

 **From Washington to Weardale**

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Hello,

With Rob Parsons on holiday, it's Graeme Whitfield (editor of The Journal in Newcastle) who will be rounding up the Northern political news for the next fortnight.

To kick us off, news that Humber and East Yorkshire company bosses can breathe a sigh of relief after the first night of Coldplay's gigs in Hull passed off without any unfortunate kiss-cam incidents.

Singer Chris Martin told the crowd at Cravens Park that he was "so happy" to be in Hull but that the kiss-cam would be continuing because "we are going to meet some of you."

Elsewhere in today's Northern Agenda:

- **A Defence Minister praises a Northern factory helping the Ukraine war effort;**
- **A fundraising drive in Yorkshire helps save a Barbara Hepworth sculpture for the nation;**
- **The fall-out over the Government's decision to not support the bioethanol industry continues;**
- **Morecambe FC is saved from the same fate as other Northern clubs.**

The start of a new school term is always stressful. But for many parents in North Yorkshire, controversial new rules coming in next month are making the process more costly and uncertain.

North Yorkshire Council says that from this term it will only provide free transport to a child's nearest school only rather than their catchment school, meaning hundreds of families face having to organise their own transport or pay more than £800 for a bus pass.

And writing in today's Northern Agenda, Oli Rahman, one of the parents campaigning against the change, says the change will have consequences for local families and the environment. Read his full op-ed at the bottom of today's newsletter.

Defence spending to boost North, Minister says

While global attention was focussed on Washington DC and talks over the future of Ukraine, the Armed Forces Minister was in the slightly less celebrated setting of Stanhope, County Durham, to see a North East firm that has supported the Ukrainian war effort.

[Luke Pollard at Cook Defence Systems](#)

Cook Defence Systems, part of the Sheffield-based William Cook Group, is a specialist designer and manufacturer of tracks for armoured vehicles. It has been a fixture in the Weardale village since World War Two and has seen a big surge in demand in recent years from both the Ministry of Defence and some of the UK's military allies.

In recent years it has also used its expertise to help Ukraine and yesterday Armed Forces Minister Luke Pollard [announced a major extension to an MoD contract](#) that will support its 125-strong workforce for a number of years.

Mr Pollard was also keen to hammer home the message the Government has been emphasising since announcing a major hike in the amount it intends to spend on defence in our more uncertain world: that as well as keeping the country safe, the increased spending should benefit companies around the North.

He said: "We want defence to be an engine for growth. That means using that increased defence spending to create more, decent and well-paid jobs in every part of the country, including in the North East.

"Where we've got amazing SMEs, like Cook, that are doing something that nobody else in Britain does, we want to be backing them. That's why we're announcing a multimillion-pound contract today for the latest tracks for our advanced fighting vehicles – Challenger 3, Ajax and others – to make sure we can continue to support brilliant businesses like this.

"It's also a business that is doing the right thing, like taking on apprentices and investing in new technologies and new equipment. As we increase defence spending, I want more of that spent with British companies and more spent in particular with SMEs.

"We inherited a situation where only 4% of the MoD's entire budget was being spent with SMEs directly.

"That's not enough and that's why we've made the decision that we want to increase that, and to do that, that's where the new Defence Industrial Strategy that we'll be announcing later this year will be making a clear direction to spend more with SMEs and drive growth with local economies."

That commitment - and the new contract - was welcomed by Cook Group director William Cook. He said: "This contract is a very welcome signal that heavy armour remains core to British army planning and that companies like Cook are at the heart of the Government's forthcoming Defence Industrial Strategy."

Happiness for art lovers (but not lovers of happiness)

A tale of two contrasting fortunes for the work of two (very different) Northern artists.

First the good news, that an ["extremely rare" sculpture by late artist Barbara Hepworth is to be saved](#) after The Hepworth Wakefield raised £3.8m to buy it.



[Sculpture With Colour \(Oval Form\) Pale Blue And Red](#)

The 1943 work entitled Sculpture With Colour (Oval Form) Pale Blue And Red had been in private ownership and was placed under a temporary export ban by the UK Government to give a British museum the chance to acquire it.

The sculpture will go on permanent display at The Hepworth Wakefield, in the artist's West Yorkshire hometown, after the art gallery led a fundraising drive which saw donations from more than 2,800 members of the public.

Olivia Colling, interim director and chief executive at The Hepworth Wakefield, said: "Barbara Hepworth often talked about her need to be part of a community and its proactive development. We think she would have been delighted that so many people have come together to enable her work to be part of a public art collection which can be experienced and enjoyed by so many."

Less positive news, however, from Liverpool, where a multi-million pound scheme to create a happiness centre in honour of the late comedian Sir Ken Dodd has been abandoned after failing to secure funding.

As [David Humphreys reports for the Liverpool Echo](#), the £15m proposals for the £15m Sir Ken Dodd Happiness Centre were signed off by Liverpool City Council last year, with plans to show Sir Ken's vast personal collection of artefacts and joke books. It had been hoped work would begin this year with a view to opening in 2026.

