

Report to Full Council from the Leader of the Council

As we enter the festive period, I am sure everyone will be aware that it remains a challenging winter period for the city, particularly with the increase in the infection rate of Covid-19 and the emergence of the Omicron variant, which understandably, is of concern. Despite these difficulties, I know that our staff, partners and the city's keyworkers will continue to do all that they can to help protect residents and visitors, as well as support our local businesses and communities.

At the same time, work continues to progress a number of important strategic issues for the city, including unlocking devolution, responding to the integration of health and social care, developing the council's budget proposals, progressing major regeneration projects across the city and readying our frontline services to respond to some of the adverse weather that we have already seen.

Before I provide the substantive updates in this report, I would just like to take this opportunity to thank again our staff, partners, councillors, residents and businesses for their continued work. I hope that everyone has the opportunity to rest over the festive period and I wish you and your families all the very best this Christmas.

Covid-19 and Winter Campaign:

Infection rates continue to be a cause of concern and with the recent emergence of the omicron variant of the virus; the Council is doing what it can to encourage everyone in the city to enjoy what York has to offer safely. At the time of writing this report, the latest official "validated" rate of new Covid cases per 100,000 of population, for the period 20.11.21 to 26.11.21 in York, was 337.4 (712 cases). In contrast, the national and regional averages at this date were 441.1 and 353.1 respectively.

In response, the Council has launched our new winter campaign to help 'keep York safe and open' over the festive period. As part of this campaign, the Council has committed to provide hundreds of free face coverings for distribution in retail spaces, as thousands of visitors and shoppers visit our city. Together with signage and posters for businesses to display, it is hoped the campaign, which launched in mid-November, will encourage residents, visitors and those who work in the city to continue with measures that help reduce the spread of Covid.

In order to ensure the messages of the campaign reach as far as possible, we would be grateful if colleagues could share related social media posts and promote the messages of the campaign to local communities. All the resources are available on <https://www.york.gov.uk/BusinessToolkit>, should anyone want to use them.

In the absence of clear Government advice, we will continue to encourage residents and visitors, where possible, to take these important measures to ensure York is as safe as possible, and I know that our Public Health Team will continue to provide specialist advice to local schools, businesses and organisations in the difficult weeks ahead.

Integration of Health and Social Care:

The Council, together with our partners on the York Health and Care Alliance, have continued to work to respond to the incoming legislative changes surrounding the integration of health and social care, as well as begin to develop a set of local priorities for health partners to focus on in order to improve health services for residents.

More recently, we have written to the ICS Board to underline that it is our view that the responsibility for planning and delivering quality services needs to be carried out at the York level, with assurance to the ICS Board. Colleagues will know that York and North Yorkshire already have well established partnership arrangements that are informal and respect the democratic and organisational autonomy of York. In a very similar case to Local Government Reorganisation, we want decisions to continue to be made locally, whilst working jointly with North Yorkshire.

Given the significance of this work and the potential financial resources available via the integration of health and social care, I have asked that an all-member briefing be arranged in advance of January's Executive meeting, so councillors have the opportunity to be briefed on the latest detail and ask questions directly to the officers involved in this process.

Devolution in York and North Yorkshire:

Since my last report to Full Council, I'm afraid to say that we still await publication of the Government's Levelling-Up White Paper. At the time of writing this report, it is rumoured that the Government's Levelling-Up White Paper will be published in January and that in turn, this will trigger the next step in taking forward the devolution negotiations. As highlighted in my previous report, we will continue to explore all options, as we want to secure the best possible deal for York.

Ultimately, the final say on devolution will come to Full Council and once we hear back from the Government, I have asked that briefings be offered to all members to provide the latest updates on this process.

The Local Plan:

Work has continued to progress York's Local Plan. As colleagues will know, the draft Local Plan is one of the most significant strategic documents for our city, as it will determine how York develops over the next 20 years. Therefore, I am pleased that the Government's appointed planning inspectors will undertake a series of public examination sessions of York's Local Plan in 2022, with the first hearing sessions set to take place from February. These hearings are the next step in the process of adopting a Local Plan for the city, and they will provide the opportunity for the Council to respond to the issues raised in the sessions.

The inspectors will take into account the comments submitted to date, as far as they relate to soundness considerations such as whether the plan is justified, effective and consistent with national policy. All aspects of the plan will be examined by the inspectors during the hearing sessions.

