

**Leader's Speech Full Council 7 December - Draft v2**

*(2,819 words/ 21.7 minutes)*

Members and officers of the council,

I welcome you all to this final meeting of Full Council in 2021, at the end of what has been a momentous and eventful year for Tameside.

Before I begin, I'd like to take a brief moment to reflect on how far we've come in twelve months.

December 2020 saw us stand at a critical juncture in the coronavirus pandemic. While the creation of an effective vaccine promised light at the end of the tunnel, the emergence of more contagious variants and the imposition of a third national lockdown after New Year meant that the danger of widespread infection and death remained very much with us.

As 2021 draws to a close we must remain aware there can still be no room for complacency when it comes to protecting ourselves and those around us. However I believe we are also in a position to start building Tameside into a borough equipped to thrive in the post-pandemic world.

Over the next twenty minutes or so I want to provide Council with a brief overview of where we have taken the first steps to achieve this ambition in 2021, and where I believe we need to accelerate our pace in 2022.

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As you may already be aware, the emergence of the new "Omicron" variant of coronavirus has led the government reintroducing a number of protective measures.

These include the compulsory wearing of face masks in shops and public transport, requiring all contacts of suspected Omicron cases to self-isolate for 10 days regardless of whether they have been vaccinated or not, and tightening up the rules for people arriving into the UK from abroad. Booster jabs, which were previously available for adults over 40, will also now be offered to all adults by the end of January and second vaccination doses rolled out to children aged 12-15.

I know this is not the situation any of us wished to face so close to Christmas, but there are concerns among scientists that this new Omicron variant has the potential to be both more infectious and less responsive to vaccines than anything we have encountered so far.

While infection rates in Greater Manchester remain below the English average they are increasing in seven out of ten local authority areas, including in Tameside. Until we get to grips with this latest challenge, please wear your facemask, get your vaccinations, and do your best to protect yourself and those around you.

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As I said at the start, once an effective vaccine for the coronavirus was created it was clear that a swift and thorough rollout throughout 2021 would be the single most important factor in fighting back against the pandemic.

From the very beginning, Tameside & Glossop drew on its experience of integration and coproduction to launch an ambitious vaccination programme, bringing together local public, private, voluntary and community sector organisations under the banner of a “leave no one behind” approach.

As part of this, the Hyde Primary Care Network vaccination site was designated a “drive through” site. This gave many people, especially the elderly or vulnerable, the option of remaining in their cars while receiving the vaccination.

Thanks to the efforts of everybody involved, by May this year we had exceeded the Greater Manchester average for both first and second doses. As of yesterday, 73.3% of our residents have been fully vaccinated before taking booster shots into account.

In recognition of this extraordinary work our Vaccination Rollout programme was recognised by the prestigious LGC Awards, receiving a shortlisting in the category of “Public Health”.

But the fight against coronavirus is not just about getting people vaccinated, as vital as that is. We also must empower our residents and communities to make the right choices in regards to protecting themselves and those around them.

We recognised early on during the coronavirus pandemic that there are many in Tameside who, quite understandably, preferred to receive their information from people that they know and trust. It is for this reason that we established the Community Champions scheme.

Throughout the past year more than 250 residents have signed up to be Community Champions, undertaking a variety of actions to disseminate information and seek feedback from our residents.

To give just a few examples; Community Champions have visited Hyde Jamia Mosque to increase the visibility of messaging and vaccine take-up among ethnic minority communities, designed and distributed a newsletter for elderly residents, and created videos and a “My Covid” activity book for young people.

Such has been the success of the scheme that we’ve taken steps to make the Community Champions model a permanent element of our approach to community engagement going forward, in areas as diverse as health and wellbeing, community cohesion and digital exclusion.

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2021 was also the year where we committed wholeheartedly to a policy of Inclusive Growth for Tameside.

As we seek to recover from the economic and social damage wreaked by both the coronavirus pandemic and a decade of austerity, we recognise that the only kind of growth worth pursuing is that which creates opportunities for all, and distributes the benefits of prosperity fairly across our borough.

The single largest project where we are striving to make this ambition a reality is, of course, the Godley Green Garden Village. Outline planning permission for the development was submitted in October, and the relevant documents are now publically available for scrutiny. I would ask anybody who still has questions or concerns to direct them to the formal Local Planning Authority route where they can be addressed in full.

