

Council**21 September 2023****Report of the Leader of the Council**

Council Plan

It's with great pride that I bring the 2023-2027 Council Plan to Full Council. This has been a truly collaborative piece of work laying out the priorities for the council over the coming years. Incorporating both the administration's priorities of making York a more affordable place for residents to live, work and study, closing health inequalities across our city, making York a more equal place with opportunities for everyone and tackling the climate emergency and improving our environment.

My administration and the council's officers are ambitious for our city and are ready to tackle our most pressing issues including the supply of good quality, affordable and green housing, making sure everyone who needs to can move around York efficiently, sustainably and at affordable prices, that we protect our environment, reach our net zero goals, improve biodiversity and protect nature.

The Council Plan reflects the priorities of the people, businesses and organisations across our city, there is an awful lot of work to achieve. We've made good progress in some areas already and will progress others in a planned and structured way so that we deliver what we've promised. I call on all Councillors across the chamber to join us in delivering these actions for the benefit of all of York.

City and Community Engagement

One of my primary joys and priorities is to make sure we get out of West Offices and engage with our city. The period since July Council has seen me attend a number of events and meet with a range of organisations across York from Foxwood Family Fun Day, Different Strokes peer support group. The York and North Yorkshire Police Fire and Crime Commissioner's Conference on Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls in North Yorkshire and York. The York Minster Fund's evening to celebrate the start of works to build the Minster's ground-breaking Centre of Excellence. Speaking at the exciting Research Project launch for a New Era for Female Entrepreneurship in York and North Yorkshire: a collaboration between the Federation of Small Business and the University of York. Visits to York Museum's Trust, Explore Libraries and Archives and the Company of Merchant Adventurers and the Civic Trust.

Electrification of bus fleet and good news for bus routes funding

The electrification of First's bus depot is great news for York, making it one of the first outside London to go fully electric. This is a welcome and necessary part of supporting what will be a fully electric First bus fleet of 86 vehicles by the end of this year. I was delighted to meet First to take part in the 'switch on' of its new fleet of electric buses which will cut around 3000 tonnes in carbon emissions each year. I also made representations to First about the need for greater accessibility on its buses in future.

Another welcome step with First is its commitment to deliver some of the currently subsidised bus services back to commercial operated, removing some of the need for further Bus Service Improvement Plan support funding and providing some longer-term certainty for passengers using these services. This doesn't cover all those services receiving short-term BSIP funding, but it does represent a change in position from First and I want to thank Cllr Kilbane and council officers for their efforts in helping secure this shift from our largest bus operator.

For other services not being commercially run but which are currently being supported with BSIP funding, this support will initially extend until January 2024. This allows time for officers to undertake a network review, ensuring we have routes that run commercially as much as possible and with less reliance on subsidy, giving greater stability for services in the future. I would urge councillors to do all they can to promote bus use to help make services sustainable longer term.

UNESCO World Heritage Site

It was great to see that York has been added to the Tentative List in April 2023 for the potential designation of York as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The York World Heritage Steering Group has done an immense amount of work and experts across our city have supported this work. It has been a fantastic team effort, I'd like to thank everyone involved. I recently met with key figures from the team who are currently working on a plan with the input of Council officers for the next steps to be taken on this long and arduous journey. We have discussed the need to present York's case for inclusion as a World Heritage Site as a city that has changed and adapted over the millennia of our rich and vibrant history. It doesn't stand still; it innovates and moves with the times to deliver the best outcomes for its residents.

I look forward to seeing the application progress, reflecting our rich history, vibrant culture while actively acknowledging the challenges our city currently needs to tackle. I look forward to keeping you updated.

Devolution for York and North Yorkshire

Our Devolution journey continues to progress, perhaps not quite as quickly as we would hope but it progresses. I have had reassurance and confirmation from the Minister responsible that the Devolution Order wording will be with the constituent authorities imminently, now that Westminster is sitting again. The wording of the Order including Governance Structures still needs to come through for review and approval. The Order then goes back to Westminster for final approval through both Houses. Due to both conference season and the November recess, it is expected that this procedure won't be completed until December.

It means that the legal creation of the Combined Authority won't happen in November as we had hoped. This is obviously disappointing but the delay for this part of the procedure to January or February won't delay the election of the region's elected Mayor in May 2024. Cllr Carl Les, Leader of North Yorkshire Council and I have written a joint letter to Dehenna Davison MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, outlining the need for urgency of action from government to get the procedures completed in good time so as not to impact our expected timeframes.

