



A great place to live, work and visit



Annual Leader's Statement 2025

For Full Council Tuesday 20 May



Terry Richardson
Leader, Blaby District Council

Introduction

It is difficult to believe that another year has passed, however the Annual Council meeting always provides a great opportunity to reflect on the challenges we have faced and our achievements over the last 12 months.

It is with pride that I say, whatever seems to be thrown at us, we at Blaby District Council, always rise to the occasion. Without question this past year has been no exception.

Of course, the one issue which looms large over us currently is local government reorganisation and devolution and I will speak more on that later.

First, I'd like to touch on some of our work to ensure Blaby District remains a great place to live, work and visit. Our Blaby District Plan, launched in 2024, is instrumental in helping us focus our service delivery on five core themes, enabling our communities and supporting vulnerable residents; enhancing and maintaining our natural and built environment; growing and supporting our economy; ambitious and well-managed Council – valuing our people; keeping you safe and healthy.

The single achievement I am most proud of has been increasing the amount of accommodation we can offer to our vulnerable residents facing homelessness. Having Council owned accommodation is a quantum leap forward and I am truly grateful to the whole Council for supporting this initiative. This, coupled with properties we can access through partners, came into use during the last year as has been our on-going commitment to provide the necessary support to our housing team at an extremely challenging time.

Our commitment to expanding the range of social housing available continues with fresh housing developments brought forward and the anticipated extensions to our New Lubbethorpe community, focusing on innovative and sustainable construction.

We have helped residents cut their energy bills and contribute towards carbon savings with promotion of our collective buying initiatives, Solar Together and Big Community Switch.

Efforts to reduce our own carbon footprint, as part of our ambitions to be Net Zero in our operations by 2030, have been extensive. We have two new electric heavy fleet vehicles; a sweeper and bin lorry and solar panels are now fully installed and operational on the roofs of our three depot buildings in Whetstone.

The energy generated by the panels is more than enough to fulfil all the depot's requirements and we are actually exporting energy back to the grid.

Our teams went above and beyond to respond to the flooding which hit the District at the start of the year, overwhelming many homes and businesses. A huge thanks to everyone who helped those affected both at the time and in the aftermath.

One success which deserves special mention is the rejection of the Hinckley National Rail Freight Interchange. In March the application was thrown out by the Secretary of State for Transport. All our work in opposing this ill-thought-out scheme finally proved its worth, saving hundreds of acres of countryside from unwarranted development.

I would also like to update Members on the latest developments regarding local government reorganisation and devolution.

Our Council is working closely with the other District and Borough Councils in Leicestershire as well as Rutland County Council on a plan for future local government structures in our area.

Together, we have submitted an interim plan built on a foundation of collaboration, evidence and engagement.

Our North, City, South proposal envisions three equally sized unitary Councils delivering all services from 2028. It would also deliver devolution.

The new authorities would maintain strong connections with local communities, streamline services, protect the vulnerable, make savings and foster economic growth.

The Government is clear that our structures need to change and we need to ensure these changes benefit our residents.

This is an opportunity to reset, reimagine and reinvigorate local government. We aim to create organisations that work closely with communities and partners to deliver better outcomes for communities.

Our Council has deep-rooted connections with villages and parishes and has built strong relationships across various sectors to drive improvements in our area.

We share this collaborative culture with our partner Councils and are committed to passing it on to any new organisations.

While we await feedback from the Government on our interim plan, we continue to gather more evidence and data in preparation for a full submission in November. We will continue to try to work with both the City and County Councils to ensure a collaborative approach to local government reform.

Over the summer, we will engage extensively with residents, businesses, and stakeholders. Member participation will be vital, and I look forward to your involvement. We received an excellent response from stakeholders to our proposal and a significant level of support during our initial engagement work.

I will continue to keep Members informed as the plan is progressed and officers are ensuring that Council employees are kept updated and engaged.

Finally, I should like to thank all our officers for their work during that last year especially with change looming large on the horizon. I genuinely believe that change should be embraced and not feared and that opportunities will result from these changes. The achievements mentioned in this report could not have been made without your support and commitment to our providing the best service to our residents and for that I should like to thank you.



