

## **Minutes of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 28 February 2022**

Present: Tina Clements (Chairman)

### **Attendance**

Keith Flunder (Vice-Chairman (Overview))  
Philippa Haden  
Graham Hutton

David Smith  
Bernard Williams

**Apologies:** Philip Hudson, Syed Hussain, Ian Lawson and Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf

### **PART ONE**

#### **37. Declarations of Interest**

There were no Declarations of Interests made.

#### **38. Minutes of meeting held on 13 January 2022**

**RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 January 2022 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

#### **39. Variation of Order of Business**

**RESOLVED** – That the order of business on the Agenda be varied and that item No. 7, "Accessibility Strategy", be now considered.

#### **40. Accessibility Strategy Committee Report**

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Education (and SEND) regarding the preparation of Staffordshire Accessibility Strategy 2021/24 under The Equality Act 2010 (schedule 4 to the signed minutes).

The County Council were required to prepare a Strategy for implementation within all their schools, in order to increase access to education by children and young people with disabilities so that they could benefit from the same provision as all children in the area.

According to the Authority's Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Strategy (2021-26), priorities for children and young people with SEND included:- (i) 'We communicate well with each other'; (ii) 'We work in partnership to meet the needs of children and young people'; (iii) We ensure that the right support is available at the right time' and; (iv) We encourage communities to be inclusive'.

The principles set out in the above-mentioned Strategy were:- (i) 'All children and young people have a right to have their needs met, which will normally be within their local mainstream school, in their community'; (ii) Children and young people can access their education setting, participate within it and feel included'; (iii) Children and young people with a disability can access and participate fully in family and community life to meet their needs'; (iv) Staffordshire County Council (SCC), its schools, other partners and stakeholders will work together to support the needs of children and young people with a disability within education'; (v) SCC will engage with children and young people with disabilities, their parents/carers to capture their views to inform service development and working practices'.

The key priorities included in the Accessibility Strategy were:- (i) Increase Access to the curriculum for children and young people with disabilities; (ii) Improve the physical environment to increase access for children and young people with disabilities and; (iii) Make information more accessible to children and young people with disabilities. Actions to be undertaken by the County Council were listed under each.

During the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave detailed scrutiny to the Accessibility Strategy, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising issues of concern as necessary, including:- (i) evidence of early implementation in local schools within in their areas; (ii) arrangements for monitoring and review to ensure consistency of application across the County; (iii) the results of consultation with stakeholders undertaken on the draft Strategy and how this informed the final version and; (iv) implementation of the Strategy's aims within schools' wider curriculum.

In conclusion Members welcomed the Strategy and acknowledged its importance in ensuring equality of access to education for all pupils. However, they were disappointed over the relatively low number of responses received to the consultation undertaken on the Strategy and urged the Cabinet Member to consider how this and other engagement measures might be improved in the future. In response, the Cabinet Member acknowledged their concern and re-assured them that appropriate action would be taken. In addition, he undertook to amend the Strategy's implementation period to bring it in line with that of the County Council's existing SEND Strategy.

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

(b) That the County Council’s Accessibility Strategy 2021/24 (to be amended to 2021/26) be supported.

(c) That appropriate action be taken to improve engagement with Stakeholders in the future having regard to the relatively low number of consultation responses received on the draft Strategy.

#### **41. Staffordshire Community Learning Service Annual Self-Assessment (2020-2021)**

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills regarding Staffordshire Community Learning Service Annual Self-Assessment for 2020/21 (schedule 1 to the signed minutes).

The Service provided a range of formal and informal education and training opportunities to meet the needs of learners (aged 19 years and over), the economy and wider community across Staffordshire. Their work was funded by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) through direct grant totalling £1,622,044 during 2020/21.

Learning programmes were delivered by both the Direct Delivery Unit and 23 Partner organisations who targeted and prioritised vulnerable adults with barriers to learning. The four main strands of delivery during the year were:- (i) Community Learning Framework 2019-2023; (ii) Community Learning Trust Responsiveness Fund; (iii) Wider Family Learning Grants and; (iv) Adult Skills, with courses being provided through a combination of classroom based, online and hybrid/blended learning owing to the national Covid-19 lockdown restrictions in place.

