

APPENDIX A

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 7 DECEMBER 2023 QUESTION TO LEADER OF THE COUNCIL ON THE EXECUTIVE REPORT

Question from Councillor Kate Foale

At the Midlands Connect event, you reference discussions on “the changes in rail investment following recent Government announcements”.

Did these discussions include the impact that abandoning the East Midlands HS2 Growth Strategy will have on Nottinghamshire?

Response from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Ben Bradley MP

The changes to the HS2 Strategy were on the agenda at the meeting, no surprise. It was attended by the Chair of HS2 Ltd as a contributor and we had a lengthy discussion about that, the implications discussed at great length, with a number of Leaders, not just myself, from around the East Midlands. As the Chair of the region’s HS2 Strategy Board I’ve been involved in numerous discussions about those next steps and implications too.

Whilst there is obviously a significant impact in terms of particularly the journey times between Nottingham and Birmingham in terms of these changes, I don’t recognise what Councillor Foale said about the Growth Strategy being scrapped. I’m the Chair of that particular Board, and in truth whilst the model that we had devised and worked up over the last 12 months through government funding incorporated HS2 in the thinking, it remains a positive and viable Growth Strategy, even without new HS2 lines, we just need to go away and rethink how we get people in and out in a transport sense.

But, the work will be adapted to these new circumstances, it will become the East Midlands Stations Growth Strategy, continues to focus on key hub rail stations at Parkway, Nottingham, Derby and Chesterfield, and to further develop plans for major investment and growth around those sites. I’ve always maintained, and in conversations I’ve had with Government around the HS2 announcements that the key priority for us as a region was not journey times between here and there, it was the hubs and the growth around places where stations were due and where trains would have arrived, Toton being one example, Parkway, Chesterfield, Derby, Nottingham as I’ve raised. We can continue to build around those stations and access, we just need to use the funding that has been shifted away from HS2 and into our regional transport package, whether that is the bus funding we’ve recently received, the £1.5 million devolved transport fund, to devise the right ways to help people to access those sites and that includes, as I said, the new Toton development which presents a major opportunity for us in terms of growth.

So not gone, it will have to change, there are obviously some impacts and it is incumbent on us now as members and it will be incumbent on the new Combined Authority in particular to take that plan forward. The decision by the Board yesterday was to make those amendments to the plan, to continue with the ongoing government funding we’ve got to redevise those strategies and hopefully in May when the

Combined Authority comes into being, to put those plans on the desk of the Mayor to have them delivered.

Question from Councillor Jason Zadrozny

In your report, you have welcomed the recent visit of current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak to Nottinghamshire. Did you discuss inflation and its impact on the County Council?

Response from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Ben Bradley MP

I'm really pleased that the Prime Minister chose to visit Nottinghamshire several times, as I said in my speech about the report itself, both in Gedling, in Newark and more recently in Worksop, to speak to local businesses and to speak to local residents.

Of course, in that conversation with residents the cost of living and the impact of inflation absolutely did come up along with a number of other issues as well. I think it shows a commitment to our county that he's spending time here and listening to local residents. I should add that he was also meant to visit Mansfield Woodhouse library but unfortunately storms and train disruptions impacted on that one, but I hope to have him back.

So as I said, that did come up in the conversation, not specifically around the Council, he was there to speak to residents rather than to me, but I can assure you that I do speak with Prime Minister, Chancellor, Local Government Secretary on these matters on a regular basis, you'll have seen, possibly, media coverage yesterday of our latest correspondence with the Prime Minister on these matters and the Chief Executive and I recently met with the then Local Government Minister Lee Rowley to take him through the pressures on our budget and the impact of inflation in great detail, so we continue to make that case to government wherever we can.

Question from Councillor Michelle Welsh

At the Business and Trade Select Committee, what areas of further devolved funding did you advocate for as a Council Leader?

Response from the Leader of the Council, Councillor Ben Bradley MP

The Business and Trade Select Committee was particularly focused on the Investment Zone Freeport propositions within the region, as that's the specific focus of their Inquiry. I attended the Committee alongside the South Yorkshire Mayor Oliver Coppard to speak about these projects, and about the management of them in our various local contexts. In a separate session, as I said, the Chief Executive of the Freeport also attended and gave evidence.

It's brilliant news that the East Midlands in the autumn statement had an Investment Zone agreed and secured, and having called for it to be expanded during that Select Committee meeting I'm really pleased that they have doubled the investment from £80m to £160m. That's a really significant investment in our region, one we're only able to access because of the emerging Combined Authority that we are part of.

I also called for the extension of Freeport timeframes, because of course the pandemic, in the middle of the proposed period for tax incentives to be utilised, delayed things in the delivery of Freeport significantly. We're faced with potentially running out of time before we managed to use those incentives to their full potential, so again, really positive news that those timeframes have since been extended by five years from 2026 to 2031.

Whilst the discussion wasn't specifically about devolution or the Combined Authority, we did discuss some elements related to economic growth in particular and I highlighted the opportunity to bring a clearer strategy together to make sure that all of these different vehicles that we have, as I mentioned in my speech earlier on, Freeport, DevCo (Development Company), STEP Fusion, Investment Zones, Gainshare Fund and others, are all working on a shared endeavour that complement each other, which is a piece of work we are currently undertaking.

I was asked specifically about fiscal devolution, and confirmed that I'd like to see more opportunities for local flexibilities on taxation, on business rates and the like so that we can get more benefit locally from the growth that we create.

I was also asked about areas where I might like to see further powers in relation specifically to delivering the economic goals of these projects, and I suggested that more freedom around planning decisions and rules based on our local strategy rather than on national frameworks would be beneficial. I've always said, in those planning conversations, that I don't think it's likely, to be honest, that we will ever find a national planning framework that works the entire country, because our need and our local areas are so different, and the need is so different in each place, so I would welcome and suggested in the meeting that I would welcome being able to have that local flexibility to support growth and accelerate progress on these various projects, but also in terms of trying to build better homes, in the most appropriate places.

I would reiterate, just to add context to her question, that the Select Committee was discussing specifically Freeports and Investment Zones, so it didn't have a wider context discussion about the future of devolution in that space, but there are a number of examples there of things that I have called for or suggested in terms of further powers.