Councillor Terry Richardson
Leader of the Council



Our Work

Enabling our communities and supporting vulnerable residents

◆ Flooding support

The new year heralded devastating flooding in parts of the District. Roads were unpassable, fields submerged and scores of households were affected, both internally and externally.

Once again our teams, fellow Councillors, partner agencies and our communities themselves went above and beyond to help those in need.

Emergency centres were opened, sandbags delivered, food and drink distributed and the displaced found accommodation.

During the clear-up we arranged bulky goods collections, operated extra waste collections and sent out our sweepers to clean impacted areas.

We were also able to use UK Shared Prosperity Funding to offer the most severely affected households free resilience surveys to help them plan and prepare for any future flooding.

It is clear these flooding events are becoming more regular, so we are working diligently with partners to try and better understand the causes and put defence and reactionary mechanisms in place.



◆ Green schemes

Supporting our residents to reduce their energy bills as well as their carbon footprint is a win-win situation. As well as helping them cut costs it also helps us edge closer to our ambition of becoming a Net Zero District by 2050.

Again, this year we offered two major reverse auction green schemes, Solar Together where people can take advantage of hassle-free and cost-effective battery storage and solar panel installation, and the Big Community Switch, harnessing group buying power to deliver savings on 100% renewable energy tariffs.

Almost 500 households registered an interest in Solar Together last year while those who joined our Big Community Switch in 2024 enjoyed savings of up to £93 a year.



◆ Reducing homelessness

Along with the rest of the UK, here in Blaby District we are seeing increasing levels of homelessness. There are many reasons behind this including lack of affordable housing, high rents, the rising cost of living, incidents of domestic abuse and fewer available properties in the private rented sector. It is a complex situation and we always do our very best to assist those who are facing the prospect of homelessness.

This year we have been able to invest in several properties to provide temporary accommodation for homeless households, including people with mental health needs, thanks to working in partnership with EMH Homes.

We have helped bring forward a dedicated Mental Health Supported Unit providing 14 flats for people who need assistance maintaining tenancies.

Thanks to funding we also now have four properties which can be offered to rough sleepers and going forward we plan to buy more accommodation to help those who find they no longer have a roof over their head.

◆ Community Awards

It's an absolute highlight of my year to be compere at our annual Community Awards ceremony. This year was the fourth event of its kind and again I was humbled to be in the company of so many dedicated people who go that extra mile to make a difference within their communities.

It is always a challenging task for our judges to whittle down the nominations to select the winners and runners-up as all the nominees are truly deserving of praise and recognition. All those who support our communities are winners in my eyes.



◆ Community Grants Scheme

Our ongoing Community Grants Scheme proved to be as popular as ever this last year.

The first round of our 2024-25 scheme saw £18,000 split across 12 groups to fund projects as diverse as solar battery storage, new gazebos, room refurbishments, coaching costs and purchasing children's pyjamas.

The funding can be a true lifeline for community organisations, helping them improve facilities or help deliver services to residents, often to the most vulnerable in our society.

As we head into a new year of grant-giving we are looking forward to assisting many more groups as they make a real and positive contribution to our residents' lives.

◆ Glen Parva Community Fridge

We were excited to announce the launch of our new Glen Parva Community Fridge just a few weeks ago.

Community Fridges help reduce food from supermarkets and other suppliers going to waste, with surplus stock being redistributed to local hubs through a partner platform called Neighbourly.

Local people can visit these hubs during opening hours and help themselves to the food free of charge. No referral or registration is necessary.

Thanks go to our officers for helping set up this Community Fridge and recruiting volunteers who we hope, in time, will take over responsibility for its operation.

The Community Fridge is open every Tuesday from 2.30pm to 4pm at Glen Parva Memorial Hall.

Enhancing and maintaining our natural and built environment

◆ Hinckley National Rail Freight Hub rejected

Finally in March the Secretary of State for Transport threw out plans for the monstrosity which would have been the Hinckley National Rail Freight Interchange.

We have worked hard for the last few years, ever since the first pre-application consultation in 2018, to prevent this scheme which would have seen development in vast swathes of countryside in our District.

Our contention was always that the applicant, Tritax Symmetry, had failed to mitigate some of the scheme's most damaging effects. Not least the far-reaching negative impacts on highways routes, the landscape and environmental and visual intrusion.