But while Godley Green is still very much in the initial stages, 2021 saw the full completion of a number of other projects to drive inclusive growth in Tameside.

This included the new Droylsden Library in Guardsman Tony Downes House, the construction of which also incorporated a tribute to the former Leader of the Council Kieran Quinn. In addition to this, the month of July saw the opening of the new state-of-the-art pool in Hyde as well as the successful execution of the second phase of the Ashton Old Baths redevelopment.

As our society begins to open up again after multiple lockdowns, we have also made a special effort this year to put on a slate of activities to bring communities back together and revive our town centres both economically and culturally. This has seen the introduction of regular events such as the Ashton Artisan Market and Stalybridge Street Feast, as well as seasonal celebrations like the spectacular Winter Parade held in Hyde last month.

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Moving onto the key priorities for next year, 2022 will be when the green transport revolution in Tameside and Greater Manchester truly begins to spread its wings. Following an extensive period of consultation and negotiation, May will see the introduction of the GM Clean Air Zone. This scheme will form the cornerstone of our plans to tackle dangerous levels of air pollution, which are believed to contribute to the premature deaths of 1,200 people every year in the city region.

Despite what you may have heard, this is not a congestion charge. Drivers of private cars, motorbikes and mopeds will not have to pay to travel through the Clean Air Zone. However, some commercial vehicles that do not meet the emissions standards, usually because they are older or more polluting, will be subject to a charge. Owners of such vehicles, including HGVs, coaches, vans and taxis, will be given the option of accessing government funding to purchase modern replacements. With this support we fully hope, and expect, that in time the amount of money raised from the Clean Air Zone will fall to zero.

Following extensive lobbying from the Council and local residents, sections of the A628 and A57 in Mottram and Hollingworth will now also be subject to the Clean Air Zone. This corrects the inconsistency of roads in Tameside with dangerous levels of air pollution not being included to the scheme due to them being managed by Highways England.

But the introduction of the Clean Air Zone, as important as it is, is only one part of the jigsaw that is Greater Manchester taking the fight to the climate crisis in 2022.

While this year's Budget was a disappointment in many ways, it did release a significant amount of capital funding to turbo-charge the development of our Bee Network, the comprehensive upgrade to our city region's cycling and walking infrastructure.

As part of this, we've secured in principle approval for no less than 11 potential new Bee Network schemes throughout the borough. Two of these improvements, the first between Chadwick Dam between Ashton and Stalybridge, and the second from Hill Street to Trafalgar Square in Ashton, have already been carried out.

As we move through the next year I hope to bring you news about the completion or breaking ground of many more as the Tameside branch of the Bee Network comes to fruition.

We're also in the final stages of preparation before we submit our Bus Services Improvement Plan to the government. This is Greater Manchester's blueprint for a modern, affordable and accessible bus network for the city region, on a par with London and many other major cities in Europe.

Improving our bus services by simultaneously reducing fares and travel times, while increasing frequency of services and environmental efficiency, will transform not just the economic prospects of Greater Manchester, but the people who live in it as well. If we're truly serious about fulfilling our ambitions of being a world-leading city we cannot, and will not, accept anything less.

We know it can be done, we know how we're going to do it, and we have the political will to see it through. If the government backs up our commitment with the necessary funding, we hope to see this new and improved public service up and running in Tameside by 2025.

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But side-by-side with these long term ambitions for 2022, we must also not lose sight of the obligation we have to make our resident's lives better today. In particular, I want to see us redouble our efforts to make sure that everybody in Tameside can live free from crime and abuse.

Many residents are concerned about the increase in anti-social behaviour in their communities. I share these concerns. Which is why in 2022 I intend to work closely with the new Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police, Stephen Watson, to carry out a swift and clear response against those who pay no respect to Tameside or the people in it.

Data released by the GMP has shown that the number of recorded noise complaints, the most highly reported type of anti-social behaviour, were four times higher in 2020-21 than in 2018-19. This does not even cover more serious forms of ASB that may involve drugs or alcohol.

As always, the impact of austerity is impossible to ignore. A decade of cuts have meant that that local authorities, who work with police and communities across the country to prevent anti-social behaviour, will need at least £2.5 billion in additional funding over the next financial year just to maintain existing service provision.

