

APPENDIX B

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 30 MARCH 2023 QUESTIONS TO THE LEADER, CABINET MEMBERS AND COMMITTEE CHAIRMEN

Question to the Leader of the Council from Councillor Bethan Eddy

Would the Council Leader join me in welcoming the Chancellor of the Exchequer's announcement, in his Spring Budget, that 12 new Investment Zones will be created across the UK, including one in the East Midlands?

What does this mean for Nottinghamshire and the East Midlands in terms of economic development and central government investment?

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

A really important opportunity for us, one that we're only really able to access because we are on this path to Devolution. Only areas with Combined Authorities, or emerging Combined Authorities are able to host one of these Investment Zones.

£80 million of flexible funding incentives for things like either tax incentives to attract businesses to come and invest here, or also capital and revenue funding to get sites ready for those investments, and it builds on the funding we've already had, as I've mentioned, for things like retrofit, gigabit broadband and bringing forward brownfield land.

Very similar incentives to the Freeport and you have to choose a specific sector. Members who know our area well I'm sure will be able to choose from some of those that we have real capability in, but from sectors like digital and technology, green industries, life sciences, advanced manufacturing, creative industries. They're the nationally significant industries on the Government's list and therefore, as you will recognise, we have really good bases in several of those sectors to be able to build something really positive.

It's worth saying, because I know Members opposite had some concerns about Investment Zones when Liz Truss was Prime Minister, that these aren't the same proposition. It's a very research and science-led proposition, to the extent where we have to partner with a research institution – a university – to deliver it, and it is all about advancing those largely engineering and scientific sectors.

It is also an opportunity for us to get 100% rates growth retention which, again, is a hugely important benefit for us for anything we're able to do in terms of bringing investment to the area, bringing jobs to the area, we can keep the benefits of that to reinvest, so that will be fantastic.

The challenge that we will have, is that other Combined Authority areas have clear governance, they have a system to put these decisions into, where collectively they can decide where this goes and what it looks like. Obviously, we are still some months away from having that system, so it wouldn't be right for me to say it should be this

place or that place at this stage, because we're going to have to go and work that through with colleagues in Derby and Derbyshire and in Nottingham, but it does have the potential to attract significant inward investment to our area, and as I say, I can't say where it will be, but Members will be able to think – and we talk on these benches a lot – of significant investments, anchor institutions, perhaps in the North of Nottinghamshire, that could benefit from these incentives if we look a little further down the road.

So, huge opportunities, and an example of where our journey on all of this - regardless of our conversation about the structures and all the rest of it – our Devolution journey is already starting to help us to make those changes for our residents.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Children and Families from Councillor Penny Gowland

The Council will be aware that children in West Bridgford have been offered school places a long distance from their home and some as far away as Eastwood and Hucknall.

As this is clearly an appalling situation for children and their families, what will the Council be doing to mitigate this problem?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Children and Families, Councillor Tracey Taylor

In the past few weeks, I've heard certain Labour councillors trying to imply that the situation that Councillor Gowland describes in her question is caused by a shortage of school places and a lack of school place planning in the Rushcliffe area.

This is not true, and I believe Councillor Gowland and other Labour councillors know very well it is not true.

Demand for school places in the Rushcliffe area is high, which is a compliment to quality of the schools in the area, but the situations to which Councillor Gowland refers mostly arise from the way some parents have chosen to engage with the school admissions process, which is a national statutory procedure.

To explain, I will quote directly from page 9 of the 2023/24 Nottinghamshire County Council Admissions to Schools Guide for Parents booklet. It states, and I quote:

'Before making your preferences, it is important that you consider carefully which schools you would like your child to go to. You should check the admission oversubscription criteria for all your preferred schools.'

'We recommend that you use all 4 preferences, as listing only one preference could substantially reduce the chances of your child being allocated a preference.'

And I'll repeat this, Chairman, because it is absolutely key to answering Councillor Gowland's question, and indeed to avoiding these unfortunate outcomes in future:

'We recommend that you use all 4 preferences, as listing only one preference could substantially reduce the chances of your child being allocated a preference.'

'You should check the admission oversubscription criteria for all your preferred schools.'

The guidance booklet also states:

'Remember that living in the catchment area, attending a nursery or children's centre, attending a linked school or having a brother or sister attending a school does not guarantee that your application will be successful.'

It is also crucially important to note our role in the admission process described in the statutory code, and that is to administer it on behalf of secondary academies in Nottinghamshire, all of whom are their own "Admissions Authorities". The academies define their own "over-subscription" criteria, each of which may be subtly different from the next.

