

Report of the Leader of Council – 14 January 2020

Devolution

Before the General Election was announced significant progress was made in talks with Government about a devolution deal for Leeds City Region. As local council leaders we view this is a stepping stone deal, with One Yorkshire devolution our eventual ambition. However the Prime Minister and his team have made it very clear that they do not see One Yorkshire as a viable devolution proposition at this time and therefore do not support our One Yorkshire devolution ask. At the same time the Prime Minister has acknowledged the work of the One Yorkshire Leaders' Board which is cross party and cross geography. Inevitably when the General Election was called all talks were suspended. However Ministers have been clear that they wish to pick up these talks as soon as possible to progress to a conclusion.

The Yorkshire Leaders' Board met last week and we reiterated our commitment to One Yorkshire in the future, whilst adopting a pragmatic approach in this parliament to stepping stone deals. It is vital that the Leeds City Region has the funding it needs to support good growth over this next parliament. We have priorities in skills, transport, climate emergency and housing that need to be delivered and any deal from Government needs to recognise both the need and the potential of our region.

Meeting with Secretary of State for Transport

Last week I, along with other Leeds City Region leaders met with the Secretary of State for Transport, Grant Shapps to discuss the terrible service people in the North are getting from Northern Rail. Jake Berry, the Northern Powerhouse Minister accompanied him in the meeting. The Secretary of State agreed with us that passengers are getting a poor service and he indicated that he would make a decision on the future of the Northern Rail franchise at the end of this month. We reiterated our view that moving to Operator of Last Resort was the only acceptable outcome of his deliberations.

I also took the opportunity in the meeting to ask the Secretary of State to visit Queensbury Tunnel. The Queensbury Tunnel Society issued an invitation to him a few weeks ago. He was aware of the invitation and gave me to understand that he would reply positively to it.

A Budget preparing for Climate Emergency

The Labour Group announced its budget proposals in the first week of January. Bradford Council has had its budget slashed by Government since 2010 and as a result has had to take £278 million out of its budget since then. There's a further £31 million to be taken out in future years if Government do not grant a more favourable permanent settlement. The Government granted a pre-election boost to finances for social care as a one-off for 20/21. But one-offs are no good for financial planning purposes, we need to see sustained increases for social care coming to local authorities and soon. In spite of the financial pressures, we've set aside £25 million this year for climate emergency measures. Money has been set aside for a district heat network, renewable energy projects, buildings carbon reduction, electric vehicles and flood alleviation. We need Government to show the same seriousness

of intent when it comes to climate change and making sure local authority services are financially sustainable.

West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Future Ready Skills Commission

As Chair of West Yorkshire Combined Authority I have been Chairing the Future Ready Skills Commission for the last year. This Commission is made up of business leaders, FE leaders, a University rep and Policy Think Tanks. The purpose of the Commission is to look forward to a time when our region will have devolution with the powers and funding that should flow with that. There is a big skills need in our region and the current centralisation of skills commissioning in this country does not serve us well. Through the Commission we are looking at three areas:

- Careers advice and inspiration
- Enhancing Workforce skills
- Improving technical education and skills

We published the interim report in November, setting out the 10 things that need to change within skills system. A blueprint for a future-ready skills system that sets out how a future-ready skills system should work will be shared at the Commission's next meeting later this month. The final report is due to be published in the summer. There is already interest from other Combined Authorities in the work and its findings. More information can be found here <http://futurereadyskillscommission.com/>

Brexit

Given that the UK will be now leaving under the withdrawal agreement at the end of this month, the Secretary of State for Housing Communities and Local Government has written to me to highlight that all the national emergency planning has been stood down and we will be entering the transition period at the end of this month.

Bradford Council is working with partners across the district, regionally and nationally to focus on the following key issues:

Supporting our EU nationality residents, particularly those from vulnerable communities. Through our communications and public comments, we have been clear that Bradford continues to be a welcoming city and we support all our citizens, regardless of their background. We are working to ensure that the 26,000 estimated EU citizens are aware of what they need to do to apply for settled status, which they will need to do by 2021 to ensure they have the same rights as they do today. The latest Home Office estimates show that by the end of September, over 40% of Bradford's EU citizens had applied for settled status. We are working to fulfil our statutory duty to ensure all EU Looked After Children are supported with their applications.