I must sincerely thank our planning team, our consultants, our partners in opposition and of course our residents for all helping to highlight the issues with the warehousing and rail hub, contributing to its rejection.



◆ Braunstone Village Conservation area

The centre of Braunstone has some fabulous old buildings which give it a unique historical character. Following a positive public consultation, we took action last year to ensure this character is preserved for future generations by adopting the Braunstone Village Conservation Area.

Any new developments within and surrounding the conservation area will now need to be sensitive to the heritage of the village, as other developments have been alongside the previously established conservation area within Leicester City's boundary. We recognise how important our heritage and landmark buildings are for our communities, contributing to and enhancing residents' sense of place and local pride.

◆ New Lubbethorpe progress

Our award-winning community at New Lubbethorpe continues to grow with several approvals granted over the last year for Phase 2 of the development.

We are seeing innovative and sustainable house construction with features such as solar panels and wildlife friendly additions like swift boxes and hedgehog highways.

One of the most exciting elements this year has been work to deliver the new local centre, the Brook Centre. When completed this will house a supermarket, medical centre and cafe as well as other retail outlets.

It will be fantastic to see it open and up and running, providing essential services for existing and future residents.



◆ New Local Plan

We continue to work on our new Local Plan which will guide growth across the District up to 2041, shaping where housing, employment and retail sites should be developed and where development should be restricted.

It is a complex and challenging piece of work, made more so by the change in Government last July and a shift in priorities.

This has inevitably delayed the progress of our Local Plan as we seek to ensure our blueprint meets the new requirements but remains robust and true to our ambitions for development across the District.

We will of course be sharing this vision with a wide-ranging consultation set to proceed once all our preparatory work is done.



◆ Improvements to parks and open spaces

Thanks to money from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund we have been able to spruce up some of our most popular parks and open spaces, benefiting both visitors and nature.

Pathways were replaced and widened at The Osiers, Crow Mills and Whistle Way, allowing better access for visitors during all seasons.

At Countesthorpe the balancing ponds have been fenced off to help protect wildlife, creating designated nature zones.

The top field there has been planted with new saplings to boost biodiversity and provide an attractive feature for all to enjoy.

Considerable investment has also been put into our entranceway and car park at Bouskell Park. We have a completely refurbished car park with low-level lighting and designated bays. We have widened the bridge and improved drainage and will add extra planting in due course.



◆ Fosse Meadows lease

Last summer we secured a lease arrangement with not-for-profit organisation Green Circle Nature Regeneration to take over the management of Fosse Meadows Country Park for the next 20 years.

Green Circle had been working with us on an informal basis for the last 18 months, looking at ways to boost biodiversity and make the park financially sustainable.

This led to new nature zones being created, with wildflowers flourishing and providing valuable habitat for bugs and birds.

By taking on the lease Green Circle will extend such initiatives and be able to tap into external funding streams which are unavailable to us as a Council.

Their stewardship will provide opportunities for investment and enhancement, for the benefit of wildlife and park users.

Growing and supporting our economy

◆ New Tourism Growth Plan

Our new Tourism Growth Plan was approved recently, outlining successes from the last five years and looking forward to how we will continue to drive the District's visitor economy, so supporting local jobs and businesses.

Tourism is a great opportunity to raise our profile and reputation, not only regionally but nationally, putting Blaby District on the map and encouraging people to sample what we have to offer.

Our festivals and attractions have something for everyone. Music events, crafting and community galas and of course, the country's largest Second World War re-enactment weekend, The Victory Show.

Figures from 2023, the latest available, showed visitor spend in the District was an impressive £217 million with spend on accommodation, recreation and food and drink seeing the biggest rises. There was also significant upturn in employment numbers despite the recruitment difficulties facing the sector.

This is all great news but as our new plan suggests, we are not sitting on our laurels. Tourism is a springboard to wider economic growth and general increase in prosperity across the District.

We have set out some ambitious targets including increasing both economic benefit and visitor numbers by 10% and I'm confident we will achieve both.



◆ Enriching our own tourism offerings

While supporting the festivals and attractions which bring in visitors to enjoy our District and boost our economy, we have also been mindful of enriching our own offerings.

Over the last few years the summer tours of our restored Ice House in Blaby village's Bouskell Park have been enormously popular, with guided sessions sold out.

