

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 2ND JULY 2014

POSITION STATEMENT FROM THE CABINET LEAD MEMBER – BROADBAND AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Broadband

Significant progress continues to be made in rolling out Superfast Broadband to Leicestershire communities. Last month the Council announced the first phase of communities to benefit from the £18.6m Superfast Leicestershire Programme. More than 62,000 homes and premises will benefit from this programme by March 2016. This first phase involves deployment to 10,000 homes and businesses. I was also delighted to announce last month that the local community group 'Disewired' had secured £119,000 to deliver high speed fibre broadband to Diseworth by the end of 2015.

The Superfast Leicestershire programme should secure 96% fibre broadband coverage across Leicestershire, of which nearly 94% will be 'superfast' that is at least 24mbps. I am determined however that we provide the best possible broadband speeds to all homes and businesses in the county and to achieve this, the Council is taking a number of steps. We are bidding for £3.7m Government funding as part of the Superfast Extension Programme and will be seeking to make this part of a larger funding package of at least £9m by securing funding from local authorities and the Local Enterprise Partnership together with investment from a broadband supplier. I will also be seeking to ensure that county residents and firms get maximum benefit from the current contract with BT and that the information available to communities about planned deployment is improved. I have asked officers to further explore alternative commercial and community solutions that will take us to 100% coverage. If there are opportunities to provide even faster connections, using for example fibre to the property technology, we will explore these too.

Broadband is essential infrastructure for businesses and families and it is important that those living and working in rural areas share in the benefits of the new digital technologies being developed, including online services provided by public services including this Council. I am acutely aware, however, that rural communities not currently covered by planned deployment will justifiably have concerns about how quickly they will benefit from faster broadband speeds. Workshops to explore options have been organised for next week and all parish councils have been invited to attend these. I am also in dialogue with local community groups, for example in the Welland Valley, about how improved broadband can be made available as quickly as possible and am committed to supporting and working with other communities who wish to explore how they might be served by alternative community and commercial solutions.

Leicestershire Rural Partnership (Rural Conference/ LEADER)

This year's Rural Conference, held at Scalford Hall nr Melton Mowbray, was very well attended by over 80 stakeholders including partners, businesses, and community representatives. Attendees heard from a range of national and local speakers about the challenges facing, and opportunities available to, the rural economy and rural communities in Leicestershire.

There was a particular focus on the content of the Draft Rural Framework, providing stakeholders an opportunity to influence the future delivery of its emerging four priorities:

1. Active, inclusive and empowered Parish Councils & meetings
2. Working with communities to deliver local services
3. Enterprising and sustainable rural economies
4. More affordable homes in rural areas

The Framework, which sets out the vision for rural Leicestershire up to 2026, and how the LRP will help contribute to this, will be consulted on over the summer.

As Chair of the Rural Partnership I am overseeing the establishment of a shadow Local Action Group which will bring together a number of key rural stakeholders to further develop and implement an East Leicestershire LEADER bid. We have secured £19,200 from Defra to help develop our proposal which will cover Melton and Harborough districts, some areas of Charnwood and Countesthorpe and Kilby in Blaby. We hope to secure up to £2m to support rural growth and job creation across the area. If successful, LEADER will commence in January 2015.