During the year participation on Digital Skills, Employability and Adult Skills courses had been low owing to difficulties in reaching low-skilled residents, without the means of classroom-based learning. However, a new range of courses had been delivered including:- (i) English to Speakers of Other Languages Progression for Work; (ii) English and Mathematics (Maths); (iii) Personal Development; (iv) Animal Care; (v) Video Calling; (vi) Getting Started with Blogging; (vii) Confidence with Social Media; (viii) Word Processing; (ix) Digital Cloud; (x) Web Design; (xi) Office Skills and; (xii) Essential Digital Skills qualifications.

The Service's Annual Self-Assessment was based on service-wide data and other evidence including: (i) learner feedback; (ii) information on learner destinations; (iii) course documentation and; (iv) quality monitoring reports. The process involved benchmarking against an internal Quality and Performance Framework together with Ofsted's Education and Inspection Framework (2019) which defined the criteria for high quality provision and continual improvement and monitoring.

Their most recent Ofsted inspection had been undertaken in 2017, following which they had been rated as 'Good' according to the four-point scale. The 2020/21 Self-Assessment had concluded that the Service remained 'Good' with the Behaviour and Attitudes component being rated as 'Outstanding'. In addition, performance against Key Performance Indicators set out in the Quality and Performance Framework was also encouraging with only Attendance (89.7%) falling below target (90%) owing to the difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

During the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave detailed scrutiny to the work of the Service and results of the annual Self-Assessment, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising issues of concern as necessary, including:- (i) further opportunities for joint working with universities and colleges to improve skills required by employers, in particular, large private sector businesses operating in the County eg HS2 etc; (ii) engagement undertaken with small businesses to learn of their requirements in respect of suitable candidates for vacant posts; (iii) the efforts being made to increase participation in courses following easing of Covid-19 restrictions eg 'comms' messaging, and (iv) the different media channels and provision of learning venues etc.

In conclusion, Members said they were satisfied with the performance of the Service during the year as highlighted by the 2020/21 Annual Self-Assessment and welcomed the additional investment which had been made to expand the curriculum. However, whilst they were disappointed to hear of the fall in participation rates during the Pandemic, they looked forward to seeing an increase in the numbers of residents coming forward for training in the 2021/22 Assessment. In addition, they requested the Cabinet Member look at what further measures could be adopted to encourage further education by those who had undertaken Community Learning courses.

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

(b) That the 'Good' performance of the Community Learning Service during 2020/21 be welcomed.

(c) That efforts continue to be made to increase participation rates in Community Learning during 2021/22.

(d) That additional measures be adopted to promote further education by those who had undertaken Community Learning courses, as necessary.

## **42. Countryside Estate Review**

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture regarding a revised future vision for the County Council's Countryside Estate (schedule 2 to the signed minutes).

In March 2019, Cabinet agreed a two-stage approach for the Countryside Estate; firstly, a review of the countryside service operating model to achieve Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) savings, and secondly a formal process to explore transferring management to external bodies or to a newly created charitable trust. Alongside this, a range of further measures were proposed to improve financial sustainability.

However, since Cabinet had agreed this approach, various key contextual changes had occurred including the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and urgent need to focus on environmental outcomes such as climate change and nature recovery had prompted a review of the decision. Accordingly, the draft revised vision was now:-

- (a) 'Management of the estate is retained by Staffordshire County Council. Opportunities to build community capacity and involvement will be developed. Due to the recent increased significance of countryside sites to communities; should interest emerge from local community bodies in increasing their involvement in the management of local / picnic sites, this will be explored as opportunities arise on a local site basis'.
- (b) 'Expansion of the volunteering offer, including creation of volunteer warden roles in addition to the volunteer task force. This would enable paid staff to focus on strategic duties and support greater involvement by the local community in the delivery of the parks'.

