

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 21ST FEBRUARY 2024

POSITION STATEMENT FROM THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Ratby/Kirby Muxloe Gas Outage

I want to place on record my thanks to the local communities, their representatives, Cadent (the gas distribution company) and the Local Resilience Forum for their quick response after the recent gas outage, caused by a burst water pipe, which affected 3,500 homes in Ratby and Kirby Muxloe and left some people without heating for nearly a week.

The response locally has been exemplary. Our local councils, Cadent and voluntary groups – including Leicestershire Search and Rescue and British Red Cross - and our residents have gone the extra mile to look after their communities, including by supporting vulnerable people, providing hot food and giving out heaters and blankets.

I will give special mention to Jane Moore, Director of Children and Family Services, who chaired the Tactical Co-ordinating Group overseeing the Local Resilience Forum response to the incident. She had a number of difficult decisions to make, all of which she handled in a calm and professional manner, whilst still carrying out her important day job. I'm sure members will agree with me that Jane did an excellent job, for which we are all grateful.

At the Cabinet meeting on 9 February we asked the Local Resilience Forum to calculate the cost to the public purse so that costs can be recovered from those responsible. We have also written to Severn Trent to ask for an explanation of the cause of the incident and the apparent delayed response to the first burst water pipe.

Flooding/Storm Update

The Local Resilience Forum also took a central role in supporting the response and recovery phases of Storm Henk.

Storm Henk resulted in the River Soar and many tributaries reaching record levels (worse than the Easter 1998 flooding). In Leicestershire alone, around 535 residential and commercial properties have been reported to date as having suffered internal flooding.

Our Highways team worked around the clock to support the emergency services and communities and to manage the road network with up to 70 roads closed. They are now continuing to clear gullies impacted by floodwater and work through the significant backlog of drainage enquiries.

It is not yet known how many formal flooding investigations have been triggered; this could take several weeks to establish as more information is received. These investigations can be very resource intensive and time consuming and require all responsible agencies to be involved.

This may then result in further actions or future project work to try and address the flooding. Given the unprecedented number of investigations that are likely to be needed, and potential work in bidding for funding to deliver works, I am pleased to say I have been able to allocate an extra £400,000 to help the Council tackle flooding over the new MTFS period.

It is also likely, however, that in some instances there may not be a realistic or affordable solution for flood prevention.

With changing climate meaning more rainfall and greater intensity when it rains, there is a greater need to move communities towards resilience via property protection and community action. The County Council is committed to support our communities in this.

Devolution

I said that I would keep the Council updated on devolution. Since our last meeting we have heard from the Devolution Minister in DLUHC, Jacob Young, that the Government is very keen on a level 2 deal for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland and would like to include that in the Chancellor's Budget Statement next month. Members may recall that reference to the Lancashire level 2 deal was made by the Chancellor in his Autumn Statement last year. The Minister will be meeting me, the City Mayor and the Leader of Rutland next week.

Members of Parliament

The Cabinet has continued to work with the Conservative Members of Parliament for Leicestershire to ensure that the County Council's case for fair funding continues to be pressed on the Government. There is now inevitably a recognition across the board that a proper solution will have to await the next parliament but in the meantime we have been able to make some progress. The Government agreed some additional funding for 2024/25 last month, which is reported in the papers for today's meeting. That followed some direct lobbying of the Government and I was grateful in particular to Alberto Costa MP and Neil O'Brien MP for putting their names to a letter to the Secretary of State.

Biodiversity Net Gain

The Environment Act 2021 introduced mandatory Biodiversity Net Gain (known as "BNG") as a new requirement to be delivered through the planning system. The legislation requires the delivery of a 10% increase in biodiversity above the pre-development status of a site and this will be secured through the planning system. Mandatory BNG commenced on 12th February 2024 for major applications and will apply to smaller sites from 2nd April 2024.

This new requirement will affect planning applications that the County Council deals with in its statutory role as the minerals and waste planning authority and will apply to the County Council's own developments, such as schools and roads.

Mr N. J. Rushton
Leader of the Council