

Report of the Executive Member for Finance, Performance, Major Projects and Equalities

My first report to Council focuses primarily on a budget amendment that will enable our administration to deliver on our key pledges. It also sets out our intention that Equality and inclusion will drive our decision making.

Budget Amendment

The attached budget amendment (Annex A) refocuses spending including the saving made by the reduction in the number of Executive Members and reversing the allocation of venture funding to wards. This will be diverted to fund additional outreach Youth Services, enabling more communities to benefit from support for young people, especially important in the context of the ongoing impact of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

Funding will also be provided to pilot the extension of universal free school meals to Key Stage 2 to inform the future scale up across all primary schools. The key pledge to mobilise the city to give free school meals to all primary school children will deliver benefits to families across the city and will ultimately result in lower spending for the Council, through public health benefits and lower costs throughout the lifetime of our citizens. Children cannot learn when they are hungry, this worsens the attainment gap, a persistent challenge in York, and leads to long term impacts to children, their families and communities. Families struggling to cope will save around £500 per year if free school meals are provided, a real and direct support to cope with the cost of living crisis. We will also reverse a previous cut of £24k restoring a specialist catering adviser to support this pilot.

We have allocated funding for consultation and communication relating to work needed to reverse the 'Blue Badge Ban' and improve access to the city centre for all. The consultation will be a genuine engagement with the people most affected by access restrictions to refine our plans for restoring access to the city centre and longer term improvements to access across the city. We will also invest in better communication with those most affected by access restrictions, as we enact the plans. We are committed to reducing unnecessary vehicle journeys through the city

centre but that must not be at the expense of those who need to use a vehicle to access the city. The Human Rights of disabled people are being curtailed by lack of access to their city centre and this cannot be allowed to continue. York is known for being welcoming, a Human Rights City with a reach across the world and we must restore access as soon as practical while working to repair the damage done.

We will fund a new post to support the Council in accessing external funding opportunities, enabling greater opportunities for inward investment, delivering more for the city despite cuts to central funding. We have allocated a small budget for pilot planning delivery for our 'Neighbourhood Caretaker' pledge and a further small sum to establish a York Climate Emergency Fund, giving a platform to engage people across the city as stakeholders and investors in climate change projects, and to seed fund community projects that emerge from a climate emergency 'hackathon'. Addressing the climate emergency is not something that can be done by the Council alone and we need to engage everyone in co-creating solutions for our city.

Highways are an area of ongoing concern for all residents, and central funding is not sufficient to halt the decline. Short term pothole patching is just that, a short term solution that is expected not to last. By suspending the allocation to the Ward Committee Highways fund for the current financial year we create capacity for longer term highways repairs, increasing the lifespan of the highways and driving efficiency. This will be reviewed in future budget planning.

It is no secret that York Council like many of our residents and every other Council is facing a financial crisis. Whilst it would be lovely to be able to afford to fund lots of ward schemes we need to face the reality of the financial situation. We just cannot afford it. It is much more important that we get basics right. Therefore the budget amendment sees the suspension of the ward highways funding programme and invests the funding in our roads, by increasing the efficiency and prolonging the life of roads by increasing the number of structural repairs to our road surfaces.

In housing the increase in depreciation charge enables us to respond to the urgent issue of damp, which has significant health impacts when it leads to mould. Accelerating repairs and the retrofit programme will make homes easier and cheaper to heat, an important response to the cost of living crisis for some of the most vulnerable in our communities

while reducing carbon emissions. Funding for bringing council houses back into occupation more quickly will enable quicker turnaround, speeding up the process of re-letting to those who are waiting for a property and maximising income to the council. Housing Estate Improvement Programme (HEIP) funding will be refocussed to ensure that it offers genuine benefits to the most vulnerable in our communities, this will be reviewed in future budget planning processes. These changes to funding bring public health benefits through our housing provision.

Funding allocated to ward committees has been reviewed and will be allocated on a need basis. Each ward will receive a basic amount of funding, to ensure that ward committees can respond to the needs in their communities and additional funding will be allocated to those wards with greatest need, to ensure that we target spending to where it can do most good during a cost of living crisis.

Budget setting for 2024/25

Work will now start to prepare the budget for the next financial year. In the face of ongoing funding challenges we will make the process more open and transparent, participatory budget development before the budget comes to Full Council for approval. I look forward to engaging about the funding challenges and spending priorities through this process.

Anti-Racism Strategy

IERUK have published the report funded by CYC as a result of the motion passed unanimously by Council. It makes for uncomfortable but essential reading. We should not be afraid to face up to the problem of racism, we must uncover it and expose it to make change. That change only comes when people, and institutions, accept that it exists and needs to be eliminated. The report and strategy have been developed independently, and are driven by data as well as the lived experience of contributors. I am grateful to all who have been involved, for exposing the scale and depth of the problem so that we can begin the work to address it. The strategy will be discussed at Executive and I look forward to the hard work ahead to implement it across the city in the Council and through our work with partners.

Major projects

We are committed to the delivery of major projects for the city. As an administration we inherit some projects that are not necessarily as we would have developed them and where appropriate we are reviewing aspects to ensure we get the best for the people of York in challenging times. We do however need to be pragmatic ensuring the actual delivery of much needed investment into our city.

By working with the rail industry officers have secured £1.5 million for Haxby Station to develop plans and a business case for the station. That business case was submitted to Government four months ago. We call on Government to announce the funding for this project.

The enabling works to move gas, telecoms and power supplies off Queen Street Bridge are nearly complete. This will allow a contractor to demolish the bridge and create the space to create a fitting entrance to the city as part of the Station Frontage project. While there have been some concerns raised about access aspects of the design we are hopeful that suitable resolutions can be achieved, to ensure that all citizens and travellers can enjoy the improvements to our transport system.

Work to develop the dualling project for York Outer Ring Road scheme continues. Whilst the dualling is key to the delivery of aspects of the Local Plan, just as important is the development of a Local Transport Plan and projects that will capture the space created by moving the through traffic from city to the ring road. We are awaiting further detail on this aspect to ensure we not only deliver the local plan but do so in a way that achieves the Council strategic ambition for our climate, health and wellbeing and economy.

We look forward to working with our strategic partners on York Central. There remain opportunities to improve the scheme both in terms of what it delivers for the city but also in terms of how the proposals work for our current residents, because we are not happy with the plans as they stand regarding access through the museum for residents.