years. £3.5m has been allocated to TVCA to develop the schemes in this plan this year with a view to entering a competitive negotiation for a share of the £4.2bn intra-city transport settlement allocated to the eight mayoral city regions for 2022/23 – 2026/27. TVCA is seeking to develop the strongest possible case to maximise the allocation for Tees Valley
7. A summary of some of the key developments are:
 - (a) Darlington, Middlesbrough and Hartlepool Stations are all progressing as part of the strategy to unlock rail capacity and improve rail services across the Tees Valley. However, consultations have been launched recently by train operating

companies proposing a new timetable in 2022 to manage capacity issues before these projects are delivered.

These timetable proposals are complicated and do have an impact on services at Darlington. I am working with the Tees Valley Combined Authority to put a strong case forward to the operators and the Department for Transport not to implement any proposals that have a detrimental impact on services at Darlington given the growth projected in Darlington and across the Tees Valley.

The consultations clearly demonstrate the need for investment in the East Coast Mainline and the need for the Darlington Station project.

- (b) A rail freight project is progressing to improve connectivity to the port and the rest of the UK, without having to move freight through Darlington Station. This involves improvements on the line between the port and Northallerton, through Yarm.
- (c) The new Tees crossing road project is progressing with government seeking approval to progress to Full Business Case. This scheme is complex and expensive and will require a significant funding commitment from the national roads programme to deliver. Darlington Northern Link Road (DNLR) project is moving towards completing the outline business case and will look to emerging future funding opportunities to try and secure funding to move towards the full business case stage.
- (d) Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Projects are progressing at various stages across the Tees Valley. Darlington's first scheme is the Woodlands Road and Duke Street scheme.
- (e) A new capability fund has been allocated to the Tees Valley and £1.36m will be delivered on activities such as Active Travel Hubs, E-Cycle lease schemes, public transport marketing and promotion, cycle and pedestrian training and schemes to incentivise active travel.
- (f) TVCA, Local Authorities and Bus Operators are working together on an ambitious timetable to bring together and Enhanced Bus Partnership and Bus Service Improvement Plan to ensure bus services recover following COVID-19 and move forward to provide improved service and choices for customers.
- (g) To complement this work has commenced on a series of studies across the Tees Valley looking at corridors where bus services can be improved by physical infrastructure works.
- (h) Tees Flex continues to operate, and numbers of passengers are increasing. More promotion of the service will be undertaken and Members are encouraged to promote to eligible residents.

Towns Fund

8. 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, pots and benches will be installed early in July and will make a significant visual difference. The installation

of free public Wi-Fi has been completed and new lighting has been installed around the town centre. This will be completed by underlighting of the new benches which are currently being installed along High Row

9. The business cases for the nine main Towns Fund interventions are being completed and will be submitted to government for funding over the forthcoming months. The first four submissions for the Adult Skills facility, Skinnergate and the Yards, the Rail Heritage Quarter and T-Levels (which offer students a mixture of classroom learning and work experience) are planned before the end of July. The remaining five submitted in advance of the end of October 2021. 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.

Climate Change

10. The Cross-Party Climate Change Working Group continues to meet every two months; the latest meeting was on 14 June. Members have been supporting the Sustainability and Climate Change Lead Officer in developing the Climate Change Action Plan, which is on track to be presented for approval at September Cabinet.
11. To help them with their roles on the Working Group, Members have been building their knowledge and understanding of the issues by taking part in webinars, such as the recent APSE Energy Conference. They also undertook a visit to Moor House Wind Farm.
12. The Group is working with the Communications team to strengthen our communication strategy to inform both residents and businesses and enable the whole Borough to join us as we take steps to reach net-zero.
13. The Tees Valley Strategic Transport programme will also contribute to climate change activity in Darlington:
 - (a) The active travel and bus service improvement plans will improve opportunities for cleaner and greener transport choices.
 - (b) A Tees Valley Hydrogen Transport hub will look to support the trial of hydrogen vehicles in real world situations.
 - (c) Electric vehicle charging infrastructure will start to be rolled out this year with a single supplier being procured to deliver £2m of investment at locations across the Tees Valley.
 - (d) Tees Valley wheels to work will provide access to electric motorbikes and e-cycle to assist people get to work.

Youth Unemployment

14. The 18-24 year old claimant count for April 2021 stands at 13.6% (1,005 young people, the same as March 2021 figures. The Darlington figure is above the North East average of 9.9% and the Great Britain average of 8.9%, both of which have seen slight declines (down 0.2% and 0.1% respectively). Darlington has the second highest youth claimant rate in the Tees Valley, where claimant counts range from 12.4% to 13.9%.

15. Young people continue to be supported through a range of local and national employability programmes, including DBC's Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) and Routes to Work programme. DWP has now arranged for a dedicated Job Centre Youth Adviser to be co-located with the YEI team.

Councillor Mrs Heather Scott OBE
Leader of the Council Portfolio