

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 3RD DECEMBER 2014**POSITION STATEMENT BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL****Midlands Connect**

Last week, I attended an event in Derby which was set up to launch a new initiative to bring together all of the Midlands transport authorities, to deliver a unified strategy for investment in strategic transport infrastructure. Known as Midlands Connect, the intention is to have a unified position on what strategic transport interventions are required in the Midlands to maximise the growth potential of the area and of the UK as a whole.

As a comparison, transport authorities in the North of England are already working to deliver a shared long term plan for strategic transport investment. Government has recently announced its support for the North's proposal for "HS3", which is about greatly enhanced train connections between the northern cities.

The Midlands needs to do the same and identify our own strategic transport priorities, especially in relation to the east-west movements, which currently place severe constraints on economic activity. Such an approach will give us a much stronger lobbying position to justify the investment that is needed. Equally problematic is our road network's resilience to incidents, which can create major congestion and which costs the local economy millions of pounds every year.

I'm committed to ensuring Leicestershire plays a lead role in the development of this initiative. Working together, we can deliver more and ensure that our area gets its fair share of future Government funding for transport investment. Having met with the City Mayor on Monday, I know that he is equally committed.

East Leicestershire LEADER Bid

I am delighted to report that the East Leicestershire bid for LEADER funding has been successful. The bid was led by the County Council-led Leicestershire Rural Partnership which is very ably chaired by Mrs Pam Posnett and was prepared in collaboration with the LLEP, district councils and local businesses. The bid sought £1.74m to deliver 100 projects, create or safeguard over 150 jobs and benefit 350 businesses across the whole of Melton and Harborough and parts of Charnwood and Blaby. Most of this funding, between £1.52m and £1.656m, has been secured. The precise amount will be confirmed by DEFRA in the near future. The funding will be targeted at increasing farm productivity, supporting micro and small enterprises and farm diversification, rural tourism and cultural/ heritage activity, improved rural services, and forestry initiatives.

European Structural and Investment Fund

It is anticipated that approximately £110m of European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) will be confirmed early in 2015 to support a range of skills, worklessness, low carbon, innovation and business support activities across

Leicester and Leicestershire up to 2020. This will be vital funding to support implementation of the Leicestershire and Leicester Economic Partnership's (LLEP's) Strategic Economic Plan and the Council's own economic priorities and I am pleased to have joined the Local ESIF Committee which will be managing this programme.

I have also agreed with partners (including the LLEP and City Council) to establish an improved inward investment service to ensure potential investors are aware of the county's excellent portfolio of employment sites, superb connectivity and skilled workforce, and are provided with the support they need to ensure they choose Leicestershire as the best location for them to prosper and grow.

CCN Conference

I attended the County Councils' Network Annual Conference in Marlow, Buckinghamshire, along with Byron Rhodes, Kevin Feltham and Trevor Pendleton. It was good to see Sarah Hill and Betty Newton also in attendance away from Glenfield. Without doubt, the number one issue talked about by Leaders, from across the political divide, was devolution to the Counties. We need to convince the next Government to get serious about a new settlement for English local government and agreeing new powers as part of that new settlement.

This includes a fairer funding settlement in general and for Leicestershire in particular. It is a powerful case. Now that the Smith Commission on devolution has proposed sweeping new tax and spending powers for the Scottish parliament, surely England cannot be left ignored?

Meetings with Leicestershire MPs and Emma McClarkin MEP

Last week I travelled to Westminster, with the Deputy Leader Byron Rhodes, to outline Leicestershire's case for fairer funding and asked the MPs to work with us to secure a fairer funding settlement. I am delighted to report that our MPs took our case extremely seriously and have agreed to set up meetings with Ministers and try and get to see the Chancellor. Byron will be speaking separately on this. I am very grateful to the Leader of the Opposition, Simon Galton, who is using his good channels to set up a meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander MP. Whilst we do disagree on some political issues, where we can agree to work together, fighting our corner and standing up for Leicestershire, we should so do.

I also met with Emma McClarkin MEP at County Hall last week and outlined our funding position to her. I have no doubts that she will argue passionately for Leicestershire's case in Brussels and Strasbourg on our behalf.

Chairman's Dinner for Her Majesty's Services

Last Wednesday evening I joined the Chairman at the County Council's annual dinner for Her Majesty's Armed Forces. This was a very well attended event with representatives from all our local Regular and Reserve units, plus our Police and Fire Services, and the local Armed Forces benevolent organisations. We are unique

in hosting such an event for the Forces and the feedback we received following the dinner was unanimously supportive.

Working Dog Sculpture unveiling

I was pleased to join civic dignitaries and the Commanding Officer of the Defence Animal Centre at the unveiling last Thursday of the Working Dogs sculpture in Melton Mowbray, at the kind invitation of Mr Byron Rhodes, the Leader of Melton Borough Council. The bronze sculpture features three working dogs – a German Shepherd, a Labrador and a Springer Spaniel. The German Shepherd was unveiled last year, and the addition of the Labrador and Spaniel now completes this wonderful tribute to the long association between the town and the Defence Animal Centre.

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