

Minutes of the County Council Meeting held on 17 March 2022

Attendance

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

Apologies for absence: Gill Burnett, Ian Lawson, James Salisbury, Ross Ward, Conor Wileman and David Williams

PART ONE

56. Section 85 of the Local Government Act 1972 - County Councillor Ian Lawson

The Chairman informed Members of Cllr Lawson's continuing absence from Council meetings due to ill health.

RESOLVED – That, in light of Cllr Ian Lawson's continuing ill health, and for the purposes of section 85 of the Local Government Act 1972, his continuing absence from Council meetings be authorised until 17 September 2022.

57. Declarations of Interest under Standing Order 16

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

58. Confirmation of the minutes of the Council meeting held on 10 February 2022

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the County Council held on 10 February 2022 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

59. Chairman's Correspondence

There were no items of Chairman's Correspondence on this occasion.

60. 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.

Ukraine

(Paragraph 7 of the Statement)

Cllr Alan White referred to Putin's invasion of Ukraine and indicated that Staffordshire stood ready, with open arms, to welcome those fleeing the conflict. He also referred to a letter sent to the Prime Minister recently jointly from the leaders of the County Council and the eight Borough and District Councils showing the strength of the Councils' support and combined efforts to assist those fleeing Ukraine. He added that many residents of the County had already offered to open their homes to the refugees.

Cllr Charlotte Atkins added that she welcomed the joint letter from the leaders of the County Council and the eight Borough and District Councils and added that she was sure that the tremendous generosity of the British people would be shown towards the Ukrainian people. She also indicated that there was a need to ensure that those fleeing the trauma of war were not exploited by the few who sought to make a financial gain from trafficking and enquired as to whether the County Council had sufficient staff to carry out the necessary checks to ensure the safety of both those fleeing Ukraine and those residents opening-up their homes to the refugees. Cllr Atkins also referred to the existing Ukrainian communities in Staffordshire and to the vital role they would play in supporting the refugees.

Cllr Smith and Cllr Deaville spoke about the people of Ukraine living in fear, and particularly the impact of the conflict on young children. Cllr Smith called on the Council, and the residents of Staffordshire, to do everything they could to provide the necessary support to those fleeing the conflict and, once the war had ended, to enable them to return to Ukraine if they so wished.

Cllr Hood referred to the need for the Council to lobby the Government to ensure the availability of the necessary resources to provide counselling and therapy to those fleeing the conflict. She also referred to the impact on the mental health of young people in this County who had been following the war in the Ukraine on the news and on social media, and the need for counselling to be available in all Staffordshire schools.

Cllr Winnington spoke about all those who were suffering under Putin's regime, not just those from the Ukraine. He, together with Cllr Phillip Atkins, also referred to the impact of the war on food production and how the sanctions imposed on Russia would have an impact on the price of many commodities in the UK.

Cllr Tagg indicated that, in times of crisis like this, it was fantastic to see the good in society and how communities came together to support those in need. He, together with Cllr Wilson, Cllr Sutherland, Cllr Oates and Cllr Phillip Atkins, referred to many examples, across the county, where individuals and groups had come together to appeal for donations of provisions and other goods to support those still living in Ukraine and also those fleeing the country.

Cllr Hussain referred to the community of 400 Ukrainians residing in East Staffordshire, and he commended the work of local charities and groups who were sending essential supplies to those living in Ukraine. He also paid tribute to those Ukrainians fighting to defend their country from the Russian invasion.

Cllr Loughborough-Rudd expressed his thanks to the leaders of the County Council and the eight Borough and District Councils for their joint letter to the Prime Minister showing the strength of support and combined efforts to assist those fleeing Ukraine. He also indicated that the West needed to maintain its readiness to defend Europe.

Cllr Alan White thanked Members for their comments. In response to the point raised by Cllr Charlotte Atkins regarding the costs associated with finding homes for Ukrainian refugees, Cllr White indicated that local authorities were to be allocated around £10,500 per refugee. He added that safeguarding services in Staffordshire were commencing the planning of the support they would need to provide to the refugees, and that the Resilience Forum was also gearing up.

