

**Cabinet - 24 May 2019****Item 8 - Supporting Growth in Leicestershire****Liberal Democrat Response**

The lack of infrastructure in all its forms, roads, schools, hospitals, surgeries and community facilities has become an increasing concern in recent years. Emphasis has been put on the need for this infrastructure to support further growth but what is of immediate concern to the people we represent is the congestion on our roads, the difficulties in finding school places and problems with obtaining doctors' appointments and indeed appointments in hospitals.

The problems faced by local authorities through lack of funding has been well outlined in the recent report of the National Audit Office, Planning for New Homes, which needs to be read when considering this issue.

The creation of a Growth Unit is to be welcomed but it should also address the existing crisis and it also needs to encompass a partnership with District Councils, the NHS, the Education Funding Agency, the building industry and Homes England with all agencies playing a full part.

There is an assumption in this report that agencies in the public sector and in particular the District Councils are in a position to make further financial contributions whereas, of course, all agencies in the East Midlands and Leicestershire in particular are severely underfunded.

This report is predicated on the ambition of the Government to build a million homes by the end of 2020 and the part this County will play through its Strategic Growth Plan, which incidentally is already raising serious concerns. Unfortunately, it does not fully address what is happening on the ground. District Councils are doing their best to meet the 5 year housing land supply challenge but in practice Sec 106 agreements are being re-negotiated as developers insist they cannot afford the payments and other undertakings previously agreed.

Above all, the key role of the District Councils who issue the bulk of planning consents after what is often a tortuous exercise negotiating with land owners and developers has to be recognised. It would be very strange indeed if the result of this proposal were to drain resources away from Districts and leave them less able to fulfil the functions currently expected by their residents. It is worth pointing out that in this county, the Districts' positive performances in processing applications is recognised by the Government's audited data.

Could I therefore make the additional suggestion that there needs to be Government Office representation as Planning Inspectors currently have little or no compunction to sympathise with planning officers, communities or their elected representatives who strive their utmost to balance local aspirations against the overwhelming demand for new housing and industrial developments?

Our County faces tremendous development pressure, but what must be taken into account by all involved is that many of us highly value the countryside and all the benefits it gives. We strongly believe that it should be protected for future generations to enjoy and not be simply seen as a massive building site to exploit due to the demands imposed upon us. This was a point borne out by many of us who spoke in the recent debate on the climate change emergency which attracted the unanimous support of all County Councillors.

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23<sup>rd</sup> May 2019