

Leader's Full Council Speech – 12th January 2021

(1,865 words/14.4 minutes)

Members and officers of the council,

Before I begin, I'd like to take the opportunity to welcome to you to the first meeting of Full Council of 2021.

After the turmoil and uncertainty of last year, I hope everybody has had as good a break as possible given the circumstances, and that you're all ready for what will undoubtedly be a very significant year for Tameside.

Even though barely two weeks of the New Year have passed, we've already witnessed images and events that will resonate through history.

I know that I am not the only one who watched in shock and horror as armed far-right mobs stormed onto the heart of Washington DC to prevent the peaceful transition of power in America.

It provides us with a sobering and stark reminder that democracy, whether it's taking place here or in the White House, is a fragile and precious thing. We can, and sometimes should, disagree on many issues, but those disagreements must be tempered by a spirit of compromise and a common set of basic principles.

At the end of last year we reached a vital milestone in our struggle in the coronavirus pandemic, as we welcomed the news that the coronavirus vaccine developed by Pfizer was now in the process of being rolled out across Tameside and Britain as a whole.

This will be supplemented by the Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine, which was approved on 30 December. Easier to store and transport than the Pfizer equivalent, we stand ready to use whatever stocks of it we get whenever we get it.

So far in Tameside 9,000 people in the top priority groups have now have received their first jab, and I'm happy to say that if we continue to receive an adequate supply of the vaccine from the government we are on course to have all of our most in-need residents protected by mid-February.

As per the national guidance from NHS England we received yesterday, we are delaying the rollout of the second jab to later in the year. This is in order to ensure that as many as possible get their initial vaccination.

I know this will be disappointing for many, however the models suggest that vaccinating a greater number of people with one dose will prevent more deaths and hospitalisations than giving both jabs to a smaller number of people.

Unfortunately, as you are no doubt aware, over the Christmas period we've also seen the emergence of a far more infectious strain of coronavirus. This has forced the imposition of another national lockdown to reduce infection rates while the vaccine rollout is in progress.

I know that this not the way that people wanted to begin the New Year, and my heart goes out to everyone – individuals, families and businesses – who have already experienced such a difficult year.

We are under no illusion that the impact of repeated lockdowns on the livelihoods and mental health of many of our residents, as well as the education of our children, has been severe. It grieves me that after all that has happened, you are being asked to make yet more sacrifices.

But, at the same time, the public health experts have made it clear that we are in the middle of the most serious crisis we've faced since the beginning of the pandemic.

Infection rates in Tameside may remain below both the England and Greater Manchester average, but as a country we are experiencing a sustained and dramatic increase in coronavirus infections across the board.

The latest analysis from NHS England shows that just under a third of the beds available to the entire health service are occupied by coronavirus-positive patients. This is 162% higher than even the worst days of the first wave back in mid-April.

If we want to protect our hospitals, not just for those who have coronavirus but for people with other serious health conditions as well, we have no choice except to adhere to the new lockdown rules until this most critical of moments has passed.

As was the case in previous lockdowns, I have no doubt that our residents, Community Champions, council officers and NHS and key workers will rise to the challenge to keep vital services running and support those in need.

Where we have had to close buildings to comply with lockdown restrictions and keep people safe, we are doing everything we can to deliver these services differently and provide safer alternatives. There is also help available for anyone who is struggling either mentally or with accessing food or other types of support.

I hope that the rollout of the vaccine means that we are beginning to glimpse the light at the end of the tunnel of this terrible pandemic, but it is clear that there is still a longer and harder road ahead than we would have hoped.

But if we do as we must and stick to the rules while looking after ourselves and those around us, I know that better times for us all will eventually arrive.

Regardless of what the next few months bring, we must also resolve to continue being a strong voice for Tameside and our residents on the national stage by lobbying the government to do what we know must be done to ensure that nobody is left behind during this new lockdown.

That includes extending coronavirus financial support to the millions that are currently excluded, including many small business owners and self-employed, as well as increasing statutory sick pay so that nobody needs to make the decision between following the law and going to work.

