



**Council**

**24 March 2022**

## **Report of the Leader of the Council**

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Since my last report to Full Council in December, once again, much has changed for our city and indeed, the country. Russia's unprovoked and unjustified invasion of Ukraine is the latest crisis that demands our attention, and in response to these tragic events, I am proud to see the people of York come together to show their solidarity with the people of Ukraine and come forward offering support for those fleeing war.

At the same time and closer to home, the Council continues to respond to numerous issues and challenges facing the city, including the ongoing pandemic, successive storms and flooding, the ever increasing cost of living, and crucially, delivering on the objectives outlined in the Council Plan.

Before I provide the substantive updates in this report, given the scale of work underway across the city, I would just like to reiterate my thanks to our staff, partners, councillors, residents and businesses for their continued work in response to these challenges and in support of our communities.

### **Ukrainian Refugee Support:**

York has a proud history as a city of sanctuary and our communities have always shown themselves to be caring and supportive for people in desperate need. Since the terrible events of Putin's war unfolded a few weeks ago, the Council has been in regular contact with Migration Yorkshire to offer York's support to those refugees fleeing the Ukraine.

We have seen an outpour of support amongst residents and communities, from donations of food and clothing, to offers of accommodation. Residents looking for ways to support those affected by the current situation in Ukraine can now find the latest information on how best to give support via the Council's new website page

here: [www.york.gov.uk/UkrainianRefugeeSupport](http://www.york.gov.uk/UkrainianRefugeeSupport). The page provides links to national and local campaigns, charities and groups who are working to support refugees and those impacted by the current crisis. Colleagues will also know that the British Red Cross is asking for financial donations in order to provide food and medical equipment to the Ukraine, but there are other national and international charities requesting financial help to provide doctors, medical equipment and to help children involved in the crisis. All this information is signposted on the council's website.

With regards to the schemes announced by the Government, at the time of writing this report, the 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme has just launched. The scheme enables individuals, charities, community groups and businesses to register their interest in supporting Ukrainians fleeing the war, including those refugees with no family ties to the UK. As it stands, the first phase of this scheme will allow sponsors in the UK to nominate a named Ukrainian or a named Ukrainian family to stay with them in their home or in a separate property. Sponsors will be asked to provide homes or a spare room rent-free for as long as they are able, with a minimum stay of 6 months. In return, they will receive £350 per month. Ukrainians arriving in the UK under this scheme will be granted 3 years leave to remain, with entitlement to work, and access benefits and public services. The Government has also confirmed that Ukrainians who are on work, study or visit visas in the UK will have their visas temporarily extended or be able to switch to different visa routes or for those on seasonal work visas to have their leave temporarily extended.

Beyond those details, there is not much information about how the scheme will work in practice, particularly with Local Government. We know that the Secretary of State has confirmed that local authorities will receive £10,500 in funding per refugee, but the detail behind these announcements is scarce. I know that colleagues will agree that councils will be central in helping families settle into their communities and access public services, including schools, public health and other support, including trauma counselling. The Government must work closely with councils, the community and voluntary sector and other local partners to co-design this sponsorship scheme moving forward, so it can move at the pace needed to support those fleeing war.

Given the sheer scale of the crisis and the huge number of refugees being forced to leave their homes, I sincerely hope that these details and practicalities are worked through swiftly. In the meantime, we will continue our dialogue with Migration Yorkshire and stand ready and willing to support those fleeing the current conflict in any way we can.

### **Levelling-Up White Paper and Devolution:**

As colleagues will know, the Levelling-Up White Paper, which was published early in February, announced the Government's intention to open negotiations regarding a potential Mayoral Devolution Deal for York and North Yorkshire, as well as detail the new framework for devolution in England.

We have been clear from the outset that we will explore a deal which fundamentally works for York and the wider region, benefiting our communities and businesses and helping to facilitate a strong recovery. Devolution undoubtedly presents a huge opportunity for our city and could unlock significant investment in York and the wider region over the next 30 years. However, any deal has to be right for York. York will continue to play a key role in achieving levelling up for our region and the right devolution deal has the opportunity to deliver the changes and investment that is most needed in for our city.

I hope that the publication of the Levelling-Up White Paper signals a beginning of a wider strategy for the North which genuinely recognises York and North Yorkshire's importance in levelling up our region. Funding and delivery must now match the words of ministers.

Discussions are ongoing to better understand the process and timescales with Ministers and Civil Servants, particularly with regard to how the new framework will shape the negotiations. At the same time, I have asked officers to create a form of pre-consultation with councillors, scrutiny, residents and businesses to raise awareness and generate conversation on this important issue. Looking down the line, there will be key points, such as the Governance Review and consultation on the Scheme, when input and views would be very much welcomed. I have said all along that any devolution deal, which is subject to Full Council decision, must be right for York, so consultation will be a very important feature moving forward.

