

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 28TH MARCH 2019
QUESTIONS TO COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN

WRITTEN RESPONSES PROVIDED AFTER THE MEETING AS THE TIME LIMIT OF 60 MINUTES FOR QUESTIONS WAS REACHED

Question to the Leader of the Council from Councillor Liz Plant

Given that there is a real imminent possibility that the United Kingdom could crash out of the European Union without a deal within the next few weeks, can the Leader of the Council inform members what, if any, plans are in place to deal with the possible impact of this calamitous situation for Nottinghamshire residents and businesses?

Response from Councillor Mrs Kay Cutts MBE, Leader of the Council

In view of the national uncertainty about any proposed deal or arrangements regarding the UK's exit from the EU, it is difficult to carry out an assessment that is not speculative.

In saying that, a significant amount of work is underway locally and regionally that takes account of the significant interdependencies with national strategic planning. We are working very closely with our local partners to co-ordinate our plans through the existing structures provided by the Local Resilience Forum and the Safer Nottinghamshire Board.

The Chief Executive (at the request of MHCLG) acts as one of nine regional leads to ensure effective communication and information flows across local government and up to MHCLG. Naturally, we are making best use of this role to ensure that all necessary information and guidance is known and understood in the Council. Two senior officers, Derek Higton and Jonathan Gribbin have participated in Local Resilience Forum telephone conferences, as part of the national information gathering structure for central government.

Service managers across the Council have examined relevant 'Technical Notices' and other guidance issued by central government. These have included, for example, specific advice for Adult Social Care. Based on all of this, it has not been necessary to call any special meetings of our 'Risk, Safety and Emergency Management Board'. However, the topic has been included on the agenda of their routine meetings, and of the associated departmental groups.

Since the beginning of January, the emergency planning team have provided a weekly update report to the Local Resilience Forum to feed into Nottinghamshire-wide reports to MHCLG.

In terms of support to businesses, our Trading Standards service has responded to requests for information from local businesses and have issued advice to Primary Authority Companies regarding UK product safety arrangements. On top of this, some 700 emails have been sent to alert businesses to the actions they need to take to be prepared for EU Exit.

As Members will be aware, specific central government funding is being provided to local government to support EU Exit related activities.

We will continue to work proactively with Government and partners to enable effective planning.

Question to the Leader of the Council from Councillor Jason Zadrozny

Will the Leader of the Council join me in congratulating Leicestershire County Council after the Government confirmed that the electrification on the Midland Mainline will be extended to Market Harborough?

Transport ministers have confirmed earlier this month that Network Rail has been instructed to draw up plans to upgrade the rail route as far as Market Harborough. This shows that the Government are willing to listen to strong business cases despite former Transport Minister Chris Grayling MP branding the electrification 'disruptive'.

Will the Council Leader join me in reaffirming this Council's commitment to the full electrification of the Midland's Mainline?

Response from Councillor Mrs Kay Cutts MBE, Leader of the Council

As I have stated on previous occasions, this Council has always supported the case for electrification of the Midland Main Line. As I have also stated in the past, a phased approach may be the most feasible to move this project forwards. The extension to Market Harborough moves us one step closer, and was part of a previous announcement.

We await the East Midlands Rail Franchise update for more details on both this proposal and others to improve rail services in Nottinghamshire – be that new rolling stock, bi-modal trains, or anything else.

We will continue to push for optimum benefits for our county's rail commuters through the Midland Main Line and East Coast Line, including improved journey times, capacity and reliability, as well as the wider economic impact which benefits Nottinghamshire as a whole.

Question to the Chairman of the Adult Social Care & Public Health Committee from Councillor Muriel Weisz

Is the Chair of the Adult Social Care and Public Health Committee satisfied that the communications with service users about recent changes to services have been clear and effective?

Response from Councillor Stuart Wallace, Chairman of the Adult Social Care & Public Health

It's ironic that you ask me whether the Council's communications with service users have been 'clear and effective', when your own question is not exactly a model of 'clear and effective' communication!

Which particular changes to services have you got in mind?

What should we consider to be the definition of “recent”?

Yes, I am satisfied that the vast majority of the communications between this Council and its service users about recent changes to services have been clear and effective. In an organisation of this size, there will occasionally be individual cases where with hindsight we could do better. We have a robust Complaints system for anyone who feels dissatisfied with advice or responses they have been given, and if these concerns are found to be justified, we seek to learn and improve our approach accordingly.

The one policy change I feel we did not initially handle as well as we could was Contributions to Care. I have acknowledged that the letters sent out to service users last November did not allow a sufficient lead-in period. I publicly apologised for this and we revised the roll-out of this policy to take place over a longer time period. We also brought forward a further change in February to reflect two levels of Minimum Income Guarantee rather than three, and to further phase the implementation of the new rate for people under pension credit age, taking into consideration the Equality Impact Assessment and views expressed in a petition presented to Full Council last December.

In other respects I think we have communicated policy changes in a professional and sensitive manner, and we have good support mechanisms in place to advise and assist people affected by those changes.

We consult service users regarding significant changes, and we listen to those responses. For example, I described in my budget speech last month how we had adjusted our proposed changes to the Protection of Property & Pets Funeral Arrangements Policy, based on the outcomes of a public consultation questionnaire, which gave us a very clear steer about respondents’ views.

As we have seen today, some allegations of poor communication are spurious, motivated by the desire to create political mischief, rather than genuine concern for service users. In such cases, the best method of communication is to set out very clearly what the facts are, as recorded in Council reports and minutes.