Chairman, the truth is that in most of the cases fitting the description in Councillor Gowland's question, parents unfortunately chose not to use all four of their preferences. It was also evident in some cases that the choices were not for places at schools where their child met the eligibility criteria.

If parents had listed four preferences, presumably for schools closer than Eastwood or Hucknall, and had heeded the eligibility criteria, they would have stood a far better chance of being successful in receiving an offer from one of those schools, but because they did not, those other parents who did exercise all four preferences were given consideration ahead of them.

The Guide for Parents booklet could not be clearer about this process. In fact, the key words recommending parents to use all 4 preferences are highlighted in bold.

In a recent radio interview, I heard a spurious claim that this Council is 'blaming' parents who did not select four preferences. We are doing no such thing. We're simply explaining the statutory process that we must follow and emphasising why it is so important for parents to select four preferences and check eligibility criteria, but we cannot and would not force them to complete all four.

In effect, parents decide whether they wish to join up to four queues to get a place in a school, or whether they take the risk of joining only three, or two or even one queue. The fewer queues you join, the more you are limiting your chances of achieving a desirable outcome. In fact, your child could even lose out on a place in a catchment school to a child whose parents have exercised all four preferences and included, as alternate preferences, schools which aren't in their catchment area.

This in turn can potentially push an applicant who did not exercise all their preferences further and further away from the area and schools they would prefer.

I'm not saying this system is right, or wrong, but it's the way the school admissions process works under the law, and as a Council we can only give our best advice to parents on how to achieve their preferred outcome.

Councillor Gowland asks what can we do to mitigate the situation for children and parents who are not happy with the outcome of this process?

There is potential mitigation built into the system through the Admission Appeals process, where parents can appeal against a school's decision to offer a place, and provide evidence of why they believe their child should be admitted. An independent panel of three or more people then hears the appeal and reaches a decision in line with the School Admission Appeals Code.

As a Council we do our utmost to offer parents a preferred school, but when families do not receive the offer they were hoping for - whatever the reason - we fully understand the disappointment and frustration this can cause. We have in fact written to each parent from the West Bridgford area that received an alternate offer for a school some distance away. We offered to provide additional support and guidance including how to appeal for a school place at a more local school.

I'm pleased to report that this year, the vast majority of children in Nottinghamshire have been allocated a place at their preferred school. In Rushcliffe, 91 per cent of families were offered their top preference school, and 97 per cent received the offer of a school place at one of their preferences.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment from Councillor Dave Shaw

In February, you made the decision that ultimately led to reductions in bus services in Hucknall. At the same, this Council stated that its ambition "...that every Nottinghamshire community will be connected to a bus or other public transport route." How do the bus service reductions which will be implemented on Monday square with this ambition and can give timescales for the bus service review being undertaken by this Council?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment, Councillor Neil Clarke MBE

It is no secret that bus services in Nottinghamshire and across the country are facing a severe challenge in recovering from the Covid pandemic. Passenger numbers are still around 80% of their previous levels in most areas outside Greater Nottingham.

This presents a challenge in trying to protect as many bus routes as possible. Solutions that could work in one area, such as the Nottsbus On-Demand service to villages, are not necessarily best-suited to other areas.

Councillor Shaw will be aware that local operators have advised us that a number of routes will either be withdrawn or reduced from 1st April.

In the context that bus operators are withdrawing services, it is incorrect to say that my decision has led to reductions in bus services. It's the operators withdrawing services.

The Council has had to make difficult decisions about which routes to support, but we have recently approved funding to support twelve more routes. These are primarily routes where services would be completely withdrawn and would leave communities with no alternative access to public transport.

The Hucknall Connect services are not being withdrawn, and most areas on the route will continue to receive a regular daytime service.

The Council currently supports over 80 routes at a cost of £4.1 million per year. The additional 12 routes we intend to support will be funded from the three-year £3.9 million Bus Service Improvement Plan funded from central government.

A full review of all these bus services is underway, so we are open to examining different solutions and funding decisions to the ones currently in place. Indeed, it has been agreed that all County Councillors will be included in the initial consultation exercise, after which any plans or developments resulting from the review will be considered later this year.

Therefore, Mr Chairman, I stand by our ambition that every community in Nottinghamshire will be connected to a bus or other public transport route.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Personnel from Councillor Kate Foale

The views, experience and attitudes of our staff is vital to ensure this Council's decision making and scrutiny processes are well informed.

