

## **Statement from the Leader of the Council (presented to the Council on Thursday 13 July 2023)**

The results of the election produced a council that at first glance would appear to be unstable due to the number of different groups. This however provides the opportunity for different political groups have to work together in the best interests of the council, residents and the district. That's what we all need to do, as surely that's why we stood for election.

Over the past few weeks, the different groups have found a way through and found a solution for administering the council. We now have the Maldon District Independent group in a minority administration, we all know however that we can only run the council together through consensus and collaboration. We all need to find agreement and demonstrate to residents that we can act in their interests.

The different groups and those that stood as independent councillors at the election, may have said different things during the election. Some may have even run negative campaigns and made negative statements, politics is a funny game, as you certainly would not be able to get away with that in most other situation. However, as the outgoing Chairman of the LGA James Jamieson said recently 90% of what we do in local government has nothing to do with politics. We therefore move on progressively and work together in the best interests of the district.

I would like to thank the LGA for the support it has provided during the past 2 months. We will continue to work with the LGA and seek their advice and expertise. This will enable all of us to change the organisation progressively. As part of that change there will be an away day next month, where leaders both political and corporate, alongside our respective LGA group peers and LGA officers will get together. This will provide an opportunity for all representative to work together for the interests of the council. I am sure that everyone wants to demonstrate their commitment to the council and to creating change by attending. It is through these initiatives we can create change and also demonstrate to a wider audience, that we want to move the organisation on from the past problems.

We all want to make that difference and deliver for our residents and businesses, and I know the Maldon District group members feel the same, then we can all look forward to working together.

This also applies to the way we work with officers. We should be professional in the way we deal with officers, after all we are all working together and for the same organisation. We need to support Officers in the delivery of their role and challenge them in an appropriate manner, However In the cut and thrust of debate we must respect the difference between challenge and confrontation.

We have to ask ourselves do we want to be seen as an organisation that is constructive, positive and motivating for both members and officers. Where we create culture of inclusivity and trust, so we have a positive image externally and it is an organisation where officers and members look forward to interacting. The alternative is something we should challenge.

We need to let officers get on and deliver. We have processes and procedures defined, and our constitution states officer decision making. Those decisions and actions are reported back to working groups and committees in a timely manner. We need to let that happen and build trust with officers. If we want to be involved in operations then we should be officers not councillors. If there is a problem or a complaint, we need to inform officers and then for the work to take place to rectify the situation.

To ensure that officers can deliver for the district, we have recently changed the structure of Service Delivery. This now creates distinct roles and structure within each of the different teams. This will enable the planning department to focus upon all aspects of strategy and delivery. Like all local authorities, it can be a challenge to retain and recruit staff in planning, Maldon can be proud of the work it is doing in this area and is leading on this in Essex and working with the Local Government Association.

Officers are working on a new customer service strategy, which I am sure we are all looking forward to seeing. The way we interact with residents and how they can contact us, needs to reflect the requirements of our residents. Not all residents are able to access services digitally. and we need to ensure that they can speak to an officer if they require. We also need to explore and develop our online interaction, and how residents can interact with us through online chat and chatbot functions.

Leading from that change we need to look at how the organisation and leadership is structured. We are unusual in not having a chief executive. We need to come up with the right structure for the organisation and also learn from other authorities and what has worked for them. We have therefore asked the LGA for advice on this matter, and they will present possible structures for our size of council.

We need to go back to previous LGA advice and look at how our planning committees are structured and how we make planning decisions. We also need to ensure that our constitution is updated for multi-party politics, as that is unlikely to change in future elections.

The LGA finance peer review took place earlier this year and this week we had a briefing and we will be discussing the recommendations later in the meeting. Like all local authorities we are under financial pressure and need to focus on what and how we need to deliver. We are an authority that is debt free as in the past the council has been risk averse to commercial strategies.

That also has a negative consequence for the council, as unlike other authorities, we have no commercial income. We are therefore reliant currently on our revenue from tax, the government, revenues and fees, and grants. Commercial strategies should have been developed when the opportunities were allowed by Government, however previous administrations did not develop or exploit that situation. Those opportunities are much narrower now and has been complicated by the lack of resources and appetite for risk.

We need to review our corporate projects and be creative in what other opportunities may be available to the council. We need to look at our assets and how they can be utilised in the best interests of the district. We need to establish how and the way we might partner with other organisations. That means having an up-to-date asset management plans and strategies.

If we set up the finance group with its new terms of reference, it will enable all political groupings and representatives to make the right recommendations and explore how, what and the way that we deliver. We are in a situation where we have strong reserves, however if we do nothing those reserves will diminish within a few years.

