

Minutes of the County Council Meeting held on 10 February 2022

Attendance

Jak Abrahams	Philip Hudson	Bob Spencer
Arshad Afsar	Syed Hussain	Mike Sutherland
Charlotte Atkins	Graham Hutton	Mark Sutton
Philip Atkins, OBE	Julia Jessel	Stephen Sweeney
Gill Burnett	Jason Jones	Simon Tagg
Tina Clements	Peter Kruskonjic	Samantha Thompson
Mike Davies	Johnny McMahon	Carolyn Trowbridge
Mark Deaville	Paul Northcott	Ross Ward
Janet Eagland	Jeremy Oates	Jill Waring
Ann Edgeller	Gillian Pardesi	Alan White
Keith Flunder	Kath Perry, MBE	Philip White
Richard Ford	Jeremy Pert	Mike Wilcox
John Francis	Bernard Peters	Conor Wileman
Colin Greatorex	Jonathan Price	Ian Wilkes
Philippa Haden	Robert Pritchard	Bernard Williams
Gill Heath	James Salisbury	David Williams
Phil Hewitt	Janice Silvester-Hall	Victoria Wilson
Jill Hood	David Smith	Mark Winnington
Derrick Huckfield	Paul Snape	Mike Worthington

Apologies for absence: Richard Cox, Thomas Jay, Ian Lawson and Ian Parry

PART ONE

45. Declarations of Interest under Standing Order 16

The following Members declared an interest in accordance with Standing Order 16.5:-

Member	Minute Nos.	Interest	Reason
Philip Atkins OBE	51	Personal	In receipt of Countryside Stewardship Funding and involved in Pilot Schemes with DEFRA
John Francis	50	Non-Pecuniary	On the Board of the Business Innovation Centre
Gill Heath	51	Personal	Owner of Agricultural Land
Jeremy Pert	50	Personal	Governor – Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group
Bernard Peters	50	Personal	Member of East Staffordshire Borough Council
Mark Winnington	49	Personal	Non-Executive Director of Nexus
Mark Winnington	51	Personal	Grower of Energy Crops and in receipt of Countryside Stewardship Funding

46. Confirmation of the minutes of the Council meeting held on 9 December 2021

RESOLVED –That the minutes of the meeting of the County Council held on 9 December 2021 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

47. Chairman's Correspondence

Staffordshire residents recognised in Queen's New Year's Honours

The Chairman extended his congratulations to Mrs Emily Doorbar, the Council's COVID Defence Lead, in being awarded a British Empire Medal for public service during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Her Majesty The Queen's New Year's Honours.

He also extended the Council's congratulations to the following Staffordshire residents who had also received been honoured:

- Professor Helen Jayne Stokes-Lampard DBE, Chair, Medical Royal Colleges and Chair, National Academy of Social Prescribing, for services to General Practice.
- Ms Laura Manning Shoaf CBE, Lately Managing Director, Transport for the West Midlands, for services to Economic Regeneration for the West Midlands.
- Mr Adam Peaty OBE, for services to swimming.
- Mrs Kay McIntyre MBE, Young People Manager at East Cheshire Council, for services to Children and Young People.
- Mr Patrick Nyarumbu MBE, Executive Director of Strategy, People and Partnerships at Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust, for services to nursing.
- Mrs Lianne Jayne Al-Khaldi BEM, for services to the community in Stafford during Covid-19.
- Mr Ian Derek Mountford BEM, for services to the community in Stoke-on-Trent, particularly during Covid-19.
- Mr Adam Ralph Prince BEM, for services to the community in Burnham, Buckinghamshire during Covid-19.

Honorary Alderman Len Bloomer

The Chairman informed the Council of the death, on 5 January 2022, of former County Councillor Len Bloomer. Mr Bloomer represented the Stafford Trent Valley (Stafford) County Electoral Division on the County Council from 2001 to 2017.

Mr Bloomer served on a number of the Council's Committees including the Audit Committee, Corporate Review Committee, Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee, Planning Committee and Corporate Parenting Panel. He also served as Chairman of the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Authority between 2009 and 2016.

Mr Bloomer was appointed as an Honorary Alderman upon his retirement from the County Council in 2017.

Cllr Philip Atkins, Cllr Deaville, Cllr Francis, Cllr Alan White and Cllr Winnington paid tribute to Mr Bloomer following which Members stood and observed a one-minute silence in his memory.

48. Strategic Plan 2022 - 26

Cllr Alan White presented the draft Strategic Plan 2022 – 26 which details the Council's ambitions and priorities for the years ahead. It outlines what the Council wants to achieve and how it intends to do so. The Plan is the Council's primary strategic document that shapes its financial and delivery plans.

The Strategic Plan identifies five priorities:

- Support Staffordshire's economy to grow, generating more and better-paid jobs.
- Fix more roads, and improve transport and digital connections.
- Encourage good health and wellbeing, resilience and independence.
- Tackle climate change, enhance our environment, and make Staffordshire more sustainable.
- Offer every Staffordshire child and young person the best start in life, and the chance to achieve their potential.