Supporting our business community – The impact of Brexit on our business community will evolve as the trade negotiations develop. We are working with colleagues at the Yorkshire level and closely with organisations like the Chambers of Commerce and West Yorkshire Combined Authority to understand the evolving picture including how our business community can take advantage of the opportunities of Brexit and address some of the upcoming challenges.

Tackling hate crime – statistics and intelligence from West Yorkshire Police have not indicated that there have been any specific recent increases in hate crime towards EU nationals in the District. Nevertheless, we continue to monitor the ongoing hate crime trends through our partnership with the police.

QUESTIONS TO THE LEADER

Councillor John Pennington

(Note: Councillor Pennington's questions were not captured by the electronic recording so there is not a verbatim record. A summary is given below.)

Devolution - where is the name Bradford in the title of the Leeds City Region? What are the sticking points with devolution? Northern Rail is a disgrace. The Combined Authority must not allow the Secretary of State to just change the name of Northern Rail but the personnel need to be changed. Queensbury Tunnel – the proposal by Highways England to fill in the tunnel is heritage vandalism. This madness has to be stopped. The budget – the Government is plugging gaps for the benefit of the people. Brexit – enough said.

Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe

Thank you for those questions. I will try and take them one by one. First of all Leeds City Region. We are already in the Leeds City Region. It does exist. It has existed as an entity for several years now. York is a non-constituent member and therefore that is why it is called Leeds City Region. It is very difficult to put all the names in the one name of course and I think it is time Bradford just had the confidence in itself to know that we are the big part of Leeds City Region. We are 537,000 people. Youngest city in the UK. Bigger than Liverpool, Bristol, Newcastle and we have to have confidence in ourselves and not worry about a name. It is what it delivers for us and we have not had devolution for a long time. We have not had powers of funding that we need. Rather than arguing about a name let's make sure we get the powers of funding we need as soon as possible. As far as we are concerned, as far as colleagues across Yorkshire are concerned it is a stepping stone. It is the Government I am afraid who are stepping in the way and saying no to One Yorkshire devolution but we are being pragmatic. We know that funding in powers for ourselves here, for our residents is absolutely vital and that is why we are putting aside any sort of competitiveness between each other and getting on with trying to do a deal. I hope that the Government will come up with a date for us to meet again very soon.

Regarding Northern Rail I think we have unanimity on how poor the service has been in this Chamber. We are favouring Operator of Last Resort. There may well be changes. I do not know how that will impact on people who work in that company of course but most of the staff there will continue as continuity of employment, they will have a term of employment, but the real problem with railways is how the Government have been running them for the last ten years. Privatisation has led to a completely fragmented system. Everybody who works on the railways, all the different companies are given different objectives and none of them line up to the core objective, one objective is just running the railway efficiently and well to one timetable. So if there was a guiding hand from the Region saying this is how we want things to work in this region I think things would be better but we are on a long journey to do that so the Williams Review is not out yet. I expect the Williams

Review to talk about local powers and local devolution of railway decisions. However it is not going to be a quick fix. This is a long time, ten years is a long time of fragmentation and a system that does not work in a unified way and putting it right is going to take years. So we do not just need the powers but we also need the money to do it. So let's not try to run a railway system on the cheap. If you want a good efficient public transport system then I am afraid it does cost money.

Regarding Queensbury Tunnel yes I took the opportunity there when he was in the room to say have you had the letter and are you going to turn up and he was very positive about the fact that he would accept but I do not think an official response has been received yet. This is a Highways England issue and of course Highways England do report to the Department of Transport so it is essentially a Government issue that they need to settle between themselves and they need to provide the money to keep that tunnel open. They have an absolute responsibility for this historic infrastructure to make sure it stays open. It is firmly at the Government's door to make the right decision. Regarding the budget I cannot shy from the fact we have had ten years of austerity and we had a bit of money on social care and we are pathetically grateful I have to say but there is no long term solution yet to social care funding in this country. That needs to happen for everybody's sake and not just local authority's but also for people who are adults and in need of care and therefore it is our responsibility to keep reminding the Government it is their responsibility in that regard. We run a Council that uses money wisely and well but we do need to make sure those vulnerable residents are well looked after and that does require the Government to take its own fiduciary responsibilities very seriously. Thank you.

