

**March 2021**

**Mayor's Update**

**Purpose of Report**

To provide LEP Board Members with an update on key Mayoral activity relating to the economic agenda.

**1. The COVID pandemic**

COVID has been tearing the heart and soul out of our communities for almost a year. However, there is positive news and light at the end of the tunnel with the successful vaccine rollout and the Prime Minister's announcement of a timetable for the easing of lockdown.

Despite all the pain lockdowns have caused, it is critical that any easing be done based on solid science and at a cautious pace. COVID-19 has shown that the economy and health are inextricably linked. We have to get case rates down before we reopen the economy – not just to protect the NHS and save lives, but also for better economic outcomes. Those businesses forced to close or seeing reduced demand must be additionally compensated for this sacrifice. This must be the last lockdown.

Whilst the South of England has recently seen large reductions in its case rates, rates have stabilised at a higher level in most of the North and Midlands, especially in South Yorkshire. Recent reductions have been slower in more deprived communities. It is no coincidence that COVID has hit the most deprived areas of our country hardest, including places like South Yorkshire where people cannot afford to lose income and cannot work from home so easily.

We have to get test and trace right; we have to extend furlough; address business debt; extend the business rates holiday and VAT cut for hospitality, retail and leisure for at least six months; and we have to make sure people are not forced to choose between financial survival and isolating themselves if they have symptoms.

In the longer term, we need a rebuilding that does more than get us back to the status quo – but tackles our deeply unequal society and helps build a stronger, greener and fairer UK.

Local public procurement reform can help our regional recovery effort. That's why we are proposing a comprehensive effort to utilise our own procurement processes to leverage spending support for the local economy, enable enterprise, and create social value to a much greater degree. We want to support local businesses as much as we can by directing money into the local

economy. This will mean making it easier for smaller companies, including cooperatives, to bid to work with us.

Improved procurement practices will encourage higher labour standards, better pay, faster decarbonisation, more apprenticeships and other goals. I look forward to working with the LEP to start developing our proposals, which could lead the way for further public procurement improvements across the region.

## **2. Integrated Rail Plan for the North and Midlands**

We are expecting the Government to publish its long-awaited Integrated Rail Plan for the North and Midlands sometime between the Budget and the local elections in May. This is a critical strategy, which will shape Government investment in rail infrastructure in South Yorkshire for many years to come. I'm continuing to work with ministers to ensure that the content of the Integrated Rail Plan reflects the priorities we set out in our own Integrated Rail Plan published in 2019.

## **3. Improving local public transport**

The impact Covid has had on our local public transport system should not be underestimated. Our bus network was already at a low base, with falling levels of patronage and declining public and private investment. Covid has accelerated trends we already knew existed and which we needed to address.

That is why I'm continuing our commitment made at the MCA, to drive improvement in the bus network in South Yorkshire by responding to the bus review conducted by Clive Betts and his commissioners. This will be a major priority over the next 12 months, as we use the opportunity provided by the pending National Bus Strategy to rethink our bus services and how they operate.

## **4. Protecting people from flooding**

Following the devastating 2019 floods in South Yorkshire, action, and not just words, is needed to better protect people, communities and businesses from the risks of further floods. The Priority Programme of 27 schemes that the Mayoral Combined Authority developed and presented to Government nearly a year ago would protect over 10,300 homes and 2,800 businesses.

Given that Government announced last March that the national budget for such investment had doubled, we now urgently need Government to make this programme happen. I have written to the Chancellor to ask him to act now. The provision of an £36m from Government, when combined with confirmation of the indicative Grant in Aid and Medium-Term Plan allocations, would bring forward nine schemes, enabling work to start on £66.2m of our priority programme before the end of 2022.