The Council were informed that the last four years had brought many challenges and opportunities for local public services, not least the global pandemic. Throughout, the Council has remained ambitious for Staffordshire, and focused on delivery including:

- The Successful completion of a large-scale Children's System Transformation programme.
- The Building Resilient Families and Communities Programme which has achieved successful outcomes for 1,203 families, exceeding its annual target of 784, and helping over 9,000 families since 2015.
- The launch of the virtual Family Hubs during Covid-19, which have been held up nationally as an example of good practice.
- The Council being recognised nationally for its response to Covid-19.
- The Staffordshire Warmer Homes, in partnership with District and Borough Councils, which aimed to better insulate and heat homes to reduce fuel poverty and support our efforts to reduce carbon emissions.
- Staffordshire has built two Dementia Centres of Excellence in Stafford and Burton, leading the way in delivering care that is person-centred and promotes independence.
- The Staffordshire Means Back to Business Support Scheme, a £6m partnership with Staffordshire's District and Borough Councils, providing critical support for small businesses and people whose jobs and employment prospects have been impacted by Covid-19.
- Since 2014, Staffordshire's Economic Growth Programme has created or safeguarded more than 10,000 jobs and enabled construction of more than 4,000 new homes.
- The delivery of a number of key infrastructure projects including the Lichfield Southern Bypass, Stafford Western Access Route and the 60-acre first phase of the i54 Western extension.
- The Council has achieved a 25% reduction in its carbon emissions in the first year since declaring a climate change emergency.

Cllr Sutherland, Cllr Tagg, Cllr Sutton, Cllr Greatorex and Cllr Winnington expressed their support for the Plan and commended what had been delivered to date.

In response to a question from Cllr Pardesi in relation to Community Managed Libraries, Cllr Wilson confirmed that the libraries had access to a professional Librarian and also cleaning staff. Cllr Pardesi also indicated that the voluntary sector was meant to complement statutory services, not to replace them. In response, Cllr Wilson indicated the Council's intention was to allow local communities to do more for themselves, enhancing what was provided by the County Council. Cllr Greatorex also commented on the vital role played by the voluntary sector during the Covid pandemic.

Cllr Winnington and Cllr Philip Atkins spoke about the Government's levelling-up agenda and how access to broadband/5G, particularly in rural areas, would play an important part in this.

Cllr Hood referred to the lack of mention of mental health in the Strategic Plan and the need to look strategically at the provision of mental health services. She also indicated that the act of volunteering often had a positive effect on that individual's mental health.

Cllr Alan White thanked Members for their comments and, in response to Cllr Hood's point about mental health, he highlighted the important role played by the Family Hubs. Cllr Philip White added that people who were independent and in control of their lives were more likely to enjoy better health and wellbeing. The Council therefore needed to continue to empower and inspire our communities and people to help themselves and each other and also to grow the local economy to create more and better paid jobs.

RESOLVED – That the Strategic Plan 2022-26 (as set out in Appendix 1 to the report) be adopted.

49. Medium Term Financial Strategy 2022/27 and 2022/23 Budget and Council Tax

The Council received a joint report by the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources on Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2022/27 and 2022/23 Budget and Council Tax proposals.

Cllr Alan White informed Members that the County Council was a well-run, financially stable authority which was investing for the future. He added that much of the budget was spent on social care for the old and young and that Central Government needed to find a sustainable solution to these funding issues. He also spoke about the success of the Council's economic growth programme and the proposed investments going forward.

Cllr Alan White moved, and Cllr Philip White seconded, the recommendations contained in the report before the Council.

Cllr Charlotte Atkins extended her congratulations to officers for putting forward a balanced budget despite the Authority being amongst the most under-funded Councils in England. She added that the Government's Levelling-up White Paper did nothing to address this issue, and neither did the Social Care White Paper. She, together with Cllr Hussain, also referred to the impact on the elderly, disabled and those on low incomes of the anticipated increase in fuel prices alongside increases in National Insurance contributions and inflation above expected levels. Cllr Hussain also asked that, bearing in mind the issues highlighted above, the Council give further consideration to its proposal to increase Council Tax by 2.99%. In response, Cllr Jessel indicated that the Council would welcome a long-term sustainable solution for the funding of social care. She also extended her thanks to the Government for its response to the Covid Pandemic and indicated that this additional support needed to be paid for.

Cllr Sutton, Cllr Francis, Cllr David Williams, Cllr Deaville, Cllr Winnington and Cllr Philip Atkins expressed their support for the MTFs and Budget proposals.

Cllr Sutherland extended his thanks to the County Treasurer and those other members of staff who had assisted in the development of the MTFs, and also to the Cabinet, for presenting a good and balanced budget.

Cllr Alan White thanked Members for their comments and indicated that Staffordshire still had the fifth lowest level of Council Tax in England.

