

Minutes of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 13 January 2022

Present: Tina Clements (Chairman)

Attendance

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

Apologies: Syed Hussain and Ian Lawson

PART ONE

29. Declarations of Interest

County Councillor Keith Flunder declared an Interest in Item No. 6 on Agenda, "Economic Renewal and Transformation - Six Monthly Review", owing to his receipt of a Small Business Loan.

30. Minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2021

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 29 November 2021 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

31. HS2 - Education, Skills and Prosperity for Staffordshire - Six Month Update

The Committee received an oral report and PowerPoint presentation (slides attached at Appendix 1 to the signed minutes) by HS2 giving them six monthly update on the impact of the development of the new high speed rail line on education, skills and prosperity in Staffordshire.

The meeting was attended by:- (i) HS2's Senior Area Engagement Manager (Jonathan Lord); (ii) Head of Community and Stakeholder Engagement (Jason Pacey); (iii) Senior Business Engagement Manager (Matt Hadlington) and; (iv) Skills and Employment Strategy Manager (Rebecca Young).

During their presentation, the representatives updated them on the progress made towards construction of Phases 1 and 2a of the Project. They then outlined work which had recently been undertaken to engage with local businesses, promote skills, education and employment in the area, together with news regarding the award of grants made under the Community Environmental Fund and Business and Local Economy Fund initiatives.

In the discussion which ensued Members scrutinised and held HS2 and Cabinet Member to account over their efforts to safeguard/enhance prosperity in the County, raising various matters of concern including:- (i) the efforts being made to link HS2's workshops in Staffordshire's schools into existing curriculum themes; (ii) job vacancies within the local community likely to be generated from the various high value contracts referred to in the presentation (eg Phase 2a - Design and Delivery, Advanced Civils Works and Rollingstock etc); (iii) HS2's involvement in developing training opportunities at Staffordshire Universities leading to recognised qualifications; (iv) opportunities available to local communities not directly affected by the construction of the line to apply for grant aid and; (v) links being made into primary school education.

In response to requests from Members:- (i) the Director of Corporate Services undertook to forward an electronic copy of the PowerPoint slides to them for information; (ii) HS2 undertook to provide a link to the Webinar being hosted jointly by Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership and HS2 in March 2022 (as referred to in the presentation) and; (iii) share details of those Staffordshire schools included in their programme of visits, in due course.

The Chairman then thanked the representatives of HS2 for their attendance, an interesting and informative presentation and the opportunity to visit the Apprentice Hub, Curdworth, Warwickshire in November 2021.

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

(b) That the efforts made to date to maximise the opportunities available to Staffordshire residents from the construction of the high-speed rail line by HS2 be welcomed.

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

(d) That the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills continue to be held to account for his efforts to maximise the opportunities available to Staffordshire residents from the construction of the line, where possible.

32. Aspiration Future Economy and Enterprise All Party Working Group - Six Month Review of Action Plan Implementation

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills updating them on progress with regard to implementation of the recommendations of the former Aspiration, Future Economy and Enterprise All Party Work Group (schedule 1 to the signed minutes).

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.

During his presentation of the report the Cabinet Member highlighted:- (i) the work which had recently been undertaken to develop the 'Staffordshire Story' and 'We are Staffordshire' brand; (ii) outreach work to promote aspiration through the provision of digital resources; (iii) work to support Staffordshire Chambers of Commerce 'Ignite Programme' encouraging students to develop their hidden entrepreneurship; (iv) the operation of Staffordshire's Business and Rural Loans Schemes; (v) work to increase provision of suitable sites for business growth involving the regeneration of Shire Hall, Stafford, Burton Library and Rugeley Power Station into enterprise hubs and; (vi) the sustainable approach being adopted to encouraging aspiration having regard to the Authority's recent declaration of a climate change emergency.

Members reviewed the progress made against the 17 Recommendations contained in the Action Plan (attached as an Appendix to the report) in turn to ensure that they continued to address the various issues highlighted and were timely, giving detail scrutiny and asking questions where necessary.

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

(b) That the progress made to date in implementing the recommendations of the former Aspiration, Future Economy and Enterprise All Party Work Group, be welcomed.