But now trustees of the scheme, including Sir Ken's widow Lady Anne, have confirmed it will not go ahead after failing to secure funding through the National Heritage Lottery Fund. As a result, the charitable foundation set up in the late comedian's name has "reluctantly" withdrawn from the project.

Government under fire over Vivergo closure



Vivergo

The fallout continues over the news announced late on Friday that the Government would not be providing financial support to the UK bioethanol industry.

The announcement led to an immediate move to start closure of the Vivergo plant near Hull, though there are hopes that the country's other bioethanol-producing site - Ensus, on Teesside - might fare better due to the fact that it also produces valuable CO2.

Vivergo described the Government decision "a flagrant act of economic self-harm" and politicians in the area [have also expressed their disappointment](#).

Hull City Council leader Mike Ross said: "The Government is asleep at the wheel, and the result is job losses. This is a company producing clean fuel and providing decent, well-paid jobs in our region. I'm appalled but not shocked that the Government has failed to act to protect these workers."

And Beverley and Holderness MP Graham Stuart, whose constituency includes the Saltend Chemicals Park, said: "Vivergo was let down by Keir Starmer's deal with Donald Trump, offering the entirety of the British bioethanol industry to the Americans. That means the loss of jobs, the loss of expertise and the loss of a foundational industry of the future.

"I applaud all Vivergo's incredible workers who I've been working with over the last few months and the officials who had worked to save the plant, even if their hands were tied by the Prime Minister's personal deal with the US."

Meanwhile, Labour MP for Hull West and Haltemprice, Emma Hardy, said: "I know this news will be incredibly difficult for everyone who works at Vivergo, or who has a loved one affected by this decision. My thoughts are with all those impacted.

"I've been in touch with senior leadership at Vivergo earlier this week and I've spoken directly with the Minister to ask that swift and effective support will be made available to those who need."

Joy for Shrimpers' fans as Morecambe is sold



Morecambe FC

Football fans in Bury and Macclesfield will need no reminding of the pain caused when their teams went out of business.

It had seemed that the same fate could be about to befall National League club Morecambe FC, but confirmation came at the weekend that it had been [rescued by Indian sports investment group Panjab Warriors](#).

A statement on the club's official website read: "Bond Group Investments can now confirm that it has sold its majority shareholding in Morecambe to Panjab

Warriors."

The statement concluded by urging "all fans of the club to now focus their energy into supporting the club as it enters the next chapter of its story."

The takeover has been approved by the National League, meaning the club can have their suspension lifted and start their season by hosting Altrincham on Saturday, providing the necessary paperwork is completed in time. With a transfer embargo in place until all creditors have been paid, the new owners say they hope to clear debts this week.

The club said its main priority this year would be to stabilize the club before targeting promotion back to the English Football League in future seasons.

The worry continues, however, for fans of Salford's rugby league team, whose owners have admitted the club is in a 'state of prolonged financial stress'.


Now MPs in the area have called for urgent action to protect the future of Salford Red Devils, with Worsley and Eccles MP Michael Wheeler and Salford MP Rebecca Long-Bailey writing to the Rugby Football League (RFL) and Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy outlining their concerns over the club's future.

Salford mayor Paul Dennett and Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham have also spoken out about the club's situation.

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Northern Stories

 [Giant sand portrait unveiled by children's charity Barnardo's unveiled on Bridlington beach to highlight the impact of poverty on the nation's children](#)

CAMPAIGN: A giant sand portrait has been unveiled to show how [millions of youngsters in Britain miss out on days out](#) during the summer holidays because of poverty. Children's charity Barnardo's created the work on Bridlington beach with landscape artists from Sand In Your Eye and the charity's youth ambassadors.

TRANSPORT: Preparatory work is starting on [six new tram lines](#) across Greater Manchester and out to mid-Cheshire just months after the Government approved Metrolink extensions. A report to Transport for Greater Manchester has identified 15 'candidates for new lines and extensions' with staff set to start preparatory work on six new lines in the next year.

REGENERATION: A [housing project on the banks of the Tyne](#) has been handed a £120m funding boost. Ministers have funding for the Quayside West development in Newcastle, which could see 1,100 homes built on derelict wasteland next to the Utilita Arena.

TRADE: A Manchester MP has resigned as the UK's trade envoy to Turkey amid controversy over a visit to Turkish-occupied northern Cyprus. Labour's Afzal Khan said the trip to the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which is not recognised by the UK Government, was to visit his nephew and to receive an honorary degree.

ELECTION: Former North of Tyne mayor Jamie Driscoll will [stand for election in Newcastle next year](#) and believes a "progressive alliance" can become a major political force in the city. Mr Driscoll, who served as the metro mayor from 2019 to 2024, has confirmed that he will be seeking a return to his former Monument ward seat on Newcastle City Council City Council in 2026.

