

Minutes of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 23 July 2021

Present: Tina Clements (Chairman)

Attendance

Keith Flunder (Vice-Chairman (Overview))	Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf
Philip Hudson	David Smith
Graham Hutton	Ross Ward (Vice-Chairman (Scrutiny))
Ian Lawson	Bernard Williams

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Mike Deakin, Philippa Haden, Syed Hussain and Jessica Shulman

PART ONE

8. Declarations of Interest

County Councillor Keith Flunder declared an interest in all matters included on the Agenda as they related to the County Council's former All Party Working Group on Communities/Isolation owing to his role as Chairman of the Group.

9. Minutes of meeting held on 11 June 2021

RESOLVED – That subject to the deletion of Topic No. (iv), "Safer Roads Partnership, Enforcement and Future Partnership Working", from the "Highways and Built County (Economy Infrastructure and Skills)", Service Area, the minutes of the meeting held on 23 July 2021 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

10. HS2 and Impact on Prosperity in Staffordshire - Quarterly Update

The Committee received an oral report of the Cabinet Member for Economy & Skills and presentation (PowerPoint slides attached at Appendix 1 to the signed minutes) by HS2 giving them a quarterly update on the impact of the development of the new high speed rail line on prosperity in Staffordshire.

The meeting was attended by HS2's Senior Area Engagement Manager (Jonathan Lord) and Head of Community and Stakeholder Engagement (Phase 2a) (Jason Pacey).

Members heard that key contractors had recently established on Operator Skills/Apprentice Hub at Dunton Wharf near Tamworth with the aim of upskilling local residents enabling them to access new employment opportunities. In addition, HS2 continued to work with Local Enterprise Partnerships to agree local economic priorities and undertake activities to drive economic growth and create local jobs. The County Council and HS2 supply chain contractors were Jobs Brokerage Partners of HS2's

Regional Jobs Board which sought to support jobseekers looking for opportunities in the sector. Partners were also to collaborate in the establishment of a Board specifically for Phase 2a of the project, in Autumn 2021.

During the discussion which ensued Members scrutinised and held the Cabinet Member and HS2 to account over their efforts to safeguard/enhance prosperity in the County, raising various matters of concern including:- (i) short ,medium and long term benefits of the line to local communities; (ii) impact of the construction phase on existing businesses, infrastructure and services and; (iii) additional opportunities which might arise in the leisure and tourism sector.

In response to concerns expressed by a Member regarding the level of consultation undertaken by HS2 with local residents on a major planning application in his Division, the representatives of the company explained that the submission had been made by Balfour Beatty, a strategic partner/contractor in the project. However, they undertook to liaise with the Member concerned and Balfour Beatty with a view improving communication together with measures aimed at mitigating the impact of the associated work. The representatives of HS2 also acknowledged the need for consistency of approach to consultation/engagement during the project.

The Chairman then thanked the Cabinet Member and representatives of HS2 for their attendance and an interesting and informative report/presentation.

RESOLVED – (a) That the oral report and presentation be received and noted.

(b) That arrangements be made for the Committee to visit HS2’s Operator Skills/Apprentice Hub at Dunton Warf, Tamworth to see something of the work being undertaken to safeguard/promote prosperity in the County.

(c) That a further update be brought to the Committee in January 2022.

11. Executive Response to All Party Working Group - Aspiration, Future Economy and Enterprise

The Committee considered a report of the Leader of the Council (schedule 1 to the signed minutes) setting out the Executive’s response to the final report and recommendations of the Aspiration, Future Economy and Enterprise All Party Work Group, having regard to their Terms of Reference.

The meeting was also attended by County Councillor Simon Tagg, former Chairman of the Group.

The Aspiration, Future Economy and Enterprise All Party Working Group had undertaken an overview project to consider “How can we in Staffordshire raise aspirations around lifelong career learning and upskilling, ensuring all local people can progress into ‘better jobs’ throughout their working life?” and “Given the impacts of Covid-19 and looking to our future local economy, how can we ensure that the Staffordshire workforce – of all ages – remain ambitious for their future, and how can we encourage entrepreneurship?” during 20/21.

