

**Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee Meeting held on 24 July 2020**

Present: Ian Parry (Chairman)

**Attendance**

Tina Clements (Vice-Chairman)	Kyle Robinson
Keith Flunder	Jessica Shulman
Syed Hussain	David Smith
Ian Lawson	Bernard Williams
Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf	

**Also in attendance:** Jonathan Price and Philip White

**PART ONE**

**88. Declarations of Interest**

Ms Jessica Shulman, Parent Governor Representative, wished to put on record that she worked closely with Mr Alun Harding, Headteacher of Codsall High School, in relation to minute no.91.

Mr Philip White, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Employability and Skills, wished to put on record that his wife was a secondary school teacher, in relation to minute no. 91.

**89. Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 18th June 2020**

**RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee meeting held on 18 June 2020 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

**90. Community Learning Briefing Paper**

The Skills and Employability Service provided Community Learning through a range of formal and informal programmes for adults across the County. It provided programmes that supported people and their families to gain skills needed to progress in the world of work and to support parents to give their children the best start in life. Community Learning offered engaging “first steps” learning opportunities as a way of increasing participation for people who were least likely to engage in adult learning and to prepare learners for more formal learning, as well as offering inclusive programmes to the community that helped prevent social isolation through poor health.

Members heard that this Service was funded through the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) and worked with schools, colleges, third sector organisations and local community groups across Staffordshire. 90% of Service delivery was through commissioned provision to a range of sub-contracted partner organisations. The four priorities for the Service were:

- to develop the skills, confidence, motivation and resilience of adults of different ages and backgrounds;
- to support individuals to progress towards formal learning or employability;
- to support individuals to improve their health and well-being, including mental health; and
- to develop stronger communities.

Members received details of the learning framework, the 2019-2020 academic year performance for terms 1 & 2, and funding. The funding criteria for adult learning was for those outside of compulsory school age, therefore 18+ years of age.

In particular Members received details of the Service response to Covid 19 and its immediate and long-term impacts. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Employability and Skills acknowledged the challenge the Service had faced during this crisis, and particularly paid tribute to Amanda Darlington, newly appointed Community Learning Manager, for managing the crisis whilst being new in post.

Members noted there had been good engagement of learners across five of the eight districts and that further work was needed to improve engagement in South Staffordshire, Staffordshire Moorlands and Newcastle. Consideration was given to the reasons for this, including whether there was any correlation between levels of need and employability. It was noted that enrolment for adult learning courses had been low in Newcastle in previous years and members asked for further data to identify the reasons for this and what was being done to address the issues identified.

One of the consequences of the Covid 19 crisis was a more rapid move to all on-line learning and Members noted the challenges that had emerged. Going forward Members asked whether the on-line offer would remain a significant part of the Service offer. In particular they noted that any geographical differences in offer were removed with on-line courses, which was beneficial. However, they also shared concerns that homes without access to appropriate IT equipment would be disadvantaged, asking that consideration be given to how access to equipment could be achieved, through possible loan equipment to communities and/or individuals. The use of libraries in accessing equipment was also discussed to help combat digital exclusion. Wellbeing issues were highlighted by the Select Committee, noting that for some individuals the ability to learn outside their home environment was essential for their health and wellbeing, giving domestic violence, small housing/crowded households and low-income home heating difficulties as some examples.

An increase in unemployment was expected as a result of Covid 19 and Members asked whether the Service would need to increase their job training offer to help address this. Prior to this crisis Staffordshire had excellent employability, however there had been a concern at the proportion of low skilled, low wage jobs. It was expected that unemployment levels would rise dramatically due to Covid 19 and work was being developed to ameliorate this, including operating an emergency triage service through

the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) with discussion around training and skills for individuals facing redundancy. It was expected that this would continue post-Covid.

Members noted that the planned enrolment target of 50% had not been met and understood that this was as a result of the Covid 19 crisis.

The Select Committee suggested that learning pathways would help support engagement and employability of adult learners. Progression learning was helpful and used to support learners in these areas.