In accordance with statutory requirements, the Chairman called for a named vote to be taken in relation to the approval of the recommendations contained in the report, the result of which was as follows:

Those Members voting in support of the recommendations:

Jak Abrahams	Graham Hutton	Mark Sutton
Philip Atkins, OBE	Julia Jessel	Stephen Sweeney
Gill Burnett	Jason Jones	Simon Tagg
Tina Clements	Peter Kruskonjic	Samantha Thompson
Mike Davies	Johnny McMahon	Carolyn Trowbridge
Mark Deaville	Paul Northcott	Ross Ward
Janet Eagland	Jeremy Oates	Jill Waring
Ann Edgeller	Kath Perry, MBE	Alan White
Keith Flunder	Jeremy Pert	Philip White
Richard Ford	Bernard Peters	Mike Wilcox
John Francis	Jonathan Price	Conor Wileman
Colin Greatorex	Robert Pritchard	Ian Wilkes
Philippa Haden	James Salisbury	Bernard Williams
Gill Heath	Janice Silvester-Hall	David Williams

Phil Hewitt
Jill Hood
Derrick Huckfield
Philip Hudson

David Smith
Paul Snape
Bob Spencer
Mike Sutherland

Victoria Wilson
Mark Winnington
Mike Worthington

Those Members voting against the recommendations:

Arshad Afsar
Charlotte Atkins

Syed Hussain

Gill Pardesi

Those Members abstaining from voting: Nil

RESOLVED – (a) That the following be approved:

- (i) a net revenue budget of £567.826m for 2022/23 as set out in Appendix 11 to the report;
- (ii) planning forecasts for 2023/24 to 2026/27, as set out in Appendix 11 to the report;
- (iii) a contingency provision of £10.000m for 2022/23;
- (iv) a net contribution to reserves and general balances of £12.442m for 2022/23;
- (v) a budget requirement of £580.268m for 2022/23;
- (vi) a council tax requirement of £406.258m for 2022/23;
- (vii) a council tax at Band D of £1,401.30 for 2022/23 which is an increase of 2.99% when compared with 2021/22. This results in council tax for each category of dwelling as set out in the table below:

Category of dwelling	Council Tax rate £
Band A	934.20
Band B	1,089.90
Band C	1,245.60
Band D	1,401.30
Band E	1,712.70
Band F	2,024.10
Band G	2,335.50
Band H	2,802.60

- (viii) that the County Treasurer be authorised to sign precept notices on the billing authorities respectively liable for the total precept payable and that each notice states the total precept payable and the council tax in relation to each category of dwelling, as calculated in accordance with statutory requirements; and
- (ix) the Financial Health Indicators as set out in Appendix 10 to the report.

(b) That the following recommendations, which are included within the Capital and Minimum Revenue Provision Strategy 2022/23, the Treasury Management Strategy 2022/23 and the Commercial Investment Strategy 2022/23 (Appendices 9a to 9c to the report), be approved:

- (i) the Minimum Revenue Policy for 2022/23 as contained within the Capital and Minimum Revenue Provision Strategy 2022/23 in Appendix 9a;
- (ii) the Prudential Indicators as set out within the Capital and Minimum Revenue Provision Strategy 2022/23 at Appendix 9a;
- (iii) the 2022/23 Treasury Management Strategy, based on the 2017 CIPFA Codes (Prudential Code and Treasury Management Code), and 2018 MHCLG Guidance (on Local Government Investments and on Minimum Revenue Provision);
- (iv) the Annual Investment Strategy (AIS) 2022/23 detailed in paragraphs 61 to 107 and Annex A and Annex B of the Treasury Management Strategy 2022/23 (Appendix 9b);
- (v) the policies on reviewing the strategy, the use of external advisors, investment management training and the use of financial derivatives as described in paragraphs 108 to 118 of the Treasury Management Strategy 2022/23 (Appendix 9b);
- (vi) the proposed borrowing strategy for the 2022/23 financial year detailed in paragraphs 39 to 56 of the Treasury Management Strategy 2022/23 (Appendix 9b);
- (vii) the Treasury Management Strategy recommendations will operate within the prudential limits set out in Annex C of the Treasury Management Strategy 2022/23 (Appendix 9b) and will be reported to the Cabinet Member for Finance, with respect to decisions made for raising new long-term loans, early loan repayments and loan rescheduling;
- (viii) the Commercial Investment Strategy for 2022/23 (Appendix 9c) and note the circumstances under which commercial investments can be made;
- (ix) the governance arrangements that are in place for proposing and approving commercial investments;
- (x) a maximum quantum for commercial investments of a further £20 million in 2022/23;
- (xi) a maximum limit for an individual service investment loan of £10 million in 2022/23; and
- (xii) any upwards change in the amounts of the limits specified in recommendations (x) and (xi) be delegated to the County Treasurer in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources.

(c) That the County Treasurer be authorised to adjust the contingency provision to reflect any grant and local taxation changes announced in the final 2022/23 Local Government Finance Settlement.

(d) That the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources and the County Treasurer be authorised to challenge Cabinet, the Senior Leadership Team and services to manage and deliver the current five-year plans and to identify further cost reductions and income generation opportunities, as appropriate.

50. Statement of the Leader of the Council

The Leader of the Council presented a Statement outlining his recent work since the previous meeting of the Council.

VCSE Capacity Building Recommission

(Paragraph 1 of the Statement)

Cllr Sutton informed the Council of the proposals for investing in VCSE capacity building activity once the current arrangements end on 31st July 2022 in order to ensure that the sector remained strong, sustainable, and had the stability required to continue supporting communities in Staffordshire. He gave examples of the VCSE work including its hosting of the annual youth camp associated with the German War Graves on Cannock Chase in which young people from both Staffordshire and Germany took part. Cllr Hussain, Cllr McMahan and Cllr Wilson also paid tribute to the invaluable work of volunteers, particularly during the Covid pandemic.

