

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 25TH MARCH 2015
LEADER'S POSITION STATEMENT

KING RICHARD III

I would like to take this opportunity to thank officers of the County Council who have played key roles in co-ordinating the events leading up to this reinterment week.

The Chairman has paid tribute to the Civic Team but there have been valuable contributions from across the County Council, particularly staff from highways, museums and heritage and communications, and not forgetting 200 plus staff who volunteered for duties such as acting as traffic marshals.

The event at Bosworth Battlefield on Sunday was splendidly organised and very well received. I would particularly like to thank Franne Wills from the Communities and Wellbeing Service, and Richard Knox and Richard Mackinder from the Battlefield for all that they did over many months to make the event so successful. Ian Vears in Environment & Transport did a tremendous job in co-ordinating all the traffic and transport arrangements across the road network on Sunday.

The organisation involved in the week was always going to be extensive. The City Council and ourselves decided some time ago that we would second two senior officers to lead a project team working with the church and other authorities. Our secondee has been Julian Haywood from Corporate Resources, who has evidently done a great job.

Of course, what we all have to do now in Leicester and Leicestershire is make sure that our area capitalises on the Richard III legacy. I'm confident we will do so.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Positive progress continues to be made in securing funding to support local businesses and the creation of jobs. I was delighted to sign the Growth Deal with the Cities Minister Greg Clark alongside the City Mayor and Nick Pulley, Chair of the LLEP. I was especially pleased that this deal secures much-needed funding to regenerate Melton cattle market, improve the Midland Mainline

through Market Harborough and improve workspace provision in Coalville. It was also very good news to hear that a food enterprise zone has been secured for Melton, that work is well underway to construct the Advanced Technology Innovation Centre at Loughborough University and that the MIRA Technology Enterprise Zone is to be extended.

The Council's contributions to these projects, and a wide range of other economic activity, are captured in the Enabling Growth Plan recently approved by the Cabinet. It demonstrates how the Council will deliver its economic priorities by investing over £37m into projects, leveraging a further £70m from the Government, local partners and private businesses.

The meeting with Greg Clark provided an opportunity to discuss with him how we can strengthen our partnership working and collaboration locally, including exploring the creation of a combined authority. This is a conversation I will pursue with Greg Clark or his successor after the general election. I believe we have shown locally that we are serious about supporting growth and that we can, and should, be trusted with more powers and greater control over funding so that we can do even more.

SUPERFAST BROADBAND

Excellent progress is being made to increase superfast broadband coverage across Leicestershire. In partnership with BT, our initial contract is delivering on time with almost 30,000 premises (out of 62,000 planned) now able to access high-speed broadband. Last week, for example, improvements were completed in Sharnford, Donisthorpe, Dunton Bassett and Stoke Golding. In January I was pleased to attend a community event in Diseworth to celebrate the launch of its broadband cabinet and was delighted to hear about the benefits that fibre broadband will bring to small businesses and residents in the village.

A further 10,000 premises will benefit as part of the Superfast Extension Programme. Earlier this month, we signed a new £9.2m contract with BT with £1.45m of the funding provided by the County Council and £2m secured through working with the LLEP.

The challenge to deliver superfast broadband to all premises remains a real one though. The Council has set aside £500,000 to help communities identify and fund alternative solutions, and I welcome the Chancellor's Budget

announcements last week which seek to guarantee much faster speeds for households and businesses in remote rural areas and outlined an ambition to deliver 'ultrafast' broadband of 100mbps to nearly all homes. We will be ready to work with Government, the LLEP, district councils and broadband providers to turn this ambition into reality in Leicestershire.

RAIL STRATEGY FOR LEICESTERSHIRE

Members will be aware that Leicestershire is set to see two significant changes in its rail network. An announcement is due this year from the Government on HS2, and the Midland Mainline is due to be electrified in the next 5 years or so.

If the Government does progress with its plans for HS2, we need to ensure that Leicestershire people and businesses are able to benefit from the new route. Improving our local rail services is going to be key, first for places like Loughborough and Melton Mowbray that are already on the network, but then also for Coalville and Ashby who have lost their train services but still have a railway line.

I have asked the Director of Environment and Transport to look at how we can improve the strategic network in Leicestershire, providing better local rail services and even re-opening lines that were closed to passenger traffic some decades ago.

The strategy will be a high level study looking at the potential for future rail investment to address issues such as:

- Freight trains having to cross the Midland Mainline at Mountsorrel and Wigston, which impacts on the efficiency of the Midland Main line;
- Improvements at Market Harborough in terms of line speed and the station, as mentioned earlier;
- The potential for introducing passenger services to the Leicester to Burton Line;
- Leicester to Coventry improvements through Warwickshire's KNUCKLE3 project.

I hope this study will support the development and prioritisation of future business cases for Government investment into rail infrastructure and services.

The work on re-appraising the viability of passenger services on the line through Coalville and Ashby, with a focus on improving connections to the national rail network, would bring significant economic benefit to North West Leicestershire. As such I have been in discussion with the Leader of the District Council and he has agreed to look at the possibility of his Council making a financial contribution to the cost of the study.

FAIRER FUNDING

I wrote to Eric Pickles to raise our well documented concerns about Leicestershire County Council's low funding position. I was very pleased to receive a personal response with positive comments on our agenda for change. I have replied to this letter explaining further our funding position and pointing out that we intend to continue to campaign for fair funding and will make our case to the incoming Government.

I also explained that we would like to explore the possibility of greater devolution of business rates and possibly other responsibilities and that we will be working up proposals for discussion in the near future. We want to be self-funding and have more local control over services. As mentioned earlier, I also had the opportunity to discuss this and other combined authority possibilities with Greg Clark, the Cities Minister, when he visited Loughborough.

It is pleasing to see that the Chancellor's budget promised a review of business rates, although disappointing it will not report until early 2016. The budget also designated two pilot areas that will be able to retain 100% of the growth in business rates above existing forecasts. Although our ambition is for full devolution it does show that there is an open door to discuss these possibilities. I hope after the election in May this remains the case.

LEICESTERSHIRE PUBLIC SECTOR COMMISSIONING SKILLS ACADEMY

We know that how services are commissioned is vital to our Transformation Programme and the MTFS savings more widely.

I am pleased to report that support has recently been secured from the Cabinet Office for the development of a local public sector wide commissioning academy in Leicestershire. This follows work which has been ongoing with the Government since August 2013.

Discussions will now be held with our partners across the local public sector, such as the NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups and the district councils to move forward so that we can improve our collective expertise in the area of commissioning.

HARBOROUGH DISTRICT COUNCIL SYMINGTON BUILDING

I recently visited Harborough District Council's Symington Building where the County Council has worked with Harborough District Council to transform the Council offices that were only 60 percent used and which had a maintenance backlog of £1.8million.

Through careful design and excellent joint working, this £6million project was completed on time and on budget. From a County Council perspective, it has replaced four buildings and means that the library, museum, register office, adult learning, social care and a touchdown point are now under one roof, alongside the District Council, the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Job Centre.

This is yet another example of how the county has worked with a district council to respond to the financial challenges facing us all, whilst at the same time achieving co-location of services in a modern, fit for purpose building.