

Leader's Report Council 22 March 2016

Devolution

It was disappointing but not a surprise that the Chancellor did not announce even an in principle devolution agreement for our Area. The indications we have been receiving over the last few weeks clearly indicate that whilst there is a deal to be done in line with the asks that have been submitted there appears to be on-going political difficulties for the Government in resolving some of their internal difficulties with regards to the geography.

I am confident that with good faith on both sides we can still come to an agreement within the next couple of months and should that be the case then members have my assurance that any proposals will come to Council for ratification and also be consulted upon with the wider district community.

I need to make clear my view that any devolution deal for our region is unlikely to be the finished article and that we have seen in other areas that previous agreements have merely been the first stage in securing greater devolution in subsequent years. I think that it is likely that any deal we do will merely be a starter for 10 and that we will need to continue to press for greater control over our infrastructure and economy to ensure that we can best use our local knowledge to secure ongoing improvements in our economic output, skills levels, and transport system for the benefit of the people that we represent, rather than having to await national government approval or relying on national competitions.

Budget Implications

I am sure that many Members will have scoured the budget for any good news for local government and like me failed to find any. The announcement of further significant public spending cuts towards the end of the parliamentary session is of real concern to all in local government as history shows that local authorities are one of the first places that this government comes to when it is seeking cuts. Given the parlous financial state that Bradford and other districts find themselves in any further cuts could be disastrous for local services.

Members may also have seen the announcement that the government intends to take small and medium size businesses out of the business rates regime. Whilst on the surface this is to be welcomed as it gives the opportunity for more business start ups in the district, we are still awaiting clarification as to whether local authorities will be compensated for the loss of income or whether this will simply be a further reduction in our spending power. The government announcement previously that councils will retain 100% of the business rate from their area is already likely to have a detrimental economic effect on Bradford Council and we will seek assurances about this latest announcement and report back to the Council as soon as we have clarity.

In policy terms the announcement of forced academisation of all schools is simple political dogma not based on any educational evidence and takes away the local choice for parents, governors and headteachers. This policy is also likely to have financial implications for the Council given that the rules currently make the Council responsible for many of the liabilities at the time of transfer.

Ofsted meeting

As many members will have read in the media a senior delegation from Ofsted came and met with Council officers and members of the Executive a few weeks ago. The meeting was one in which there was an honest and robust exchange of views but I feel created more heat than light. Whilst Ofsted raised some legitimate concerns it is my view that they made some general statements but provided no evidence to support these in terms of the situation in Bradford. They seemed to be extrapolating from the position they found in other parts of the country rather than providing us with any direct evidence of their concerns in the Bradford district.

I would stress to Ofsted, and to any elected member or member of the public in the Bradford district, that if they have any suspicion or evidence that there are any unregulated educational establishments in the Bradford district, or they have any concern about the welfare of an individual child then this should be reported as a matter of urgency so that it can be investigated and the Council can take the appropriate action.

It is only by working together in the best interest of young people throughout the district that we can ensure the safety of all our children and it is beholden on all agencies and individuals to make any information available without delay to the appropriate authorities. I would stress that all and any concerns and allegations will be investigated without fear or favour and should any wrong doing be uncovered we will take the necessary action both to resolve the immediate situation but also to learn from the circumstances so that we can improve our intelligence network and procedures.

HS3

The recent announcement by the government about the proposed route of the HS3 should be a grave concern to everyone in the Bradford district given that it fails to provide a stop in Bradford. It seems to me to be ludicrous that one of the biggest district economies in the North of England should not be on the HS3 route given the justification for the investment in HS3 is to link the major economies across the North of England.

I am aware that there is cross party support for Bradford to be included on the HS3 route and I am sure that all politicians in this chamber will use all their contacts and every opportunity to raise the case for Bradford to ensure that we are not by-passed by this major investment that will not only be of benefit to our districts business and residents but also will help with the development of the government stated aim to create a Northern Powerhouse by linking our economy with others in the North of England.

We will continue to lobby decision makers and work with local MPs to ensure that our case is put and the route reconsidered.

The Odeon

Members will have heard and read the recent press coverage of the future of the Odeon development. All I can say is they must have been a very slow news week because nothing new was said by myself, the developer or anyone else weeks earlier and in many cases to the same media outlets.

To reiterate the Council's position and to reassure members of Council and members of the public with an interest in this project, the Council continues to support and work closely with Bradford Live to ensure that their development progresses as soon as possible.

However, we have always recognised that this cannot be an open ended commitment and there will come a time when if funding is not secured or there are other issues that make it look like the development will not progress then we and the developers will have to review the situation. Some time ago I indicated that I thought that the end of 2016 would be a reasonable time to review the situation with regards to the Bradford Live development and this was recognised by the developer. There have been no new or additional announcements since that position was adopted and I am sure we are all hopeful that Bradford Live will be able to progress the development.

The National Media Museum

There has been justifiable concern raised about the plans to transfer some of the National Media Museum photographic archive to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and we will be debating this in a motion later on in the meeting.

At the same time that the issue of the archives was raised it became conflated with a number of other changes that are being delivered at the National Museum and many of these were not new announcements but merely the culmination of plans that were announced at the time that the people of Bradford successfully protected the Museum from closure.