- (c) 'Car park charges– installation of car parking charges at more car parks across the estate, with the option of an updated parking permit scheme covering multiple sites, providing a more affordable option for regular users. Under existing legislation, costs can be recovered to support provision of facilities and any surplus must be ring fenced for reinvestment in the countryside sites. This has been agreed as part of the Cannock Chase protection proposals and is already successfully operating at two locations on the Chase and at Chasewater Country Park. The approach would be extended to other sites in the county'.
- (d) 'Cafes, business opportunities and leases – expansion of the current offer and improvement to café facilities, with retail opportunities, to offer improved services for visitors and generate income to support operating costs of the parks. NB these opportunities should be focused on complementing the overall site offer'.
- (e) 'Rebranding of the service and a 'friends' scheme to facilitate public support for operating the sites with updates on activities and benefits to scheme participants such as the annual parking permit, discount vouchers etc'.
- (f) 'Building on the success of the EU-funded Rural Development Programme for England's Countryside Explorer project and existing Countryside Stewardship and Section 106 schemes (under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990), further investment through external funding bids for environmental management and infrastructure development'.
- (g) 'The countryside estate acts as a 'shop window' to raise awareness and directly contribute to the Council's environmental priorities – actively tackling climate change and nature recovery'.
- (h) 'The service provides a route into environmental work for young people in Staffordshire, offering opportunities through seasonal roles and modern apprenticeships'.
- (i) 'The estate directly supports physical health, active lifestyles and mental wellbeing through programmes of health walks, dementia trails, enabling more inclusive access and opportunities to increase wellbeing. Creating better links with GP surgeries and other health professionals to benefit the community more proactively'.

In addition, the County Council intended to introduce car park charges on further countryside sites where it was financially viable to do so and for any surplus generated to be reinvested back into the sites.

Although there were no further MTFs savings required over and above those which had already been delivered (£500,000) through adoption of a revised operational model, the proposals sought to secure greater longer-term financial sustainability through cost recovery, income generation and external funding. However, some investment funding might be required to lever opportunities and subject to approval, further work would be undertaken in due course.

During the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave detailed scrutiny to the revised Vision asking questions, seeking clarification and raising issues of concern as necessary, including:- (i) the future role of volunteers in the operation of the service; (ii) the scope of the vision in relation to maintenance of the County Council's Public Rights of Way Network; (iii) secure provision of parking meters on remote sites and; (iv) potential funding opportunities arising from HS2's High Speed Rail development.

In conclusion, the Committee expressed their support for the revised Vision, in particularly (a) above. They stressed the need to have greater regard for the environment in the future management of the estate and cited potential opportunities for promoting less reliance on cars through the Country Parks offer. However, they noted a lack of specific reference to wildlife and habitats in the revised Vision and asked the Cabinet Member to consider including a suitable mention to re-enforce the work already undertaken by the Authority through the Staffordshire Nature Recovery Declaration.

The Committee also acknowledged the valuable contribution made by volunteers in managing the Countryside Estate and looked forward to an enhanced role for them under the new Vision, as appropriate.

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

(b) That the revised Future Vision for the County Council's Countryside Estate be supported.

(c) That consideration be given to the inclusion of reference to habitats and wildlife in the Vision to re-enforce the work already undertaken in the Staffordshire Nature Recovery Declaration.

(d) That a further report enabling pre-decision scrutiny of future investment proposals for Staffordshire's Country Parks be brought to the Committee for consideration, at the appropriate time.

### **43. Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Plan**

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport on the draft revised Highways Infrastructure Asset Management Plan (HIAMP) which had been prepared to ensure the County Council continued to meet their statutory duties under the Highways Act 1980 whilst making best use of the resources available (Schedule 3 to the signed minutes).

The format and content of the HIAP was based on national guidance and provided a link between the County Council's strategic objectives and operational activities. It set out in detail how they were to manage each highway asset in order to meet strategic goals whilst supporting delivery of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy.

In addition, it ensured Department for Transport Incentive Fund resources could be maximised, making the case for additional funding and enabling the Authority to better defend claims.

The revised document covered the three-year period from 2022/23 to 2024/25.

During the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave detailed scrutiny to the scope and content of the HIAMP seeking clarification and raising issues of concern as necessary, including:- (i) how its provisions would be applied to the County Council's existing strategic infrastructure Partner to ensure satisfactory performance; (ii) the significant shortfall in funding currently available for Highway maintenance work and the contribution the HIAMP would make towards bridging the gap and; (iii) the need for effective two-way communication with Local Members and the public on Highway matters.

In conclusion, the Committee expressed their support for the draft revised HIAMP and welcomed the amalgamation of information currently contained in separate documentation. They noted that the Plan did not constitute revisions to either policy or service standards but stressed the need to ensure implementation of its provisions under the existing contractual arrangements.

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

(b) That the draft revised Highways Asset Management Plan be supported.

(c) That additional efforts be made to ensure compliance with the various provisions set out in the Plan under the County Council's existing contractual arrangements including, where necessary, better communication channels with Local Members and the Public.

#### **44. Work Programme**

**RESOLVED** – That the updated Work Programme (schedule 5 to the signed minutes) be approved.

**Chairman**