

Convention of the North and NP11 Covid 19 Statement

In the face of the recent surge in COVID-19 infection rates across the UK, Northern leaders and businesses have come together to call for urgent dialogue with the Government on a joint plan of action. As leaders of Councils and Business led Local Economic Partnerships across the North, we are deeply concerned about the rapidly growing health and economic impact of the pandemic, and we now we want to work with government to jointly devise a path forward that protects our communities and economies.

A new approach on both fronts is now needed, with infection rates having increased, not decreased, in 19 of the 20 areas where local lockdowns have been imposed. We support restrictions where these are effective at reducing the spread of the virus, but we want to see these kept to a minimum, both in scope and duration and we need greater transparency about the evidence on which they are based. The unclear and inconsistent rationale underpinning measures like the 10pm curfew, is causing widespread confusion, hitting local businesses but also having potentially unintended and harmful health impacts. This risks undermining the concerted national effort the Prime Minister is calling for. As we head into what will be a challenging winter, government must now engage with the North to create a more effective response.

The North's Economy on a Knife Edge

- **2 in 3 Northerners impacted by local lockdowns only 1 in 140 in the South**
- **20.7% decline in GVA between 2019 and 2020 Q2**
- **2m of the North's workforce furloughed in the summer**
- **Unemployment already doubled in many northern cities**
- **Big increase in 16-24 year olds on unemployment benefits, up as much as 475% in the worst hit areas**
- **1.4m people out of work by Christmas before any further restrictions**
- **Footfall in city and town centres down between 45-75%**
- **Up to a third of hospitality, retail, culture & tourism businesses closed in some places, with the sector vulnerable to any further restrictions**

This is a moment of great fragility for our local economies. The partial recovery we saw in the summer is already at risk of evaporating, as we face further restrictions, and the end of furlough. The North has been doubly hard hit by Covid, having to bear the lions share of local restrictions, and suffering a harsher economic impact - jeopardising the UK's future wellbeing and economic prosperity.

Both the Convention of the North with NP11 and Government want to ensure that this does not generate the scarring effects on people and communities that we saw in the 1980s. That's why we are united in our commitment to levelling up. The immediate challenge is to avert mass job losses and business closures. We now need urgent and far-reaching action to prevent a permanent and devastating levelling down effect.

In his speech at the Conservative Party conference, the Prime Minister reiterated his commitments to levelling up, and building back better and set out his ambition for the UK to become the *'the world leader in low cost clean power generation'*. We welcome these commitments and the North stands ready to play our part in making them happen.

The Convention of the North with NP11 set out in our Spending Review Submission (The Levelling up deal for the north) our offer to work in partnership with the government to deliver levelling up and clean growth. *We already generate 50% of England's renewable energy, and we can drive the UK's transition to the green economy of*

the future. But we can only pivot to this future opportunity if our local economies can survive through Covid, and right now many of them are on a knife's edge.

Council leaders from the UK Core Cities have already written to government setting out their plan for a new approach. This statement builds on that, representing a partnership of Councils, Mayoral Combined Authorities, and Local Enterprise Partnerships that covers a population of 15 million, across the North. We need urgent co-ordinated action to safeguard our communities and to protect our local economies from falling over. Our offer is to work with Government to develop an approach to the health and economic management of the pandemic which saves lives, protects jobs and maintains confidence in the social solidarity that will be required across all communities in the North.

The basis of this co-ordinated plan should be:

1. **An urgent dialogue between Mayors, local leaders and government to agree the basis of any new system of local restrictions**, including any potential tiered framework for local lockdown. This should include full sharing of data and evidence that underpins the case for any further restrictions. No decisions should be made or announced before this has happened.
2. **A Financial support package for places, businesses, organisations and employees**. This should be tailored to the severity of the restrictions, and their likely impacts on specific sectors, as well as on local jobs. It should support affected businesses to remain viable and to be able to adapt to Covid and support people to remain in work. Measures should include full financial support for those employees who need to isolate, local extensions of furlough support for at risk sectors, enhancing and extending the Covid business grant scheme, and local retraining and reskilling employment support packages for at risk employees. -
3. **An integrated and localised test and trace system** that uses vital local knowledge and respects diverse community needs, as well as local control of infection rate monitoring.
4. **Clear and consistent communication between the North leaders, Mayors and government**, where business voices are heard, and local leaders and Mayors act as the main channels of communication with the public and as the systems leaders, coordinating and managing interventions in their local areas.
5. **A pathway that goes beyond lockdown with ideas to help businesses in vulnerable sectors manage and adapt to COVID-19 transition**. Given the importance of critical retail and hospitality milestones like Christmas, we want to be able to help local businesses plan and innovate within a rational framework of town and city centre management. This could include an Innovation Fund to support the development of localised Covid Kitemark schemes for hospitality businesses linked to innovation in safety and outdoor provision.

This is a constructive agenda for joint dialogue on how the North and government can work in partnership to avert the worst effects of this pandemic. Together we can ensure the North is in the strongest possible position to build back better and to lead the transition to an economy based on clean growth.