

**Cabinet – 10th February 2017****Liberal Democrat Comments on the MTFS**

As always the Council faces difficult choices. Due to the continuing withdrawal of Central Government funding we are seeing a budget full of cuts to services that under normal circumstances nobody would wish to make.

However, despite the difficult circumstances there are choices available and I am disappointed with some of the choices that the Cabinet seem to be making.

There are three areas in particular where we have concerns:

Prevention and Early Intervention

One of the Council's responses to the increasingly difficult financial situation has been to develop strategies to transform services and make them more coherent and holistic in how they operate. A key plank of these strategies is the importance of prevention and early intervention services that prevent larger costs occurring in later years.

Unfortunately, despite recognising the importance of prevention and early help these budgets are being slashed, often justified by the fact that the services aren't statutory. However, cutting these budgets now is likely to increase the pressure on statutory services further down the line. This is incredibly short sighted.

Bus Subsidies

Around a third of the County's buses depend on subsidies to operate. The MTFS includes plans to cut these subsidies and end most supported bus services from 2018/19, replacing them with a "once a week" DRT service. This would be a huge reduction in service and completely inadequate for those who rely on public transport to get to work.

At Scrutiny, the leader acknowledged that this would be unpopular with residents but stated that as it will occur in next year's budget, it's not "straight away" and doesn't need to be grappled with now. However, my understanding is that for this saving to be achieved the decision would need to be in place by 1st April 2018, meaning that the decision-making process, including consultation would have to be completed before then, to allow time for implementation.

If the MTFS goes ahead with this saving then by the time we debate it again at next year's Budget meeting, it will be too late; the decision will have been made. If we wish to save these services we need to act now.



Highways Maintenance

By the end of this MTFS, the budget for Highways Maintenance is expected to have a spending power that is 78% lower compared to ten years ago. This will inevitably impact heavily on the quality of Leicestershire's roads.

At its meeting in December, Cabinet endorsed an Asset Management Strategy containing some worrying statements such as *"It is important to recognise that the current condition of the network reflects ... the good overall condition that Leicestershire's road network was in at the beginning of the period of austerity. The consequences of the current levels of investment will not therefore manifest themselves fully for several years"* and *"we anticipate an increase in pothole numbers at a time when we were looking to move away from reactive repairs and the costly operation of our mobile road-menders"* and *"where we suffer any catastrophic failures we may have to consider temporary long-term closures"*.

The Liberal Democrat Group is greatly concerned that insufficient detail is being given to the public about the consequences of this reduction. The Administration insists on painting an overly rosy picture when they should be more open with residents about the impact of cutting £10m (revenue and capital) from the Highways Maintenance budget. If they are serious about protecting Leicestershire's services and winning Fairer Funding for the Council then they need to be more forthcoming about the damage this and other budget cuts will cause.

Simon Galton

Liberal Democrat Group Leader