The refocusing of the Museum's core offer towards a greater emphasis on the STEM agenda was part of the package that was announced at the time of the decision to keep the Museum open as was the plan to consider whether or not to change the name of the Museum.

As part of the significant investment that the Science Museum Group are making in the National Media Museum the Council as it agreed some time ago will be supporting this investment to bring new galleries into the Museum as well as working with them to bring new exhibits from London to Bradford.

QUESTIONS TO THE LEADER ON THE REPORT OF THE LEADER OF COUNCIL

Councillor Cooke

It is one of those occasions when there are a lot of questions I was going to ask but I am not going to ask that many. If I can make one not a question really a statement which is to say as far as our Group is concerned we will absolutely support any activity or actions in order to try and make a case for a HS3 station in the Bradford district and obviously we will work on trying to make this. Which brings us to the common links one which is thank you for the update on devolution. As you know we have had an engagement in terms of the Conservative Group Leaders from across West Yorkshire meeting with some but not all of the Labour Leaders. Do you want to give us in the context of what you said a little bit of an update on where we are with the responses on that and I appreciate that nothing is going to happen until after 23 June but it would be good to just have an update on that?

Leader - Councillor Green

Why what is happening on 23 June? The ongoing debate regarding devolution is that there have been meetings between the Leaders of five West Yorkshire Councils and the Leader of the five main Opposition Groups on the West Yorkshire Councils and I believe that we are close to agreeing if you like a draft letter sent across those two groups of people to the Chancellor. The discussions that we had the other week that I could not attend but I know that Councillor Cooke was there was looking at some of the issues around Governance and around the involvement of Elected Members from across whatever the final geography of devolved authority is in terms of some sort of regional assembly. We have always said that we believe that there needs to be a multi party cabinet so that there is representation across the piece and in West Yorkshire Combined Authority as it stands at the moment that is the case. I think those general principles are likely to be agreed this week. I think the devil will always be in the detail and we will continue those negotiations but the fundamental issue is that you ain't going to have a Northern Powerhouse that does not include Bradford and Leeds. You are not going to have a Northern Powerhouse that does not include West Yorkshire and Leeds City Region. So somebody down in Westminster and Whitehall has either got to put up or shut up and stop playing games.

Councillor Jeanette Sunderland

I am aware there is a debate later but there seems to be a little bit of confusion between your response Councillor Green around the Media Museum and the Labour Motion. Can you just unpack a little bit more about the STEM and the decisions and the consultation that the Council went through to get to STEM because I think that is the most important change for the Museum that the City must welcome. (at this point the Leader sought further clarification on the question) It is just about the consultation that went through about the STEM subject science and there certainly is the big pressure that I felt that we were all behind that movement in the Museum and I just felt that there is a little bit of a dissonance perhaps between the answer that you have given and the Labour Motion. So I am seeking your commitment to STEM.

Leader – Councillor Green

I do not think there is any dissonance between our Motion and that. I think the two are on slightly different subjects given the fact that it is an amendment to a Motion. The commitment to our support for the direction of travel putting aside the issue of the archives that the Science Museum Group and the National Media Museum has overtaken has been there since this Council and the people of this district prevented closure of the Museum. At that time it was stated that they were going to move towards a greater STEM agenda linked to Media etc, our position is that we continue to work with them to deliver that.

Councillor Pennington

More a comment rather than a question. I just wanted to go through one or two items, like my Leader here I have got one or two concerns. There is one here about we mention on devolution internal difficulties. I do not know just where the internal difficulties are, whether they are north or south? I suspect they are more north. Just to move on to something as I consider to be very serious and that is the change in the arrangements for business rates. You say here that we will have a report back to Council as soon as possible. Can we have it as soon as possible because I get an awful feeling about this. It is alright having these smaller businesses having free rates and expecting bigger businesses to cover the difference. Bigger businesses cannot afford to cover the difference. Also I just want to make a comment on the Odeon. Thank you for this commitment here. Just to fill you in on this. I am spending a full day on Thursday in the building with Lee Craven and Bradford Life to see if we can come up with any solutions.

Leader – Councillor Green

I think you will find that the internal problems rest within your Party down in Westminster Councillor Pennington. Anything you can do to sort them out much appreciated because your leadership apparently cannot. In terms of the business rates this year my concern isn't that they are simply going to transfer business rates to larger companies, my concern is they are going to transfer the loss of business rates to local authorities. That is the real fear. As I say on a principle if you are a small business or a start up business not having to pay business rate is going to be a great benefit to allow you to succeed and to grow. However if you look at the economy of a place like Bradford which has got a huge number of smaller/medium size enterprises it is the lifeline of our business. We do not have the Toyotas etc of this world based here. What we need to do is to understand the effect that has on our business rate base, the income to the Council to provide services to individuals and businesses and if the Government plan is simply that you reduce the business rate take for local authorities given the other changes they have introduced then it is going to be a real challenge, not just for Bradford but for every local authority. What we have got is a Government almost one-liner announcement and again the detail is going to be what will either make or break this as a proposal. As soon as we have got that we will let all Councillors know exactly what is going on and it is the same with the academisation proposals.