

COUNCIL
31 MARCH 2022

LEADER OF THE COUNCIL OVERVIEW

Council's Continued Response to COVID-19

1. The Prime Minister announced the revoking of the legislation which was introduced in 2020 and provided the regulations and restrictions that were used to manage the pandemic and keep the public safe for the past 2 years. From 1 April all the regulations and restrictions will be removed with the with a new national "Living with COVID-19 plan" now introduced which sets out the principles that will now be used to inform the ongoing response to threat and impact of COVID-19.
2. This doesn't mean that COVID-19 has disappeared but instead we are now in a new phase of the pandemic where COVID-19 will now regarded in a similar way to other infectious respiratory diseases such as flu. As a local authority, Darlington Borough Council, will continue to support the NHS and UK Health Security Agency to maintain resilience through surveillance and the ongoing provision of the vaccination programme, particularly to those who are most vulnerable. As individuals we all need to continue to do our bit to help in managing the pandemic, be it through encouraging safer behaviours, such as hand washing, and practicing good respiratory hygiene, getting vaccinated when invited to do so and supporting others we know to get vaccinated.

Strategic Transport

3. The pandemic has changed travel behaviour and the recovery is varied across sectors. However, there is no doubt that bus patronage has been impacted and we will all need to work to encourage bus users back onto our bus services to ensure they remain sustainable.
4. The establishment of a Bus Service Improvement Plan and Enhanced Partnership is a step towards addressing the challenges that the bus industry face and we will work with the Bus Operators and the Combined Authority, as the Transport Authority, to aide and promote that recovery.
5. The Government has announced that it will provide a further £150m to support bus services between April and October 2022. The funding will assist bus operators in running services as they develop new, effective, financially sustainable networks after the pandemic.
6. The City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement will provide significant investment over the next 5 years to deliver projects across the Tees Valley that will improve our sustainable transport network and contribute to our climate change action plan. All the funding will be focussed on bus, rail, walking, cycling and other sustainable initiatives.

Darlington Station Improvement Project

7. The Council and partners took another step forward in preparations for delivery of this project. The compulsory purchase order was confirmed, which secures the land for the project. However, we continue to recognise the impact on those people it affects, and we continue to work and support those people affected to secure acquisition by agreement and facilitate the acquisition of alternative properties.
8. The development work to deliver the project continue to be progressed with work being scheduled to commence later this year.

Darlington Railway Heritage Launch

9. Thursday 3 March represented a real milestone for Darlington with the launch of the £35m Rail Heritage Quarter. The project will create one of the most exciting Heritage Visitor Attractions in the North of England and play a central role in regenerating the Northgate neighbourhood that it sits in. The unique collection of railway buildings will be restored and animated to tell the story of how the Stockton and Darlington Railway changed the world.

Great British Rail Headquarters

10. Earlier this month the Council submitted its Expression of Interest for Darlington to be to be considered as the national headquarters for Great British Railways. The headquarters will be home primarily for corporate functions and needs to be in place by the time Great British Railways is established in the coming year. This national competition aims to identify a location outside of London with a rich railway heritage and strong links to the national network. The Expression of Interest is the first step in a four-stage selection process which should be concluded by summer 2022.

Cummins

11. I had a very informative visit to Cummins, accompanied by Councillor Dulston and Ian Williams, when we were given a tour of their facilities, and in particular the development of Hydrogen engines for business and trucks. The announcement of the £14 million investment is good news and we will continue to work closely with them during the development of the site. This new facility which covers 738 m² will mean Cummins can develop and test a wide range of power technologies, including engines to operate on green hydrogen, renewable natural gas, or sustainable diesel. Its installation and testing capability will also extend to hydrogen fuel cell and battery electric powertrains. Ground preparation has already commenced, and it is anticipated the first phase to open for operations by May 2023.

Citizenship ceremonies

12. It has been a pleasure to be able to attend the Citizenship Ceremonies again now the rules have relaxed, attending the ceremonies on 18 February and 18 March, and a great opportunity to welcome people from all over the world to our community.

Student Loans Company visit

13. I was very impressed at a visit to the Student Loans Company in February, seeing their facilities and the opportunities available. This was followed up with an invite to meet in the Town Hall to meet with councillors and key officers to develop relationships and look at opportunities and support for care leavers and a new schools' outreach proposal. They are one of our biggest employers and it's important that we work together to support local people find secure employment opportunities.

Ukrainian Refugee Sponsorship

14. We will do everything we can to help in the sponsorship between residents and refugees and await further information from government about the process and local authorities funding support.

High Sheriff Awards

15. I attended, along with Councillor Dulston, the High Sheriff Awards held in Usha Historic House, a wonderful location. The awards were given predominantly to young people, which was a great tribute to those involved, particularly during COVID.

Climate Change

16. The Cross Party Climate Change Working Group met for the first time in 2022, in February. Amongst the discussions, the group considered the importance of including adaptation alongside carbon reduction measures and has requested a demonstration of a system to record the impacts of severe weather events.
17. The climate change fund was established to help deliver on our climate emergency declaration and Portfolio Holders are to look at their services to see which additional projects this fund would be appropriate for.

Councillor Mrs Heather Scott OBE
Leader of the Council Portfolio