

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 22ND FEBRUARY 2023**POSITION STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL****Support for Ukrainian Refugees**

On February 24th of last year, almost exactly a year ago, Russia mounted its illegal invasion of Ukraine. That triggered a humanitarian crisis with millions of refugees fleeing the warzone. I am very proud of Leicestershire's contribution in response to this crisis. To date 957 Ukrainian refugees have arrived in the county due to the generosity of Leicestershire residents who have hosted Ukrainian families and individuals in their homes. In many cases this hosting has lasted nearly a year. Council staff working with partner agencies and the Ukrainian Centre in Leicester have facilitated the welcome and integration of people from Ukraine by administering payments to hosts and guests, helping families access school places, signposting people to much needed services and staffing a welcome desk at East Midlands Airport. To mark this sad anniversary, but also to reinforce our warm welcome to those seeking refuge and to thank sponsors and staff for their outstanding efforts over the last year, an Oak Tree was planted in a ceremony attended by myself, the Deputy Leader, Chairman, hosts, guests and two representatives from the Ukrainian Centre. We all hope for a speedy and just resolution of the conflict and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have contributed to Leicestershire's response.

Earthquake in Turkey and Syria

My thoughts are very much with the victims and survivors of the earthquake in Turkey and Syria and their families. I am proud to announce that four Leicestershire firefighters formed part of the International Search and Rescue Team, which comprised over 70 highly trained volunteers and search dogs helping with the search operation to rescue survivors. The firefighters were deployed on 7 February and safely returned to the UK on the 15 February. During their time in Turkey they rescued many people in the most challenging of circumstances. Their bravery and achievements will be formally recognised by the Chief Fire and Rescue Officer in the coming days.

Asylum Seekers

Several members have had to deal with understandable local concerns when the Home Office and their contractors, SERCO, have taken unilateral decisions to take over hotels to accommodate asylum seekers. The shortness of notice if any, the absence of consultation, the unwillingness to recognise the impact on services, particularly in our case education provision, and the

failure to recognise the implications for local communities, continue to be completely unacceptable.

On local services, our Children's Services are at breaking point trying to deal with the children of asylum seekers and individual young people. Also, we receive no extra funding.

I am aware that our MPs affected have made their concerns known to the Home Office but I do not see any evidence that the Home Office have learnt any lessons from these bad experiences.

So we have found out in the last few days that the Yew Lodge Hotel in Kegworth is going to accommodate asylum seekers from next week. The County Council will work closely with North West Leicestershire District Council to ensure the strength of local opposition and community concerns, already loud, is conveyed to the Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister, whose own constituency is not far away.

We can have no confidence, however, that the Home Office are in listening mode and so we do need to ask wider questions. Why is it that Leicestershire has had more hotels identified than Nottinghamshire, than Derbyshire, and than Northamptonshire? Is it the case local hotel chains and owners are offering the use of more hotels in Leicestershire than elsewhere or because of some separate Government criteria?

It is also worth noting that the City of Leicester is being asked to accommodate more asylum seekers than Nottingham or Derby.

These are questions I am asking officers to pursue with the Home Office and I will also ask our MPs to use their own channels to try to get answers.

Coronation Bank Holiday Weekend

Over the Bank Holiday weekend for the King's Coronation, it is hoped that many of our communities will hold street parties and celebrate the Coronation Big Lunch which will be on Sunday 7th May. To assist communities the County Council will be waiving any costs associated with road closures as well as providing organisers with free traffic cones, signs and guidance about where to place them on the highway. If anyone wishes to apply to close a road they must do so by Friday 31st March. Further information is available on the Lord-Lieutenant's coronation web page (at www.leicestershire.gov.uk/coronation). I would encourage Members to promote this within their divisions.