Our Local development plan project is at a crucial stage of development and we are unsure at this stage what the Government might decide on the NPPF. This has resulted in 51 authorities pausing their local plan projects. The council is now in a good position with its 5-year housing land supply. There will always be targets set by Government for authorities to deliver housing and we need to recognise that factor.

The local development plan is something all members should demonstrate their commitment to, as it is your opportunity to shape the future of the district. We need to create a sustainable district, which balances the need for new homes and businesses, along side protecting our environment. We need a district that is sustainable in all senses of the word. As an authority we need to recognise where we can directly make decisions and areas where we can create influence.

Our high streets and towns are already attractive places to visit and are known for their character. We need to enhance them and in the long term make them places where events and other attractions take place. Making them person friendly and focused on the pedestrian rather than the car. We need to have clear high street plans and strategies.

We need to restore our link to the wider infrastructure and how we connect Maldon via a rapid transit link to the rail network. We need to look at creating a transport hub, with sustainable transport methods. This will relieve pressure on roads and create opportunities for both businesses and residents. In the rural parts of the district, we need to ensure that in the long term and further investment, so that public transport is sustainable and meets the needs of residents. The we need to exploit opportunities to have sustainable long term transport strategies.

One of those areas of influence is to ensure we work with our partners to deliver on infrastructure. We all had similar doorstep conversations during the election and the emails we receive, about roads and infrastructure, public transport, NHS facilities and schools. Working with our partners to ensure deliverer and for our officers to continue to lobby, as strongly as possible for the investment, delivery and implementation.

One of the key partnerships we have created is One Maldon District. This partnership now has a clear action plan and will provide more benefits in the longer term. We need to ensure that all our partners commit to delivering for our communities alongside ourselves and that it provides the opportunity to improve health and well being outcomes for residents. This alongside the support the council provides, is particularly important at the moment, where many of our residents are dealing with the cost of living crisis.

We need to build our connection to parish and town councils, so that a community network can be built across the district. We already have the Parish and Town council engagement forum. This is going through a process of change and it needs to become a forum for both Clerks, Chairman and Mayors to meet representatives from the district. We can then inform, engage and empower parish and town councils, and respond more directly to needs of the Parishes.

Our approved Corporate Plan for the period of 2023 to 2027 was developed earlier this year and sets out our vision, our priorities and our guiding principles. It demonstrates that we are a local authority where quality of life matters, and it is our aim to improve this over the next four-year period. It is also vital that we make sure we have a sustainable district in social and economic terms where we protect our characteristics and environment and that we seek investment for the future, supporting existing and attracting new businesses.

Our Corporate Plan is well evidenced and has a vision that staff are committed to with clear priorities. Our service managers have set out their delivery plans and we as members need to support them in enabling delivery and meeting the challenges we face as an authority. Expectations of what local authorities can deliver are higher than ever from partners who also face financial burden, and no doubt this means making some tough decisions about what can actually be achieved over the next 4 years.

Where we can, we need to ensure that our projects are ready for future levelling up funding. In addition to this, we also want to put a spotlight on the Government designating the district as a Priority 1 level area for Levelling Up. We are committed to delivering our £1 million UK Shared Prosperity Funding Plan and will continue our efforts to secure funding. All funding we successfully secure for the district is going to help bring forward investment and exciting projects that achieve greater outcomes for our people, place, and communities.

It is through partnerships with other local authorities that we can engage and also improve the delivery of services both in the district and across Essex. All local authorities are under financial pressure and we need to establish both in the short and long term how we might work with other authorities to explore any opportunities that are available. We are already part of North Essex Economic board and the North Essex association of local authorities. It is through these and other external working groups that we can establish combined approaches and strategies. It is important that we are a positive voice in those meetings and engage constructively.

It seems that no matter who wins the next election, that some form of devolution will be on the cards. That does not threaten the sovereignty of this council. We need to work with whatever level of devolution deal is secured to maximise what is best for the district, its residents and businesses. By taking this approach we will maximise the opportunities.

A statement that has been made about myself is that I am ambitious, my ambition is to achieve more for the district, which I hope that is something where we all have agreement. As councillors that should be something that motivates us all, that we want the best for the district and that we are ambitious for our residents. Together as councillors we need to focus on making a difference, delivering and creating a legacy. That's why I stood a councillor.

As I said last week my aim and I hope yours is, is to put politics aside and to ensure the Council works hard to support the challenges our residents are facing through these really hard times.

We all need to deliver on making a difference and delivering on the pledge to make where we live a place where the quality-of-life matters for all. Together all these aims, ensures we have a district that is truly sustainable in all senses of the word. Delivering for now and also creating strategy for the future. Sustainability for residents, businesses, the environment, our partners and those who come after us. Making a difference to the quality of life.