York Central

Following our last Full Council meeting it was very welcome to have confirmation of the additional £40 Million of fiscal support approved and confirmed by the Government. This was an ask within the Devolution deal. This announcement shows the commitment from a broad range of government stakeholders in the transformative potential of the York Central Project. The funding will support the project as it moves forward whether to incentivise new key employers to locate to the site or to support top class infrastructure or facilities. The procurement for the Lead Developer is currently being carried out by Homes England and Network Rail, the main landowners. We hope to hear the outcome in early to mid-October. This will be another key milestone and I look forward to starting talks with the winning bidder on how York Central can truly deliver for the people of York.

Our city needs modern commercial spaces and more essential affordable housing, sizeable green spaces created for public enjoyment

and biodiversity, within our net zero commitments. I want a place our residents are proud of, can enjoy and can benefit from, no matter where they live in our city. It's vital that York Central delivers its potential, and I look forward to working with partners across the project to make this happen.

Local Plan

The Local Plan continues to progress with what I hope to see as the final stage of short consultation on a couple of potential Green Belt amendments having recently closed. The progress of the Local Plan to adoption in the coming months will be a relief for all who have been involved in this long and sometimes painful process. The Local Plan is a vital tool for allowing our city to have effective control over appropriate development in York and deliver on much needed and long overdue housing and commercial space. I'm sure we all look forward to its adoption followed by the important work of implementation. We now wait for further news on the next steps from the Inspectors. I would like to thank all officers, developers, subject matter experts, statutory and other consultees who have all committed so much time, expertise and resource to this process.

Royal Gun Salute – Queens Birthday

In July I was honoured to be invited to celebrate the Queen's birthday at Imphal Barracks and the Museum Gardens. The Royal Gun Salute was hosted by the 4th Infantry Brigade and the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association (RFCA). It was a really valuable opportunity to meet serving army personnel and Armed Forces Champions from local authorities across the Yorkshire and North East region. The City of York Council is a Gold award employer. There are only a small handful in the city. The Council upholds and has signed the Armed Forces Covenant and proactively demonstrates forces-friendly credentials as part of recruiting, selection processes and employment terms for service people, reservists and veterans.

Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission

I am glad to have been nominated as the Regional Vice Chair for the Yorkshire and Humber Climate Commission. This is a hugely important regional body with private, public and the voluntary sector members coming together to support and guide ambitious climate actions across our region. The Commission promotes climate resilience and the transition to net-zero emissions in a positive, constructive, and evidence-based way. It also seeks to take climate actions in a fair, inclusive and

just way so that no-one and nowhere is left out or left behind. I have met with the Chair and Co-Director of the Commission and will attend the action and planning day as it moves from Stage 1, creation, to Stage 2 where members will focus on action development and delivery over the coming days. This is a hugely important and exciting initiative. Knowledge sharing and support for collective and local actions is vital as we make critical steps towards a Net Zero future for York and our neighbours.

Council Finances

The council's finances are in a precarious position and we cannot as an authority continue to spend beyond our means. I have no doubt that any councillor came into local government to make cuts to services, but we have no option. We can turn this into a political football or be grown up about it and work out ways of making those cuts that have the least impact on those in most need. We can continue to lobby central government for fair funding for York, while highlighting the appalling settlements across local government, NHS and education that put York bottom of the national pile.

The council has been talking about being more targeted in how it delivers services for over a decade since austerity first hit local government, but this hasn't been prioritised. Now we have no choice. The more for less narrative has been done to death and was always just an illusion.

Last year and this year, with what we have inherited, we'll collectively see the best part of £10m removed from reserves just to balance the budget. I challenge any councillor to stand up and tell me how that is sustainable. It simply isn't. So, we're going to get to grips with the situation we've been handed and make the hard decisions needed.

We'll do this with a great deal of discomfort and unwillingness, but it's a choice to make these decisions ourselves or pretend the problem doesn't exist and have the Government step in to make them for us. We cannot entertain the latter.

I hope aside from the annual budget setting process that the council's scrutiny committees will look at the council's finances and consider a longer term approach to putting the organisation on a sustainable financial footing. That is what Executive Members are doing. They will be more than willing to engage with scrutiny if they do.

Councillor Douglas, Leader

13 September 2023