

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 1 DECEMBER 2021

POSITION STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

A County Deal for Leicestershire

I am grateful to all members for their support for our County Deal bid to the Government. I am particularly grateful to the Opposition group leaders, who have outlined their thoughts and expressed support for whatever brings extra investment into Leicestershire. It is also backed by all of Leicestershire's MPs, the leaders of the seven district councils in the county, the City Mayor and Oliver Hemsley, the leader of Rutland County Council.

Along with the deputy leader, Deborah Taylor and my senior leadership team, we were recently invited to a ministerial call to make our pitch for a county deal. It was a very positive meeting and we were well received. We stressed the strong local support and buy in that we have achieved by working closely with local stakeholders. I believe we are the only county council pitching a directly elected mayor, with other leaders pitching "strong county leader" models. We know Michael Gove is supportive of mayoral-led bids, so this puts us in a strong position. The next stage will be to await to hear from DLUHC to negotiate further on our bid, which, if successful, will allow us greater local flexibility and certainty of funding, to deliver on our strategic priorities.

As and when we have any more information, I will ensure that everyone is updated. As far as district leaders are concerned, I have put this on the agenda when I meet them on 16th December in the Members Advisory Group.

Fair Funding

The Council will be well aware that we have been at the forefront of campaigning for a better deal and fairer funding for councils for many years now.

The Government's Fair Funding Review acknowledges that the local government funding system is broken and must change. Allocations today still link back to historic spending levels – rewarding those who spent the most on services decades ago – and significantly out of date data (including council tax bandings still based on 1991 values).

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has meant that major reform is difficult at this time. A cross party grouping of the lowest funded councils have however teamed up to move the issue out of the political long grass, the F20. We are united in the belief that change is needed in the short term otherwise those authorities at the bottom end of the funding tables will be hit the hardest.

The think-tank *UK Onward*, working with our own Director of Corporate Resources, has carried out detailed research which sets out a proposed short-term solution.

Pumping £300m into the system, and placing a floor on Combined Spending Power, would benefit the F20 authorities that have the unenviable double whammy of higher levels of council tax and lower levels of core spending power.

Clearly a temporary solution is not ideal but it would be a great step forward towards the end goal of delivering a future fair funding system for local government. In the short term this would provide the Government with a quick and relatively cheap solution and put the lowest funded councils on a more sustainable footing. It would also enable the system to carry on for a little longer whilst we work towards the bigger prize.

The F20 Councils are in the process of lobbying the Government and are looking to involve their local MPs.

Without additional financial support, those authorities with low core spending power will increasingly struggle to provide essential and valued services to their local communities. Next week we will be publishing our draft MTFs and at the all-member briefing Lee Breckon will outline to members the scale of the challenges faced by this Council.

Integrated Rail Plan (IRP)

The recent announcement regarding the Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) and the scaling down of HS2, whilst not welcomed everywhere, does contain a lot of positives for the County.

The IRP gives limited detail on the exact location of the high-speed line planned to connect Birmingham to the East Midlands (HS2 East). The document says the HS2 line will be built from the West Midlands to East Midlands Parkway, with high-speed trains continuing on the MML direct to Derby and Nottingham stations.

We are seeking details of what this will mean for Leicestershire and the timescales for delivering this and understand the importance of that for local communities and their elected representatives.

The IRP also states there will be full electrification of the Midland Main Line (MML) between London and Sheffield. A large section of the MML runs through Leicestershire. From previous work with Network Rail, it is clear that this electrification will require changes to some road bridges which cross the line, and new electricity supplies and associated substations.

In terms of timeframes the IRP outline delivery timetable appears to show an electrified MML northward from Harborough planned to be operational in the late 2020s.

Equally important is the commitment in the IRP to work with the Midlands Connect Rail Hub proposals. This could include improved connectivity with Birmingham and improvements to the Leicester to Coventry line.

Now that we have some degree of certainty it is vital that we keep pressing the Government to move quickly with these proposals so the benefits for the local economy and passengers can be realised.

Tree Strategy

At the last Cabinet meeting we agreed proposals to join with the National Forest to sign up to a Tree Charter.

The County Council currently looks after around 320,000 trees and the plans we adopted in 2020 will see that number increase as we have committed to help plant an additional 700,000 trees – one for each resident in the County.

The Tree Charter sets out its ambitions to continue nurturing trees and woodlands in the county and thus improve the environment, people's health and wellbeing, and also to provide more green jobs.

Working with the National Forest will enable us to share learning and expertise, to develop new and innovative approaches to use resources and funds more effectively.

We recognise the significant challenge posed in trying to improve tree coverage in the county when all other authorities are seeking to do the same. The resulting demand on nursery stock production nationally will be significant. Officers are already being informed of shortages and have been advised to reserve stock years in advance. To address this, we are exploring the development of a tree nursery for the County Council. This will help to:-

- Safeguard against national shortages of nursery stock;
- Improve Bio Security by reducing movement of stock around the country;
- Increase production and use of local provenance stock;
- Provide greater control on production and stock quality;
- Enable targeted production to meet future demand;
- Provide a trading opportunity to supply other organisations (e.g. National Forest Company, local community initiatives etc);
- Provide an opportunity to run apprenticeship schemes in nursery.

The aim of the Tree Strategy and Charter is not just to help us achieve carbon neutrality but add beauty to towns, villages and countryside.

Joint Meeting with Jane Hunt MP and Ed Argar MP

Straight after attending the short service of Remembrance at the Stand Easy memorial, which unfortunately could not involve local children this year, I hosted a joint meeting with the MPs for Loughborough and Charnwood to discuss a range of local and broader strategic issues that affect their residents and communities.

I updated them on our County Deal bid, which both MPs strongly endorse. On the agenda was a briefing on the emerging MTFs and Budget for next year, our work on the F20 group of lowest funded councils in England, the Charnwood Local Plan outlining housing and infrastructure concerns, demand pressures in Adult Social Care, an update on our approach to unaccompanied asylum seeking children arriving in Leicestershire and an update on the Covid-19 pandemic and how it has affected council services.

Meeting with the City Mayor

Maintaining good working relationships with the City Mayor and Leicester City Council has always been very important since I became leader. It is vitally important that we continue to work together on key issues affecting both councils.

I met Sir Peter again recently. We discussed the county deal bid for Leicestershire, the recent success of his bids into the Levelling Up fund and his plans for a work place parking levy. We also discussed the future of LEPs, the East Midlands Development Company, the East Midlands Freeport, the Great Central Railway and the latest NHS plans on health and care integration.

Mr N. J. Rushton CC

Leader of the Council