The budget was allocated dependent on need. Those areas identified as most in need had the highest proportion of funding allocation. Digital learning costs were lower. Members queried the cost gap between the services commissioned and the funding they received. This funding was used for management costs, including quality control measures to ensure the courses being provided were high quality and fit for purpose. Members agreed that there was a need to quantify the benefit from this Service, considering wider impacts than engagement figures and course satisfaction to wellbeing and employability, evidencing a measurable impact to support investability. A range of benchmarking and performance measures were used to evidence the Service performance, including benchmarking against other authorities. Amongst other performance and inspection measures Members were informed of the change to the Ofsted inspection for adult learning which included the need to evidence quality and effectiveness of provision.

The Select Committee commended Officers on the report and on their response to the Covid 19 crisis.

**RESOLVED** – That:

- a) the performance of the Community Learning offer half way through the academic year 2019-2020 be noted;
- b) the changes made to the Community Learning offer in response to the Covid 19 crisis be commended; and
- c) the comments outlined by Members be fed back into future Community Learning offers.

**91. Covid 19 school Update**

The Chairman welcomed the newly appointed Cabinet Member for Education and representatives of Staffordshire Headteachers: Ms Claire Evans, Executive Headteacher (The Mease Federation St Andrew's CofE (C) Primary School & Mary Howard CofE (VC) Primary School); Mr Chris Best, Executive Headteacher (The Meadows Special School & Springfield Special School); and, Mr Alun Harding, Executive Headteacher (Codsall High School, Perton Middle School & Bilbrook Middle School), who shared their experiences of the challenges faced during the Covid 19 crisis and how these had been addressed.

The Cabinet Member shared with the Select Committee his pride in the way Staffordshire schools had risen to the challenges presented by the pandemic. Almost all schools had remained open throughout, including bank holidays, half term and Easter breaks. There had been over 200 pieces of new guidance and/or legislation, all of which

had been taken on board. An Education Reference Group had been established to provide a forum for discussion around the new guidance and approaches to the issues faced. Select Committee Members heard details of the level of commitment shown by schools in supporting the most vulnerable, in providing continued learning for those not able to attend school and in working towards opening for the wider year groups.

The Select Committee heard from headteacher representative Mr Alun Harding about the initial shock of the impact of Covid 19 and understanding of the issues faced, the online learning resources for children and the effective safeguarding measures established. This was swiftly followed by adapting the model as new guidance was developed and more children came back into school. They had developed a blended learning approach, a mix of on-line and app learning, physical resource packs sent home and pastoral care by staff to ensure pupils were contacted weekly. Contact and engagement had been monitored, with form teachers contacting those pupils where gaps in engagement occurred. The expectation was that there would be considerable anxiety around returning in September, particularly around the logistics of large numbers of children moving around the school, specifically when considering the buildings layout. A further concern was around pupils who have had little routine or structure over the pandemic months and their necessary adjustment.

Ms Claire Evans told members that she had combined those pupils entitled to attend the two primary schools within her federation and run out of one school during lockdown. She felt there had been some positives from the experience, including:

- natural team building for staff, with staff pulling together to address the challenges;
- putting the school at the heart of the community again;
- more flexibility with the curriculum, developing a curriculum which focused on positive mental health and providing for their children's needs;
- re-establishing good home/school relationships;
- a successful phased return for children of every year group;
- although there were restrictions on classroom layout, pupils had responded well and enjoyed working in their own space;
- children had reacted well, developing skills for the future of adaptability and resilience; and
- improved social work links.

Less positive had been the amount of different guidance, which at times had been overwhelming. The free school meals (FSM) voucher system had also presented challenges, with difficulties in accessing these.

Mr Chris Best told members that the pace at which things happened had been very challenging. Guidance for special schools had often been vague, with each special school developing their response in slightly different ways but with similar moral purposes. Consideration had to be given to what was a "vulnerable" child in a special school context. In Mr Best's schools all children were entitled to attend as all pupils were considered vulnerable. A particular challenge for special schools was the geographical area from which the pupils travelled, with pupils from Cheshire, Derbyshire, Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent attending the Meadows & Springfield Special Schools. The impact of local outbreaks on the school was therefore difficult to manage, as was the impact on the "bubble" approach to pupil attendance. Pupils and their families had been brilliant throughout the crisis, appreciating the difficulties faced and supporting decisions made, with effective communication being at the heart of this.

