

Leader's Speech, 24th July

Members and officers of the council, in the two months since my last address to Full Council, we have made significant progress on a number of key priorities for Tameside.

At the end of June I had the pleasure of joining colleagues, stakeholders and budding entrepreneurs at Ashton Old Baths, to celebrate the first anniversary of the reopening of the famous building.

Now operated by specialist business incubation experts Oxford Innovation, the Ashton Old Baths have now assumed their rightful place as the jewel in the crown of our pioneering digital strategy. Just as they once stood as a striking monument of Tameside's proud industrial past, now they stand as a statement of our shared, technological future.

During the course of the evening, those in attendance had the opportunity to hear our tenant entrepreneurs explain how the Ashton Old Baths have helped them realise their ambitions for their businesses.

As somebody who has closely followed the renovation from its earliest days, I'm delighted to see how the grand old building has been given a new purpose and lease of life.

We will also shortly finalise the contract with Robertson Construction Group for Vision Tameside, securing the completion of the Joint Service Centre following the collapse of Carillion at the beginning of the year.

Due to the delays outside of our control caused by the need to engage with a new contractor, it has been necessary to draw down £9.4 million from the Council's Capital Programme.

While committing to that kind of additional spending is not a decision that should ever be taken lightly, it is clear to me that there is no other alternative. Better a more expensive but finished building that can begin to pay back what was spent on it than an incomplete white elephant that will only drain our coffers further.

A little further down the road, the bus station has been partially closed to allow construction of the new transport interchange in Ashton-under-Lyne to begin.

Once completed, the interchange will offer a state-of-the-art gateway not just in and out of Ashton, but also to Tameside's other towns and further afield to Greater Manchester, Derbyshire and Yorkshire.

Construction is due to be finished by spring 2020, and I look forward to further updating you on its progress in the months ahead.

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Over a year after the election of Andy Burnham as the first Mayor of Greater Manchester, we are also beginning to see how devolution is making a real difference to the place that we all call home.

I'm honoured to announce that I have been asked by the Mayor to take up the position of Vice Chair of the Combined Authority, a role I will share with Sir Richard Leese.

The issues that we face as a city region do not stop at the borders of Tameside, or Oldham, or Stockport or Salford. They are issues that involve every part of Greater Manchester, and they therefore require every part of Greater Manchester to come together to solve them.

We've all seen the good work that has been undertaken to date by the Stalybridge Town Centre Challenge team. But in other ways as well, such as to holding the government to account for the appalling service and conditions on Northern railways, we've shown we now have a platform to map out Greater Manchester's future in a new and powerful way.

Nowhere is this more apparent than when it comes to protecting the air that we all breathe.

Air pollution nationally is believed to contribute, in one form or another, to 40,000 deaths every year. That is nothing short of a public health crisis, and it is something that all of us need to take responsibility for.

I think Tameside can, and will, play a leading role within Greater Manchester in finding a solution.

At the start of June we welcomed Chris Boardman, the former Olympic athlete, to Tameside to discuss a comprehensive plan of work to encourage people to cycle, walk and use public transport in Greater Manchester.

The plan, named "Made to Move" contains a number of eye-catching and ambitious projects, including the investment of £1.5 billion over 10 years into a ring-fenced walking and cycling infrastructure fund.

However, there are also a number of improvements that we are carrying out right now, without the need for major building works or spending.

Adding cycling racks in town centres or marking lanes and crossings on roads may not sound like much, but when put together they create an environment in which residents can be assured that walking and cycling are safe and supported options.

Tameside also took the lead in this year's Clean Air Day on 21st June as residents, led by council staff and Russell Scott Primary School, came together to declare what they would pledge to do to reduce air pollution; even if it was as something as simple as walking to work or school once a week.

I also intend for Tameside to hold its own Green Summit later this year, modelled on the Greater Manchester event, to bring together experts, partners and residents to discuss how best to meet our goals on air pollution and the wider environment.

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Because if we were ever in any doubt about how important protecting and preserving our environment is, all we have had to do for the past few weeks is look to the moors above Stalybridge and Mossley for the starkest of reminders.

At the end of June, the worst series of moors fires in living memory led to the declaration of a major emergency, the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service calling in the military for assistance, and the evacuation of several residents in Carrbrook.

At times, the fires were so widespread that NASA satellites were capable of picking the smoke out from orbit. A thorough assessment of the damage wrought has yet to be carried out, but it is estimated that up to 2,000 acres, or 8 square kilometres, of moorland may have been affected.

This is a natural disaster unlike anything we have ever seen before in this part of the world, but once again, our emergency services, council staff and communities proved beyond any doubt their resilience and bravery.

That includes the men and women of the Greater Manchester Fire and Rescue Service, Greater Manchester Police, the Royal Air Force and the soldiers of the 4th Battalion, Royal Regiment of Scotland.

That includes organisations like the Public Health England and United Utilities, who also lent their expertise to support those that worked around the clock to contain and control the blaze.

That includes the residents and businesses who offered people evacuated from their homes places to stay, or who brought refreshments and supplies, often paid for out of their own pocket, to those working on the scene.

That also includes the officers right here at Tameside Council, who went above and beyond the call of duty in transporting firefighters and officers around the moors, conducting air quality assessments, communicating safety advice and clearing up waste. This vital work was noted by all involved in the firefighting efforts, in particular the men and women of the armed forces, who have very kindly gifted us an official regimental plaque in appreciation.

It is a tribute to these combined efforts that the fires have been successfully tackled, with no loss of life or serious injury. Even in the midst of a major and unprecedented incident, we have shown that the outcomes from working together are much greater than the sum of our individual parts.

But we also must look at the bigger picture as well. While we do not yet know what caused the fires, it is clear that they were exacerbated by a heatwave so intense that it has turned the acres of scrubland and vegetation into so much dry fuel and kindling.

Since records began in 1910, the nine warmest years in British history have all occurred in the 2000s. We must be prepared for the possibility that, unless we start taking serious collective action as a planet, incidents like we've seen back in June may end up becoming increasingly commonplace.

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Despite this, I look forward to the rest of the year, and beyond, with confidence.

In the face of challenge we have proven that Tameside can do more than endure, we can face down the obstacles and press onwards regardless.

I would like to thank all of those who have made that possible in the face of difficult circumstances. In particular, I want to recognise those working in services that, while often flying under the radar, are vital to protecting the health, safety, wellbeing and happiness of Tameside.

I pledge to you that, as a council, we will ensure that all parts of the council have what they need to carry out their jobs effectively, and to build further on the progress we have made since I assumed office.

Not just in terms of buildings and summits, but in continuing to ensure that we have the resources, the people and the vision in place to preserve Tameside's past, maintain Tameside's present and secure Tameside's future.

Thank you.