Burton Town Deal - Proposed Library Move

(Paragraph 2 of the Statement)

Cllr Wilson indicated that she was looking forward to hearing from East Staffordshire Borough Council as to whether their regeneration proposals, which would see Burton Library relocated from its current location to the Market Hall, Market Place, Burton upon Trent as part of the Burton Stronger Town Deal, were to proceed. Cllr Hussain and Cllr Wileman indicated that they were opposed to the library's relocation, as were 77% of respondents to the recent public consultation. Cllr Hussain added that he was also fearful for the livelihood of the market traders if the library was to be relocated into the Market Hall.

Cllr Philip Atkins and Cllr Hudson indicated that they were supportive of the regeneration proposals; and Cllr Jessel added that town centres needed to adapt and modernise if they were to survive.

Cllr Alan White drew a comparison with the recent relocation of Lichfield Library which was opposed by a petition by over 5,000, but, once relocated, had seen a doubling of users.

Home to School Transport - Review of Temporary Vacant Seat Scheme

(Paragraph 3 of the Statement)

Cllr Charlotte Atkins referred to the impact of the review of the temporary Vacant Seat Scheme, how non-school bus services were not required to be fitted with seat belts and the time it will take bus operators to modernise their fleet. In response, Cllr Price indicated that the review had been brought about due to new regulations from Central Government and would only impact those young people who were not entitled to free school transport.

Cllr Philip Atkins asked for the situation to be kept under review and, in response, Cllr Price indicated that the County Council would work with bus operators so try to minimise the impact to those affected by the review.

Formal Report from the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman regarding SEND

(Paragraph 4 of the Statement)

Cllr Charlotte Atkins and Cllr Francis referred to the difficulties often encountered by parents in trying to navigate through the SEND process to get support for their child. In response, Cllr Price referred to the improvement brought about by the Children's System Transformation Programme, and he also informed Members that the Council had recently appointed a new Head of Vulnerable Learners who would support Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators.

Proposed Relocation and Expansion of St Leonard's Primary School, Stafford

(Paragraph 5 of the Statement)

Cllr Pardesi indicated that she welcomed the proposal to relocate St Leonard's Primary School into the Kingston Centre. Cllr Price thanked Cllr Pardesi for her comments and added that the relocation would enable the school to expand to meet the expected demand for primary school places generated by local housing development and would also provide a modern learning environment and on-site playing field.

Chatterley Valley West - Project Update

(Paragraph 7 of the Statement)

Cllr Hutton, Cllr Sweeney and Cllr Huckfield welcomed the proposal for the 43-hectare (gross) employment site at Chatterley Valley which could generate around 1,700 jobs. Cllr Philip White thanked the Members for their comments and added that the project was a good example of how the County Council, working with others, could unlock land for development which the private sector could not deliver on its own.

Families Health & Wellbeing (0-19) Service: Contract Extension

(Paragraph 8 of the Statement)

Cllr Sutton indicated that the extension of the contract for the Families Health and Wellbeing (0-19) service with MPFT will enable children, young people and families to access information, advice and support from Health Visitors and School Nurses.

IA2609 Framework for Responsive Property Maintenance and Day Works

(Paragraph 9 of the Statement)

Cllr Deaville informed Members that Framework Agreements ensured that the Council received best value for money and that the majority of suppliers were local companies.

Staffordshire Means Back to Business - Oral Update

(Paragraph 10 of the Statement)

Cllr Alan White referred to the success of the Staffordshire Means Back to Business programme which had achieved a number of successes including new employment generating developments in the County, such as ASOS in Lichfield (2,000 jobs) and Pets at Home in Stafford (800 jobs). He added that there was still work to do in supporting certain groups, such as the under 25's, to gain employment.

Economic Recovery & Growth: Enhancing Delivery

(Paragraph 11 of the Statement)

Cllr Alan White highlighted that the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) included an additional £1million per annum to support economic recovery and encourage economic growth; of which £0.200m had been used to create a Destination Management Partnership (DMP) post and to create a DMP marketing budget, and £0.640m had provided the ability to develop and operate the Staffordshire Means Back to Business scheme, both of which were vital to support the Staffordshire Economy.

Establishment of the Staffordshire Leaders Board

(Paragraph 12 of the Statement)

Cllr Smith and Cllr Tagg expressed their support for the establishment of the Staffordshire Leaders Board, the purpose of which was to continue to improve joint working between the County, District and Borough Councils in Staffordshire, and to develop and negotiate a County Deal with Government. Cllr Alan White referred to how the County, District and Borough Councils had worked together during the Covid pandemic, and he added that the establishment of the Leaders Board was a natural progression to this joint working. He also added that the "door was open" to Stoke-on-Trent City Council should they wish to join the Board at some point in the future.

Update from COVID-19 Member Led Local Outbreak Control Board

(Paragraph 14 of the Statement)

Cllr McMahon provided Members with the latest information in respect of the impact of Covid in the County including infection rates, hospitalisations and vaccination rates.

The Queen's Platinum Jubilee and Commonwealth Games

(Paragraph 15 of the Statement)

Cllr Hussain, Cllr Philip Atkins and Cllr Wilson paid tribute to Her Majesty The Queen for her 70 years of service to the Country and the Commonwealth.

