

Minutes of the County Council Meeting held on 16 March 2023

Attendance

Jak Abrahams	Philip Hudson	Bob Spencer
Arshad Afsar	Syed Hussain	Mike Sutherland
Charlotte Atkins	Graham Hutton	Mark Sutton
Philip Atkins, OBE	Thomas Jay	Stephen Sweeney
Tina Clements	Julia Jessel	Simon Tagg
Richard Cox	Jason Jones	Samantha Thompson
Mike Davies	Peter Kruskonjic	Carolyn Trowbridge
Mark Deaville	Tom Loughbrough-Rudd	Ross Ward
Janet Eagland	Johnny McMahon	Alan White
Ann Edgeller	Paul Northcott	Philip White
Alex Farrell	Jeremy Oates	Conor Wileman
Keith Flunder	Gillian Pardesi	Bernard Williams
John Francis	Ian Parry	David Williams
Philippa Haden	Bernard Peters	Mark Winnington
Gill Heath	Jonathan Price	Mike Worthington
Phil Hewitt	Robert Pritchard	Nigel Yates
Jill Hood	David Smith	
Derrick Huckfield	Paul Snape (Chairman)	

Apologies for absence: Gill Burnett, Colin Greatorex, Kath Perry, MBE, Jeremy Pert, Janice Silvester-Hall, Mike Wilcox, Ian Wilkes and Victoria Wilson

PART ONE

49. Declarations of Interest under Standing Order 16

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

50. Confirmation of the minutes of the Council meeting held on 9 February 2023

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting of the County Council held on 9 February 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

51. Chairman's Correspondence

By-election – Watling South (Tamworth)

On behalf of the Council, the Chairman welcomed Alex Farrell to the Chamber and congratulated him on his recent election as the County

Councillor representing the Watling South (Tamworth) County Electoral Division.

52. 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.

Staffordshire Means Back to Business – Oral Update

(Paragraph 1 of the Statement)

Councillor Philip White informed Members that the Government had recently granted permission for JCB's hydrogen-powered backhoe loaders to be used on UK roads; and the publication of the Council's Economic Strategy which detailed the Council's economic priorities in the coming years. Councillor Winnington also welcomed the recent news about JCB's hydrogen-powered backhoe loaders and he also spoke about trialling new technologies to repair pot-holes.

Councillor Hussain referred to those families on low incomes and how the potential loss of Universal Credit could be an impediment to seeking employment, especially in those sectors where pay was low. In response, Councillor Alan White indicated that the Council routinely lobbied the Government on such issues.

Councillor Hussain also referred to the Government's proposals for eight new Investment Zones and the need for the Council to lobby with a view to securing one of the Investment Zones in Staffordshire. In response, Councillor Alan White indicated that, under the current criteria, it was unlikely that the Council would qualify for an Investment Zones in Staffordshire.

Diversity and Inclusion – Progress Update

(Paragraph 2 of the Statement)

In response to a question from Councillor Charlotte Atkins concerning the gender pay gap and the need for the Council to make employment opportunities available to encourage a more diverse workforce, Councillor Alan White referred to the Council's new People Strategy and added that the Council had an "open door" policy and was taking steps to strengthen its approach to diversity and inclusion. He also indicated that the Council would continue to look to work with community leaders (as it had done during the Covid pandemic) to improve accessibility for all sectors of the community.

Empowering Our Communities

(Paragraph 3 of the Statement)

Councillor Northcote spoke about the importance of empowering communities within the County and the need to build on this work, including through the Staffordshire Parish Councils' Association.

Councillor Hussain referred to the important role played by Community Centres, many of which were struggling with rising costs, and the need for the Council to support them.

Councillor Sutherland spoke about the Members' Community Fund and how the initiative had provided valuable support to local communities.

Councillor Charlotte Atkins enquired as to how the County Council intended to build capacity at parish and town council level. In response, Councillor Sutton indicated that he would ask Councillor Wilson to let her have a detailed reply.