How in your role as Cabinet Member have you been able to represent staff during the scrutiny process, when decisions which impact upon personnel are being considered?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Personnel, Councillor Gordon Wheeler

I wholeheartedly agree it is important that employees are properly engaged and consulted by the those responsible for employment matters on decisions which may have significant impact on their employment with the Council, in line with our agreed policies and procedures.

Staffing consultation mechanisms have been agreed with the Trades Unions and are set out in our Employment Relations Agreement and also in the Constitution in the Employment Procedure Rules which form part of our collective bargaining arrangements. Most employee-related decisions are delegated to the Chief Executive, acting as the Head of Paid Service, and other officers delegated by the Chief Executive with whom responsibility for full and proper staff consultation lies.

In some instances, proposals require formal collective consultation and we are bound by how we consult in these circumstances by the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992

Chairman, I meet regularly with the trade unions. I met them on 2nd February, and my next meeting is on 26th April. Our Services Director – Customers, Governance & Employees and our Head of Human Resources also meet regularly with the trade unions and keep them up-to-date and informed – it’s a great consultation mechanism, which I think probably works better than anywhere else - a personal view.

Where there are decisions made by Cabinet that impact on employees, the relevant Cabinet Member will work with officers to confirm they have undertaken the necessary staffing engagement and consultation and what the outcomes and possible impacts are.

In a Cabinet model of governance, Select Committees and Overview and Scrutiny Committees are not decision-making bodies. As such it is difficult to imagine where the requirements to directly consult employees would be met in a scrutiny context. As the Cabinet Member for Personnel, I am not accountable for staff engagement on individual decisions across the Council as I’ve already described.

It is also not within my delegation as Cabinet Member for Personnel to represent the views of employees during the scrutiny process as you have described in your question. Any consultation with employees would take place by officers in relation to the actual decision, not at the scrutiny stage. Employees would have the right to represent their own views in this process or be represented by a recognised trades union.

In considering a decision or proposed change to services with a potential impact on employees, scrutiny members may ask questions about staff consultation and the outcomes. I am aware that recent scrutiny undertaken by the Overview Committee, ably chaired by Councillor Boyd Elliott, involved a number of member visits and informal dialogue with staff about their views in relation to ways of working and the use of buildings as part of a wide-ranging review of the use of Council buildings.

In my role, I do have oversight of wider informal employee engagement activities across the Council, as it is important to know the views of our staff on a broad range of employment matters and to provide opportunities for employees to raise issues, hence the consultation I referred to earlier on, Mr Chairman. This involves ongoing dialogue between staff and managers, staff newsletters, intranet pages, blogs, surveys, focus groups and workshops. This approach is reflected in our “Nottinghamshire Way” programme where we have worked with staff to shape our values and the culture of the organisation.

Councillor Foale, I would be very happy to meet with you to talk through the Council’s approach to these matters, if she would find that helpful. As part of this discussion, I can also explain to you how deleted posts are reviewed and addressed in our delivered service in another way, and I hope a far more efficient way too.

Question to the Leader of the Council from Councillor Mike Intra

Would the Council Leader join me in welcoming the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s announcement, in his Spring Budget, that the districts of Bassetlaw and Mansfield are

two of the areas being invited to form Levelling Up Partnerships, to provide bespoke place-based regeneration over 2023-24 and 2024-25?

Could the Leader explain what financial and practical benefits this announcement will bring to these areas as part of our County?

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

Another example of an opportunity for our County from the Levelling Up Programme – the ‘gimmick’ as it has been described, the ‘vanity project’ that is funding North Nottinghamshire to the tune of pushing 300 million quid, over the course of the last year or eighteen months or so!

I am pleased that North Nottinghamshire represents 10% of the country’s allocation of this round of Levelling Up Partnerships with both Mansfield and Bassetlaw worthy of support. Unlike Levelling Up bids, district councils didn’t bid for these, so I should put my thanks on record to Brendan Clarke-Smith for his work in lobbying the Government, and Councillor Payne already knows that Mansfield is always front of the queue anyway, so that should be a given!

The opportunity to have structured conversations with Government on these is really important. Unlike Levelling Up fund bids, we haven’t submitted a specific project. This is Government saying ‘let’s have a conversation between partners locally and the department about the data, about the need locally, and about what therefore we can build and deliver.