Cllr Trowbridge outlined some of the events which were taking place in Stafford Borough to commemorate the Platinum Jubilee.

National Apprenticeship Week and Skills

(Paragraph 16 of the Statement)

Cllr Smith referred for the need for apprenticeships to be recognised with a comparable qualification in a similar way to those who have gone into Higher Education such as university courses. In response, Cllr Alan White indicated that the Council would explore this issue further.

Cllr Pert referred to the links between apprenticeships and the various strands in the Council's Strategic Plan. He also outlined how apprenticeships could be used to tackle unemployment amongst the 18 – 25 group.

Cllr Charlotte Atkins referred to the need to examine the gender and diversity in-balance amongst those taking up apprenticeships, i.e. within the construction sector. In response, Cllr Winnington referred to how the advice given in schools often steered young people into certain career pathways. Cllr Philip White added that the Council needed to ensure that career pathways were open to all and that he would write to Cllr Atkins regarding the position in Staffordshire.

Cllr Sutherland cited an example of how apprenticeships were being used very successfully by a business in his area which was taking on an average of five new apprentices every year.

Director of Public Health Report

(Paragraph 17 of the Statement)

Cllr McMahon commended the Director of Public Health's Report to all Members of the Council.

Climate Change

(Paragraph 18 of the Statement)

Cllr Smith stated that he was pleased to see Climate Change on the agenda.

Cllr Tagg reminded Members that applications under the Climate Change Action Fund needed to be submitted by no later than 24 February 2022.

RESOLVED – That the Statement of the Leader of the Council be received.

51. Notices of Motion

Cllr Tagg moved, and Cllr Wilson seconded, the following motion:

"This council acknowledges that:

Nature is in long term decline. With 41 per cent of wild species in decline nationally, and 15 per cent facing extinction. The requirement to take action to reverse this is urgent. We recognise that:

A) Nature provides us with vital support systems ['ecosystem services'], and severe declines in biodiversity are undermining nature's productivity and adaptability, posing excessive uncertainty for our economies and wellbeing;

B) A thriving natural environment underpins a healthy, happy, prosperous society;

C) The impacts of climate change are driving nature's decline, while restoring and protection of natural habitat provides a wide variety of cost-effective benefits to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change.

D) Many areas of work of local authorities across the county of Staffordshire have an impact on nature, and we have responsibilities to make decisions to protect and enhance it.

In order to support the recovery of nature across Staffordshire, and in recognition of new obligations under the Environment Act 2021, this Council commits to:

1. Work with partners and stakeholders to develop and deliver a Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) that sits within the national Nature Recovery Network and underpins planning, development and land management decisions. As part of this, we will:

a) improve and protect the landscape and flora and fauna's resilience to climate change, providing natural solutions to reduce carbon and manage flood risk, and sustaining vital ecosystems;

b) prioritise the restoration of peatland habitats and other high quality natural habitats, and adopt a peat-free policy wherever possible for all council contracts and supplies;

c) formulate a tree policy and strategy which is underpinned by Nature Recovery Network mapping across the local authority area, pursuing a "right tree, right place" approach;

d) after satisfying safety and visibility priorities and the Highway Code, develop highways verge cutting regimes that maximise potential for carbon storage, sequestration and biodiversity;

e) seek to manage council-owned land for the benefit of wildlife by 2030 (in line with UK Government's national and international commitments);

f) meet the Environment Act requirement of 10% biodiversity net-gain commitment across all council-owned land, aspiring to increase this wherever possible;

h) carry out a carbon audit of our key landholdings to establish how carbon storage/sequestration could be improved.

2. Embed nature's recovery into all strategic plans and policy areas, not just those directly related to the environment. Ensure the LNRS is well understood across the authority and complements other relevant plans and strategies.

3. Working with partners, demonstrate leadership by supporting and engaging with businesses, communities and the wider public to take action to put nature into recovery.

4. Build tackling the nature crisis into Cabinet's environmental portfolio to provide a designated lead.

5. The Council designates a lead officer to coordinate the council operations in relation to the ecological emergency.

6. Integrate the targets, objectives and outcomes of this motion with those outlined in the existing Climate Emergency Declaration to ensure measures to tackle climate issues do not contravene the principles of enhancing biodiversity.

7. Where appropriate, the council will invest in nature-based solutions to climate change in order to tackle the nature crisis and climate emergency together.

8. Through the LNRS, develop an evidence-based action plan including short and long-term targets for putting nature into recovery by 2030. Areas of focus will include:

- Land management
- Biodiversity
- Roads and highways
- Planning and development
- Air quality
- Transforming urban spaces
- Health and wellbeing
- People and communities
- Education and awareness

9. That the relevant Overview and Scrutiny Committee monitor the LNRS and the council's action to support biodiversity and nature recovery on an annual basis.

10. Work closely with Staffordshire's borough and districts councils via the recently formed Staffordshire Sustainability Board and other partners to promote Local Nature Recovery.

Cllr Charlotte Atkins moved, and Cllr Hussain seconded, the following Amendment:

- (i) That the words "wherever possible" in line 2 of paragraph 1b be deleted.
- (ii) That the words "using information boards to explain the rationale to members of the public" be added at the end of paragraph 1d.
- (iii) That the words "as a minimum target" be added after the word 'commitment' in paragraph 1f.