## **Flooding Response:**

Following successive storms in February, York was once again on the frontline of climate change as severe flooding affected parts of the city. I am pleased that on this occasion, all defences that were put in place held against the higher river levels.

I'm sure everyone will join me in thanking all council staff, partners and residents who worked tirelessly to support the city during this period. Together, they installed all necessary flood defences and precautions, whilst at the same time, kept the city moving, well-informed, and ultimately, were on hand to clean up the city as river levels dropped.

Sadly, recognising that York will continue to have to face the challenge of flooding for many years to come, we will continue to call nationally for a joined-up approach to tackling flooding across the region to ensure that our communities and businesses are protected, as flood events become more frequent.

## **Great British Railways:**

Earlier this year, the Department for Transport announced their competition to find the future location of the headquarters of Great British Railways. Since that announcement, the council and partners have worked together to mount a bid, positioning York as the natural home for Great British Railways.

The competition seeks bids from towns and cities with a rich railway history and which are strongly linked to the rail network. Following extensive work with our partners and the many rail operators based in the city, York's historic and strong connection to the rail sector will form the heart of our bid to Government.

At my decision session earlier this month, I agreed York's formal expression of interest. In turn, this will signal our intent to bid jointly with North Yorkshire County Council and York and North Yorkshire Local Economic Partnership, to locate the new headquarters of Great British Railways here in York.

Building on our rail heritage, York has a strong case to secure the HQ of Great British Railways, of which our case is undeniably compelling:

- With strong connections both North to South, and East to West, York is connected directly to one third of the UK's population;
- We have over 5000 people employed by the rail sector here in the city;
- We are home to some of the UK's large rail operators, such as LNER and Northern Rail;
- The railway industry has been a key cog in the city, dating back to the 1840s. Today, its importance remains; clearly demonstrated by Network Rail's choice to locate their Railway Operation Centre in York;
- The allure of York's lasting role in this sector also entices over 710,000 visitors a year to the National Railway Museum, which has an ambitious £60 million transformation plan to build on years of rail heritage;
- And looking forward, York has the highest skills levels of any city in the North of England, with access to outstanding universities and colleges, providing the talent needed to drive innovation in the rail sector moving forward.

We must ensure that these strengths are communicated to Government and to the public, positioning York as the centre of the rail network.

### **Active Travel England:**

In another announcement from the Department for Transport, it has been confirmed that Active Travel England will be located in York. This is indeed very welcome news for our city, boosting our economy and further raising York's profile.

Prior to this announcement, we have been working hard to position York as a major contributor in the development of decarbonised transport infrastructure. We all know that York is a fantastic city with a highly skilled population and in this announcement, we can see reaffirmation of our reputation as a destination of choice for investment.

It is a credit to all those involved in securing this investment, and I'd like to thank everyone involved. With work ongoing to progress York Central,

one of the most important and attractive regeneration sites in the country, this is an exciting time to live, work and invest in York.

### **Easing of Covid Restrictions:**

Amongst everything that has happened over the past few weeks and months, it is easy to miss that the Prime Minister announced the lifting of Coronavirus restrictions from 24<sup>th</sup> February. Therefore, as of now, the legal requirement for positive cases to self-isolate in England has ended, as has self-isolation support payments.

The advice for fully vaccinated contacts and those aged under 18 to undertake daily testing, and the legal requirement for contacts who are not fully vaccinated to self-isolate, has also ended. Instead, national guidance now encourages people to limit the risk of infection to themselves and others. Contact tracing has also ended, along with venue check-ins on the Covid app.

Significantly, free testing will end for most people from the 1<sup>st</sup> April. From that point, there will be some limited ongoing free testing available for a small number of at-risk groups, although the Government is yet to set out further details on which groups will actually be eligible. We are concerned about the potential impact that this change will have on the spread of the virus, which is indeed still circulating, and we will continue to lobby for those groups and workers who interact with vulnerable residents.

Of course, it is thanks to the work of our frontline teams, the NHS and the success of the vaccine programme that we can now see restrictions removed. Whilst this is welcome news, we should continue to remain vigilant. We know people across the city will have varying emotions about this latest change, so as we prepare to make this next step, let's continue to encourage everyone to be mindful of others, so we can all safely move on with our lives.

### **Queen's Green Canopy Champion City Status and Tree Giveaway:**

I was pleased to be joined by Her Majesty's Lord-Lieutenant of North Yorkshire, the Lord Mayor, representatives from Forestry England and Poppleton Scout Group to unveil the Queen's Green Canopy 'Champion City' plaque, awarded to York at the new community woodland, where

70 trees have been planted to commemorate Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee.

Places up and down the UK are joining the 'Plant a Tree for the Jubilee' initiative. In York, this is one of many events taking place this year to encourage Jubilee tree planting across the city, increasing the city's tree canopy and boosting local biodiversity.

