

Leader's Speech – 20th July 2021

(2,861 words/22 minutes)

Members and officers to the Council,

Before I begin, I want to echo the Civic Mayors congratulations for the Tameside residents and organisations whose heroic efforts have earned them recognition in the Queen's Birthday Honours list. In their own ways, they all stand as living examples of the greatest values and virtues of our borough.

Congratulations are also due to the NHS staff and key workers who have been recipients of the George Cross, the highest award for civilian gallantry the country can bestow, as part of the celebrations to commemorate the health services 73rd anniversary. I'm delighted that their incredible work on the front lines of the pandemic has been recognised, and I hope the government will see it fit to follow up the medal with a well-deserved pay rise as well.

I also wish to take the opportunity to pay my condolences to some legendary Tameside figures who have recently passed. As you all know, back in May we tragically lost world-famous Olympic runner, entrepreneur and Freeman of the borough Ron Hill MBE at the age of 82. His funeral took place at Dukinfield Crematorium last month, and it was a truly spectacular sight to see all those who Ron had inspired over the course of his life line the streets of Tameside to pay their final respects.

The end of the June also saw the passing of Charles Meredith MBE, the former Civic Mayor, longstanding councillor and champion of Stalybridge. He might not have run in any Olympics, but his impact on Tameside was just as profound as Ron Hill's. From the moment he was elected to the old Stalybridge Town Council in 1954 Charles, in his own words, "ate, drank and slept the town".

The Royal British Legion, St Paul's Church and Stalybridge Celtic were just some of the local organisations he influenced and supported, and his efforts culminated in him being named Freeman of the borough in 1998. As a man and as a pillar of his community, the legacy that Charles Meredith leaves behind him in this world will never be equalled.

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Like most of you, I spent much of the past month enthralled by the heroic performances of England's football team as they reached their first major final in 55 years. Despite losing in heart-breaking circumstances at the last hurdle,

that in absolutely no way should take away from the magnitude of their achievement, nor the pride we should feel for them in getting so far.

Whether they or their families came from Stockport or Nigeria, Withington or Trinidad, these brave young men are England. Not only have they excelled on the pitch, they have taken a knee for a new vision of our country. A vision of England where all its people, regardless of their race, sexuality, religion, or wealth, should expect and demand to be treated with dignity and respect.

It is perhaps for this reason that, while the overwhelming majority of England fans cheered them on, a small but vocal minority chose to instead indulge in the most hateful and appalling abuse. The defacing of the mural of Marcus Rashford has been the most egregious example of what we've witnessed.

These racists, for that is what they are, were aided and abetted in their racism by figures in the media and government. From the Home Secretary and Prime Minister down, those who refused to condemn their behaviour until it was politically necessary to do so instead gave tacit consent to their terrible words and deeds.

My message for them is simple; you are on the wrong side of history. That the racist graffiti you defiled Rashford's mural with was so quickly and comprehensively covered up with messages of support speaks volumes of the disgust and contempt that ordinary people feel for you and your actions. There is no place for you in the England of Rashford, Sancho and Saka.

We cannot ignore as well that the majority of this abuse has taken place online through social media. The past weeks have highlighted that more powers are required to hold those who use Twitter and Facebook as platforms of hate to be held responsible for their actions. Not just through their accounts being banned by the companies themselves but also, if necessary, for the authorities to be given the power to investigate and prosecute.

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In the midst of all this however, we should not forget that this is also a time of celebration. After a few bumps along the road the latest, and hopefully final, stage of lifting the restrictions we have lived with for almost a year and a half came into effect yesterday.

I know that so much has been asked of you over that time; to put your regular lives on hold, to stay apart from friends and loved ones, and to be constantly alert as to how your actions might affect the chances of you or those around

you being infected. The only consolation I can offer is that these sacrifices are now starting to bear fruit.

But, as positive as this occasion is, I must also sound a note of caution. The worst may be over, but the long shadow of the pandemic remains with us still. Infections in Tameside last week increased to 496.3 cases per 100,000 of the population, the highest rate for several months. This has been driven by the recent spread of the Delta variant, which is estimated to be 40-80% more transmissible than the previously dominant strains of the virus. The impact of this has already spread over the past week to many of our vital services such as bin collections due to council employees being forced to self-isolate, and I would ask for your continued patience as we meet this new challenge.