Children and Family Hubs Award

We are one of 12 local authorities that were successful in our bid to secure funding of £944,000 from the Government's Family Hubs Transformation Fund to create a network of 'family hubs' in the county by March 2024. This funding

will transform how we deliver services to our families in their communities. Family Hubs are a mixture of physical and virtual spaces where all families can easily access a range of information, guidance and support, to help give all children the best start in life and ensure families with children 0-19 (or up to 25 with SEND) have the resources they need to improve long term outcomes and reduce inequalities.

Suicide Prevention Conference

200 attendees from across public sector organisations and the voluntary sector attended this years' 'Time to Talk' Suicide Prevention Conference, held at the King Power Stadium, on Thursday 2nd February. The event raised awareness, knowledge and understanding of suicide amongst professionals, shared information about new and upcoming work and challenges in the area; and raised awareness of the 'Start a Conversation' campaign.

Presentations were delivered to the audience by a range of local and regional partners and services. The programme also included personal stories delivered by individuals with experience of suicidal ideation or family experience of suicide.

Buses – innovating schemes, DRT, Fox Connect

We recognise the challenges affecting bus services across the county. Commercially provided services make up around 90% of the bus routes across Leicestershire and therefore working with commercial operators is a priority for us. We have delivered on our commitment to create an Enhanced Partnership with local operators to improve bus services and passenger experiences for our communities.

The harsh reality is however that current expenditure on our existing contracts for our subsidised bus routes will be £1m over budget for the coming financial year due to increasing cost of fuel, labour and reducing patronage. Putting £0.5m back into buses therefore will not stop the need for a review of our services and ultimately, some of those being withdrawn. Given that the subsidy levels on some of our services are up to £22 per passenger and therefore represents very poor value for our spend, we need to continue with the review of all of our subsidised services to ensure that the funding we do put into buses represents good value for the Leicestershire tax payer.

Where commercial operators cannot provide services, we are looking for innovative ways to connect people to important amenities through modern demand responsive services. We took the opportunity to be part of a pilot project to bring an app based flexible service to Leicestershire through our successful bid to the Rural Mobility Fund. We received over £1m and the FoxConnect Service is now operating in rural parts of south-west Leicestershire with key destinations such as Magna Park, Next Headquarters, Carlton Park, Fosse Park as well as Narborough and Hinckley train stations.

We will use this experience to drive future thinking of flexible ways to connect people in Leicestershire.

Network Rail Performance

Network Rail is currently undertaking significant works on the Midland Mainline through Leicestershire and will continue to do so for years to come with the electrification of the line. We have found in the past, however, and continue to find that, unfortunately, Network Rail is poor at engaging with us in time to meet its programme and repeatedly ignores the Highway legislation we must operate under. Officers are continuing to press senior Network Rail officers to collaborate with us and take on board within their programme the required processes to comply with highway legislation, to minimise highway disruption and ensure safe working, while giving Network Rail confidence in its work programme to implement essential rail improvements.

Leicestershire Climate and Nature Pact

Following approval of the Net Zero Leicestershire Strategy and Action Plan at County Council in December, our plans to work with residents and stakeholders to achieve a net zero county by 2045 are progressing at pace. On the 28 February we launch the Leicestershire Climate and Nature Pact alongside our key stakeholders, demonstrating our collective commitment to tackling and adapting to climate change and protecting and enhancing biodiversity. We have secured additional funding from Innovate UK to progress our plans and flagship projects such as improving the energy efficiency of homes in the county and continuing to attract grant, enabling us to do more to cut emissions and support households through the cost of living crisis.

Nursery Partnership with the National Forest

We are developing a new tree nursery in partnership with the National Forest Company (NFC). The project is to develop a new community-focused nursery involving local groups and organisations to help collect seeds and grow new trees to plant across Leicestershire and the National Forest.

The project – which aims to produce around 20,000 trees per year - will be trialled for four years with ambitions to inspire other communities to start up tree nurseries. Work on the site located in the heart of the National Forest in Moira is due to start soon, with phase one of the project involving the development of the site, access, infrastructure, polytunnels and growing beds.

Mr N. J. Rushton

Leader of the Council

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