

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 29TH SEPTEMBER 2021
POSITION STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

County Deal

On the 15th July 2021 the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, outlined his vision to deliver further funding and powers to counties, to deliver on his promise to “level-up” all regions of the country and complement the Government’s existing programme of devolution to cities, towns and combined authorities (<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-sets-out-new-county-deals-to-devolve-power-to-local-communities-in-levelling-up-speech>).

He invited those areas who had not yet agreed a deal with the Government, in the main the English county councils, to submit outline expressions of interest to the Government by 13th August 2021.

A bespoke County Deal for Leicestershire will mean the devolution of funding and powers from the Government to allow us to build and shape our communities locally, without having to continuously bid into an ever-increasing number of national funding pots, which limits our ability to work with our partners strategically and stifles growth and prosperity.

In brief, our County Deal bid calls for a £25 million per annum funding settlement over 30 years, allowing Leicestershire greater freedom and opportunities to deliver its own local priorities, such as being able to fund infrastructure to support development, drive economic growth, skills and prosperity, and taking effective action on climate change and carbon reduction, but all in line with the Government’s agenda.

We want to unleash Leicestershire’s full economic potential, raising living standards across the county, maximising every opportunity to increase our contribution to the UK economy. Our housing growth rate over the last 20 years is 21% compared to 16% in England and the number of homes over the last 5 years has grown by 6.7% compared to 4.7% nationally - 40% above the national average.

At present, there is inadequate funding to support the local planning authorities with their Local Plans and deliver infrastructure to support sustainable communities. The bid calls for an integrated £50 million per annum fund for five years, consolidating 11 separate national funding pots, to enable the creation of multi-year transport plans, to reduce excessive bidding costs by ending an inefficient process, and enable greater funding certainties to support future growth and development in the county.

Let me be clear, this is not local government reorganisation by the back door, it isn’t a bid for a unitary and it is certainly not a “county takeover” of existing local government services. Successful deals may be dependent on the government asking for an elected mayor, in return for powers and funding. It is also recognised that it will require working closely with district leaders, government departments, MPs and agencies such as Highways England, Network Rail and Homes England.

To this end, we have submitted an early expression of interest and I’m very grateful to all Leicestershire MPs for their help and advice with our outline bid. We have secured the support of all the county’s MPs and I would urge all members to get behind our bid to ensure Leicestershire is in the vanguard of county deals invited to negotiate with Government.

East Midlands Freeport

Work continues apace to progress the establishment of an East Midlands Freeport which includes land at and adjoining East Midlands Airport in this county as well as at the soon to be decommissioned Ratcliffe on Soar Power station in Nottinghamshire and next to the Toyota factory in Derbyshire.

I strongly believe this will be a game-changing development for the county's economy and indeed for that of the East Midlands as a whole, with the potential to create 55,000 jobs and contribute £8.4 billion to the regional economy over the next 30 years. It is because of that potential that I'm very pleased that the County Council has taken on a key role as lead authority and accountable body for the Freeport. In that capacity, and as a full partner on the interim Board which has been established under the leadership of Penny Coates, the Council has made a substantial contribution to the development of a robust Outline Business Case (OBC) which was submitted to the Government on 10th September.

The next stage of the process is to prepare and submit a Full Business Case by the middle of December. Like the OBC, this will be a substantial piece of work and as lead authority the Council is taking steps to ensure the right capacity, knowledge and skills are in place to support the submission of a persuasive case that will lead to the Freeport being formally designated and becoming operational as soon as possible in 2022. Major opportunities like this inevitably come with challenges and in representing the Council on the interim Board I will be especially keen to ensure the Freeport is accompanied by necessary investment in transport infrastructure and skills development so that Leicestershire residents and communities can fully benefit from the economic growth the Freeport is expected to bring. I'm also keen to ensure alignment with the proposed East Midlands Development Corporation, although it requires legislation to put it on a statutory footing, so that the benefits of each of these initiatives are maximised and unnecessary duplication avoided.

Cloud Hill Forest School

I was pleased to have the opportunity to open a brand new forest school a couple of weeks ago. The school is based in Worthington and runs on Saturday afternoons.

Forest schools are independently run and offer children excellent opportunities to build confidence whilst learning practical skills. Outdoors, hands-on learning can play a big part in our children and young people's development and wellbeing, and it is great news that Cloud Hill is adding to the wide range of educational opportunities available across Leicestershire.

Mr N. J. Rushton CC
Leader of the Council