

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 5 DECEMBER 2018

LEADER'S POSITION STATEMENT

iMPOWER – Most Productive Council

The County Council has been named as the most productive council in the country for the second year in a row according to a table compiled by consultancy firm iMPOWER.

The “iMPOWER iNDEX” defines productivity as outcome value per pound spent and draws on 20 publicly available data sets and 49 outcome indicators.

This is a great achievement by the Council and I would like to pay particular tribute to staff for their hard work. I would also like to recognise the personal role which Byron Rhodes has played in leading our transformation programme, which has been instrumental in this achievement. I agree with Byron that if we were to receive fair funding, we would in all probability also be the highest performing council in the country.

Unitary Local Government

Following the Cabinet decision in October to start an engagement and scrutiny process on outline proposals for the development of a unitary structure, I received a copy of a private and confidential letter from MPs, which was copied to the District Council Leaders. Unfortunately it was soon reported in the press and notified to districts' staff. That letter asked me to stop any work on reorganisation and made the same request of the District Council Leaders.

Whilst I will respect their views, MPs should not expect me to stop something decided by the Cabinet. I understand the legislative process and the significance of MPs in that process – I spoke to the Secretary of State during the CCN Conference - but equally I think it is important that all concerned recognise both the serious financial situation facing the County Council and the need to keep under review how local government in the East Midlands can best influence Government in both the national and regional context.

I am grateful to the Leaders of the Liberal Democrat and Labour Groups and the Conservative Commissioners in taking forward the scrutiny process on a cross-party basis. I hope everyone who has taken part in it will believe that this has been a thoroughly worthwhile process, with many useful contributions and hopefully enabling debate to flesh out and clarify the outline proposals presented to Cabinet. And the challenge from scrutiny has been welcome. In particular, I would like to thank all the outside speakers who gave a lot of their time to present to scrutiny members and to take questions.

The scrutiny process has not yet concluded – there is another meeting tomorrow at which two of the District Council Leaders have accepted an invitation to attend.

I must place on record my appreciation, and I am sure the appreciation of all members, to Jean Collins who has attended every scrutiny meeting bar one and it is good that she has an opinion on the best way forward. Talking of which, I think it is significant that there is a strong body of opinion from commerce and industry that the one thing which is important is that debate should continue.

Having discussed this with my Group, I believe the best way forward is to ask the Chief Executive to commission a business case that will flesh out in detail what a unitary structure for Leicestershire will look like in the context of a clear vision, what powers it will have and how it will operate. Once that business case is completed, that will go back to the Scrutiny Commission and the cross party working group for further consideration, before coming back to Cabinet and then to Full Council at some point for final approval. This will become the settled will of the County Council, should it be approved.

County Councils Network Annual Conference 2018

All Groups were represented at the CCN Conference held this year in Surrey.

In my role as CCN Finance Spokesman, I chaired a session looking into the funding pressures facing the County Councils. In that context, we were very pleased to see Rishi Sunak MP, Minister for Local Government, at the Conference. In his speech he praised Leicestershire for our work on delivering a needs-based, cost-driver model of funding and it is good to know that we are highly regarded by the Ministerial team and his civil servants.

East Midlands Collaboration

I continue to attend meetings of the Midlands Engine Executive Board, the Midlands Connect Board and the Board of Transport for the East Midlands. I cannot underestimate how important these bodies are to the future wellbeing, not just of Leicestershire, but of our region generally. As I have said before, the picture has changed and, whether we like it or not, it is bodies such as these which are the only ones able to get substantial funding out of Government for major infrastructure projects. Without those, strategically planned development, whether it be for housing or industry, will not be possible.

I am aware there is opposition locally to what is known as the A46 Expressway. I can inform the Council that Phase 2 of the Midlands Connect A46 study is underway and will report next year. I can also report that there has been positive news on the Coventry-Leicester to Nottingham rail corridor with the business case for improved rail services showing promising results.

Leicester and Leicestershire Local Enterprise Partnership

I am pleased to report that the Government's recent review of LEPs across the country is not proposing any changes to the geography of our partnership. Elsewhere there are considerable tensions about boundaries and also about the Government's intention to reduce local authority involvement and influence. I certainly share those latter concerns but I believe that we have a stable partnership in Leicester and Leicestershire, which is well led and therefore in a good position to manage any changes introduced by the Government.

It is nevertheless a real concern that there continue to be difficulties about the retention of business rates from Enterprise Zones, of which we have three in our LEP area. If any billing authority is seen as unreasonable by private sector partners and other local authorities, it does nothing for the reputation of local government and could weaken the partnership and its good reputation with Government. I hope that common sense can prevail.

Social Value

The Cabinet has recently approved a Social Value Policy Statement which goes beyond the statutory requirement to consider wider social, economic and environmental benefits when awarding contracts for services. Importantly this will secure wider community benefits for the people of Leicestershire by enabling us to maximise our spending power by leveraging additional resources from our suppliers and providers.

This policy covers all contracts over £50,000 and I know it has been well received. I am particularly grateful for the support from the Leader of the Labour Group.

Broadband

In the last five years the County Council's Superfast Leicestershire programme has upgraded more than 72,000 homes and businesses to fibre broadband. I am delighted to announce that we have now secured an addition £5.63m from the Rural Development Programme for England to add to our already committed investment. Our target is the 'final 4%' of Leicestershire which would otherwise be left behind on slow or inadequate broadband speeds. Details of the areas to benefit will be made public next summer with engineering works expected to start next autumn.

Mr N. J. Rushton CC

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