The Chairman then led the Council in a minute of reflection.

COVID-19

(Paragraph 1 of the Statement)

Cllr Charlotte Atkins expressed her thanks to Dr Richard Harling for so effectively leading the County Council's response to the Covid pandemic. She added that Public Health played a vital role but did not get the recognition it deserved. In response, Cllr McMahon indicated that the Council would do all it could with the funding made available to Public Health. He also updated the Council on Covid rates in the County, including the positive impact of the vaccination programme. He added that the Council remained ready to deal with any outbreaks which occurred. Mr McMahon also expressed his thanks to those scientists who had developed the vaccine and to residents of the County who had supported each other during the pandemic.

Cllr Alan White referred to the need for people to take personal responsibility and to lead healthy lives. He also highlighted the impact of the pandemic on people's mental health.

Staffordshire Means Back to Business – Oral Update

(Paragraph 2 of the Statement)

In response to a question from Cllr Hussain relating to insolvency rates in the County, Cllr Philip White indicated that company insolvencies were a normal part of commercial activity as some businesses ceased to be viable. He added that, in November 2021, in Staffordshire, there were approximately 15 – 20 insolvencies.

Cllr Hussain also referred to the number of people on housing waiting lists and the need to press for Government action on the provision of more affordable housing in the County.

Cllr Sutherland indicated that he welcomed the report and he spoke about the positive impact of the various regeneration initiatives. Cllr Hudson also spoke about the regeneration proposals in Uttoxeter and Burton Town Centres.

In response to a question from Cllr Charlotte Atkins concerning the tangible benefits of the County Council's attendance at the four-day MIPIM Real Estate Conference in Cannes, Cllr Philip White indicated that he would respond to Cllr Atkins in writing. Cllr Winnington added that MIPIM played a valuable role in marketing investment sites, such as i54, on an international stage.

Cllr Philip White also informed the Council of the launch of the consultation of the County Wide Economic Strategy and invited Members to submit their

views. He added that this would be followed by a Rural Economic Strategy to be launched in about a month's time.

Potential Joint Coroners Service, Business Case

(Paragraph 5 of the Statement)

Cllr Greatorex indicated that the business case for the potential Joint Coroners Service had been examined by the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee who were supportive of the proposals and the benefits they would bring. He enquired as to whether the restructuring of the service would bring about cost savings. In response, Cllr Wilson indicated that she did not have the relevant information to hand and would therefore respond to Cllr Greatorex in writing following the meeting.

Cllr Hussain spoke about the need for the service to be mindful of the needs of all sectors of the community. In response, Cllr Wilson requested Cllr Hussain to write to her regarding his concerns.

Major Improvements to A50/A500 Corridor

(Paragraph 6 of the Statement)

Cllr Philip Atkins, Cllr Flunder and Cllr Hudson expressed their support for the proposed improvements to the A50/A500 corridor and highlighted the benefits the proposals would bring. Cllr Flunder and Cllr Hudson also referred to the need for a full consultation on the proposals at an early stage. In response, Cllr Philip White indicated that this was a nationally significant project which, it was estimated, would create around 12,000 new jobs. Cllr Alan White added that the local authorities along the corridor would be involved in delivering the project and that the County Council would continue to push hard to bring the project to fruition.

Queen's Platinum Jubilee

(Paragraph 8 of the Statement)

Cllr Tagg outlined some of the events taking place in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and also across Staffordshire, as part of the Platinum Jubilee celebrations.

Cllr Smith enquired as to whether the Members' Community Fund could be brought forward so as to enable Members to support events associated with the Jubilee celebrations. In response, Cllr Wilson indicated that the Fund would be launched in early/mid-April.

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

61. Recommendations to the Council

(a) Members' Allowances Scheme - Independent Remuneration Panel Report

Members were informed that the County Council was required to establish and maintain an Independent Remuneration Panel to provide advice and recommendations to the Council on its Members' Allowances Scheme. Any decision on the nature and level of allowances were a matter for the full Council, but the Council must have regard to any recommendations submitted by the Independent Remuneration Panel before establishing or amending the Members' Allowances Scheme. The Panel met each year to consider the recommendations to be made to the Council in respect of the level and nature of the forthcoming year's allowances.