Brendan Clarke-Smith and I have written to the Minister just in the last week to say that we really want to see a strategic approach to this, so we can seek to tackle some of those long-standing issues and make sure we don’t just end up building a building with a short-term impact. We want to do something really meaningful.

So, I hope that long-term focus on Bassetlaw and Mansfield, the strong relationship with Government that can come from this means we can replicate some of the examples (if Members want to have a quick Google) of places like Grimsby or Blackpool who have achieved some really big outcomes from these partnerships in the past. I hope we can replicate some of those for our communities.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment from Councillor Francis Purdue-Horan

On 5 January 2022, Nottinghamshire County Council approved carrying out a Strategic Review of the recycling centre network across Nottinghamshire to “...ensure it continues to meet the increasing needs of the county’s growing population.” This Strategic Review was expected to take three months, then delayed with the recommendations expected by the end of January 2023. What has changed?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment, Councillor Neil Clarke MBE

If Councillor Purdue-Horan had actually read the recent Nottingham Post online article about recycling centres, he would already know the answer to his question.

Nottinghamshire County Council is in the process of finalising a strategic review of our recycling centre network, and Councillor Purdue-Horan is correct that this process is taking longer than originally anticipated, but for very good reasons.

Reference was made in the question to 'expected by the end of January 2023'. Well, that was an invention by Councillor Purdue-Horan's Independent colleagues on the scrutiny committee, asking or requesting for something by the end of January. It wasn't the administration putting that forward.

We are keen to ensure that the proposals arising from the review deliver a service suitable to meet the waste recycling needs of residents long into the future. The review is taking account of learning from the Covid pandemic, predicted housing growth, and upcoming changes to kerbside collections required to meet the statutory obligations of the Environment Act and the Resources & Waste Strategy for England.

Any proposals resulting from the review need to align with national waste and recycling policy. This means it is not possible to finalise our recycling centre review, or complete a refresh of our recycling centre strategy, within our original timescales, given the delays to the implementation of the Environment Act and Resources and Waste Strategy. We will continue with the review and announce our proposals as soon as possible.

This review is for the whole of Nottinghamshire. The outcomes of the review will cover all of Nottinghamshire, not just Rushcliffe, but it is certainly important to ensure we put the right plan in place for the Rushcliffe area. If that means taking longer to fully incorporate the factors I've described, it's better we do that properly rather than implement the wrong solution quickly.

I use the phrase, Mr Chairman, 'better to be right than rushed'.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Children and Families from Councillor Michelle Welsh

This Council's Early Help Strategy states that "Many more families are experiencing food insecurity and the number of children living in poverty is rising."

As this Council has ended its partnership with Family Action to deliver 11 FOOD clubs across Nottinghamshire via the use of our Children's Centre services, is the Cabinet Member concerned that this decision may mean fewer opportunities for our frontline workers to interact with those children and families experiencing food poverty?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Children and Families, Councillor Tracey Taylor

The initial funding received by Family Action was administered through our Public Health and Communities functions, falling within the remit of the Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care & Public Health, and our Cabinet Member for Communities, rather

than me. But given that you raise the issue of children's centre services, I am happy to take your question.

Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, Nottinghamshire County Council has awarded significant amounts of money to support food redistribution schemes.

In 2020, there were no known schemes in Nottinghamshire, but funding received through temporary Covid grants from central government enabled 22 Family Action Food On Our Doorstep clubs to be established, 11 of which were hosted in children's centre buildings, given that normal use of these centres had been interrupted by the pandemic.

It is untrue to imply that Nottinghamshire County Council "ended its partnership with Family Action", to quote Councillor Welsh's words, and I'd have to add it does seem to be a day for having to correct the Labour councillors questions, in terms of the way they're framed, before we actually get to the real facts.

The Covid funding used to sustain these Food On Our Doorstep clubs was, by definition, a temporary funding stream that simply came to an end in August 2022. In fact, as an interim measure, this administration made available £50,000 for the Food On Our Doorstep club schemes in children's centre service buildings to continue operating until March 2023.

Between August 2022 and December 2022, we conducted a review of food redistribution schemes, exploring the availability of provision across the county, particularly given that new schemes had been developed by community and voluntary organisations in response to local need. That report was discussed on 15th December.

With life returning to normal after the pandemic, the right priority for our children's centres has been to return to delivering core services for families with children under five, and expectant parents. This may or may not mean there are fewer opportunities for our frontline workers in these centres to interact specifically with children and families experiencing food poverty, but the Council as a whole remains very attentive to this issue.