Last year we were able to extend our tours with a specially designed interactive trail to engage the younger generation. Sitting alongside the normal tours, it featured an activity map with puzzles to solve. It was a resounding success and will be another highlight of the summer this year.

◆ Boost to businesses

There are many business-focused ways we seek to support employment and our local economy, from our regular Job and Skills Fairs, to specialised coaching and training sessions.

We have had some really well attended events over this last 12 months and, thanks to funding and strong links with partners we have been able to offer tailored advice to help District businesses grow.

Our two-day, small business masterclass run in conjunction with De Montfort University was heralded a huge success by participants and our Business Breakfasts remain ever popular.

Expert guidance from our Business Growth Advisers has also led to some fantastic outcomes. One local engineering firm was able to secure funding and consequently a £3 million parts supply contract thanks to the skill and knowledge of our officers.



Ambitious and well managed Council – valuing our people

◆ Elections

Last July saw the General Election with a new Labour Government being voted into power. Any election is a challenge for local authorities to manage but a General Election is particularly demanding. We have also managed the Police and Crime Commissioner, District by-elections, Parish and the recent County Council election.

Despite the pressures our Electoral Services team rose to each occasion, putting in a huge amount of effort to deliver smooth and efficient processes, from the notice of elections to polling days themselves.

Many staff committed their time to running the polling stations or burned the midnight oil at the verification and counts. Some even did both. Whatever their role, everyone worked exceptionally hard to ensure democracy continues to be upheld.

◆ Youth Council activities

It's always a pleasure for me to report on the activities of our Youth Council and how they are working on issues which are important to the young people of our District.

Over this last 12 months the Youth Council have continued to press ahead with their efforts to tackle their top three priorities, discrimination, vaping and climate change.

Discrimination and hate crime have seen particular success with a video, Hate Has No Name Here, which was filmed at Winstanley School and launched there to resounding approval.

A school competition with students urged to create a piece of artwork which included the tagline Hate Has No Name Here. The drawings were displayed here at our Council Chamber in December and winners were chosen by a panel of judges who were incredibly impressed with the quality. In March we held our annual youth conference which was a huge success resulting in even more young people joining our Youth Council.

At a time when society seems to be ever more divided and engagement with politics is wanting we must remember as an ambitious and responsible Council that the future of democracy lies in the hands of our young people. Let us continue to nurture our Youth Council and encourage them in their efforts.



◆ Going green at the depot

We are making progress on our ambitions for our operations to be Net Zero by 2030 and for the District to be Net Zero by 2050 with some exciting developments over the last year.

Thanks to Government funding, we welcomed our first two electric vehicles to our fleet, an electric sweeper and a bin lorry. The bin lorry was a diesel-run vehicle which was coming to the end of its use but we were able to give it another, greener, lease of life by converting it to electric.

We also saw the completion of our solar panel installation across the roofs of the three depot buildings in Whetstone. We now have 287 solar panels in place which are providing all the electricity needs for the depot and saving thousands of kilograms of CO2 emissions.



Our green credentials will improve further this coming year with solar panels and electric storage units in the pipeline for Enderby Leisure Centre.

◆ Transformation

One of our major decisions from last year was to leave the LICT Partnership and bring our IT services back in house. We have made significant progress on this with our new network in place, including all our internet lines, cloud service infrastructure, VPN access for remote working and internal switching ready to go.

We have rolled out new WIFI for guests at the offices. We are looking to roll out new devices shortly, ensuring users have the most reliable work tools available to help provide the best service to our residents.

The new IT provision will help speed up data capture and production of reports, all improving our efficiency as a local authority and service provider.

◆ Accounts sign-off

For some time nationally there have been issues around the audit profession not being able to offer prompt auditing of accounts for local authorities. For Blaby, although the Finance Team had published the draft accounts within Government timescales, the external auditor had not completed the audit of those accounts for the historic financial years 2020-21, 2021-22 and 2022-23.

To try and get every authority back on track, last year various backstop dates were set by Government for the statement of accounts to be signed off by auditors.

For years before 2022-23 the backstop date was 13 December and for the 2023-24 statement of accounts a date of 28 February 2025 was set.

The Finance Team pulled out all the stops to provide the information to the external auditors in order for the statement of accounts to be signed off within the timescales. In December audits were completed for the historic years and in February the audit for 2023-24 was completed and signed off by the external auditors.