Following a vote, the Chairman declared the Amendment lost.

Members then debated the original Motion and, following a vote, it was:

RESOLVED – That the Motion be carried.

52. Recommendations to the Council

(a) Future of Local Public Audit

The Council were informed that the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 brought to a close the Audit Commission and established transitional arrangements for the appointment of external auditors and the setting of audit fees for all local government and NHS bodies in England. When those transitional arrangements ended on 31 March 2018 the Council was able to move to local appointment of the auditor. There were three broad options open to the Council under the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 (the Act); a) to make a stand-alone appointment; b) set up a Joint Auditor Panel/local joint procurement arrangement; or c) opt-in to a sector led body arrangement. The Council, via decisions taken by the Audit & Standards Committee and Full Council, decided to opt into the sector led body procurement process administered by PSAA in order to appoint its External Auditor for the 5-year period ending 31st March 2023.

Once again there were three ways for a principal Local Government Body to appoint its auditor for the five financial years from 2023/24 namely:

- Option a) Undertake an individual auditor procurement and appointment exercise as laid down in the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014
- Option b) Undertake a joint audit procurement and appointing exercise with other local bodies: or

- Option c) Join the Public Sector Audit Appointment (PSAA) sector led body national scheme.

The Council noted that Option C i.e. to participate in the PSAA Ltd led procurement initiative would offer the best value for money. This was approved by the Audit & Standards Committee at their meeting on 14 December 2021. In order to accept the option to opt into the 2023 procurement exercise being undertaken by PSAA, the Council must formally accept the invitation by 11 March 2022.

Cllr Worthington moved, and Cllr Trowbridge seconded, the recommendations contained in the report.

RESOLVED – That the Council accepts Public Sector Audit Appointments’ invitation to opt into the sector-led option for the appointment of external auditors to principal local government bodies for five financial years from 1 April 2023.

(b) Re-Appointment/Appointment of Independent Persons under Localism Act 2011

The Council were informed the County Council has a Code of Conduct for members which complies with the requirements of the Localism Act 2011. That Code requires the involvement of Independent Persons (IPs) in considering alleged breaches of the Code. An Independent Person has to be consulted by the Monitoring Officer at various stages of the complaint handling process. Separately, if the complaint is pursued, the member complained about has the right to seek the views of an Independent Person.

Additionally, the Employment Rules for the Head of Paid Service, the Monitoring Officer and the Chief Financial Officer require Independent Persons to be included in the membership of any special committee which might make recommendations to Council on any disciplinary action against the holders of those posts.

In 2017 the Council agreed to add to its then list of 2 Independent Persons by appointing a further two – Mr Tom Roach and Mrs Christina Robotham, each for a period of four years. The service and commitment given by both Mr Roach and Mrs Robotham, particularly following the loss of the original two IPs, had been greatly valued and appreciated and, therefore, the Council was asked to approve their re-appointment for a further four year period. Both had confirmed their willingness to continue in the role.

To address the limited number of IPs currently available for consultation by the Monitoring Officer and other parties, it was proposed that a recruitment exercise be carried out with a view to appointing at least 1 more IP. That

exercise would fall under the remit of the Audit and Standards Committee with any preferred 'candidate' recommended to Council for approval.

Cllr Worthington moved, and Cllr Trowbridge seconded, the recommendations contained in the report.

RESOLVED – (a) That Mr Tom Roach and Mrs Christina Robotham be re-appointed as Independent Persons for a further four-year period.

(b) That the Audit and Standards Committee be requested to carry out a further recruitment exercise for a Independent Person(s).

53. Report of the Chairman of the Staffordshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel

In response to a question from Cllr Charlotte Atkins in relation to the closure of the Community Rooms at the Community Fire Stations as a result of the Covid pandemic, Cllr Peters indicated that he was awaiting a response from the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner on the proposals for their reopening and would respond in writing to Cllr Atkins once he received the information.

In response to a question from Cllr Pardesi in relation to the why the Citizens Panel no longer existed, Cllr Peters indicated that he would make enquiries and respond to Cllr Pardesi in writing.

RESOLVED – That the report be received.

54. Questions

Cllr Pritchard asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

Tamworth Public Footpath No.4 runs from Station Fields mobile home park, under the West Coast Main Line (on land owned by Network Rail) and alongside the River Anker to meet the new Anker Valley housing development in Tamworth.

With the influx of new residents to the area, this path offers an alternative and increasingly popular walking route to Tamworth town centre from the Anker Valley development. However, the path is being badly eroded in places and it is very muddy when wet. It is totally unsuitable for those who are less able or parents with prams. Network Rail are unwilling to hard surface the path in their ownership, so I ask if there is anything Staffordshire County Council can do to hard surface the path and provide residents with a much-needed traffic free route to Tamworth town centre?

Reply

Thank you for your question. The path in question is a public right of way that runs between the mobile home park, beneath the railway and across to the new housing development. From a recent inspection of the route, it is clear that the path has received increased use since the development was constructed and the surface was wet and muddy in places, symptomatic of both the time of year and the increased usage. The section of unsurfaced path is just under 400 metres in length.