Members received the Independent Remuneration Panel's report of March 2022, including recommendations on the Members' Allowances Scheme for 2022/23. As part of their deliberations and in response to feedback from Members of the Council, the Panel proposed that the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the Pensions Committee and Audit and Standards Committee receive the same remuneration as the Planning Committee Chairman and Vice-Chairman respectively. The Panel also proposed, for consistency, that the Chairman of the Pensions Committee must also Chair the Pensions Panel.

It was also noted that the Panel had indicated their intentions for next year which included a review of the allowances paid to the Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of the County Council, the difference in allowances paid to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Health and Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the allowance paid to the opposition.

Cllr Trowbridge expressed her thanks to the Panel for their work and also spoke about the need for an appropriate level of remuneration to Members as the allowances paid in Staffordshire were lower than those paid by comparable authorities. Cllr Smith added that, with the current level of remuneration, it was difficult to attract young people to stand for election. He also referred to the need for the cost of the stationery which Members used to be covered in the Scheme.

Cllr Philip Atkins referred to the proposals for the Chairman of the Pensions Committee also being responsible, going forward, for Chairing the Pensions Panel. He expressed the view that he could not support the proposal as the roles of the Pensions Committee and Pensions Panel chairs were distinct and required different knowledge and, therefore, required different Chairs.

Following a vote it was:

RESOLVED – That (a) the Independent Remuneration Panel report be received.

(b) That the following recommendations of the Panel be agreed:

- (i) the Members' Allowance Scheme within the Council's Constitution be amended to increase the allowance paid to the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the Pensions Committee and Audit and Standards Committee.
- (ii) The Council's Constitution be amended to reflect that the Pensions Committee Chairmen must also Chair the Pensions Panel.
- (iii) As a general rule, Committee Vice-Chairmen should receive 35% of the respective Committee Chairman allowance.

(c) In their report for 2023, the Independent Remuneration Panel be requested to review the allowances paid to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the County Council.

(b) Pay Policy Statement 2022/23

The Council were informed that it was a legal requirement of the Localism Act 2011 for the County Council to have a Pay Policy statement which must be published annually before 31 March. Amongst other matters, the Statement must set out the authority's policies for the financial year relating to:

- (a) The remuneration of its chief officers,
- (b) The remuneration of its lowest-paid employees, and
- (c) The relationship between –
 - (i) the remuneration of its chief officers, and
 - (ii) the remuneration of its employees who are not chief officers.

The Council received the Pay Policy Statement for 2022/23.

RESOLVED – That the Pay Policy Statement for 2022/23 (as set out in Annex A to the report) be approved.

(c) Review of the Constitution

The Council were informed that, at the meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee on 14 December 2021, it was agreed that a working group be formed to consider possible areas for changes to the Council's Constitution. Not included within this work were the sections on Financial Procedure Rules and Procurement Regulations, because these sections had already been updated and brought through the governance process separately. Whilst not proposed initially to do so through this work, the Officers section of the Constitution was reviewed and the Director for Corporate Services made minor updates in accordance with his delegated powers.

The working group met on the 18 January 2022 to shape a review of the county council's Constitution. The working group discussion was wide-ranging, and some of the points raised would become opportunities for working with Members on improvements to the existing arrangements (these are not proposals for changes to the constitution but were included within table 3 in the appendix to the report for noting).

In addition to the working group, discussion was had with the Leader and Cabinet and an opportunity given to all elected members to offer their suggestions.

A report was then taken to the February 2022 meeting of the Audit and Standards Committee, where the recommended amendments were agreed.

Members considered the three tables contained in the appendix to the report:

- Table 1: Areas of the Constitution where a change is recommended, and where Full Council is asked to approve.
- Table 2: Areas of the Constitution where a change is recommended that the Monitoring Officer is able to approve under his delegated powers.
- Table 3: Areas of the Constitution where items have been raised by Members for further investigation.