It is also absolutely essential that we reiterate again the need for clear and timely communication between the

government and local communities as to their intentions. Time and again during this pandemic we have either been kept in the dark as major announcements were leaked to the media, or had the rug pulled from under our feet by last minute U-turns.

The government's handling of the school closure issue, where we were told that they would remain open until literally the first day of the new term, is just the latest example of this situation. I know the distress that this caused to parents, teachers and children alike and it could have, and should have, never been allowed to happen.

Looking beyond the coronavirus pandemic for the moment, there are a number of other projects taking place in 2021 that will help shape the future of Tameside.

In March we will be supporting local residents to fill out the 2021 Census. A national survey of all the people and households in England and Wales which takes place every ten years, the Census is unique in that it gives us the most complete picture we have of what our country looks like.

A huge number of organisations, including Tameside Council itself, depend on the information from the Census to make decisions on vital areas like funding and services. Furthermore while previous Censuses saw forms mailed out to every household, in 2021 it is hoped that the vast majority of residents will fill out the Census online.

I expect that every people in this meeting will be involved in our efforts in some capacity, and we will be releasing more information about what this will mean within the next month. By ensuring that as many people take part as possible, you will be helping to plot the course for Tameside now and for the next decade to come.

We will also be progressing a number of projects at the local and Greater Manchester level. Our annual Budget, which we have recently consulted on and is due to be released at the end of February, will provide the framework to secure our finances and begin rebuilding for the post-pandemic world.

After a decade of austerity, the financial situation that we face remains deeply challenging, especially since the uncertainties around the impact on the pandemic on service demand and sources of income are not yet fully known. Earlier last year our worst case scenario for the required savings in 2021-22 was around £48 million. This has now been revised down to £28 million, but it is clear that there still a significant gap to make up.

Despite the struggle against coronavirus that defined the last year, we moved forward on a number of bold and innovative improvements within the borough, and much of our attention in 2021 will be on building upon this good work.

The most notable examples of these are plans for Inclusive Growth in Tameside, the public consultation for which is due to end next week.

This will provide the scaffolding for a huge variety of regeneration and investment projects in Tameside over the next five years, from enhancing our employment and skills offer to the renovation of our town centres.

Hand-in-hand with this will go the rollout and expansion of Tameside's part of the Greater Manchester-wide "Bee Network" and other cycling and walking infrastructure.

Following the discussions at the Combined Authority before Christmas, after Stockport Council chose to reject the draft Greater Manchester Spatial Framework for public consultation, 2021 will also see the development of a new Joint Plan for Homes, Jobs and the Environment covering the nine Greater Manchester authorities.

A common approach between the remaining local authority Leaders was agreed at the end of last year, and I expect to be able to share our initial findings with residents and members in the near future.

But true Inclusive Growth means challenging the spectre of inequality. Last week a new GM-wide survey was launched with the intention of capturing the lived views and experiences of inequality from residents across the city-region. Their findings, once complete, will inform the work of the GM Independent Inequalities Commission in 2021 and beyond.

It is my hope as well that a number of important elections that were delayed because of the pandemic last year, including the polls to select the next wave of

council members and the Mayor of Greater Manchester, will be held as soon as it is safe and practical to do so.

Later in this meeting we will be discussing Tameside's submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. A Parliamentary Constituency Boundary Review has also been launched, which is due to conclude by 2023 in time for any potential General Election in 2024. When taken together, I hope that they will preserve fair representation and equal access to democracy for all our residents.

The past ten months have been among the most difficult and traumatic in living memory, and unfortunately it looks like we will have to remain vigilant against coronavirus for as long as is necessary.

But if we go into 2021 with a relentless focus on protecting ourselves and others from the pandemic on one hand, and on inclusive growth, financial sustainability and strengthening local democracy on the other, I am confident that we will lay the foundations to build back better and fairer in 2021.

Out of a year of crisis will spring a year of renewal. Let's work together to make 2021 a new beginning for us all as we learn to live with coronavirus.

Thank you.