

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 26 MARCH 2003

POSITION STATEMENT BY THE DEPUTY LEADER

Planning and Compulsory Purchase Bill

The Government is pressing ahead with its proposals to reform the planning system - despite widespread opposition.

Members will be aware that the proposals involve replacing our system of structure and local plans with regional spatial strategies and local development frameworks. They mean that important decisions about where development will take place across Leicestershire will no longer be taken by the democratically accountable County Council but by either a remote non elected Regional Assembly or an even more remote Secretary of State in London.

The Cabinet has a number of objections to the proposals.

First, the lack of democratic accountability. 30 of the 100 members of the Regional Assembly are not elected. Worst still the Assembly's Planning Board is likely to include people who are not even members of the Assembly. Who will they be accountable to? Where Assemblies are not directly elected, the final approval for strategic plans will be taken by the Secretary of State. What local accountability does that provide?

Second, the Government has said that Regional Assemblies, whether directly elected or not, will draw functions and responsibilities from Central not Local Government. However, planning responsibilities are being taken from local government and given to Regional Assemblies.

Third, the separation of strategic land use planning from strategic minerals, waste and transport planning which are retained by County Councils is a recipe for less integrated solutions.

Fourth, the new arrangements are far more complex than the current system.

The Deputy Prime Minister has consulted on his proposals and an overwhelming majority has said NO. 90% said they opposed the replacement of structure plans by new regional arrangements. The proposals are founded in the false premise that the current system hinders business. The House of Commons Select Committee has said it does not and business organisations have objected to the new proposals, which the Select Committee described as 'unworkable'.

The Bill goes through its House of Lords stage in April before going back to the Commons. I hope County Council members of all parties and Leicestershire people generally will take this opportunity to let their MP's know that the Government should heed the response to its own consultation on these proposals and scrap the unnecessary and damaging legislation. We will be providing briefing material to Leicestershire MP's and a range of organisations in the County.

Regional Assemblies

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister recently issued a consultation paper which sought 'views, information and evidence on the level of interest in each English region in holding a referendum about whether to establish an elected regional assembly'.

Members will recall that the County Council has thus far agreed with the East Midlands Regional Assembly that the appropriate approach in the Region is an evolving partnership based Assembly which takes account of democratic accountability and the interests of East Midlands people, and does not significantly increase the cost of delivering public services in the Region.

I am pleased to say that in responding to this latest consultation the East Midlands Regional Assembly has maintained its stance that it does not wish to trigger the process that could lead to a referendum on introducing a directly elected assembly (with the consequent reorganisation of local government).

The County Councils Network of the Local Government Association has also been active in preparing a response to the consultation.

The Cabinet in its response has supported the position of both the East Midlands Regional Assembly and the County Councils Network. It has reiterated the County Council's view that local people and organisations do not wish to see an elected Regional Assembly established in the East Midlands and that there is no case to justify the cost of carrying out a local government review and holding a referendum.

Education Funding - F40 Update

F40 met in Stafford on 8th March 2003 to reflect on the fairer funding campaign and to discuss the possibility of a continuation of the F40 lobby or lobby by a successor organisation.

The County Council was represented at the meeting by Mr Ould and Mr Osborne, the Senior Assistant County Treasurer, three governors and the Teacher's Consultative Committee representative.

A new Working Party has been established to review the technical issues stemming from the recent review of funding and its impact on member authorities (which seems to have been mixed).

Leicestershire will be represented on the Working Party by Mr Ould, and Mr J Herbert (Association of Leicestershire Governors).

The Working Party will report back to a conference to be held in Leicestershire on 11th October 2003. That conference will decide on the future path of F40.

Schools in Leicestershire are extremely disappointed and angry to find that full passporting represents a “real terms” reduction to budgets of approaching 1%. This is at variance with a letter from the Minister which promised that no school would be worse-off in 2003/04 if LEAs passed-on the allocation.

Work to establish the technical issues stemming from the ODPM/DfES formula changes is an essential component of any future lobbying activity.

Yellow School Buses

I am pleased to be able to confirm that our three new yellow school buses, readily distinguished by their ‘get on boards for learning’ livery, made a very successful start in service last Monday, serving Kibworth High School, De Lisle School in Loughborough, and Humphrey Perkins High School at Barrow upon Soar.

The new buses provide a tremendous opportunity to improve the quality of home to school transport, and set new standards in passenger security and comfort.

The initial reaction of pupils, their parents and schools suggests the buses have been well received, and we therefore hope the buses will achieve their objective of improving service quality, encouraging good pupil behaviour, and addressing concerns about rising transport costs.

Leicestershire’s yellow school bus initiative has attracted considerable interest from the media, and from other Leicestershire schools wishing to take advantage of their availability for hire during the middle of the day.