Rates of infection, hospitalisation and, sadly, deaths are expected to rise further as our society and economy begins to reopen. However, the good news is that the link between infection and severe illness or death appears to have been significantly reduced, and the vaccine rollout locally continues to progress well. The most important thing we can do now is keep applying common sense to minimise risk of infection, including being responsible about socialising and taking precautions such as regular hand washing and wearing masks on public transport and in indoor public spaces even if it is no longer a legal obligation.

If you have not had your second vaccination yet, I urge you to seek it out as soon as you are allowed to. Over the past few weeks, we have supported a number of pop-up centres and drop-ins where residents can receive their vaccinations without an appointment or ID required, and testing sites are still open to ensure we stay on top of tracking and tracing new cases in the borough.

Now is also the time to begin to start addressing the damage that coronavirus, aided and abetted by over a decade of politically-driven austerity, has wreaked upon the fabric of our society.

Like many of you, I was shocked but also sadly unsurprised by the findings of the Marmot Report, which concluded that due to longstanding health inequalities and regressive spending cuts, the mortality from coronavirus in Greater Manchester was 25% higher than England as a whole.

My view on this is unambiguous. A society that does not protect the most vulnerable, the most deprived and the most at risk is not a society that any of us should accept. We can do better, and we should demand better.

Over the past year we have been working to take what action we can at a local and regional level through the GM Inequalities Commission and our local Inequalities Reference Group. Our local public health teams have also done incredible work to address the worst of the inequalities in our health and social care services. But until the government recognises the scale of the problem, and puts in place the funding and political will that any solution will demand, we are fighting against a rising tide.

Resolving the issues highlighted in the Marmot Report may begin with making sure that everybody has access to both physical and mental health and social care, but we must go far beyond that to look at what makes people happy and healthy in their everyday lives.

Ending zero hour contracts and poverty wages, investing in businesses and jobs rooted in their communities, fixing our broken housing market, protecting our shared environment and putting our young people first. As a country, we have the resources to fulfil all of these ambitions and more if we truly put our mind to it.

It will be a profound tragedy and an unforgivable neglect if we do not seize this opportunity following the end of the pandemic to create an economy and a society that works for the people, and not the other way round.

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Part of turning that ambition into reality begins here. Our Improvement Programme in Children's Services is continuing to make progress, however the impact of the pandemic, our own self-assessment and recent feedback from the Ofsted visit in May have made it clear that further improvements are required.

In particular, capacity issues within the service were reported as a major concern, creating a challenge for social workers and others to have the time to do the work they need to do at the quality that we would wish. High caseloads also impact on our ability to recruit and retain Social Workers. Other areas highlighted were access to sufficient and suitable placements to ensure children are able to live in places that best meet their needs, moving away from a focus on compliance to what children themselves are experiencing, and improving management oversight and line of sight to practice.

However, the visit also shed a light on the positive progress and good work with children that has been made in areas such as the enhancement and improvement of partnership work between children's social care and schools during the coronavirus period. The priority now must be to build on these

foundations to accelerate this work and to further stabilise and improve the service as it continues to support children and families, including dealing with the impact of the pandemic.

We have already committed to a seven Sustainability Projects, much of which has been completely or at least partially delivered. This will now be combined with a robust response to Ofsted's findings to build on our work to date and provide a clear direction of travel for ongoing improvement. In brief, this will incorporate a 16 point rapid improvement plan, investment in the capacity of social workers and personal advisors, establishing new brokerage, monitoring and commissioning functions, and enhancing quality and performance. These efforts will be supported by the investment of an additional £461,000 in the service this year, and a further £504,000 in 2022.

This is the highest corporate priority that we face, and we now have the resources and personnel in place to move very quickly on this. We will leave no stone unturned in our efforts to continue our improvement journey and do our best for children and families in Tameside.

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At Executive Cabinet at the end of last month, we also approved a report on the work necessary for the preparation of a Compulsory Purchase Order in regards to the Godley Green development.