Thanks must go to members of the Finance Team who worked with outgoing auditors, Ernst and Young, to ensure commentary was received within the deadline, while at the same time dealing with new auditors Azets who were busy on the audit for 2023-24.

◆ Local Government Reorganisation

Following the publication of the Government's White Paper on English Devolution in December we have worked closely with our fellow Borough and District Councils across Leicestershire as well as Rutland County Council to develop our favoured solution for the structure of local government in the County going forward.

We believe our North-South-City blueprint, which has now been submitted to Government in draft form, ensures we are large enough to deliver devolution but close enough to respond to the needs of our communities.

We will continue to develop our proposal over the summer, engaging proactively with stakeholders and residents. Our final proposal will be submitted on 28 November.

A huge amount of officer time has already gone into shaping our approach to this immense challenge – the complete revisioning of local government in our area for the first time in 50 years.

Intense collaboration has been required amidst very tight timescales, and these sterling efforts will continue to ensure we present the very best proposal. I applaud all those involved.

Keeping you safe and healthy

◆ Sport and physical activity highlights

Our health and leisure team deliver some amazing programmes which are thoroughly enjoyed by the hundreds of residents who take part.

From helping elderly residents stay mobile and flexible to encouraging active lifestyles with walking sports and fun, dance-based classes, the aim is to make a positive difference to people's health and wellbeing.

The latest feedback gathered showed 100% of people who took part in any of our activities would recommend the programmes to a friend, a tremendous result.

Attendances during 2023-24 and into 2024-25 were among the highest ever, leading to a 44% increase in physical activity levels in residents taking part, with 61% stating an improvement in mental health and an incredible 90% mentioning increased friendship and social interaction as a benefit.



◆ Active Travel Strategy

We are progressing our Active Travel Strategy as we encourage residents to make walking and cycling their first choice for short journeys within the District.

A project group has been established which will help inform the delivery of the strategy and we continue to liaise closely with housing developers to ensure our new communities feature attractive, safe and comprehensive walking and cycling connections.

Changing perceptions is a key element as we promote the benefits of active travel, both from a health and wellbeing point of view but also an environmental aspect.

Our message is, if you can, leave the car at home if you pop to the shops, walk your children to school and maybe ride that bike into work. We are here to support and encourage, whichever way residents want to embrace active travel.

◆ Community focused initiatives

Throughout the year our community safety team has linked in with partner agencies for events and campaigns aimed at keeping our residents safe.

From working with the police and fire service on driver awareness and road safety to raising awareness of knife crime and ASB, promoting the Ask Angela scheme and handing out anti-spiking items.

We continued our regular campaigns to deter litterbugs, aiming to keep the District a clean and pleasant place and reduce risks to wildlife and the environment as a whole.

Most recently we supported Keep Britain Tidy's Great British Spring Clean encouraging our residents to take advantage of the support we can provide for litter picking.

◆ **Work on contaminated land**

Across the District we have a legacy of contaminated land, areas used as landfill sites decades ago when rules on what could be dumped were far less stringent than they are today.

As an authority we are extremely aware of our responsibility to ensure these sites are safe.

We all know how much time and money we have spent on making Huncote Leisure Centre and the surrounding land safe following the detection of high gas levels.

It's satisfying to note this area continues to be well managed with gas levels under control.

Investigations into other potentially contaminated sites are taking place, with information from historic maps, planning records and site visits considered to decide if more extensive ground studies are required.

Our officers, as always, are scrutinising planning applications with respect to possible land contamination, ensuring development is safe for residents and the wider environment.

◆ **CCTV upgrades**

Recently we installed new CCTV systems in Blaby village centre and at Narborough Train Station.

The pan, tilt and zoom cameras record 24/7 and are centrally monitored by Hinckley and Bosworth Borough Council as part of the local Community Safety Partnership.

They will augment our existing work to prevent crime and antisocial behaviour and we hope their presence will help make people feel safer in these areas.

◆ **The Big Sleep Out**

Members of Cabinet and the senior leadership team slept out in March for the Great Tommy Sleep out for the British Legion raising an impressive £2748.75 while trying to understand some of the difficulties our homeless communities face.

