

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 27TH SEPTEMBER 2023

POSITION STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Trading Standards work at East Midlands Airport

I am really pleased to inform members that almost 440,000 potentially dangerous or non-compliant items have been intercepted and seized by Leicestershire Trading Standards at East Midlands Airport in the last year.

The seizures are worth more than £15.3m and include electrical goods which could overheat and cause fires, toys which failed to meet UK safety standards, jewellery with high levels of hazardous metals and cosmetics containing toxic ingredients. All of these unsafe items have now been stopped from making it into shops and online marketplaces. They are all sent to a specialist disposal firm for recycling.

Our Trading Standards team works in partnership with Border Force on a nationally-funded project at East Midlands Airport. The partnership is intelligence-led, which means that Trading Standards and Border Force can target resources in the areas of highest risk, with potentially unlawful and non-compliant consignments being identified, targeted and then intercepted.

Most of the seized items are destined for sale at large online marketplaces, where they are sold on behalf of the importer.

The Trading Standards team has made an excellent video examining a consignment of unsafe goods, which can be seen at www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXYQeFizvow. It is one of our most watched videos to date, with over 24,000 views on TikTok alone.

I'm sure members will wish to join with me in congratulating the Trading Standards team for their important work in this area.

Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service Firefighters in Morocco

As Chairman of the Combined Fire Authority, I am proud to report that Leicestershire Fire and Rescue Service (LFRS) staff have been deployed to the earthquakes in Morocco.

The LFRS supports the United Kingdom International Search and Rescue Team (UK-ISAR). This is a highly trained and skilled group of individuals, that, if requested by foreign governments and approved by the UK Government, will deploy on to foreign soil to render humanitarian aid and save lives.

A UK-ISAR team of 60 people and 4 dogs were mustered and have now deployed into Morocco to conduct Search and Rescue. Within the team two LFRS personnel are included. I am proud of their involvement and commitment in rescuing people in a horrific and deeply troubling natural disaster.

Both personnel are highly trained and work within Leicester City, one of whom also responded to Turkey recently.

Bradgate Park

As Chairman of the Bradgate Park Trust, I am delighted to be able to inform members that Bradgate Park is the first place in Leicestershire to be recognised as a Green Heritage Site and has secured a prestigious Green Flag award for the second year running.

Bradgate Park now ranks alongside East Midlands neighbours, such as Wollaton Park in Nottingham and Derby Arboretum, which are also recognised as Green Heritage Sites for their interesting history.

Run by environmental charity Keep Britain Tidy, the Green Flag award scheme sets the standard for the management of parks and beaches and inspires people to be litter-free, to waste less and live more sustainably. The scheme is also dedicated to recognising heritage through the Green Heritage Site accreditation, supported by Historic England.

To support Bradgate Park in its efforts to 'go green', we have been able to use the Active Travel Grant to enable rangers and volunteers to carry out tasks around the Park such as litter picking or updating the noticeboards on an electric cargo bike.

The e-bike will replace some of the Trust's diesel vehicles, supplying an eco-friendly alternative for the short trips taken along the Park's most popular pathways. We hope that this will improve air quality in heavily used areas of the Park and make walking on the pathway more peaceful for visitors.

Devolution

I reported in my Position Statement to the May Council that the County Council Leadership had had, at her request, a meeting with the Levelling Up Minister, Dehenna Davison MP, and it had been a very helpful and constructive meeting. She subsequently wrote to myself, the City Mayor and the Leader of Rutland asking us to pursue a level 3 deal with the Government.

As members will know, a level 3 deal is only available if there is agreement locally to have an elected mayor for the combined authority area and that remains unacceptable to the City Mayor.

The Minister then wrote to the three Leaders to ask us to state clearly if we intend to pursue a level 3 deal or the lesser level 2 deal. In the circumstances we have replied to say level 2 and we wait to hear from Government officials as to next steps.

I was very sorry to learn of Dehenna Davison's decision to stand down as a Minister and the reasons why. I wish her all the best for the future. She was always wanting to be positive in our meetings.

Ministerial Visit

I would like to this opportunity to thank Lee Rowley, DLUHC Minister, for his recent meeting with Mrs Taylor, Mr Breckon, Mr Bedford, Mr Ashman and me. The discussion was positive and followed constructive talks with the Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, in Westminster. We set out a pragmatic, temporary fix which would see Government put in an extra £350m to level up 32 of the lowest funded councils.

