



Leader's Report

28 April 2020

Report of the Leader of the Council

PURPOSE OF REPORT
To present the Leader's report to Council.
This report is public.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To receive the report of the Leader of Council.

REPORT

1.0 Cabinet

The Cabinet meeting scheduled for 17 March 2020 was not formally held due to concerns arising from the coronavirus pandemic and the inability to hold formal virtual meetings at that point. Cabinet held an informal virtual meeting on that date to consider the items that required a decision. The decisions were subsequently taken by the Leader and published as Individual Cabinet Member Decisions (ICMDs). They are available on the City Council website.

2.0 Decisions required to be taken urgently

As required by Access to Information Procedure Rule 17, Rule 15 Special Urgency of the Constitution, the Chair of Overview & Scrutiny Committee was requested to agree to an exempt report being considered at the Cabinet meeting scheduled for 17 March 2020 and agreed to waive call-in on that occasion. Further information is provided in 5.0.

3.0 Leader's Comments

We meet in extraordinary and uncertain times, but it is good that we are meeting, and that the usual rhythm of governance and scrutiny meetings is returning to our council. Although there has been a brief hiatus in formal meetings, that it not to say

that councillors have not continued to be part of governance processes of the council. Cabinet and the Cross-Party COVID working group (made up of nominees from each group and the unaligned members of the council) have met regularly through this period. Where decisions have had to be taken outside of the usual formal meetings structure, we have both tried to keep these to a minimum, and to include committee chairs and members through informal consultation.

COVID response

The Coronavirus pandemic and our nations' response has left little unchanged in our lives, both personal and professional. I'm proud of the extraordinary efforts being made by so many across the Lancaster district, and particularly the work of our officers and councillors. The response by our council has been swift, comprehensive and robust. We completely restructured our staff teams to focus on three core priorities – supporting vulnerable people, assisting local businesses and continuing to deliver our core services, and see the results in 1000s of people and local businesses supported through this crisis. We have also made partnership working a central feature of our work and are grateful for the skills and expertise of our partners from the community, voluntary and faith sectors, as well as parish councils, local businesses, health and education organisations. More than 1000 people have volunteered to be part of the pandemic response across the district, and at the moment we continue to have far more volunteers available than are needed to meet the requests for help. Although we are working hard to make sure that everyone knows they can ask, and aren't holding back, because they worry that in asking, they'll deprive someone else.

COVID Recovery

While we are still awaiting the peak in Lancashire, thoughts are increasingly turning to recovery and long-term impact on the council, on our district, our nation and the world. Perhaps the only thing that is certain about the recovery is that we cannot default back to pre-COVID 'business as usual'. We were in a climate emergency before COVID, and we remain in that climate emergency, but now we have seen how quickly things can change when there is a consensus that urgent action is needed. The challenge now is to chart a new way forward, that meets the climate emergency, helps to develop a sustainable and just local economy that serves our district and continues to build the power of our community.

Council budget

Many of you will have seen my recent letter to the Prime Minister, highlighting the need for him to honour the commitments given by his ministers at the beginning of the crisis, when they urged councils to do whatever it takes to respond to this pandemic and assured us they would financially support us. Although that letter writing campaign secured an additional £1.6billion in emergency funding, we are still awaiting advice from MHCLG as to how that money will be distributed. Lancaster City Council only received £101 034 from the first £1.6billion and had expended 150% of these funds (£150 387) by the end of March.

It is clear that the financial impacts of the pandemic mean that as a council we will have to revisit and revise our budget, and officers and cabinet members have

begun that work. The challenge at the moment is the sheer quantity of unknowns which makes financial modelling and projections extremely difficult. We neither have clear information about our income, nor our outgoings. Sound financial management of this council over many years, means we have more resilience than some other councils. At this stage, we should not panic, or rush into shutting everything down, but we will need to prudently review our plans and the financial resilience group will play an important role in that.

Before COVID we were arguing for a radical change in the way government worked with local government, how we were funded and the responsibilities that we had. That campaign must continue. The costs and risks of eroding public services, dismantling the welfare safety net and increasing inequality are particularly obvious at this time, and we cannot go back to the old normal.

4.0 Other Matters

The ICMD notice in relation to the Lancaster High Streets Heritage Action Zone is attached at the end of this agenda. The ICMD in relation to the Property Investment Proposal decision is exempt from publication by virtue of Paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act, 1972.

5.0 Key Decisions

The following Key Decisions were due to be considered by Cabinet on 17 March 2020:

- (1) Lancaster High Streets Heritage Action Zone
- (2) Property Investment Proposal – Urgent Business

The scheduled formal meeting of Cabinet on that date was not held, due to health and safety concerns in view of the coronavirus pandemic. A virtual informal Cabinet meeting was held at that time in order that the Leader could discuss the reports and recommendations with Cabinet members prior to taking a decision.

Prior to the decision not to hold the Cabinet meeting on 17 March, the Chair had agreed to an item of urgent business with regard to a Property Investment Proposal. The Chair of Overview and Scrutiny had agreed for the item to be considered under Rule 15 Special Urgency and had agreed to waive call-in on the item as a decision was required before 30 March 2020. The decision was taken by the Leader on 19 March 2020.

The following Officer Delegated (Key) Decisions were taken during this period:

- (1) Major Void Contract
- (2) Purchase of four refuse vehicles

Background Papers

Cabinet agenda 17 March 2020.