

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 19TH FEBRUARY 2020
POSITION STATEMENT BY THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Fair Funding

There is a lot of interest understandably in the Government's levelling up agenda. In that I am very clear that my priority is to get fair funding for Leicestershire.

With that in mind I very much welcome Rishi Sunak's appointment as Chancellor of the Exchequer. He knows us and has spoken positively about our fair funding model. He knows the current system of funding is broken and that it is in dire need of reform.

Earlier last week I met with all the Leicestershire MPs alongside my senior team. The MPs are with us in wanting to secure fair funding but the issue for all of us and for the Chancellor of the Exchequer is if it will be possible to increase the quantum of funding for local government. If that does not happen, the impact of the funding review cannot be as significant as we would hope.

The MPs have met with MHCLG but I have asked them to meet also with DfE given the critical funding issues for which that Department is responsible.

I notice that Rishi Sunak is quoted as saying that all Government Departments still have to find 5% savings. I can give him a few pointers as to how to achieve savings to reinvest in front-line services.

Devolution

Talk of devolution is around but I don't think that we can separate it from funding. The Government's manifesto was ambitious for devolution to people and places but contained no specific plans. They are to feature in a White Paper later this year.

Ahead of the White Paper and after speaking to my Group and the Opposition Group Leaders, I paused progress of a Cabinet report on a unitary structure for Leicestershire. In my view it is inevitable that any successful model of devolution to

a region or a sub-region will require local government reorganisation where there are two-tier areas. But we need to see what the White Paper says.

Where additional funding in 'devolution deals' has been achieved elsewhere, it has been mainly to improve economic growth, infrastructure and connectivity. The growth agenda here has, of course, not been supported by all local politicians. The Government's mantra is 'no mayor, no money' and so, if the financial offer is good, I can accept that. However, I am aware that devolution deals have not increased funding in supporting vulnerable children and adults, or for improving the conditions of roads, pavements and verges, or for reinvesting in a range of preventive services, or for keeping communities safer.

So, I think we should proceed with a degree of caution and not rush into anything. I can give an assurance that there will be full consultation within my Group and through the Council's decision making process before any proposal is put forward on behalf of the County Council. There is no doubt that Leicestershire and the East Midlands have been left behind in comparison to other places, but we need to ensure that any response to the government is informed by what is best for Leicestershire, locally and regionally, and does not weaken democratic control over services or our ability to work with partners.

Flooding

I want to extend my sympathy to every individual, family, business and community affected by flooding in recent days. Blake Pain will be making a separate statement about the County Council's response, funding and the seriousness of the situation.

Coronavirus (COVID19)

Members will be aware of the threat posed by Coronavirus (COVID19). I would like to thank Public Health England, supported by our own public health staff, for their efforts in testing suspected cases in the East Midlands and in leading the NHS operational response locally. There has been much coverage of the positive cases in the UK but in the same time period well over 3000 suspected cases have been tested and come back negative.

Within the Council, we have issued guidance to staff on the intranet and via a manager's digest advising good hand hygiene and signposting staff to the latest national guidance. The Public Health department have answered a number of queries from schools, care homes, the private sector and departments within the Council. The Council is awaiting Government guidance on who has responsibility for housing somebody should they present as having symptoms in Leicestershire but who doesn't have somewhere to self-isolate for a fortnight.

LLR Prepared (the Local Resilience Forum) provides daily updates from national teleconferences whilst a 'briefing' Strategic Command Group, chaired by the Director of Public Health, was held last Thursday to brief public sector organisations across Leicestershire as to the current position, immediate actions and future planning.

Even though much remains unclear as to the clinical attack rate and severity of the virus it is prudent that we 'hope for the best and plan for the worst'. To that end, Departments have been requested to ensure their business continuity plans are robust and up to date as part of our preparedness planning, if this does develop into something more widespread.

HS2

I welcome the Government's go-ahead for HS2. This rail link will bring significant economic benefits to Leicestershire and the wider economy acting as a catalyst for growth and investment in the cities it connects and will help to rebalance the economy north of London. HS2 will provide extra capacity both for the public and freight, relieving our already congested railway networks, whilst supporting the country's carbon reduction ambitions by taking cars and lorries off the road network.

Improved connections from the HS2 line to the wider rail network will create a step change in rail travel connecting the East Midlands to many parts of the UK with fast, efficient trains. This will sustain and add to the economic growth in our area, allowing people to access training and jobs in a much wider span of the country.

The Council is committed to playing a full and proactive role in representing local communities to put Leicestershire in the strongest possible position to benefit from

HS2. The priority will be to minimise the impact of the new railway construction and operation on Leicestershire's residents by working closely with HS2 Ltd and its contractors to ensure they consider the needs of the people affected. We will continue to work with our partners to reduce the railway's impact on the environment and local wildlife and will endeavour to limit road closures and hence disruption to local transport networks.

We will continue to work with our partners across the East Midlands to secure even better connectivity. This will be particularly around the Midland Main Line where we will keep pushing for electrification and subsequent direct HS2 services between Leicestershire stations and Toton.

Holocaust Memorial Day

Holocaust Memorial Day was established in 2000 following the Stockholm Declaration. The commemorative event held by this Council every year rightly focuses on the unique horror of the Holocaust while also recognising subsequent and ongoing atrocities. It provides an opportunity to reflect on the causes of prejudice and hatred, whether potential or actual, in our own communities and what we can do to stop identity-based hostility on any grounds from taking root.

One way to send an unequivocal message to those who wish to cause harm or distress to our local communities is through the adoption of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of Antisemitism (IHRA) which the Cabinet did on 7th February.

Adoption of the definition, in addition to our existing Hate Crime policies, will ensure that we have a robust approach to tackling all forms of hate crime, including those perpetrated on religious grounds, and to supporting Leicestershire's diverse communities.

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