

COUNCIL
30 SEPTEMBER 2021

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL OVERVIEW

Council's Continued Response to COVID19

1. Since my last report to Council the government has lifted nearly all COVID restrictions. Lifting restrictions does not mean the risks from COVID-19 have disappeared and there are actions we can all take to protect ourselves and others around us. The government continues to recommend the wearing of face coverings in crowded and enclosed public spaces, health care settings and care homes to protect the most vulnerable people from the risk of infection. We must all continue to remain vigilant in our approach to this new phase of the pandemic response.
2. The situation in relation to COVID-19 in Darlington has continued to be dynamic and changeable in recent weeks. Since the last report we have experienced an unprecedented peak in cases of Covid-19 in Darlington. These very high rates have reduced considerably but still remain volatile. Similar to my last report these new cases remain concentrated in younger people in the community and particularly those people under 25 years old and in those who have not yet been vaccinated.
3. The vaccination programme has since been extended to include 16-17 year olds. 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 former mobile library vehicle has been refitted to enable the provision of mobile vaccination clinics by the NHS.
4. There have been a number of mobile and pop up vaccination clinics, delivered in partnership with the NHS, in and around Darlington. This has included some high profile events in the Town Centre, including Pride and Darlington Food and Drink Festival. There have been good levels of vaccine uptake in these clinics reported, especially amongst younger people.
5. With the high rates of vaccinations across the country the rules around isolation and contact tracing have also changed with those who are fully vaccinated now no longer required to self-isolate if they are identified as a contact of a positive case. The authority continues to work with NHS Test and Trace as a Local Tracing Partnership to ensure that everyone who has tested positive is properly and fully contact traced to reduce the risk of onward transmission or outbreaks.
6. Although there was this significant rise in the rates of infection there was not a similar rise in the numbers of those who were ill in hospital or reports of deaths from COVID-19. These remain low compared to previous periods of high infection.

Strategic Transport

7. The proposed 2022 Rail timetable changes were consulted upon and I made strong representations on two fronts. I worked with the Tees Valley Mayor to submit a combined Tees Valley response that had the support of all Leaders and I submitted a Darlington specific response to the consultation and Secretary of State for Transport that had the cross-party support of the Leaders of all the Political parties in Darlington. I am pleased to say the outcome has been positive and the proposals are not progressing in May 2022 and I will continue to work to protect rail services for Darlington and the Tees Valley.

Darlington Station Improvement Project

8. Darlington Station Improvement Project continues to be developed at pace in partnership with Network Rail. The project is progressing through the planning system, progress is being made on land acquisitions and the Project team are working closely with the Department for Transport. A planning permission has been submitted for the cattle market site to use this area as parking whilst the new station is constructed. The final use of the cattle market site will be subject to a master planning exercise in the coming year and will involve engagement with stakeholders and the community.

City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) Bid

9. In mid-July the Government published guidance on a new City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement. This is a £4.2Bn fund open to the eight mayoral city regions. The aim of the fund is to provide a 5-year settlement to the Tees Valley Combined Authority to support delivery of transformational change and the outcomes identified in the Strategic Transport Plan.
10. The process is following an incredibly tight timetable with the development and submission of a prospectus outlining a 5-year programme of schemes and maintenance plans by early September. Leaders and the Mayor have been required to agree this prospectus and submit it to Government. The next stages will involve a dialogue between the Government and TVCA to agree the programmes and level of funding for the Tees Valley from April 2022. The amount of funding secured will be dependent on the strength of the prospectus and the subsequent submissions and dialogue with Government.
11. A consultation has been carried out by TVCA on the future of the Regions Bus Services. The closing date for responses as the 26 September. I will feedback the results as soon as possible.
12. Whilst this is not all new money, this has the potential to bring significant additional investment into Darlington and the Tees Valley to improve our transport network.

National Underground Asset Register

13. I attended a meeting with the Geospatial Commission, hosted by Lord True at the Northumbrian Water offices at Broken Scar on the 7th September, with Ben Houchen and representatives from the major infrastructure organisations, business sectors and council officers.

14. The meeting was to launch the development of a truly collaborative system to map all underground services and utilities on one accessible platform.
15. I'm pleased to see Darlington, the Tees Valley and the North East at the forefront of national innovation and taking this pilot forward.
16. The system will see real benefits for:
 - (a) the safety of operatives working and excavating in the ground
 - (b) improved utility services for residents and business
 - (c) Improved efficiency and improved project planning to reduce time to undertake essential repairs.
17. The services that run under our roads are critical to our daily lives and when they need to be maintained we know it can cause disruption in our streets. We visited the site in Mayfair Road where major work is being carried out to replace a sewer. We heard how the benefits of this system would improve the delivery of projects and reduce the disruption to residents whilst improving the resilience of services that we all rely on to live our daily lives.

Towns Fund

18. The Towns Fund Investment Plan continues to progress. Works to improve the environment of both Buckton's Yard and Clark's Yard are well progressed, with new doors, planters, colourful new benches, lighting and general improvements undertaken and/or planned. 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 have been installed along High Row.
19. The business cases for the nine main Towns Fund interventions are being completed. The first three submissions for the Adult Skills facility, Skinnergate and the Yards and T-Levels (which offer students a mixture of classroom learning and work experience) were summarised and submitted in July. The remaining six will be submitted in the coming months.
20. 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 facility. The funding allocated for 2021/22 for Adult Skills, Skinnergate and the Yards and T-Levels is anticipated at the end of September, subject to final approval by government.

Climate Change

21. The Cross Party Climate Change Working Group continues to meet. The Group has had a presentation on a carbon accounting dashboard and is currently discussing how to proceed; an internal system is available and the cost effectiveness of both systems will be compared.
22. A job advert for a Climate Change Officer to support the Sustainability and Climate Change Lead Officer closed on 6 August, with 31 applicants and 8 strong candidates were invited to interview. An offer of employment has been made and accepted and the Council are

currently going through the standard pre-employment checks. It is expected that the successful applicant, who was educated at Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College, will start in mid-October.

23. Criteria and an application form have been produced for the Climate Change Fund. Any Council team may apply for funding for projects that support the Council's Climate Emergency Declaration.
24. An All Members briefing was held on the 20 September on the action plan to take forward to Cabinet on 5 October.

Councillor Mrs Heather Scott OBE
Leader of the Council Portfolio