We discussed the County Council's funding and the pressure that we are currently seeing in some service areas. The Minister advised that the Government will bring forward its proposals for the Local Government Finance Settlement 2024-25 in the usual way later in the year and that he welcomed frontline feedback as to what is happening at the current time.

We have a credible solution which can be implemented quickly so we were pleased with the reassurance that the Minister will take our comments back to Government.

MTFS Update

Members will be aware that the latest budget monitoring position shows a £9m overspend this year due to the increasing costs of children's and adult social care. Inflation, the National Living Wage and increasing pressures on vital services are also driving up costs and could push our budget shortfall to over £100m by 2027. Members should be reassured that intensive work is taking place focusing on managing future demand and close management of costs will continue to reduce the forecast overspend.

Our latest financial forecast typifies the grim reality facing councils up and down the country. Let me be clear – the section 151 officer is not about to issue a section 114 notice. We're super-efficient and pride ourselves on doing the best we can with the money we have, but spiralling costs are making it much harder to keep our head above water. With many other well run authorities also facing similar pressures, local government is reaching new territory.

Section 114 notices have gone from a once in a decade event to a regular occurrence. Authorities have got into trouble through poor management and governance rather than funding so it can seem irrelevant to our County Council. Birmingham's recent demise exemplifies this, the only surprising thing was that they didn't go under sooner. However, the sheer number of councils declaring serious issues are making things feel closer to home.

York's recent warning is notable as their funding per head of population is similar to our own, they have lower levels of deprivation and none of the challenges of a rural authority. I would also draw attention to Derbyshire's plight. As neighbours we have a lot of similarities. Despite being significantly better funded than we are, their financial position does not look good.

Some of the choices we will have to make will be politically difficult, but in the medium term they will deliver far better for Leicestershire than the alternative of not adapting to the financial position.

RAAC Update: Schools and County Council Buildings

Members will be aware of the potential risks from RAAC construction and will have seen the briefing note circulated on 18 September. Going forward, an update will be regularly included in the newly re-established Weekly Digest.

Since the Council became aware of RAAC vulnerabilities, surveyors have been actively looking for the presence of RAAC in the corporate estate during the five yearly cyclical condition surveys of all buildings. The corporate estate is now undergoing a targeted review. Any buildings that have not been surveyed in the last three years and fall within the new date range of buildings that may contain RAAC and have concrete plank construction will be subject to further inspections.

I would remind members that all relevant maintained school buildings have been assessed and that RAAC has not been discovered within maintained schools. The Director of Children and Family Services has recently been notified that RAAC is present at an Academy in the county. Mitigating actions had already been put in place by the Academy Trust, including closing off the areas affected. Further surveys are being undertaken by the DfE in order to decide on the course of action needed at the school.

Adults' and children's third party providers have been written to providing guidance on requirements and where to seek advice should providers have concerns.

Further guidance is awaited from the Government and I can assure members that it will be addressed as a priority when issued.

Electric Vehicle Chargepoints in Leicestershire

I am pleased to announce that more than £3 million in Government funding has been allocated to install electric vehicle chargepoints across Leicestershire.

We worked with a number of other councils and Midlands Connect on the bid and have been allocated funding through the Government's Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure scheme (LEVI).

The earmarked funding will be used from 2024/25 and is expected to deliver up to 2,500 public electric vehicle chargepoints in Leicestershire by the end of 2030 to meet the needs of the growing electric vehicle (EV) market. Locations have not yet been identified and our next step is to develop a delivery plan with a focus on locations with the greatest public need, centring on residential streets where there is a high proportion of housing without access to private off-street parking.

The funding will also enable us to continue our green agenda and make a significant contribution to securing EV infrastructure across Leicestershire.

CaseworkerGov Software

Over the last few months, a small number of members from all groups have been piloting a software package called CaseworkerGov which is designed to help Members manage their constituents' casework. The pilot has been a success and

those Members who have used CaseworkerGov have found it beneficial. Some of its features are as follows:

- Set up and record individual constituent queries
- Set dates for follow up actions
- Tag the same issue against multiple constituents
- Ability to send emails to officers and constituents from within CaseworkerGov
- Ability to transfer emails sent to your @leics.gov.uk email address into the software
- Ability to create letters using standard templates
- Ability to analyse data as to the type of queries you are managing

For more information you can also view a YouTube video at

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLytbBA8Hlt_QpUMq7OV5cl1bKEFK0t-J1

All members have now been offered the opportunity to have access to CaseworkerGov and I would encourage you to sign up. Training sessions have been arranged for the end of October.

Mr N. J. Rushton
Leader of the Council

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