I want to make it very clear at the beginning that this does not, in any way, mean that we are seeking consent to introduce CPOs. This is a normal procedure for any development of this type, and our intentions in our discussions with landholders has always been to do everything in our power to ensure that agreements can be made via private treaty.

If we should reach the point where a CPO becomes necessary, either to provide certainty of delivery or to overcome any third-party rights, encumbrances or ownerships that cannot be dealt with via private treaty negotiation, it has been agreed that a further report and resolution on the issue will be required.

Any potential CPO, and I reiterate that I hope and expect that it is not required, will also have to satisfy a number of legal and financial tests, including the existence of a compelling case in the public interest, that reasonable efforts to acquire the land have been undertaken, and that the council and any development partner have the experience, resources and funding in place ready to deliver the scheme.

I'm explaining this process tonight in the attempt to continue the spirit of transparency and engagement that we have committed ourselves to. Our plans for the Godley Green Garden Village have been in the public domain for some time, and many aspects of them have already been altered or changed to better reflect the feedback we've received from landowners and residents.

We have also gone to lengths to clarify some of the honest misinterpretation and, sadly in some cases, challenge some of the deliberate misinformation that has been spread about what the development means for Godley Green and Tameside as a whole.

My views on the Godley Green Garden Village remain clear. It is an exciting opportunity for Tameside to offer an ambitious and sustainable model of inclusive growth. A project that will create new and thriving communities, backed up with vital infrastructure and access to open greenspace. An investment that has been backed up at the national level not just with words, but with the allocation of £10 million from the Housing Infrastructure Fund.

And if we do not build it, we will fall short of our government-mandated housing requirement and, as a consequence, run the risk of a development free-for-all as somebody else steps in to build for us. The choice is not, and never has been, between building and not building on Godley Green. The choice is between whether Godley Green will be built on by a council that puts the interests of local people first, or by a distant company that puts the interests of its balance sheet first.

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While the Godley Green Garden Villages may be the most ambitious project currently in the works to secure inclusive growth, it is by no means the only one. Across the entire borough, we are making the investments needed to create a brighter future for Tameside and its residents.

Particular emphasis in this is being placed on our town centres, both to help them bounce back from the pandemic and, in the longer term, to transform them into the vibrant community and economic hubs that we know they have the potential to be.

To give just some examples, Hyde has been selected as one of 70 towns nationally to receive support from the government's High Street Task Force Programme. This project will bring a range of expert organisations into the town centre to identify the area's strengths and challenges. Working closely with the council, local businesses and residents, we will then develop a plan of action to drive new investment and growth.

This work will be backed up by a range of support, including targeted expert consultancy, mentoring, workshops, access to local footfall data and training programmes. It is also our hope that the lessons learnt in Hyde through this process will then be able to be applied to other town centres as further ideas and projects are rolled out.

We are also looking to engage in discussions with developers in regards of the future of the Lock Keeper's site in Droylsden. When combined with the site of the former Library, which is scheduled for imminent demolition, we will be in a position to release the entire area for the construction of high-quality residential space immediately adjacent to the town centre.

Hand-in-hand with this, the Executive Cabinet has signed off on significant expansions to a number of schools in the borough with a view to increasing pupil capacity before the beginning of the new academic year in September.

This includes the relocation of the science classrooms and labs at Rayner Stephens High School in Yew Tree Lane, freeing up space for an extra 30 school places per year. Cromwell High School will receive investment to permanently develop special education sixth form provision on site. Two schools, Oakfield Primary and Greenside Primary, will also have their SEND provision expanded.

The total cost is estimated at £2 million, and will ensure that we continue to have the space to meet rising demand for both mainstream and specialist education for Tameside's young people.

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In my last speech at Full Council, I said that as we begin to emerge from the coronavirus pandemic, we must come together to ensure that Tameside endures, adapts and prospers.

By investing in our town centres and housing, and improving the help and services we offer for our most vulnerable children, we are now showing that we are willing to back up those words with action.

Just as Ron Hill and Charles Meredith left their unmistakable legacy on Tameside, let us all, councillors, residents, communities and businesses, now commit to creating our own legacy as we build back fairer, better and greener in the place we call home.

Thank you.