The Council's Principal Rights of Way Officer has been in contact with Tamworth Borough Council on this matter as it seems strange that the path was not surfaced as part of the new development. I understand that there was discussion about extending the tarmac pathway to link in with Stationfields, however (as we understand it) there was a dispute between the landowners, one of which was Network Rail.

The Council's Principal Rights of Way Officer is continuing to liaise with Tamworth Borough Council, and it is hoped that the issue can be resolved through planning measures.

It is possible to report issues relating to public rights of way via our website.

Cllr Oates asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

In a recent environment survey at www.TamworthConservatives.com/survey the number one concern of residents is litter and fly tipping, following a number of recent incidents near to and in Tamworth. Could the relevant portfolio holder inform the council as to what is being done to stop criminals fly tipping on our highways especially when highways are physically blocked by this activity?

Reply

Dealing with the abhorrent behaviour of fly-tipping requires partnership working between local authorities so as not just to move the problem from one location to another.

Across Staffordshire all the local Waste Collection Authorities monitor flying-tipping incidents and if appropriate this information can be requested and discussed at the Joint Waste Management Board (JWMB).

The Waste Collection Authorities are primarily responsible for the prevention, removal, and where possible prosecution for fly-tipping in all public areas within their respective Borough or District, including the public highway.

To help achieve this many borough and district councils already have active programmes that aim to educate residents about the right thing to do with their rubbish and to reduce the amount of household waste that is fly tipped by criminals who offer to take people's waste away for money and then dump it.

These campaigns aim to get the message across that if an individual's waste is fly tipped, even if they paid a third party to dispose of it, they can be prosecuted and end up with a fine and a criminal record.

Some borough and district councils also offer financial reward to anyone who provides evidence that leads to successful enforcement action against a person, business or organisation involved in fly-tipping.

The County Council, as waste disposal authority, would of course receive any such collected waste from the borough council and arrange for its disposal but this does come at a cost to the Council and therefore the Staffordshire taxpayer.

If fly-tipping is repeatedly obstructing or affecting the safe use of a particular section of public highway the Borough Council will need to work together with the County Council's highways team to explore appropriate additional local deterrent measures.

Cllr Charlotte Atkins asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Health and Care whose reply is set out below the question: -

Question

What is the role of the County Council in promoting good mental health? How has this role changed over the last five years? How have the County Council's mental health commissioning decisions been impacted upon by Covid and budget pressures?

Reply

The County Council has a role in improving mental health for the population as well as supporting people with assessed eligible needs for adult social care due to mental health problems. This role has not changed over the last five years.

The Council promotes mental health, for example the five ways to mental well-being:

- Connect with other people
- Be physically active
- Learn new skills
- Give to others
- Pay attention to the present moment

We also and signpost to a range of support in the community. We work with a range of partners to prevent suicide.

The Council commissions a range of care and support for people with assessed eligible needs for adult social care due to mental health problems. These include home care services that look after individuals in their own homes; Supported Living, which looks after groups of people in dedicated accommodation; and residential and nursing care homes. The total gross cost of these in 2021/22 is around £12m.

Like all adult social care services these have been affected by Covid with requirements for enhanced infection prevention and control measures and increasing difficulties with recruitment and retention. They have had additional funding during the pandemic with a share of £35m of Government Grants given to Staffordshire care providers in 2020/21 and 2021/22. Any fee uplift for next year will seek to recognise ongoing cost pressures whilst remaining affordable within the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy

Supplementary Question

Will you work closely with North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust and the Midlands Partnership NHS Foundation Trust so that we can ensure that the users of their mental health services are not left in limbo?

Reply

I agree that we do need to ensure that services are integrated, and we are currently in the process of developing a Mental Health Strategy. The contract for mental health recovery services covering North Staffordshire will end on 31 March and, from 1 April, that service will be provided county-wide by the Midlands Partnership NHS Foundation Trust.

Cllr Pardesi asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport whose reply is set out below the question: -

Question

The AA recently declared the pothole situation “a national emergency”. Underfunding is part of the problem. Does this Council accept that reducing funding on this issue and prioritising only the more problematic potholes is simply denying the seriousness of the situation and accumulating further problems for the future?

Reply

The current level of capital funding provided by government for local road maintenance each year is less than half of what is actually needed just to keep roads and footways in their current condition.

Until this funding situation improves potholes will continue to be an all-too-common problem.

Our current process for repairing potholes and other road defects is built on managing risk to the public, liability to the County Council and living within our means. As the increasing number of defects outstrips the resources needed to repair them the law is very clear that our repair teams must prioritise those that present the greatest risk to public safety.

This approach is actually the most efficient way of managing risk and liability, as well as being the most productive in terms of use of scarce resources. However, it is frustrating that our crews are having to repair individual defects rather than places, and that the repairs themselves can often only be described as ‘holding repairs’ – keeping a location safe, even sometimes repeatedly, until such time as the funding is made available to do the proper full-scale repair that is actually needed.

Prior to the COVID pandemic and in response to recommendations made by the Transport Select Committee in Nov 2019 the government had made a commitment to significantly increase funding for local road maintenance. In 2020/21 an extra 30% of capital funding was provided, which for Staffordshire equated to almost £9M extra. However, faced with the financial challenges of COVID the government has not been able to repeat that commitment during 21/22 and funding for the next three years is expected to remain at the same reduced level.

That is why during 22/23 we will be investing an extra £15M of the council’s own capital funding into local road maintenance.

