



---

Mayor Ben Houchen  
Tees Valley Combined Authority  
Cavendish House  
Teesdale Business Park  
Stockton-on-Tees  
Tees Valley  
TS17 6QY

17 March 2020

### **Protecting communities and businesses during the COVID-19 outbreak**

Dear Ben,

May I start by expressing my best wishes to you and your staff during the COVID-19 outbreak. The health and safety of the people of Tees Valley is far greater than party politics, and I stand ready to work with you to do whatever is needed to get our region through the COVID-19 outbreak that now looks inevitable.

I am writing to set out my ideas on how the Combined Authority should act to safeguard and protect our region's people, communities and economy. We have relatively few confirmed cases compared to other parts of the country, which gives the Combined Authority a narrow window of opportunity to act pre-emptively to mitigate the range of potential disruptions. I urge the Combined Authority to:

- 1. Convene an urgent meeting of the TVCA Cabinet and give a greater public profile to its support offer to businesses and communities.**

I completely accept developments are fast moving, but it is concerning to see the COVID-19 outbreak was not formally on the agenda of the recent TVCA Cabinet meeting on 13 March. An urgent Cabinet meeting should be convened to discuss the Authority's response. Once agreed, information needs to be clearly communicated to the public. At the moment, the Combined Authority's website signposts only a single link to COVID-19 support.

## **2. Refocus the Tees Valley Business Compass on helping firms to get through the outbreak, to protect jobs and the local economy as much as possible.**

Helping businesses to survive the outbreak should become the number one priority of the Business Compass. The Combined Authority should relax the funding prescriptions on the Business Compass to enable it to pivot towards providing advice to local businesses on:

- How to access emergency crisis funding: grants, tax reliefs and finance
- Developing continuity and survival plans
- How to adapt working practices to support home and remote working

The Combined Authority should draw on the £30m business growth programme to unlock additional external funding as the first port of call. Offering direct subsidies to strategically important firms for running costs should be considered as a measure of last resort.

## **3. Explore budgetary flexibilities to offer financial support to businesses.**

The Combined Authority should offer long-term loans to businesses on fair terms to support them through the crisis. It could borrow against future gainshare funding and reallocate funding that has been set aside for future spending commitments, knowing this funding would be repaid. All non-essential procurement spending should be paused to free up funding to support strategically important businesses through the outbreak. The European Commission has said it will relax some state aid rules during the crisis to enable public intervention.

## **4. Take creative steps to support businesses in the everyday economy.**

It is highly likely that the outbreak will last for a number of months. Businesses in the everyday economy (retail workers, café workers, newsagents and service businesses, for example) will likely find it difficult to survive if customer footfall drops off for a sustained period. They must be supported to find safe ways to generate trade and revenue.

Measures to support the everyday economy during this period could include:

- Set up an emergency Task Force and business support team for service industry
- Investing in online platforms to facilitate trade, along the lines of the Just Eat model. This could create trade for cafes and restaurants and help to secure the supply of food during the outbreak.
- Easy access investment and support to local businesses for digital technologies that enable the provision of services at a distance.
- The Combined Authority alongside local authorities should fund emergency outreach to these businesses to find out what if any long-term interventions would be helpful.
- Set up a creative and cultural task force to work with the sector around online programming, developing creative responses to social isolation and developing longer term infrastructure and longer term plans for recovery and growth

**5. Convene manufacturers and health professionals to help address the need for medical equipment and other supplies during the outbreak.**

Ventilators, masks and other medical equipment will be needed by health professionals during the outbreak. Demand is likely to outstrip supply, which could in itself increase prices. Given the size of the Tees Valley's manufacturing, chemicals and process sectors, the Combined Authority is well placed to facilitate conversations between suppliers and the public sector to see if local producers can develop what is needed. The Combined Authority should provide whatever investment it can to bring appropriate products to market.

**6. Temporarily refocus employability programmes, many of which now cannot be delivered as originally intended.**

In the next few months, the jobs market is going to be extremely fragile. Some people are likely to become temporarily unemployed. Existing employability programmes could therefore play a key role in addressing labour supply gaps.

- First, the targets given to employability schemes should be suspended to enable providers to re-focus their provision. Participants cannot be expected to attend training courses if the Government's guidance advises people to take social distancing measures.
- Second, an urgent dialogue should be set up between the Combined Authority and local employers to spot emerging employment gaps in strategically important sectors. The Combined Authority, alongside local authorities should consider how employability programmes could help to fill these gaps, within the boundaries of the public health guidance.
- Third, recruitment agencies should be approached to support any emerging need for delivery workers or relief staff.

**7. Widely publicise the rights, entitlements and support mechanisms for all types of workers.**

The options for local workers to access financial support during the outbreak are fragmented and confusing. The measures announced in the recent Budget will provide extra support, but it will be vital to ensure local workers are now aware of what they can get.

The Combined Authority could provide funding for an advertising campaign – on Facebook, in local newspapers and around the Tees Valley, for example – to inform workers of the support that is available to them to cover things like: sick pay entitlements for employees; access to welfare benefits for the self-employed and zero-hours contract workers; flexi-working and working from home entitlements; and directories of organisations that can provide over-the-phone hardship advice.

## **8. Develop a specific business mentoring and volunteering scheme**

A lot of businesses will need support but can also give support during this crisis. For instance, tech firms may be able to create innovative solutions around volunteer coordination. At the same time many of our local independent businesses could benefit from voluntary time and support to survive the crisis. Volunteers could be deployed to businesses in need, particularly those who are local and independent. Possible actions could include

- Appoint a volunteer-in-business lead / lead organisation and a coordinator between businesses to volunteer or take volunteers
- LA business development leads to reach out to businesses to assess offers or needs

## **9. Support local community responses**

The Combined Authority has an important role to play in partnership with local authorities and the voluntary sector to support local grassroots responses to the outbreak. As the number of cases in the Tees Valley is presently low, we are not yet at the point where local services are unable to cope – which is all the more reason for pre-emptively putting in place local support systems. The Combined Authority could:

- Facilitate a summit (online or, if safe, face-to-face) between strategic VCSE organisations like Catalyst and VONNE and parts of the public sector that are likely to need support if service pressures become unsustainable: adult social care teams, the NHS and the police, for example. The aim of the summit would be to identify the ways in which local communities can provide help where it is needed most in the safest possible manner.
- Work with VCS organisations to redirect efforts and resources towards providing support during the outbreak.
- Engage with strategic voluntary sector funders to raise awareness of resource needs in local communities.
- Recognising that local authorities may have a deeper presence in local communities (via elected councillors), the Combined Authority should do what it can to connect local people to grassroots relief schemes. It should use its social media channels and website to support recruitment efforts, including to established projects such as the Red Cross.

I and my team will be available to meet with you to further discuss how the proposals above could be taken forward and implemented.

Yours sincerely,



**Jessie Joe Jacobs**