

Leader's Full Council Speech – 21st July

(1,194 words – 9.2 minutes)

Members and officers of the council,

Before I begin, I want to take the opportunity to congratulate Councillor Janet Cooper on taking up the mantle of Civic Mayor of Tameside.

Despite the unique circumstances, I have no doubt that she will write her own page in the history of this prestigious office. Thanks should also be given to Councillor Leigh Drennan for his service and commitment to the role over the past year.

I think it would be fair to say that when we made our plans for 2020, nobody would have expected things to turn out as they have.

That being said I have a duty to say that I have been left disappointed and frustrated by the government reaction to the coronavirus pandemic.

From the delivery of PPE for our key workers to the shambles of a test and trace system that the British Medical Journal has condemned as “too slow and fundamentally flawed”, time and again we have fallen short in comparison to other nations fighting the pandemic.

The cost may end up being counted in thousands of lives in our hospitals, in our care homes and in our communities.

At the beginning of this crisis I said that it would be our community spirit that would get us through these unprecedented times, and despite the economic uncertainty and political inaction, Tameside's courage and solidarity is what has shone through.

It's shone through in the operation to deliver emergency food and medicine to those most in need, as residents from every possible background and profession gave up their own time to wrap up thousands of parcels and organise deliveries.

It's shone through in our key workers in the NHS, who left no stone unturned to help those who have shown up at their door with severe coronavirus symptoms, and in our social care team who worked 24/7 to take the strain off our hospitals and allow our elderly and vulnerable to continue living in dignity and comfort.

It's shone through in the council officers who went above and beyond to keep doing the jobs like bin collections that, while often not glamorous, are nevertheless absolutely essential to keep our communities safe, healthy and functioning.

Thanks to their dedication it looks like the worst of the pandemic may now have passed, but the virus is still out there. That's why we've launched the #ItWorks campaign to support our residents through the next stage and to remind us all that the threat of infection, and even death, remains very real.

I would ask you to keep taking all necessary precautions, including wearing face coverings in public and in shops, avoiding large crowds of people and practicing good hygiene at all times.

What has become clear is that there can be no going back to the way things were before coronavirus. Our focus must now turn from combating the immediate crisis, to the longer struggle of deciding what our economy and society will look like after the pandemic. Instead of a "new normal", we need to focus our energies to build back better.

As part of that I'm delighted to announce, in my role as Lead for Age Friendly and Equalities in the Combined Authority, that we will be using all the resources of our city-region to take action on the inequalities that have been exposed by coronavirus.

This project will bring together representatives from the public, private and voluntary sectors to identify and challenge prejudice and discrimination wherever it exists in Greater Manchester. No matter your race, faith, sexuality or disability, we want to make sure that your voice is heard and your rights are respected.

I also want to look at what we can do to give our social care workers the credit and respect that their response to coronavirus has shown that they are due.

When we came out every Thursday to applaud our hard-working key workers, we meant it. No matter what our Prime Minister says, we know that they have not failed. They have been failed by a government that has turned on them to cover up their own mistakes.

For a start, I will be campaigning to see a real living wage for all, an end to zero-hour contracts and guarantees around the protection of the health and economic security of all our workers in the continuing fight against coronavirus.

As I said before, as we move into the new normal we need to pay heed not only to the continued danger of infection, but also to the economic consequences that have followed the pandemic and lockdown.

Local authorities across the country are facing the double blow of reduced income from council tax payments, business rates receipts and other revenue sources on one hand, and a massive increase in demand for services on the other.

The exact figure is impossible to predict at the moment, but research by the Local Government Association estimates that the budget shortfall across local government could reach as high as £10 billion.

Despite what some may tell you, after a decade of austerity there will be no easy savings to make and no cuts that could fall in places where they wouldn't be noticed.

The funding we've received from the government since the beginning of the pandemic, while substantial in normal times, does not come close to meeting our costs. In 2010 we faced hard decisions; but in 2020 we will be facing impossible decisions unless more is done.

I call upon the government to launch a full and fair accounting of the costs that local authorities have incurred as a result of coronavirus, and then make good on those shortfalls in full.

In the meantime we must acknowledge that the Budget we issued in February, almost immediately before the pandemic, may no longer be realistic in the current situation.

Over the course of the next few months we will be going over our financial plans line-by-line, with a view to having a honest and difficult discussion with our residents about what it means for them and their services.

Please do not be under any illusions. The battle against the first wave of coronavirus might be in its closing stages, but this is only the end of the beginning.

Our daily figures are showing that the number of infections in Tameside is reducing, but a second wave or, worse still, a new lockdown would be nothing short of catastrophic.

At the same time, we have to send a loud and clear message that, no matter what the disruption and uncertainty, Tameside Council remains open for business.

We will continue to keep a close eye on the data we receive from the government, Public Health England and our local health workers. Rest assured that we will not hesitate to take whatever action is necessary to keep protecting our residents..

This is not going to be an easy task, but we know now the true power of our communities, and we know now the true strength of Tameside's residents in the face of adversity. Whatever comes next, they will never stop fighting for the place that they call home.

And neither will we.

Thank you.