

Leader's Report – December 2020

COVID

All councillors have had regular briefings on the latest information on COVID-19 and its impact across the district. The virus has had a major impact on the health of the district and the distress caused to families and friends who have lost someone has been immense. We all remember them and send our condolences for the loss of their loved ones.

We must say a heartfelt thank you to our council staff who have excelled themselves in these incredibly challenging times. Their dedication and commitment to the district has been outstanding. We at this side of the Chamber believe that we must invest more in our staff's learning and development to acknowledge how much we value them and want to invest in their talent, this is included in our budget proposals that we published last week. I am just angry that the Government has decided on a national pay freeze at a time when council staff have rightly been praised for their personal sacrifice in keeping the district going.

We look forward to a vaccination roll-out across the district in 2021 so that we can start to live more normal lives.

Devolution

I thank the vast majority of councillors in the Chamber for the support they have given the devolution deal. Without devolution we would have a smaller skills programme and less money to deliver our Transforming Cities regeneration programme – and that's just with the money we receive for this year, next year's funding is still to be allocated. Going forward there is going to be more money for skills and transport in particular and this is very much needed. It is predicted we will face the biggest recession for 300 years in this country, we therefore need as much investment as we can muster to enable our residents to get back on their feet. I was pleased that at the West Yorkshire Combined Authority meeting on Friday we were able to commit £13.5 million of our first £38 million devolution monies into skills across the region, a significant share of this will be committed to SkillsHouse in Bradford to further grow the number of people we can support into work through this programme.

Northern Powerhouse Rail

The work to develop this new rail line which will stretch from East to West across the Pennines has continued throughout the pandemic. This project is led by Transport for the North (TFN) and the Department for Transport. The decision of Northern Leaders at the TFN Board was to back a city centre station for Bradford. This from their press release:

Our proposed NPR network includes:

- A new line to be constructed from Liverpool to Manchester via the centre of Warrington
- A new line to be constructed from Manchester to Leeds via the centre of Bradford
- Significant upgrades and journey time improvements to the Hope Valley route between Manchester and Sheffield

- Connecting Sheffield to HS2 and on to Leeds
- Significant upgrades and electrification of the rail lines from Leeds and Sheffield to Hull
- Significant upgrades of the East Coast Mainline from Leeds to Newcastle (via York and Darlington) and restoration of the Leamside line

This is a significant decision given where we started from, however we all know there is still much work to do to make sure that Government in the coming months makes the right decision to commit the funding needed to include Bradford. There needs to be significant investment in the North and Bradford, the youngest city in the heart of the North, should be a prime candidate for this investment.

Economic Recovery Post COVID

As well as the day to day management of the effort to reduce the prevalence of the virus, we are also working hard on the Economic Recovery Plan for the district. We must plan ahead if we are to create the jobs people will need post COVID. I'd like to thank Professor Zahir Irani of Bradford University Management School for chairing the Bradford Economic Recovery Board and the members of that board for all the work they are putting into this important strategy for the future.

I was disappointed by the Chancellor's Spending Review on 25th November, I had hoped to see more money in there to support regional economic recovery. The fact that the Levelling Up fund is available for all parts of the country to bid into and has a ceiling of £20 million per bid shows that the Government has not yet grasped the enormity of the scale of recovery and investment will be needed to stimulate recovery in places like West Yorkshire which has been under stronger economic restrictions for longer than the south of the country.

Finally

Last week saw Clap for Communities when it was high time we thanked our communities for their patience, resilience and fortitude. We have been through some challenging times this year together as a district. I know people have helped each other, have phoned each other to stay in touch, connecting with people who might be on their own and have stuck by the regulations so that the infection rates come down. There is light at the end of the tunnel with a vaccine on the horizon, we will get through this and when we do, we'll have a big celebration bringing everyone together once more.