

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 19TH FEBRUARY 2025**POSITION STATEMENT FROM THE ACTING LEADER OF THE COUNCIL****MTFS**

Firstly, I would like to extend my thanks to all our officers for their dedication and hard work in pulling together a balanced budget for next year. Although the financial position continues to be difficult this is a vital element in securing a sustainable financial position. Numerous challenges lie ahead, and we will need to continue to allocate resources carefully.

As we look ahead, the potential of local government reorganisation presents us with new opportunities. If we get re-organisation right it has the potential to deliver a significant improvement to our financial position, unlocking efficiencies that would otherwise not be possible.

Local Government Reorganisation

With the Government rejecting our bid to be put on the fast track to deliver local government reorganisation so that we could unlock devolution for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, we are now focusing on revising the 2019 business case, a Vision for Local Government in Leicestershire. This will inform our interim proposals which we will submit to the Government on 21 March.

That business case highlighted the potential for a more efficient, effective and community-focused local government structure, with a single unitary council for Leicestershire (excluding Leicester City), resulting in simplified and joined-up services, substantial financial savings, a stronger community voice and improved service delivery.

I would remind members that the business case also included a strong proposal for local area committees, with devolved decision making to shape local services and give communities a stronger voice. This, along with area planning committees and empowered Town and Parish Councils means that one new unitary council for Leicestershire will not be remote. We would also be better placed to stand up to developers, because we would be speaking with a unified voice on planning matters, and able to put infrastructure requirements and local needs at the heart of the planning system.

We are planning an engagement exercise that will start shortly and will also be asking the Scrutiny Commission for its views on the proposal. When officers are updating the business case to support the interim proposals, there will be an

important focus on the criteria for unitary local government set out in the invitation letter, including that a unitary authority must:

- be the right size to achieve efficiencies (with the aim of a population of 500,000 plus)
- ensure value for money for council tax payers,
- improve capacity and withstand financial shocks;
- prioritise the delivery, improvement and sustainability of services;
- avoid unnecessary fragmentation of services such as social care; and
- enable stronger community engagement and should reflect sensible geography and a sensible economic area;

The Cabinet will finalise the interim proposal when it meets on 18th March taking the above factors into account and the outcome of the public and stakeholder engagement. We don't know what the District Councils are proposing but a single unitary council for Leicestershire (excluding Leicester City) built on the existing district areas and respecting the existing city boundary will form the critical building blocks for our proposal.

If the Government were to seek to progress any proposal for an extension of the City's boundaries, I believe it would be in the interests of the residents of our county to oppose this and to promote a single unitary authority for the County of Leicestershire as the best option for meeting the criteria for unitary local government that I have referred to above.

We will consider the position of Rutland in a unitary structure when the position of Rutland Council is known.

Flooding

On Monday 6th January 2025, during an unnamed storm, significant rainfall led to the worst flooding event in recent history in Leicestershire. To date, an estimated 900 properties across the Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland region, and a confirmed 702 in Leicestershire have flooded internally; it is likely this number will increase.

The Council was part of a multi-agency and community response to this devastating event, the scale of which is illustrated below:

- a) Nine rest centres were opened across Leicester, Charnwood and Blaby.
- b) Over 380 calls were made to Leicestershire Fire and Rescue.
- c) 60 people were rescued from properties and 27 from cars by boat.
- d) Leicestershire Police handled over 2,100 calls on 6th January (40 to 50% rise on average daily demand).

I want to thank everyone from the Council and across the Local Resilience Forum who worked tirelessly to deal with this crisis and help those communities so badly impacted. Without their efforts, things would have been considerably worse.

We are now into recovery mode and as the Lead Local Flood Authority we will be co-ordinating the work into identifying the causes and any potential solutions.

However, it is important to note that there may not always be a clear and viable solution and property level protection maybe the only option available.

Despite lobbying and updating the Government on the numbers of impacted properties across Leicestershire, at present, the Government has not yet activated the National Flood Recovery Framework, which gives communities access to various grants to aid recovery from flooding. This is incredibly disappointing, but the Council will continue to lobby the Government to highlight the significant hardship residents and business owners in Leicestershire are facing.

I am therefore pleased to confirm that the Council has committed an additional £1m towards flood alleviation, support and resilience as part of an £18.4m investment on flood alleviation across the next four-year MTFs period. While this is certainly not the answer to all flooding in the County, it will enable us to better aid many of the Leicestershire communities impacted by flooding, which sadly due to climate change is becoming more the norm as opposed to the exception.

Zouch Bridge

After several years of determined preparatory work to design and fund the replacement of Zouch Bridge on the A6006 near Hathern, construction of the bridge is underway. By building the new bridge and approach roads alongside the existing bridge, disruption will be minimised while this £19.5m scheme, funded from the County Council's Capital Programme, is completed. When construction is complete in early 2027, the structural weight limit can be removed from this strategically important route linking the A60 in Nottinghamshire with the A6 and M1 junction 24 in Leicestershire near East Midlands Gateway and the Airport. Specialist contractors Eric Wright Civil Engineering have been procured by Leicestershire County Council to deliver the construction stage. Social value, delivered through community projects, skills sharing, and employment opportunities will be generated by Leicestershire County Council and Eric Wright Civil Engineering working together alongside the residents, schools, colleges, universities and businesses of Leicestershire.

Invictus Games

I'm sure members will wish to join with me in sending huge congratulations and best wishes to Elisabeth Lee, who has been in Vancouver to represent Team UK in the Invictus Games in indoor rowing and alpine snowboarding.

Liz works at the County Council in our health, safety and wellbeing team and is a proud veteran and member of the Armed Forces Employee Network.

I am so proud of Liz to have represented her country in Vancouver for the Invictus Games. As a Council, we are passionate about supporting our armed forces and veterans and Liz's story is testament to just what is possible. It has taken a lot of hard work for her to get there.