

***Rather than my usual type of Report, here is a summary of a recent statement by Cllr Barry Lewis, the Leader of Derbyshire County Council:***

Two years on we are now leading an ambitious change agenda focused on delivering the most efficient and effective public services at the lowest cost to the taxpayer. Our aim is to become an “Enterprising Council”. This is not just about providing services in a different way but also about changing the mindset of the council. We are one of the biggest county councils in the country and culture change in local government is never easy. However, we are steadily moving from a bureaucratic approach to decision-making to one where teams and individuals feel empowered to get things done. In doing so, we are underpinning a sense of individual responsibility to make the organisation and culture far less paternalistic.

A few people have read “Enterprising Council” to equate to a programme of privatisation – which is wrong. This is not something that is driven by ideology, but by a desire always to find the best solution to delivering the highest quality of public services at the lowest cost to the taxpayer. In doing so, we want to tap into the creativity and passion of our own staff to come up with different solutions. An example of this is a new operating model for our highways services which is already regarded as one of the best in the country, thanks to an extra £6 million of investment since the election. This has seen a record number of 68,000 potholes repaired in 2018. The new model will mean even better performance and efficiency in the future.

We are rolling out a new libraries strategy that is working with local people to turn 20 of our least visited and used libraries into community-run facilities that will not only safeguard their future but also ensure that they play a leading role in the community. We are also looking to work with local organisations to safeguard the future of our mobile library service.

The sea change in the way that we work with local communities is fundamental to an Enterprising Council. We do not want to be a council that “does things to” local communities, we want to be a council that works with local communities to find the best solutions. In doing so, we are changing the whole dynamic of the council by driving a top to bottom culture change. Working hand-in-glove with our senior officer team, we are developing leadership skills across the organisation to embed an ethos of efficiency, effectiveness, and enterprise, while making sure that the ethos is cascaded down.

We have just completed a Corporate Peer Challenge from the LGA which has not happened in Derbyshire for more than 10 years. This has been a nerve-wracking experience because you open the council to criticism. We did it because we wanted to benchmark ourselves with other authorities. Overall we came out well with many of the issues identified already clear in our minds and already being addressed via the emerging Enterprising Council approach.

We have been criticized for not taking the full 4.99 per cent council tax rise allowed by Government without triggering a referendum, but that is not a target to aim for. We have a responsibility to balance our budget and take into account that residents are squeezed too. It is critical to remember that taxpayers fund our services and the people whom we employ or commission. Often it seems that they get very little that is noticeable from us on a day-to-day basis. For them, it is all about street lights, well-maintained roads, bins and pavements. Of course, go below the surface and you will see the sheer range of life-changing services and support that we provide, particularly to people who are more vulnerable. We also take care of large areas of countryside, former pits, railways and opencast sites, canals and other assets that are there for environmental or recreational purposes. Not every taxpayer will benefit directly from this provision. So we should always ask the question: could someone else look after these sites? If so, who from the local community would come forward to manage the assets at less cost while deriving more benefit from that sense of involvement?

There is of course a huge range of other things we do, which is mostly unseen. For example, facilitating economic growth, promoting tourism, providing public transport, managing budgets for schools, and a whole host of other things. All these things cost money, some of which is non-statutory but if we did not do it, who would? This means that Derbyshire has a circa £1.1 billion annual operating budget. A not inconsiderable sum which demonstrates the need to take a carefully balanced view on how we spend the money.

I hope that I have given you a flavour of the sense of change that we are trying to engender in Derbyshire with good policies and a laser-like focus on efficiency, effectiveness, and lower tax.

*Cllr. Robert A. Parkinson*