Despite the national trends and finances being against us, such is the seriousness with which we're taking this that last month we completed the installation of two new police posts in Ashton Market Hall and Ryecroft Hall in Audenshaw. These will provide touchdown points for police officers and PCSOs to help them maintain a visible public presence in the borough.

For many of us, the highlight of this summer was undoubtedly witnessing our heroic national team reach the final of Euro 2020 where, despite a truly valiant effort, they fell short of victory in the most heart-breaking of circumstances.

Unfortunately, this once-in-a-generation achievement was marred by the actions of a small but hateful minority who, both on social media and in the real world, chose to indulge in the most appalling abuse.

I said at the time that these racists, because that is what they are, were on the wrong side of history. I stand by that statement today.

That's why next year we will work ever more closely with local communities and organisations to raise awareness of, and encourage victims to report, incidents of hate crime in Tameside.

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2022 will also see us deliver on the next phase of Inclusive Growth, leveraging our competitive advantages in digital infrastructure, health innovation and advanced manufacturing to build a vibrant and productive 21<sup>st</sup> century economy in Tameside.

To give just one example of how we're actively striving to make this a reality, in October this year we took over the management of the St Petersfield area. This will enable us to create a modern and tailored employment hub that, when combined with the adjacent Ashton Old Baths development, will help attract and retain businesses and start-ups in the digital, creative and technology sectors.

A budget of £20,000 has already been approved to improve the condition of the public realm within the area, including tree maintenance, grass cutting and vegetation clearance. From early next year, this will be complemented with the release of a masterplan and development prospectus laying out our full offer to tenants and investors.

No serious vision of Inclusive Growth is possible without taking into account the impact of housing on health, employment and education. While good housing can be a vehicle to better life outcomes, bad housing is almost always a barrier to the same.

That's why next month will see the public release of Tameside's Housing Strategy, laying out in detail how we intend to deliver a balanced and sustainable housing market that meets the needs of all our residents.

This will incorporate key priorities such as taking into account the needs of an ageing population, maximising our provision of affordable, specialist and supported housing, preventing homelessness and rough sleeping, and improving the quality of our private rented sector.

Following extensive lobbying of the government, we've also received funding to take forward two projects that I know are close to the heart of many in this room.

It gives me great pleasure to say that we have received almost £20 million to begin a series of improvements in Ashton town centre. This includes the redevelopment of the former bus station site, new walking and cycling routes, building new shops, homes and offices and, after a wait of over six years, restoring and reopening the historic Ashton Town Hall.

Transport for Greater Manchester have also been awarded a grant of £50,000 to explore options for new rail service between Tameside and Stockport, finally restoring and enhancing the links between our historically connected boroughs.

But for these ambitious and exciting plans to fulfil our pledge to foster Inclusive Growth, we must also seek to understand the needs and concerns of those who exist at the very margins of our communities.

In November I had the pleasure of joining residents, community groups and partner organisations for the official launch of the Tameside Poverty Truth Commission.

The guiding principle of the Poverty Truth Commission is simple but powerful. Creating effective and lasting solutions to poverty is only possible when we understand the everyday reality of poverty.

In order to achieve this, our launch event invited residents with lived experience of poverty; Fran, Ed, Helen, Anthony, Christopher, Karen and Diana, to speak their truth. Through their honest and difficult stories, we will now work together to identify the most urgent priorities to address in the fight against poverty in Tameside, and craft solutions to meet them head-on.

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After two years defined and dominated by coronavirus, the gravest public health crisis in living memory, 2022 will be pivotal in determining how Tameside recovers as we emerge into the long awaited but uncertain post-pandemic world.

If 2021 is to be remembered as year of recovery and renewal, let us commit today to employing all of our skills, our resources and our efforts to ensure that 2022 is remembered as a year of transformation. Not just transformation for the better, but transformation for every resident and community in Tameside.

Through a relentless focus on investing for inclusive growth, fostering safe and welcoming communities, and making a difference in the climate crisis we will show that a fairer, better and greener borough is possible.

And for me, our vision of that future is clear.

A vision of Tameside with strong bonds in and between communities.

A vision of Tameside where all our residents feel like their voices and their lives matter.

A vision of Tameside that recognises that the price of inequality is too high to pay.

A vision of Tameside that is proud to play its part in the fight against the climate crisis.

It is unlikely that we will achieve all of this in the space of one year. But the deeper we lay the foundations now, the brighter the future will be for us all.

Thank you.