Councillor Jeanette Sunderland

It is back to devolution again Councillor Hinchcliffe. For our Members I would like you to lay out what exactly are the sticking points because it is now down to, we write to them and they will not meet us and then there was an election and we have not got a date in the diary now so I think it is in everybody's benefit not necessarily now in the speech but if you could lay out the differences between the two political parties that cannot come together and make some progress.

Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe

I did not say there was a difference. I do not think there is a difference. We are making really good progress coming to a solution for a devolution deal for the region and then a general election was called. Once a general election is called all civil servants down tools and do not do any more negotiation or talking to anybody. That is why there is a hiatus. If it had been another couple of weeks I would like to think we could have got a deal but obviously we have to respect Purdah when a general election was called and therefore we could not continue with that. I think we are making really good progress. I think we are near to a deal. I am always an optimist, half full kind of a person. Maybe I am more positive than others but I think we can do a deal here and I am just wanting time here quickly to come by and have that meeting again and progress from where we left off.

Councillor Dale Smith

(Note: The beginning of Councillor Smith's question was not captured by the electronic recording so a summary is given below.)

The question is about tackling hate crime. I welcome the statement. The demise of the Strategic Disability Partnership has meant that the voice of thevulnerable has been almost extinguished. I do know that within the bowels of City Hall together with the Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee, officers are working to see the practicality of reintroducing an equivalent to the Strategic Disability Partnership. You may remember that I was the Chairman for about five years and I well remember going to a police station up in Eccleshill to learn about hate crime and I was absolutely dismayed because I recognised that the example they were giving to the audience was a colleague of mine and the thought that that person had to go through that sort of trauma, I learned a lot that day. So I do invite the Leader to sort of dig about and see what is being proposed if anything towards the reintroduction of the voice of vulnerable people. Thank you.

Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe

I absolutely agree that disabilities forms part of that hate crime element and absolutely we should not tolerate hate crime however it happens and to whoever it happens with. We do have a voice with disabled people because I have been reading papers recently where we have been consulting with the disabled partnerships. I am not sure which one that is. I am sure we can let you have details and just to reassure you that the voice of people with disabilities in this district is very valued indeed. Thank you.

Councillor Alun Griffiths

When you had your meeting with the Secretary of State, the Transport and Northern Powerhouse Minister, did the conversation turn at all to HS2 and in particular given around the same time there was a critical report on the financing of HS2 and there were mutterings about the possibility of it not happening as it should do and I would wonder whether in your conversations over the canopies you gleaned any views of to what they felt of the future of HS2 in the light of all that.

Councillor Susan Hinchcliffe

Yes there was only 30 minutes and about 15 people in the room. But I did get a question in about HS2 as you would expect me to as well as Queensbury Tunnel and Northern Rail as well. They were not very forthcoming about what was going to happen next. They were generally very positive just having one general election and some of you may take comfort about that but not this side as comfortable with that. We did ask when they were going to make a decision on HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail and I think the Northern Powerhouse Rail decision may come earlier than the HS2 one but it was a fleeting conversation. What we have done as a result of that, we have written a letter setting out why as West Yorkshire Combined Authority we think both should happen and they should not try and starve the North of the rail investment it so badly needs. Going back to our Northern Rail discussion it is important that our existing railway infrastructure works well. Part of the problem is that every time you change a bit of that railway infrastructure it falls over because we try and do too much with it, we need that new infrastructure to provide new ways across the Pennines, new ways down to the south of the country. Without that it will continue to fall over in my view. It is absolutely important to get a new railway infrastructure in, worthy of the 20th never mind the 21st century. We should have done it a long time ago. Hopefully that answers your question. Thank you.