FOOTBALL: A Liverpool man arrested after Bournemouth forward Antoine Semenyo reported being racially abused has been [banned from every](#)

[football stadium in the UK](#). A 47-year-old man from Liverpool has been released on bail after he was arrested on suspicion of a racially aggravated public order offence. As part of his bail conditions, he cannot attend any regulated football match in the UK.

WHATSAPP: Three councillors embroiled in the Trigger Me Timbers WhatsApp scandal have been expelled from the Labour Party following an investigation. Tameside councillors George Newton and Jack Naylor, as well as former Stockport councillor Andrew Verdeille, have been expelled from the party, [local democracy reporter George Lythgoe has reported](#).

ENVIRONMENT: New citizen science water quality testing of Windermere has revealed "really concerning" pollution in England's largest and most famous lake. Following the results, which showed levels of harmful bacteria and phosphorus, campaigners have called for "decisive action".

North Yorkshire's school transport policy is putting rural communities at risk



Oli Rahman, North Yorkshire school transport campaigner

North Yorkshire's school transport policy is on the road to disaster. As the council tries to cut costs for one of its biggest expenses, families are dealing with the fallout.

In the past, it provided free transport to catchment schools, but is now only offering it to the "nearest suitable school". There has been pushback from parents, schools and from opposition councillors. However, at an Extraordinary Meeting in May, North Yorkshire Council [voted 45 to 35 in favour of upholding the new policy](#).

Campaigners argue the new policy could have many unwanted consequences that hit families and kids hardest. It could put local schools at risk of closure, force kids across county borders and split up established friendship groups.

It is also likely to have unforeseen environmental consequences too, with more cars on rural roads during busy periods, as many parents are left with no choice but to drive their child to school. And then there's the £818 bus passes, which are limited in number and may be revoked with just one week's notice.

Families who do manage to get their hands on one [have been warned](#) that the masterplan is to wind down many routes over the next seven years which means the chances of getting a seat in years to come will become increasingly hard.


Nobody would deny the council is under financial pressure. However, the projected savings are still unclear, and forecasts have already fallen. Many believe they may fall short of the £3 million savings over the next seven years [currently being predicted](#).

My son was denied transport because we live marginally closer to a different primary school (which is in the process of closing). We were confused by the fact that our appeal date was after the school term started. We later heard from campaigners that the council is swamped with appeals brought about by the unpopular policy change.

The appeal process is in two stages. The first is a review by senior officers and the second is a face-to-face (or via video call) in front of a members committee. Parents can appeal using new evidence, maps, or info about why the original decision may be unjustified.

We appealed on the basis that the nearest school was suspended, and were told that the council could not pre-empt any decisions about school closures,

despite the fact that this particular issue has been rumbling on for years.

 [Parents and children have demonstrated against a controversial home-to-school transport policy outside a North Yorkshire school in July](#)

Finally, after help from our local community (and campaigners), we were able to speak to the relevant school governor and confirm that the alternative school had officially applied for closure.

We were granted transport ahead of our stage 2 appeal, but are in the lucky minority. Many families are still facing appeals and not feeling positive about their prospects of success. It's extra admin, anxiety and stress, and nobody could blame them for feeling the odds are not in their favour.

There are some fantastic, responsive councillors who have listened to families (and even some who have accompanied them to appeals). However the fact remains that appeals have been rejected on spurious grounds.

If a stage 2 appeal is rejected, it can be escalated to an Ombudsman, which is something that campaigners from the School Transport Action Group (S.T.A.G) are urging all parents to do.

The old system may not have been perfect, but this new policy makes little sense in a sprawling rural county. Forcing a parent to send their child to a school only accessible via an icy, mountainous route on the grounds that it is the closest "suitable school" is baffling, as is sending four buses to one village to take children in four different directions when previously there was only the need for one.

The fact that a family had to buy two school uniforms, as they still cannot be sure which school their child will attend ahead of the start of term is farcical.

Ultimately, fair school transport is a legal right and necessary part of rural life, and funding it is essential. How can families be expected to educate their children without the support that allows them to continue working in rural regions?

Many of my neighbours are farmers who work around the clock and play a vital role in maintaining the beautiful environment around us. Expecting them to find time to do a school run or fork out an extra £818 for the privilege of a school bus place is not just unreasonable: it's ludicrous.

And longer-term the policy is putting rural communities at risk. Raising kids away from cities can be challenging, and councils need to do everything they can to encourage young families. It's time for North Yorkshire Council to listen to campaigners and get school transport policy back on track.

What does the council say?

Speaking in May after the policy was upheld by senior councillors, North Yorkshire Council's executive member for education, learning and skills, Cllr Annabel Wilkinson, said: "We adopted this policy last year to ensure that we can provide the fairest system possible for all parents, while facing such significant rises in the cost of providing the service.

"We listened to people's views and consulted widely on the proposals before the new policy was introduced. However, we are one of the highest spending local authorities in the country on home to school transport. We can no longer afford to offer eligibility for travel to more than one school."

She added: "Our home to school transport policy does not directly affect where children go to school – that is still the choice of the parent or carer and we will ensure all eligible children access free travel."

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