Cllr Trowbridge extended her thanks to her fellow members of the working group and to the officers who supported them and suggested that a review of the Council's Constitution should take place on an annual basis. Cllr Alan White also extended his thanks to the working group. He added that the Constitution was a living document, with changes made as and when required.

Cllr Smith referred to Table 3 within the report which included a suggestion for the review of the Council's Scrutiny arrangements and expressed the

wish that this should take place as soon as possible. In response, Cllr Alan White asked Cllr Greatorex to convene a meeting of his fellow Overview and Scrutiny Chairs to ensure that the current Overview and Scrutiny arrangements were fit for purpose.

RESOLVED – (a) That the changes detailed in Table 1 within the appendix to the report be approved; and

(b) That the changes described in Table 2 within the appendix, and as approved by the Director for Corporate Services under his delegated powers, be approved; and

(c) That the further opportunities for supporting elected members, as detailed in Table 3 within the appendix, be explored by the Member and Democratic Services team.

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

In response to questions from Cllr Pardesi and Cllr Edgeller concerning the future of Stafford Police Station, Cllr Peters indicated that this matter was to be considered at the next meeting of the Police, Fire and Crime Panel.

Cllr Charlotte Atkins enquired as to whether any progress had been made with regard to her question at the February Council meeting regarding when the Community Rooms at Fire Stations would be re-opening. Cllr Hood also raised the same issue regarding Stone Fire Station. In response, Cllr Peters indicated that he would raise this matter with the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner.

RESOLVED – That the report be received.

63. Questions

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

Question

Staffordshire will be hosting part of the Commonwealth Games, as well as most likely seeing the baton relay and other Commonwealth Games celebrations take place in the county. What will Staffordshire County Council be doing to ensure that there is a lasting health and sports participation legacy from the Commonwealth Games in Staffordshire?

Reply

Staffordshire County Council (SCC) are committed to ensuring there is a lasting health and sports participation legacy for the Commonwealth Games. The following information are examples of where this work has already begun and how further work is underway to fulfil this commitment.

Building the Legacy Forestry England Project for Commonwealth Games 2022

SCC made an allocation of £50,000 and became a project partner working with Forestry England to deliver the legacy project building on from the Commonwealth Games. This involved the development, at Cannock Chase, of a Blue Trail Cycle track (aimed at intermediate level), a play centre for learning to ride and a full legacy programme to ensure the facilities have continued use and access by Staffordshire residents. Funding was allocated equally from Families and Communities and Health and Care budgets. Cannock Chase District Council also contributed financially to this project.

Public Health

For the past few months, we have been engaged with emergency planning, resilience, and response processes to ensure preparations are in place to consider potential threats from infectious disease (including, but not limited to, Covid) as well as environmental and other hazards. This includes proactive action, communication, and strategy to ensure a resilient and robust plan is in place to prevent and respond to any issues which may impact on public health. This work includes messages and distribution of condoms to promote safe/good sexual health.

SCC public health officers have recently engaged in a group led by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) which is focused on how to capitalise on promotion of physical activity/health and wellbeing as part of the Games legacy. Colleagues from Cannock District Council are also involved in this group, as well as Together Active, to review and consider physical activity and leisure opportunities related to the events being held in Staffordshire.

Together Active-Projects and Funding Opportunities

Commonwealth Games Small Grants Fund (Administered by Together Active)

- £100,000 has been made available in Staffordshire & Stoke
- Grants of between £100 - £2,500
- Aims to use Sport And Physical activity to:
 - A. Bring people together
 - B. Improve health and wellbeing
 - C. Help the region to grow and succeed

Generation 2022 – Volunteering programme for the Commonwealth Games (Brokered by Together Active)

- Targeting young people who may not consider volunteering (those with Care experience, in pupil referral units or known to Youth Offending teams)
- Aged 16-24
- 30 hours of quality volunteering opportunities – incentivize by tickets to CWG &
- Sourcing placements that can provide formal qualifications and potential employment opportunities

School Games Legacy Funding (Administered by Together Active)

- Engage inactive young people through 'hook' of CWG
- £3,000 per School Games Organizer (SGO) area

Places & Spaces funding – Sport England

- Facility-based funding for sport and physical activity-based community organizations
- Up to £10,000 matched funding available

Communications

A comms plan is being developed to ensure SCC work in partnership with the Organising Committee for the Commonwealth Games, OHID, and partners to promote the health benefits including mental and physical health attributed to the Games and Sports, therefore the overall legacy.