It was a great honour to receive the Champion City plaque on behalf of the city, commemorating Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee and I look forward to the continued progress at the community woodland and in reaching that tree canopy target set last year.

Around 500 trees were donated by Woodland Trust and interest from residents was so high, that all 500 were allocated within six hours of the scheme going live. It has been great to see so many residents get involved in this initiative and help improve York's environment.

There is still much more to come. We have an ambitious tree canopy target to reach by 2050, as well as the York Community Woodland to plant and develop. I would encourage any residents who missed out on this giveaway to get involved in the many planned activities throughout this year to support the creation of the woodland and increase tree planting across the city.

### **Purple Flag:**

I am really pleased that York has been awarded the prestigious Purple Flag award, recognising York's excellence in promoting a safe and inclusive evening and night-time economy. In receiving the award, York now joins other cities with the award, including Bournemouth, Bristol, Halifax, Oxford and Winchester.

Awarded by the Association of Town and City Management, Purple Flag is an international accreditation process, very similar to the Green Flag award for parks and the Blue Flag for beaches. In working to achieve Purple Flag, the council and its partners have worked together to help foster a safe and thriving city centre at night for visitors and residents to enjoy.

This was a key commitment for this administration, and work to secure the accreditation began back in September 2019, when proposals were agreed to coordinate work with residents, businesses and visitors in the city centre through the development of Purple Flag model and the coordination of the city's safety advisory group.

Of course, there is always more work to be done and improvements to be made, but now with that Purple Flag model in place and improved partnership working, I hope that we maintain continued progress in this area.

### **The Queen's Platinum Jubilee:**

On the city's wider celebrations for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, we know many of our residents across will want to mark this historic anniversary and celebrate Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II's remarkable seventy-year reign over the four days of the Jubilee.

This is the first time any British monarch has celebrated a platinum Jubilee and given York's long and proud association with the Queen, we want to make it easy for local residents, businesses and communities to organise a street party and celebrate Her Majesty's incredible record of public service.

Over the four days, there will be a great deal going on in York to commemorate the Jubilee, and our newly launched webpage (<https://www.york.gov.uk/YorkCelebratesJubilee>) will provide all the details on the events taking place in the city, from tree planting as mentioned, through to Beacon lighting.

The page provides information about how residents and communities can apply to organise a street party, including guidance on naming events, the use of social media, and the sharing of national and local resources. Groups wanting to plan a road closure for their community street party can find links to the relevant form they need to complete to apply for a road closure. There will be no road closure fees for resident, community organised and charity events.

### **York Station Front:**



The first stage of work to improve York Station gateway is now currently taking place on Queen Street. The work on Queen Street marks the beginning of the project, with the main stage of work on the scheme set to begin later this year.

As I have detailed in previous reports, the York Station Front scheme will completely transform the station frontage, providing an improved transport interchange, as well as revamping the public space around the station. It is hoped that the scheme will help to encourage more people to walk, cycle and use public transport to access the station, as well as create a more welcoming and improved setting outside the station.

Last year a planning application was approved to transform the front of York Railway Station, with the full scheme being valued at over £25 million, which in turn is funded by the West Yorkshire-Plus Transport Fund and the Leeds City Region Transforming Cities Fund.

Yorkshire Water began their work on the Queen Street slip road in February, and this is expected to last until mid-March. They will be working to divert a water main and install new meters. Whilst access down the road will be possible, with traffic management measures in place.

### **Additional Restrictions Grant payments**

The Council has begun making the first of the latest phase of Additional Restrictions Grant payments to eligible businesses affected by the impact of the Omicron variant.

In February, we opened a new round of Additional Restrictions Grant funding to support businesses severely impacted by the rise of the Omicron variant, but not able to receive any other form of COVID-19 grant support.

Since we opened this new round of grant payments, we have received more than 150 applications from local businesses. For those interested businesses who haven't applied, you can find more information about the Additional Restrictions Grant application process, funding and eligibility criteria here on the council's website: <https://www.york.gov.uk/ARG>.

## **Breakfast clubs for York Armed Forces Veterans:**

As part of the council's Armed Forces Covenant work, new Breakfast Clubs have been established to allow members of the Armed Forces family to meet face to face in a relaxed and social environment. People can come along to enjoy breakfast and company with others who have similar, shared experiences, which can help to combat loneliness that some veterans feel when they leave service.

There are no fees and people only have to pay for their own breakfast. The clubs do not exist to raise funds for any charity, organisation or business and are purely social events. The sessions are open to all members of the Armed Forces family, including regular members of the Army, Navy and Air Force, reservists, service leavers, veterans of all ages and their families.

Here in York, we are committed to supporting serving Armed Forces personnel, veterans, and their families through the work of the Armed Forces Covenant, and the breakfast clubs are a great way for veterans to meet people who have shared experiences. I would like to thank all the York businesses who are involved in supporting this excellent initiative.