This money will be used to:

- Tackle over 20,000 additional pothole repairs, significantly reducing the post-winter workstack;
- Pilot a new approach to ‘right-first-time and single street repairs;

- Provide around 70 kilometres of additional pothole prevention treatments;
- Carry out around 200 drainage defect repairs; and
- Provide around 6Kms of road resurfacing schemes, replacing worn out road surfaces at key gateways across the county.

In addition, we'll also investing £2M of the council's own revenue, which will be used to:

- Increase the capacity of the council's highways contract management team, providing extra assurance on the quality of repairs that are carried out by contractors and ensuring that value for money is being achieved;
- As well as improving the ability to engage with local members to influence investment programmes and deliver community priorities.

This investment by the council is not going to solve the pothole problem. However, it will help to buy us time whilst central government continues to search for a long-term sustainable funding model for local road maintenance.

Supplementary Question

Is it somewhat disingenuous of our Council to be talking about great connectivity, and improving highways is one of our priorities, when the reality is that we have no ideas as to when and if potholes will be fixed?

Reply

When reported, potholes are inspected by officers and will then be categorised and put on a priority list to be repaired. We are repairing a lot more potholes than we used to and are looking at new technologies.

Cllr Hussain asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

At my request, county council leaders donated dry food such as rice to struggling households, which was warmly accepted by the residents of Burton. Will the county council consider operating a similar programme in addition to the present assistance, given the growing cost of living and the fact that some families are experiencing similar hardships during this recovery stage?

Reply

The County Council and Partners, working together with organisations across the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector have previously provided packages of food and essential supplies to vulnerable families (with and without children). These initiatives were to respond to specific needs, including those identified during national restrictions for COVID-19. This external funding has now concluded, however in October 2021, the County Council welcomed the Government announcement of a new Support Fund (HSF) Grant which has been made available to County Councils and Unitary Authorities in England to support those most in need during the winter.

Through the HSF, the County Council is facilitating the following Schemes:

- Education Support Fund (ESF): This Scheme provides approximately 26,900 children a £15.00 eVoucher for each week of the Christmas 2021, February 2022, and Easter School Holidays 2022. This Fund includes Children in receipt of means tested benefit related free school meals; Children in receipt of Think 2 funding; Children in receipt of Early Years Pupil Premium Funding; Children accessing alternative or independent education provision but identified in a household with financial exclusion and Staffordshire County Council Care Leavers.
- District Assistance Grants for Food and Essential Supplies: The County Council is administering Assistance Grants for Food and Essential Supplies using E-vouchers. Families facing substantial financial hardship are able to apply for an Assistance Grant for Food and Essential Supplies. Families/vulnerable individuals are required to meet appropriate eligibility criteria before being considered for an Assistance Grant.
- Winter Warmth Project: Individuals and families struggling to pay their fuel bills, could get up to £350 worth of financial help. Grants will be provided by pre-paid meter credit or paid directly to the resident's energy provider. The grants can be used to add credit to their account or to clear prior debt. If they are in an emergency situation and you do not have heating, or their heating has broken, we can deliver electric oil filled heaters to their home. They will also receive a Winter Warmth Pack (which includes hats, gloves scarves and hot flasks) for each individual who resides within house. Applications for this scheme are currently closed due to the volume we received.

- District & Borough Council Fund: The County Council is working with District & Borough Councils to support families with Council Tax Debt.

In addition to the above we also have the following that families can access:

1. Children's Centre staff have access to the foodbank online systems, this enables them to make referrals for support direct when families contact us needed help.
2. Staffordshire Connects has details of any financial support or discounted food available for families to access.
3. Staffordshire Children's Centres receive food donations from local supermarkets, these are made available to the vulnerable families locally.
4. We continually promote the Staffordshire County Council benefits checkers throughout our online social media, face to face through our service provision and when accessing any food support.
5. Referrals are made into the Family Support Providers where required when families are identified to support them with their finances.
6. Staffordshire Children's Centres work in partnership with the VCSE sector enabling us to access food supplies for families in emergency situations. As such we have been able to provide tailored food supplies that have been delivered direct to family homes taking into account dietary requirements.
7. The Early Years Coordination Service created the Family Hub Cooking project, please see here for more information [Family Hub Cooking | Staffordshire Connects](#). Staffordshire County Council has worked in partnership with Family Action to produce very simple recipes for families to try and that are low cost to make as well as weekly Free School Meal ideas and shopping lists. We then worked in partnership with our district partners to create YouTube Videos showing how to create the meals.

Supplementary Question

Can I ask you to include corporate orphans and those less fortunate in our rescue plans in order to protect the most vulnerable in our society?

Reply

If there are individual concerns I would love to hear about them, so if you write to me I'd much appreciate it.

55. Petitions

(a) Reopening of the Minor Injuries Clinic at Cannock Hospital

Cllr Hewitt presented a petition from residents of Cannock and the surrounding area requesting the Council to lobby the NHS Trust to secure the reopening of the Minor Injuries Clinic at Cannock Hospital

(b) Request for 20 mph Speed Limit in Leek Town Centre

Cllr Charlotte Atkins presented a further petition from local residents requesting a 20 mph Speed Limit in Leek Town Centre.

Chairman