Cllr Pardesi asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Change whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

In light of current concerns over energy supplies, can this Council reassure residents that it will not support fracking being reconsidered under any circumstances?

Reply

There is currently a moratorium on fracking in England. On 2 November 2019, the UK Government announced that it would “take a presumption against issuing any further Hydraulic Fracturing Consents” in England.

Details here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-ends-support-for-fracking>

The government is due to publish an energy security strategy imminently (possibly before this Thursday 17th March 2022 meeting), and a review of gas fracking could be among potential initiatives to help reduce reliance on imported hydrocarbons. However, there was no policy commitment to fracking by Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Monday as part of a roundtable of leaders in the UK’s offshore oil and gas industry.

Details here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/readout-of-prime-ministers-roundtable-of-uk-oil-and-gas-industry-leaders-14-march-2022>

In terms of where shale gas can be found in the UK, the British Geological Survey indicate that four areas have been identified as potentially viable for the commercial extraction of shale gas, and this includes the Carboniferous Bowland–Hodder area in north-west England (Lancashire and the Midlands).

Details here:

<https://www.bgs.ac.uk/geology-projects/shale-gas/shale-gas-in-the-uk/>

The extraction of shale gas in Staffordshire is unlikely to be commercial and/or considered a priority for shale gas exploration and our officers will keep both myself and the Planning Committee and members abreast of any change in national policy.

The Council has FAQ information relating to fracking published on our website, and this will be updated after Central Government publish their energy security strategy.

Details here:

<https://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/environment/planning/aZ/Fracking-in-Staffordshire-frequently-asked-questions.aspx>

Supplementary Question

In light of paragraph two of your reply, can we be assured that fracking will not be amongst the potential initiatives to reduce reliance on imported hydrocarbons?

Reply

I haven't been made aware of any Government Statement yet and we await Government advice on the issue. When it is received, I will ensure that every Member of the Council is notified accordingly.

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 data does the County Council collect in respect of the provision of extra care and is that data publicly available? Does the County Council identify priority areas for extra care? If so, which criteria are used to determine these areas as a priority for extra care and why is that of importance to the County Council? What impact, if any, does a County Council designation as a priority area have on the future provision of extra care?

Reply

Extra care provides housing with support, predominantly for older people. Support ranges from assistance with household tasks to regulated care.

In Staffordshire there are 23 extra care schemes providing regulated care that are known to the Council. We contract for care in ten of these for people who are eligible for Council funding. For contracted schemes a range of data is collected including the number of units available, the number of people receiving Council funded care, and the number of hours of care provided.

The Council has nomination rights to some of these schemes, which means that we have a first option when a unit becomes vacant. However, it is not always possible to find a Council funded individual who wants to move into extra care housing at the point the vacancy arises.

We are currently reviewing demand and supply of extra care, working with District and Borough Council housing colleagues and some of the larger

extra care providers. This will help us to understand the areas where there is the greatest need for additional capacity. The findings will be included in the Care in the Home Market Position Statement, due to be published this summer, which should help extra care developers make decisions about new schemes. We will also consider a business case for the Council to support new developments in some areas.

Supplementary Question

May I see the relevant data as soon as possible as I understand that Leek is not a priority for extra care?

Reply

Any data will be shared with Members and the Scrutiny process in due course.

Cllr Oates asked the following question of the Leader of the Council whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

Can the leader confirm that both he and Staffordshire County Council will be supporting Tamworth's bold and ambition application to become the home of GB Rail Headquarters? Given Tamworth's location in the country and at the crossing of two significant rail lines Tamworth's historic involvement in the railways makes it the perfect place to once again play a key role in the shaping of our nation.