At their meeting on 16 June 2021, Cabinet considered the final reports from these two investigations together with initial Executive Responses from portfolio holders which provided a planned course of action/update against each recommendation. These were subsequently received by Cabinet and agreed.

Members reviewed Cabinet's responses to the 17 Recommendations contained in the Action Plan in turn to ensure that they adequately addressed the issues which had been highlighted and were timely. During the discussion which ensued they acknowledged that the Chairman of the Group had recently been appointed Cabinet Member for Environment Infrastructure and Climate Change and looked forward to the positive contribution he could make in ensuring the Recommendations were implemented in full. However, they welcomed the significant progress which had already been made during the period since publication of the Group's report and stated their satisfaction with the challenging timescales set out in Action Plan.

They went on to highlight the Authority's responsibility to inspire and raise the aspirations of their Looked After Children together with children with Special Educational Needs and requested a further update on progress in implementing the recommendations/Action Plan following Cabinet's six-monthly review in January 2022.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be received and noted.

(b) That the Executive's response to the Aspiration, Future Economy and Enterprise All Party Work Group and the progress which had already been made to date, be welcomed.

(c) That a further update on the progress made in implementing the recommendations/Action Plan be brought to the Committee at their January 2022 meeting or following consideration by Cabinet, whichever is the later.

12. Economic Recovery, Renewal & Transformation – Quarterly Update

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills (schedule 2 to the signed minutes) giving them a quarterly update on progress made against the Staffordshire Economic Recovery, Renewal and Transformation Strategy, "Staffordshire Means Back to Business".

The Strategy was adopted in 2020 and set out the County Council's priorities for the next five years through the following four phases:- (i) Respond – "support our businesses and residents through the Covid-19 pandemic"; (ii) Recover – "create the conditions to support our businesses and residents to return to work as soon as possible"; (iii) Renew – "continue to progress those priorities that will play an important role in achieving our ambitions to develop the local economy beyond the current crisis" and; (iv) Transform – "utilise the opportunities presented by the current economic conditions by supporting the transformation of the local economy to be digital, clean and higher-value".

Members were provided with various headline statistics including:- (i) the proportion of working age residents in Staffordshire on Government support schemes had fallen to 14.2% from 19.9% in April 2020; (ii) the Staffordshire claimant count for Universal Credit had fallen to 4.4% from 5.1% in May 2020; (iii) the total number of employees in Staffordshire furloughed had fallen to approximately 34,000 from approximately 51,000 during the third national lockdown (which began in January 2021) and (iv) Staffordshire had experienced a 3% increase in vacancies between May and June 2021 compared to the previous month. In addition, they noted that according to Bank of England forecasts, the national economy was predicted to experience its fastest growth for 70 years during 2021, following the easing of Covid-19 restrictions.

During the discussion which ensued Members were pleased to note various major job creation announcements (primarily in the manufacturing sector) had recently been made in the County together with the enhanced Partnership working which had taken place to support local businesses with District and Borough Council's through the Additional Restrictions Grant. However, whilst positive signs of recovery had enabled Staffordshire to perform better than the national and regional averages, they acknowledged that a return to pre-pandemic performance levels would take time and there was likely to be further set-backs in the economy in the future as it adapted to new market/post pandemic conditions.

In response to a request from the Committee, the Cabinet Member undertook to provide a greater degree of detail in the statistics reported to future meetings so that trends by eg sector and across County Council Electoral Divisions were highlighted.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be received and noted.

(b) That the early signs of economic recovery following the re-opening of the Staffordshire economy be welcomed.

(c) That a further update be brought to the Committee January 2022.

13. Work Programme

RESOLVED – That, subject to the following changes, the updated Work Programme (schedule 3 to the signed minutes) be approved:-

- Additional item for meeting on 16 September 2021 - Climate Change Annual Report and draft Climate Change Action Plan 2;
- Items for meeting on 14 January 2022 – (i) Economic Recovery, Renewal and Transformation six monthly update (previously taken quarterly); (ii) HS2 six monthly update (previously taken quarterly) and; (iii) Executive Response to All Party Working Group – Aspiration, Future Economy and Enterprise.

14. Date of Next Meeting - Thursday 16 September 2021, 10.00 am, Venue to be Confirmed

RESOLVED – That the date, time and venue of the next meeting be noted.

Chairman