2022/23 Council Budget Proposals:

Our proposals for the 2022/23 Council Budget have now been published, in advance of the December Decision Session meetings that are soon to take place. We have committed to publish our budget proposals earlier this year and I am pleased to see the publication of reports before Christmas, so colleagues, residents and businesses have more time to provide their feedback on the proposals.

In advance of these proposals being published, we have been lobbying the Government, via the Autumn Spending Review, to underline the incredibly difficult financial situation that City of York Council, and many other local authorities, are currently facing following successive years of Government cuts to Local Government and more recently, the economic impact of the pandemic.

As part of submission to the Spending Review, we urged the Government to provide long-term funding certainty and address the immediate funding challenges local authorities are facing across the country. With that in mind, colleagues will understand my disappointment with the recent Spending Review and why the Council continues to face unprecedented financial challenges. In response, we have put forward a series of proposals to stabilise the authority's financial position in the face of financial challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and rising social care costs. The proposed budget will make significant investment in Children's Services and Adults' Social Care, and reflects the Council's commitment to protecting frontline services, accelerating recovery to 'build back better', supporting our local communities and taking action to address climate change.

Community Renewal Fund:

Last month, it was announced that 2 York based projects are among the 477 locally led projects to receive a share of the Community Renewal Fund.

Archaeology On Prescription, run by the York Archaeological Trust, helps people develop skills and improve their confidence through working with archaeological excavations. The project has been awarded over £120,000 to allow them to work with groups including young people who are no longer in the education system and who are not working or being trained for work, adults with mental health issues, people leaving the Armed Forces and those referred by GPs.

The second project to receive funding is the 'Street Life' programme run by the University of York. The project, which has been awarded over £450,000 and aims to reconnect local communities with Coney Street in the city centre. Through pop-up activities and virtual experiences, the project will aim to transform the streetscape, repurpose empty units and connect retail premises with creative, heritage-led renewal. The planned activities will include musical performances, open-mic sessions, hands-on letterpress printing workshops and more.

Integrated Rail Plan, GBR and Haxby Station:

I am sure colleagues will agree that the recently published Integrated Rail Plan was hugely disappointing for our region. We simply cannot talk about levelling up and a commitment to the North without addressing the decades of underinvestment across our transport networks. Failure to deliver on HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail is undermining the levelling up agenda. Whilst any investment in existing lines, such as the East Coast Main Line, is of course welcome and important, the lack of a coherent and joined-up strategy is frustrating.

We all know that York is one of the best connected cities in the country and will remain at the heart of the rail industry in the North and whilst the announcements regarding the Integrated Rail Plan are disappointing, our work continues to make the case for York by bidding to become the new home of Great British Rail. Recently, the Council and partners met to discuss how we can take our bid for GBR forward, so that when the Government releases the information on how the competition will be run, we can be ready to move forward.

At the same time, we are making good headway closer to home by progressing the Haxby Railway Station project. In a report set to be presented to the Executive this month, a 'preferred' site to the north of Haxby has been identified. In the report, the

two most viable sites, Station Road (site 1) and Towthorpe Road (site 2), have been compared and evaluated.

The evaluation from council officers suggests that site 2, on Towthorpe Road, has a much stronger case for the station location, citing the ownership of the land, deliverability within the Department for Transport's required timescales, potential connectivity, and ease of access as part of the rationale. After extensive work by local Councillors and officers on what has been a decades long ambition for local communities, I'm delighted to see this report come forward and that good progress is being maintained on the scheme.

Business Voucher Scheme:

Our Business Growth Voucher Scheme, worth £500,000, launched earlier this month in order to provide additional support to York's businesses. The voucher scheme is funded by the final £1.4 million instalment of the Additional Restrictions Grant, and we expect that this funding can be used to help support at least 450 businesses in the city.

The Business Growth Voucher Scheme will enable small and micro businesses to navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, stabilise their business models and refresh with help from York's business community. This scheme is designed to build upon the success of our Micro Business Grants Scheme, which saw grants of up to £1,000 provided to 1,114 small and micro businesses during the early stages of the pandemic.

The scheme will issue vouchers of up to £1000 to eligible businesses in York, which can then be used to procure services from a list of approved York-based providers. The scheme asks local businesses to identify their key requirements, difficulties and the services they need to overcome them. These services can range from business management, legal aid and publicity to marketing, sales and e-commerce. Based on their requirements, the scheme will connect local businesses with relevant York-based service providers.

