

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 7TH DECEMBER 2022

POSITION STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

MTFS

The Council's financial position, both in relation to Capital and Revenue funding is extremely challenging. In truth prior to the Autumn Statement it was looking impossible, not just for this Council but for the majority of Local Government.

The Autumn Statement was relatively positive for Councils such as ours that provide social care. Being prioritised alongside the NHS and education was exactly what we needed and hopefully this reflects an improved understanding in Westminster of the challenges we face locally.

Whilst people will be disappointed the adult social care reforms were delayed, the scarcity of social care workers to implement them and the need for funding for existing services mean that the decision was inevitable.

The changes announced in the Autumn Statement were significant and it will take time for the impact on this council to become clear. We are hopeful of news about the distribution and conditions on new funding before Christmas, but for specific grants we are likely to be waiting until next year before we have a final position.

Despite the Autumn Statement the position remains difficult, and we are faced with the unsatisfactory combination of Council Tax increases and service reductions being required to balance the budget. We are also facing significant calls to fund capital schemes to support Leicestershire's economic growth; without new funding this will need to be rationed to minimise the impact on core services.

The flexibility offered on Council tax increases is welcome. This will be a difficult decision during a cost-of-living crisis although I am not sure of how much of a choice it will be. I have talked previously about the 50p increase on the National Living Wage costing us £10 million. The National Living Wage increase of 92p will cost us £18 million next year. This is more than the maximum 5% Council Tax increase would raise.

With our financial challenges I feel it is vital that we continue to engage with our partner organisations so that we continue to make the right decisions. I'd like to acknowledge the time given up by the representatives from the voluntary sector, parish councils and other partners who attended the recent

webinars. I found these invaluable and am keen that we build on this level of engagement in our forthcoming the budget consultation.

The message I want to leave this Council with is that although the financial pressure has eased in the short term, we still have significant financial problems. We remain the lowest funded county council, which limits our options. If we are to continue to protect the most vulnerable in society difficult decisions lie ahead.

Midland Mainline and Network Rail

Can I begin by welcoming Government plans to electrify the Midland Main Line and the decarbonisation and modernisation benefits this will bring through Leicestershire.

Work to electrify the Midland Main Line will mean new overhead electricity cables and associated supporting structures, along with vegetation clearance. This work is underway with site clearance work having started in July between Market Harborough and Wigston.

The County Council will do all it can to help implement these works, with minimum disruption to the travelling public, and at no cost burden to Leicestershire. However, Network Rail, the rail operator and promotor of these works, have been slow to share their detailed proposals and have been reluctant to comply with well-established ways of working that developers normally follow when working in the public highway.

In light of these issues, I propose to write to the Minister of State for Transport, and the Harborough M.P, seeking their support to urge Network Rail to cooperate with Leicestershire County Council and comply with the appropriate legislation to facilitate this work at the earliest opportunity. I will also highlight that as every day passes, it becomes increasingly likely that Network Rail will not be able to meet their current electrification programme, without immediate action on their part to comply with established highway legislation.

Cost of Living

The Council has a wide-ranging support package worth £14.8m gained mainly through national funding. The support offered ranges from food and fuel vouchers to help those in need get food supplies and money for their energy bills as well as practical support for maintaining affordable warmth in their home. Families whose children receive free school meals are also being supported with vouchers for food during the school holidays, alongside access to free winter holiday clubs. Our First Contact Plus service can signpost residents to additional support for help with money advice, work, skills, and housing. We are working closely with partners to support warm spaces and

ensure that residents know where to get the support they need as well as giving financial support to food banks and other charities so that they can support residents directly. The comprehensive offer to support families with the cost-of-living crisis can be found at www.leicestershire.gov.uk/cost-of-living.

I am acutely aware of the impact that the cost-of-living crisis is having on our staff, whether this is being able to afford the essentials, or adding pressure that creates stress and mental health challenges. The Council has a comprehensive wellbeing offer, including an in-house counselling service. In addition, we have put a wide range of information and links to help and support around low pay and cost of living on the intranet. These pressures, of course, also impact on staff in the workplace. We are separately focusing on support for managers and staff with stress and mental health issues

Asylum Seekers

This Council has a proud record of supporting vulnerable individuals and communities including asylum seekers and refugees. We have proactively supported the Homes 4 Ukraine Scheme, Unaccompanied Asylum Seeker Children, and Syrian Refugees.

Members will also be aware from press reports that there has been an unprecedented rise in migrants crossing the English Channel in small boats. As a result, the Home Office has mandated all local authorities to accept asylum seekers in their areas irrespective of the additional financial costs and service impacts of this decision on the receiving authority. They are also discounting numbers who have already arrived in the area under the other schemes I have mentioned.

There are now 5 hotels being used by the Home Office to house asylum seekers. The Council together with its partners such as the Police, NHS, and district councils is now working with the Home Office to try and mitigate the impact of their policy on local services and communities. However, we are expecting to incur significant unbudgeted costs as a result of the standing up of these current hotels and possible future ones. Such costs include adult and children's social care, home to school transport, SEND, public health, and school admissions

Ukrainian Guests

The data shows that the number of Ukrainians who have arrived in Leicestershire as part of the Homes for Ukraine scheme is approaching 900. I am proud of the commitment and generosity shown by Leicestershire residents to the Ukrainian people and pleased that the County Council, working with district councils and other partner agencies, is providing effective

supporting both Ukrainian guests and their hosts. We are particularly working hard to ensure that existing sponsorship arrangements can continue where possible, and that new sponsors can be found where existing arrangements have to come to an end. To this effect we have agreed to provide additional thank you payments of £150 per month to sponsors (to supplement existing payments of £350 per month) for the period November 2022 to March 2023 inclusive, recognising cost of living pressures this winter. Partners continue to meet regularly to co-ordinate the local response to this issue under the auspices of our excellent Local Resilience Forum.

Foster Carers

This Christmas there will be nearly 700 children and young people in care, in Leicestershire. We are continuing to search for foster carers to become part of the Leicestershire County Council's fostering family to make a real difference to the lives of our children in care. We believe that lots of people who live in Leicestershire have the skills, knowledge and experience to become great foster carers and the Children and Families Services Department are always keen to hear from anyone interested in becoming a foster carer and accessing all of the service and support we offer our foster carers in Leicestershire. Details on the fostering service can be found at via the following link.
<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/we-can-help-with/why-foster-with-us>

Winter Preparations

As we move into winter the Council's Winter Service Plan has been activated. This service which runs 24/7 until the end of March is delivered by an experienced team with support from a network of snow wardens and farmers.

We have 16,500 tonnes of salt stored in 5 barns located in Melton, Market Harborough, Misterton, Nailstone and Mountsorrel. 20 drivers working on a rota basis every night allow us to treat 17 gritting routes which covers 48% of the highway network. The 17 routes are focussed on main distributor roads, commuter routes (rural roads carrying more than 2,000 vehicles per day), major bus routes (urban areas with 8 or more service buses an hour, rural areas with 2 more service buses per hour) and one route into each village, where possible. The County Council's website has Live mapping of all our gritting routes and travel routes. In addition, the service will be refilling 811 salt bins placed at strategic points around the County.

Mr N. J. Rushton
Leader of the Council