(c) That a further update on progress be brought to the Committee at their July 2022 meeting (to be combined with the already programmed 'Economic Renewal and Transformation – Six Monthly Recovery Update' item).

33. Economic, Renewal and Transformation - Six Monthly Update Recovery

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 which had fallen to 9% against a national average of approximately 11%; (ii) the Staffordshire claimant count for Universal Credit which had fallen to 3.6% from 4.4% in the previous report (July 2020); (iii) the predicted national unemployment peak rate which had been revised from 12% at the start of the Covid-19 Pandemic to 5.2%; (iv) then vacancy rate which had increased by 18% between September and October 2021 compared to the previous month. In addition, they noted that there had been several major business expansions announced in the County in recent months including 2000 new jobs at ASOS's development at Fradley and 800 new jobs at Pets at Homes development in Stafford.

During the discussion which ensued Members were pleased to note the positive signs of economic recovery following the recent recession caused by the Pandemic and the continued support being provided by the County Council to business. However, whilst Staffordshire continued 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 setbacks in the economy in the future as it adapted to new market/post pandemic conditions. In addition, they highlighted the need for effective engagement with school pupils and students in further education regarding entrepreneurship and requested the Cabinet Member to ensure appropriate attention was given in this respect.

In response to requests from the Committee, the Cabinet Member undertook to improve liaison with 'local' Members regarding economic development in their areas linked to the various business development initiatives being promoted by the County Council.

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

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

(c) That the Cabinet Member ensure appropriate emphasis on engagement with school pupils and students in further education to improve skills, employability and promote entrepreneurship.

(d) That a further update be brought to the Committee in July 2022 to include key metrics linked to the four priority phases listed above.

34. Highways High Level Transformation

The Committee received a PowerPoint presentation from the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport giving details of the Authority's new vision and ambitions for the County's Highway network over the five-year period to 2027 (slides attached as Appendix 2 to the signed minutes). This was to assist them in giving scrutiny to the related items already included in their Work Programme during the current municipal year with a view to ensuring the Highways Transformation Programme could be as effective as possible.

The Cabinet Member explained that during the 2021 Elections, voters had stated that repairing the County's roads should be a top priority. Funding for road maintenance was a major issue nationally with an estimated backlog of repairs amounting to £10 bn. In Staffordshire, the value of the outstanding repair bill was estimated to be in the region of £200m. Whilst Cabinet continued to consider how this challenging funding gap could be met, fundamental changes to the service were also required in order to achieve their aim of an improved Highway network.

The County Council's current contract with their Highways Partner was due to end in 2024 and Cabinet's ambition was for the new arrangements to be more customer focused. In advance of these changes, the Network Management Unit had been brought back in-house and other services including safety inspections, work identification and asset management were to be 'in-sourced' in April 2022.

During the discussion which ensued Members spoke their concerns including:- (i) the need to ensure the greater quality and consistency of repairs in future; (ii) the importance of routine maintenance eg gulley emptying and the effect of recent cutbacks in the work force on the condition of the County's roads; (iii) the need for the Authority and 'Local' Members to lobby Central Government and MPs respectively for extra resources; (iv) the impact of HGVs on the local road network; (v) the need for an enhanced role for Local Members in setting priorities in future road maintenance and; (vi) road openings by utility companies and the standard of re-instatements.

In reply, the Cabinet Member undertook to have regard to the comments made by the Committee in shaping the future configuration of services and looked forward to working with them in implementing his new vision and aspirations for the County's Highway network.

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

(b) That the various items included in their Work Programme for the current Municipal Year relating to the Highways Transformation Programme, be confirmed.

35. Work Programme

In response to a request from a Member, the Scrutiny and Support Officer undertook to circulate a copy of Staffordshire Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education's Annual report for 2021, to the Committee for information so that they could give scrutiny, as required.

RESOLVED – That the updated Work Programme (schedule 3 to the signed minutes) be approved.

36. Date of Next Meeting - Monday 28 February 2022 at 2.00 pm, County Buildings, Stafford

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

Chairman