Members noted that, whilst some distance learning may remain in future, interaction with the pupils and judging their engagement and the way they accessed learning was more effective in a classroom setting. School environments also enabled wider work to help develop more rounded individuals. Health and wellbeing of pupils was also better addressed in the school.

Difficulties for some families in accessing technology was discussed. In some cases this was poorer families not having access to technology, but included families with parents working from home so all family members needed to use the same IT equipment. Broadband issues were also faced in more rural areas creating an inequality in accessing education on-line.

The term “social distancing” was seen as unhelpful, especially for primary aged pupils. The term “physical distancing” was more appropriate, as this explained to children the need to keep distance whilst not suggesting they should avoid being sociable.

Members noted that schools and teaching staff had been brilliant throughout the pandemic, as had the wider school staff and governors. They shared concerns over the impact on school budgets, highlighting the teachers’ pay rise and whether this would need to be found from existing budgets. The Cabinet Member advised that further information was needed before the budget implications were clear.

School transport concerns were shared, specifically how this would look from September. Parents were urged to plan transport early in preparation for the September return. The Cabinet Member said that they were working with schools to produce school transport action plans. All routes would be running for those entitled to school transport, with pupils asked to wear face coverings, being loaded and unloaded according to distance, encouraged to use the same seat and with good vehicle ventilation in place. Vacant seats would not be sold to non-entitled pupils to allow for physical distancing and revised operational guidance had been produced. An additional £1m had been provided to help support this transport.

100% of special school pupils attending Mr Best’s schools relied on school transport. The transport mix of pupils was different to the required bubble pupil mix within the school. This presented challenges to the “bubble” concept but there was a balance of risk to be considered, with sensible measures in place to overcome these issues as far as possible.

Some secondary schools were able to provide some transport themselves through their minibus use. Logistical planning was necessary, using staggered start and finish times to allow for appropriate cleaning. It was anticipated that this service would adapt and evolve as necessary once the term had started.

Most of the enrichment work provided by schools through, for example, school trips and visits, had necessarily been cancelled. Members asked when this work was likely to restart. Schools were focused on getting all children back into school, the new logistics of this within structure, planning and organisation, alongside addressing the needs of the returning pupils, their anxieties, educational gaps and lockdown lack of structured learning.

Whilst there was anxiety amongst all year groups about the learning missed, this was exacerbated in years 10 and 12, the pre-GCSE and pre-A Level year groups. Examination boards had already indicated that there would be adjustments to the exam specifications, particularly around practical work. There would be a need for continued bended learning to try and help address gaps, with examination groups prioritised initially, and this work filtering down through the other year groups.

Within primary, work at home appeared to be covered in reading and mental maths, but gaps were seen in writing. Mr Best informed the Select Committee that catch-up was what special schools were all about. However, his greater concern was around the anxiety levels and the need to rebuild trust and relationships.

The Select Committee, Chairman and Cabinet Members all thanked the headteachers for their attendance at this meeting and sharing their views on work throughout the pandemic. They also wished to place on record their gratitude for the work of all schools during this crisis, exposing themselves to risk, their flexibility in accommodating shift in styles and adaptability in addressing the new guidance, noting that Staffordshire schools were in the top percentage nationally for remaining open and returning pupils. They thanked everyone from across the school community for the excellent job done in responding to the crisis and in the work they were undertaking to rebuild schools' futures in September.

**RESOLVED** – That Staffordshire Schools be congratulated for the excellent work undertaken throughout the Covid 19 crisis, and their continued work in planning for school re-opening in September be noted with gratitude.

## **92. Work Programme**

The Select Committee considered their work programme, noting that this had been amended following a Triangulation meeting between the Chairman, Vice Chairman, Deputy Vice Chairman, Cabinet Members and Officers. In addition to these amendments members noted and/or requested the following changes:

- Staffordshire Air Quality – report moved back to November to allow for the impact of Covid 19 to be included;
- request for a standing monthly update item on the economic health of the County, highlighting any business failures, business growths, unemployment/employment figures etc to inform the work programme going forward; and,
- an update on today's discussions around schools and school transport during the Covid 19 crisis to the November Select Committee, considering the issues tackled in re-opening, with the same headteacher panel invited to attend.

**RESOLVED** – That the amendments to the work programme be agreed.

**Chairman**