In December, the County Council's Cabinet agreed that food redistribution schemes should be supported with funding made available to the voluntary and community sector via our Local Communities Fund, which is administered through the Communities portfolio. This has enabled £210,000 to be made available over the next three years, with funds totalling £90,000 in 2023/24, £65,000 in 2024/25 and £55,000 in 2025/26.

We continue to work closely with our borough and district council colleagues to make sure voluntary and community sector organisations are aware of this funding. We seek to ensure food redistribution schemes are based in the best location for the people who need them. To date, Family Action have not made any bids for Local Communities Fund food redistribution grant monies. I note that my colleague for Communities signed a decision yesterday in respect of allocation of money under the latest scheme.

The voluntary and community sector plays a crucial role in providing a lifeline to some of our most vulnerable and hard-to-reach residents. The sector is well placed to deliver food redistribution schemes in their local area, and we are pleased to support them with Local Communities Funding. This means our children's centres, having fulfilled a commendable alternative role during the unusual conditions of the pandemic, are now able to re-focus fully on their primary purpose.

Question to the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment, from Councillor Matt Barney

Earlier today, I presented petitions from people living on the Nottinghamshire/Leicestershire border expressing their concern about Trent Barton's proposed decision to discontinue the Skylink bus route between East Midlands Airport and Loughborough, which serves several villages in the south-west of my division.

Nottinghamshire County Council previously stepped in to save this part of the Skylink route and fund it until April 2023, but unfortunately patronage has not been sufficient to make it viable, even with the Council's financial support.

Does the Cabinet Member nevertheless appreciate how important this bus service has been to some residents in my division who rely on it to access jobs at East Midlands Airport, and can this Council do anything to help them continue commuting to and from the airport, given the importance of these jobs to the local economy?

Response from the Cabinet Member for Transport and Environment, Councillor Neil Clarke MBE

I absolutely do appreciate how important the Skylink bus service between East Midlands Airport and Loughborough is to some of Councillor Barney's residents, and others who rely on it to access jobs at East Midlands Airport.

As with other bus services to those in village communities, the fact that a service might not command enough passengers to make it commercially viable does not mean it is any less vital to the small number of people who rely on it, whether that's to get to jobs at an airport, into major towns to access shops and other amenities, or anywhere else.

Therein lies our dilemma. We appreciate the value of bus transport, not least for people in this predicament, but we cannot write blank cheques from public money to subsidise a multitude of bus routes that fall well short of commercial viability. To do so would put too much pressure on the Nottinghamshire taxpayer.

That's why we seek to target the money we currently spend on supporting bus services in a very careful, evidence-based way, focusing on those services whose withdrawal would leave passengers with no alternative at all, and those [services] that could conceivably regain commercial viability given the right interim support.

As I've said in previous Council meetings, we're now looking at new ways of serving people who really need a bus service, but where passenger numbers are insufficient to meet commercial viability thresholds throughout a fixed bus route.

The key concept behind our new 'Nottsbus On-Demand' service is that we send our buses to stops where we know passengers are waiting for them, rather than the bus travelling a fixed route past stops where there's nobody to collect, and perhaps even travelling empty. It's still a bus service - not a door-to-door taxi service - but it is far more efficient, environmentally-friendly and responsive to public need.

The Council was successful in a bid to the Government's Rural Mobility Fund to introduce FOUR Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) pilots - Nottsbus On-Demand - in Nottinghamshire. The first three were successfully implemented last year, replacing traditional fixed route services, and the fourth pilot is going to be introduced in Rushcliffe to improve travel opportunities for residents, including the travel for work purposes I just mentioned. This area was the next best example to be considered as a pilot, following the excellent feedback from those three pilot services further north in the County.

This new service, which will replace the 865 service, will connect people from your division, Councillor Barney, to a number of key destinations including East Midlands Airport, East Midlands Gateway, East Midlands Parkway and the NET Park and Ride site in Clifton. It will enable passengers to connect to other bus services including the remaining Skylink network, Nottingham City Transport services 1 and 53, and the tram. So, I think you can see from that, Mr Chairman, it will provide a very important link to other services.

Given TrentBarton's proposed commercial decision to withdraw the Skylink leg that goes via Sutton Bonington, I have asked officers to consider the provision of some peak services to cater for workers and students for a trial period.

The 'use it or lose it' principle still applies. We cannot justify investing public money in any type of bus service that people say they want, but then don't use. However, I believe this new Nottsbus On-demand approach has the potential to achieve best value, and great outcomes, for passengers and taxpayers alike.