York Railway Station Frontage:

Work to progress the York Station Frontage scheme has taken another step forward, following the Executive's approval in November. Earlier this year, the planning application to modernise the arrival to the station was approved. This also included plans to remove the Queen Street Bridge, which hasn't been needed since trains stopped passing under it in the 1960s. Removing the bridge will create space for vastly improved access for all modes of transport.

The York Station regeneration project, which has been developed by the council in partnership with the West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Network Rail and LNER, will change and improve the entrance to the railway station by keeping vehicles and pedestrians apart, making it easier to change between different modes of transport, creating new public spaces and a more pedestrian-friendly experience and an improved setting for our historic City Walls.

Frontline Services this Winter:

With the weather starting to grow colder, our frontline teams have been preparing to support communities and businesses across the city. We have stockpiled 3,000 tonnes of road salt, which is stored in the salt barn at Hazel Court depot. On average, our crews spread around 6,000 tonnes of road salt per season, over 75 to 80 days. We have a full crew of staff for the gritters, who operate during the whole season. Each season, our crews treat eight routes across the highway, covering 226 miles of York's road network, including 13.6miles of priority footpaths and off road cycle network, and when resources allow, 36 miles of cycle network.

Around 180 salt bins, amounting to approximately 36 tonnes of salt in total, are located across the city in prominent places such as near slopes or shopping areas. Information on how to locate salt bins or report them empty can be found online.

Following the success of a trial to grit off York's off road cycle network last winter, the pilot will continue this year. Small tractors, known as 'baby gritters', will be used to grit 11 miles of York's cycle/walking network to help keep people safer in winter conditions. Popular cycle routes, including Scarborough Bridge and other off road bridges too, are also included.

As colleagues will know, the Council also runs a snow warden scheme, which supports around 200 volunteers and is encouraging more people to join. Volunteers receive training, equipment and insurance cover. They choose where and when to keep pavements free of ice and snow and make a real difference to their neighbourhoods.

Christmas Holiday Activities:

Families in the city are to benefit from an expanded city-wide holiday activity programme for children and young people during the coming Christmas break. The programme is being funded through the Holiday Activities and Food programme, which provides healthy food and activities.

The Christmas sessions, which all include a daily nutritious meal, are available to children who are eligible for free school meals. They include schemes run by clubs, charities, schools and organisations including York City Knights rugby club, York City Football Club and York Theatre Royal. These activities build on the activities that were funded and run during the last summer holiday.

York Community Woodland:

I was delighted to join representatives from Forestry England and school children from Poppleton Ousebank Primary School to commemorate the planting of the first trees at the city's new community woodland.

York Community Woodland will be planted on 194 acres of land to the West of York near the village of Knapton. This first planting is paving the way for over 100,000 trees and shrubs at the woodland to be planted over the next few years. As announced earlier this year, the preferred delivery partner for the woodland is Forestry England, who will be planning, planting and caring for the woodland.

York Business Week:

With the support of city partners, this year's York Business Week came to an end earlier this month, having hosted over 35 successful events and welcoming over 600 delegates from a wide range of businesses. The week was aimed to engage and connect York's business community through various virtual and in-person seminars and networking events. The theme of this year's Business Week was 'Rebuilding for Growth', a topic which was certainly echoed during the Conference.

I would like to thank everyone who participated in the conference, from the many expert speakers, to those partners who hosted numerous events. Given the challenges of Covid-19, the conference was a great success and we hope to continue collaborating with our partners for many such future endeavours.

Elections:

I would like to take this opportunity to thank our staff who successfully managed the recent Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner and the Haxby Town Council Elections. The Council created several new polling stations in York, in order to avoid disruption to local schools and allow Covid-19-safe measures to be put in place.

I would also like to give my congratulations to Zoë Metcalfe for her election as Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner, and also to Ruth Pearson for her election to Haxby Town Council.

16 December 2021



City of York Housing Delivery Programme and the UN International Centre of Excellence:

I am pleased to say that our innovative Housing Delivery Programme has gained us membership of the United Nation's International Centre of Excellence (the first English local authority to join).

The UN's programme, highlighted at the recent UN COP26, seeks to promote best practice on tackling the climate emergency whilst reducing fuel poverty. By joining this influential network of 26 members, we will share our experience with others, whilst gathering international best practice to replicate here in York.