

Position Statement of Leader of Council - 19 February 2015

Mr Deputy Mayor, Fellow Councillors, Officers, members of the public and media

Tonight's meeting is significant mainly because it is setting the Council's budget and council tax for 2015/16 and, therefore, sets the tone for the next five years. The Medium Term Financial Strategy will be developed on the back of these decisions and come to Council on 17 March.

For the fifth year running, we are recommending a freeze in the council tax and will be committing over £500,000 into revenue reserves, to help cushion what we know will be continuing austerity from Westminster, whoever is in power after 7 May. That shows how carefully we have managed the Council's resources and how efficiently officers have worked in maintaining our services, despite over 40% cuts in funding over the last 4 years from Government.

Not only that, two major projects of regeneration are well underway: the Crescent (now very visible), which we expect to be completed ahead of time and certainly before Christmas this year, and the new Leisure Centre, also on target for opening by late Spring next year. The planning of these two projects took some time - particularly the Crescent - but both are being delivered at no extra cost to the taxpayer and offering significant benefit in respect of facilities and economic growth.

Another recent, but ongoing, threat to our finances is the state of the County Council, which yesterday announced cuts of £18 million for 2015/16, whilst setting a council tax increase of 1.99%, in line with the increases from Police and Fire and Rescue Services. One of the cuts already announced and effective from April this year will have a significant impact on District Councils in the county - the withdrawal of recycling credits for green waste. For this Council, this is a loss of £350,000 a year! For the coming year, thanks to our sound management and the way we have stimulated local growth, our planning fee income will cover that gap - a gap, however, which will increase in future years.

It is somewhat galling, therefore, that in these times when we are encouraged to work more closely together in local government, the County Council has responded to the criticisms we made last December by stating that their only concern is their own financial position; services to our public and working together are clearly not their priority! This Council, on the other hand, is moving forwards with our Revenues and Benefits and IT shared services, the former now beginning collaborative work with DWP and Job Centre Plus on supporting local people in the run-up to local implementation of Universal Credit. Whatever you may think of the concept, and I certainly have a view, the need for us to provide support to people under financial and other pressures is vital and I am pleased that we will be playing our part.

On a more worrying note, I learned earlier this week of the theft of the ATM machine from the wall of Barclay's bank in Groby, using a JCB. The Police have made an arrest, but at a time when similar facilities are under threat in that area - with the post office being saved recently, largely through the efforts of Cllr Cartwright - we need to work with the Police to

stamp out what seems to be a pattern of activity not just in our Borough, but across the county.

Whatever the outcome locally in May's elections, this Council will face significant challenges and we need to gear up for them. To provide that impetus at an early stage, there is cross-party agreement that we welcome a Peer Challenge, financed and conducted by the Local Government Association. This will help us learn from 'critical friends' at a very early stage in the life of the new Council. Further details will be circulated by the Chief Executive.

One thing I can state with absolute certainty is that we have first-rate staff at this council, as was shown in a recent spell of bad weather, when operatives from Jubilee Building collected all the bins, gritted footpaths, erected the market and cleaned the streets. I know that staff in other areas show similar commitment and it is only right that I recognise that fact.

Finally, can I remind members that Fairtrade Fortnight begins next Monday 23 February, This council is proud to be a Fairtrade council and I hope that members will continue to support this initiative.

Mr Deputy Mayor, there is much to debate and decide tonight, all of it on the basis of an incredible amount of work between officers and Members, for which this Council is now renowned. I look forward to positive outcomes at this meeting and into the future.

I commend this statement to the Council.

Councillor Stuart Bray
Leader of the Council
19 February 2015