Reply

Thank you for your question. I can confirm that both myself and the County Council support Tamworth Borough Council's application to become the home of Great British Railways (GBRs) national headquarters. Tamworth's location on the national rail network provides excellent connectivity to other parts of the UK and makes it the ideal location for GBRs national headquarters. If successful, this bid will build upon the investment already secured from the Government's Future High Streets Fund to regenerate the town centre, bringing with it new highly skilled jobs and further investment for Tamworth helping to support our ambitions for Staffordshire's economy and the Government's levelling up agenda.

Supplementary Question

Will the Leader make a commitment to ensure that Staffordshire County Council is dynamic and flexible enough to assist Tamworth Borough

Council in this particular bid and also in delivering the Borough Council's vision?

Reply

This Authority has a long track record of cooperation with Borough and District Council colleagues, and we intend to continue to do so. I will ask the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills to ensure that this Authority is dynamic and flexible enough to assist the Borough Council in relation to the matters to which you have referred.

Cllr Hussain asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Change whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

To store carbon, trees are the best of all possible options. What more can the Council do to ensure that tree planting on the county's own land in Burton and the county as a whole is as simple and efficient as possible?

Reply

In our day-to-day services, the County Council actively manages or tenants nearly 8,000 hectares of land throughout Staffordshire, comprised of diverse habitats including woodland, heathland, country parks, county farms, regeneration sites, corporate estate and schools.

Notwithstanding the 3,800 miles of highway that we manage and its resource of an estimated 475,000 trees.

In the past few months, we have planted 17,500 trees over a couple of regeneration sites, making a valued contribution to reducing our carbon impact.

Staffordshire County Council has the expertise and opportunity to objectively identify areas within our portfolio, where we can have a positive effect with tree/woodland establishment.

Whether that be for carbon sequestration, nature recovery, air quality improvement, recreation, wellbeing or biodiversity, any strategy we undertake should realise as many benefits as possible, for any identified change in land use. Whilst maintaining the contribution that our rural portfolio adds to the communities and economy throughout our County.

With tree planting in mind, we should carefully consider the "right tree, for the right place"

All natural habitats can play a role in catching and storing carbon.

Woodlands achieve the highest rates of sequestration, but other habitats can store carbon that we need of offset, such as peat bogs, their improved condition can contribute to a vibrant and enhanced Countryside estate, as well as sequestering carbon.

For this reason, we are commissioning a study of county council land to understand its current carbon baseline (occupied or tenanted) to establish where, and how, we could increase carbon capture and storage. This might be by planting trees, but equally could be by restoring other habitats or other land management techniques.

The study will also look at additional benefits that such habitat enhancement could offer, such as natural flood management, wider biodiversity benefits, landscape enhancement, air quality and access improvements.

Through this we will be able to prioritise where we can achieve the greatest impact for both climate change mitigation, adaptation and nature recovery.

Supplementary Question

Can you give a timeframe for the study to which you refer in your reply and how Members can engage as community leaders?

Reply

Our Action Plan 2 sets out our proposals for our environmental proposals and I will ensure that a copy is forwarded to you and all other Members of the Council.

Cllr Afsar asked the following question of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

Our County's Covid has had a disproportionate impact on certain communities. What more can the Council do to draw attention to long standing socioeconomic issues such as housing, male nutrition, low paying occupations, and child poverty especially during the current climate?

Reply

It is important to the County Council that all Staffordshire residents have the opportunity to prosper.

Even before the pandemic we endeavoured to ensure that all those living in Staffordshire were able to have access to more good jobs and share in the benefits of economic growth. The County Council has worked hard to enable everyone to live in thriving and sustainable communities, and, in direct reference to your broad question; working with our partners – we strive to help our residents to live healthier, independent lives for longer.

The pandemic, together, with the wider challenges that we are all facing, have brought many of the issues that you have raised into sharper focus. The County Council is already addressing many of these matters in practical ways.

We are working with our partners, such as the CCG, on several initiatives aimed at reducing health inequalities. This includes further development of our community champions programme and launching a programme of citizens enquiry to understand the views, behaviours and issues impacting on local people.

