

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 25TH SEPTEMBER 2024

POSITION STATEMENT FROM THE ACTING LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Ofsted inspection of Children’s Services

I am now pleased to be able to share publicly the outcome of the inspection of Leicestershire’s Children’s Services that was undertaken in April this year and published in July. The inspection judged the overall effectiveness of our services as Outstanding. This is a remarkable achievement for the department and for the County Council, moving the grade from Requires Improvement in 2019 to Outstanding in 2024. The Outstanding outcome is reflection of the hard work and commitment of staff and leaders across the department as well as the support from the County Council as a whole.

Hinckley National Rail Freight Interchange

Members will no doubt already be aware that a written Ministerial statement was issued on the 10th September extending the deadline for a decision. The Examining Authority (Planning Inspectorate) has recommended that the Secretary of State (SoS) for Transport refuses the application. Weighted heavily against granting the Development Consent Order are the following issues:

- the highway safety risk at Sapcote caused by the re-routing of HGV traffic;
- the Applicant’s failure to adequately assess the impacts at the M69 J2 and M1 J21/M69 J3;
- the severe impacts on the living conditions of the occupiers of the Aston Firs Travellers site from the proposed acoustic barriers

The SoS has said that she is “minded to agree” with the recommendation and refuse. However, she has extended the deadline for the decision to allow further information to be submitted and analysed.

The decision will now be issued on or before 10th March 2025. Tritax, the developer, has until 10th December to submit further information. The County Council will have 28 days from the date of publication of this information to make further comments, but these must relate to the new information provided by Tritax.

I'd like to take this opportunity to place on record my thanks to officers for their hard work in analysing the evidence and submitting the County Council's response to the application.

Murder in Franklin Park, Braunstone

Following the incident on September 1st 2024, and tragic murder of Bhim Kohli, I would like to send my deepest condolences to his family and friends at this very difficult time.

I also acknowledge that this remains a troubling and anxious time for the community. We are working with the City Council and Blaby District Council to provide support to the area over this difficult time.

VAT Charge on Private School fees

Members will be aware of the plan to introduce a VAT charge on private school fees from January 2025. There are an estimated 5,407 Leicestershire children who attend private schools and whilst the impact of the VAT charge is yet to be understood, the impact for Leicestershire could be twofold. Firstly, increased pressure on mid-terms admissions requests into schools that are already full from the normal admissions round. Secondly, there is a risk that children who are attending private schools with additional needs may not always have an Education Health and Care Plan. The increased charge for parents of children with additional needs may therefore lead to increased requests for EHCP assessment or for specialist education places in an already heavily challenged system.

Offender Early Release Scheme

As Members will be aware, under changes to the standard determinate sentence, a number of prisoners were released under End of Custody Supervised Licence on Monday 9th September. Across Leicestershire there has been a strong partnership response between the Probation Service, the Police, the County Council and a range of other agencies to ensure this release has gone smoothly and that those prisoners who have returned to Leicestershire have been robustly managed and supported.

Devolution

The week after the last Council meeting, the Deputy Prime Minister wrote to the Leaders of all upper tier councils about the new Government's ambitions for devolution. This is the first chance I have had to report to the Council since then. Her letters were addressed to councils who had sought to start negotiations during

the last Government and those who had not. There was no doubt about a presumption in favour of the mayoral model and restrictions on geography, but the Deputy Prime Minister would welcome proposals from upper tier authorities by the end of September.

In response, Sir Peter Soulsby and I signed a joint letter to the Government registering our interest in devolution, requesting a meeting, and expressing hope that the promised new devolution framework would not be as rigid as that first published in the Levelling Up White Paper in 2022. Ministers have made it clear there is no point in either authority bidding on its own.

We have had responses from the Government but as yet no meeting has been arranged. We are also, like others, waiting for the new devolution framework to be published.

I will keep the Council updated when there is any more information but there is no point in the County Council doing any more work for now. Our first submission was made almost three years ago to the day. Although the Government changed the rules we put forward several ideas in the subsequent period for both Leicester and Leicestershire, and Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland. Ultimately, the support of the City Mayor and the Leader of Rutland was not forthcoming.

It will be interesting to see if the Deputy Prime Minister's stated willingness to resolve issues which have stalled previous devolution deal negotiations, not just in Leicester and Leicestershire, can bring about the change and flexibility we need to get a good devolution deal.

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