

Leader's Report

As we move into December I start by welcoming our new Chief Executive, John Richardson. I'm sure that all members will join with me in congratulating John on his appointment. John comes with an exceptional reputation and the admiration of those who have worked with him. In challenging times for local authorities I have absolute confidence that we have made an excellent appointment and I look forward to working with him.

We must also take this opportunity to express sincere thanks to Liz Elliott and Clive Mason who have worked so hard to deliver, enhance and protect our district over these past many months. They stepped up when we as councillors and the district communities needed them.

It's also a time for us to thank a number of our interim senior staff for all of their hard work - Vicki Jessop and Clare Pattinson - whilst congratulating our new interim monitoring officer, Julie Young on her appointment.

We must also take a few minutes to express our thoughts, prayers and condolences to our Chairman Councillor Barbara Johnson on the sad death of her husband David. David was so well loved and respected, he played such an important part in our community. This including the historic society and many of the musical bodies here in our town of Market Harborough. I was proud and privileged to call David a friend as were so many in this chamber this evening.

The last meeting of full council raised two issues that were noted. One by Cllr Nunn and one from Cllr Banister. I have confirmed to Cllr Banister my support for the Feilding Palmer, cottage hospitals being a vital part in provision of health services for our communities. I have also offered to meet with Cllr Banister and to discuss his other key points.

Cllr Nunn, members will recall, raised the point regarding the seemingly increased costs if using the App to park your vehicle here in the district. Our officers carried out a full investigation and confirmed to me that the App offered certain added extra services by way of reminders but to use these there is a charge. This was checked and double checked by our officers to the extent of even using their own "cards" to book. Once you booked, the opportunity to book extras was there but up went the cost. This was reported back to Cllr Nunn and I asked officers to offer Cllr Nunn the opportunity to include a comment in the press release that was issued. That was the correct way to do it.

The authority has been offered a new and official photograph of His Majesty the King to hang in the council chamber. I was asked if I was happy to support accepting this which I immediately confirmed and the written confirmation was also approved. In addition, a letter will be sent to Buckingham Palace to advise that while we will be honoured and pleased to have the image of our new sovereign here in the chamber we hope that His Majesty will approve our intention to have the image of our late Queen on display in the members' area.

Members are aware that I wrote as Leader of this authority to Secretary of State Michael Gove asking him to meet with me to discuss the Super Prison. This meeting request was both before the SOS made his decision and following his regrettable decision to approve the build. Mr Gove declined all of my requests. Not even when he was in Foxton for a Conservative Party event just a few days ago could we secure a few minutes of the SOS's time.

I met with residents and members of the action group with Mr O' Brien MP. The report coming to full council on this agenda will take forward the district options and information on this Super Prison for discussion and consideration.

I have been asked by a member of the opposition about opposition members having opportunities for attending seminars etc and these places being fully funded by HDC. With the request it was acknowledged that no policy on this exists and it was certainly not something that has previously been offered. I intend to recommend that this be considered for discussion at the member development group. From there, if recommended so to do, investigations can be initiated to consider the potential costs, viability and if we wish to consider this as an option.

Local Government finances are under constant pressures. Over the coming months our Chief Financial Officer will provide as many regular updates and details on a variety of matters under this umbrella. But in truth the only way forward is for Central Government to recognise the importance of Local Government and to this end I will be seeking a meeting with our members of parliament urging them to take up this matter at the House of Commons, challenging the Government head on in delivering an important and improved financial deal.

On tonight's agenda members will be asked to support deferring the decision on the SOCG, Reg 18 issues and options, Funding and Local Plan dates (LDS) etc. This is as a result of a direct request by Neil O'Brien MP to me as Leader of this authority and due to information we understand is due in the next 48 hours on the NPPF. I am very happy to support this requested postponement as it is logical as I've always said to gather information.

Taking this opportunity there are a few additional points. If I had already signed the document this agreement to support the postponement would have been impossible.

If I had or have already made up my mind then it would be illogical to agree to the postponement for information.

To put it bluntly why would I bother?

Indeed - had I already made up my mind I would as Leader already have put this to the vote. So I would make this very general suggestion.

I hope we do not see any more emails or claims that members have already made up their minds as personally I have seen no evidence of this and such accusations are unfair and unpleasant to respond to. To have already made up one's mind or made it public, is as we all know, predetermination and is a serious accusation.

We are rapidly approaching Christmas, the time of good will. I wish you all a very peaceful and happy Christmas and hope that for you and yours 2024 will be a year of good health and stress free.

Cllr Phil Knowles
Leader of Harborough District Council

11 December 2023