The existing healthy lifestyles service has been adapted throughout the pandemic to ensure continued support for local people around important issues such as smoking, weight management, NHS health checks, and workplace health. Part of this support has included expanding some of the eligibility criteria, as well as creating more flexible delivery models for services. As a sign of our ongoing commitment to this, we are in the process of preparing to retender for this service - from Spring 2023, and the framework will allow for further focus and targeting of resources at those with the greatest health and care needs.

We are growing and developing our workplace health programme, linking it into networks such as the LEP and Chambers of Commerce, to better engage large and small employers; focusing on those settings with employees who tend to have poorer health outcomes and lower socio-economic groups for example - the unskilled, those in low paid jobs, manual workforces, and in specific reference to your question - male members of the wider workforce.

In terms of the socio and economic impacts of Covid-19, again there is a growing body of evidence that highlights that certain communities have been more adversely impacted by the socio-economic implications of Covid-19 than others.

The County Council has worked proactively to support all those in need of further assistance during these uncertain times. We are helping families through our Education Support Fund Scheme which provides nearly 27,000 eligible children with a £15.00 supermarket eVoucher per week out of term time. This scheme has been delivered every half term since October 2020 and will continue until Easter 2022. Alongside this there is support for families through the Household Support Grant for food and essential supplies for those facing substantial financial hardship.

The recent Staffordshire Covid-19 Survey, highlighted that younger residents, those unemployed or unable to work, and those with a disability, were most likely to have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. The County Council's efforts to transform the Staffordshire economy and reduce our reliance on low-wage, low-value industries over the last decade ensured, however, that we were well placed to remain resilient through the pandemic and rebound strongly afterwards.

Whilst challenges clearly remain, the delivery of local and national economic support measures since the start of the pandemic, alongside the vaccine rollout, have been hugely successful in averting the economic disaster that was predicted by many commentators, with GDP now already above pre-pandemic levels.

Through our Economic Recovery, Renewal & Transformation Strategy, the County Council delivered numerous projects and programmes to support those businesses and residents most adversely affected by the public health measures implemented over the last two years. These included an emergency grants scheme, the provision of PPE, support to start a business, and delayed rent payments at our Enterprise Centres to name just a few.

Through our Countywide Employment and Skills Task Group, the County Council continues to work with Government departments and local partners to support communities hardest hit by COVID and support those unfortunate to lose their jobs back into work. This includes enabling residents to reskill and upskill, thereby improving their career outcomes, pay and productivity to aid economic growth, increased prosperity, and better wellbeing. This work has contributed to the reduction in work-related Universal Credit claimants across all wards in Staffordshire during the last year.

Our hugely successful Staffordshire Means Back to Business programme, delivered in collaboration with all our District / Borough Council partners, is also continuing to deliver funding and support for businesses to recover and grow following the pandemic, to enable people to start their own business, to develop apprenticeship opportunities, and upskill employees. Many of these schemes were proactively targeted and promoted within

areas where they were most needed and be of greatest benefit, including by local councillors.

Recognising that we are now in a far different and better place to what we might have been, it is the right time to set out our vision and ambitions for the Staffordshire economy in the coming years through our Strategic Plan and emerging Economic Strategy. This will require tackling a number of key challenges that remain, including that some parts of the county continue to lag behind.

All of our priorities will benefit communities across the county, such as our ambitions to transform our town centres and enable our residents to benefit from highly paid, high skilled jobs. We will continue to work with all our partners in delivering for communities across Staffordshire in the coming months and years, including with Government in achieving the ambitions set out within the Levelling Up White Paper.

This is supported by our Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. This identifies those wards with higher levels of need – for example with lower educational achievement, poorer health, and/or higher levels of crime.

We target our resources where possible to support those residents who most need our help, for example the Warmer Greener home programme which has funded heating and insulation for more than 500 of our poorest households.

We will continue to do our best to 'level up' the county, working with partners and communities and recognising that this is a long-term endeavour that requires action by national government, local agencies and the public.

Supplementary Question

Can the Cabinet Member consider extending the voucher scheme beyond Easter 2022?

Reply

This is a matter for the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and I will therefore raise this issue with him, but I suspect that any extension would be dependent on the Government providing the necessary funding.

64. Petitions - 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