Councillor Alan White expressed his thanks to Parish Councillors and other voluntary groups for the work that they do in Staffordshire.

Integrated Performance Report - Quarter 3, 2022/23

(Paragraph 4 of the Statement)

Councillor Parry gave a brief overview of the Council's performance in delivering against its Strategic Plan and Delivery Plan and added that, although the majority of indicators were "green", there were some areas of concern, particularly across Childrens' services.

Conflict in Ukraine

(Paragraph 5 of the Statement)

Councillor Charlotte Atkins referred to the Council's work in helping to support Ukrainian refugees to find jobs and she expressed the hope that this work would be extended to support refugees from other countries. In response, Councillor Alan White indicated that he had recently had a meeting with the Home Secretary concerning the impact of asylum seekers in Staffordshire and the need to increase the speed of the application process for those seeking asylum.

Councillor Farrell and Councillor Cox informed the Council of the some of the work taking place in Tamworth and Lichfield to support Ukrainian refugees.

Councillor Hutton referred to the difference between those people who were displaced from their homes and who one day would return (as was the case for most Ukrainian refugees) and those who were seeking asylum status.

Councillor Sutton spoke about the Council's Homes for Ukraine scheme and indicated that around 500 Staffordshire residents had opened-up their

homes to Ukrainian refugees. He added that this work had been supported by the Council's resettlement team.

Councillor Alan White thanked Members for their comments and indicated that there was not a quick solution to the conflict in Ukraine and that the United Kingdom would need to have an enduring commitment to those Ukrainians finding refuge on our shores. He also expressed his thanks to those communities in Staffordshire who were supporting the refugees from Ukraine.

Highways Investment

(Paragraph 6 of the Statement)

Councillor Yates welcomed the investment by the Council in its highways and spoke about the need for local Members to work with their local town and parish councils when developing priorities for inclusion in the Highways and Transport Divisional Programme.

Councillor Hudson spoke about the need for local residents to report potholes through the "My Staffs app"; the priority areas for highway improvement/repair in Uttoxeter; and the need to update working practices when repairing potholes. Councillor Jay also referred to the need for monitoring to ensure the quality of repairs which were undertaken.

Councillors Afsar, Peters and Wileman expressed their thanks for the Council's additional funding to support pothole repairs and spoke about the priorities for highway improvement/repairs in Burton.

Councillor Francis enquired as to the impact on the highway improvement schemes which were being funded as part of the construction of HS2 following the recent announcement of the suspension of HS2 construction works for two years. In response, Councillor David Williams indicated that civil works were to continue and it was the construction of new infrastructure which was being suspended.

Councillor Flunder referred to the petition he presented at the Council meeting in February seeking the installation of a traffic light controlled pedestrian crossing in Endon and indicated that he was pleased to hear that highway officers had arranged a meeting to consider the request.

Councillor Hussain enquired as to whether consideration could be given to increase Divisional Highway Programme funding.

Councillor Philip Atkins spoke about how highway defects were categorised and where priority was given to repairs. He also indicated that parish councils had powers to fund certain highway works.

In response to a question from Councillor Philip Atkins, Councillor David Williams confirmed that the JCB Pothole Pro machine had been on trial with the County Council. Councillor Winnington enquired as to whether the machine was hydrogen powered similar to JCB's new backhoe loaders.

Councillor Hutton expressed his thanks to the Council's Highways Team for the work they do and also indicated that consideration needed to be given to tree maintenance as he was receiving an increasing amount of correspondence from constituents about this issue. In response, Councillor David Williams indicated that the County Council spent over £1m per annum in maintaining trees.

Councillor Parry informed Members that the Cabinet, at its meeting on 15 March, approved the Highways and Transport Programme 2023/24 under which, over the next two financial years, the County Council was to invest an additional £30M to support its commitment to fix more roads. The Programme would also see a total of over £50 million invested in a range of major projects, vital local improvements, and general road maintenance.

Councillor Alan White spoke about the Council's financial commitment to its highways network since 2021 and also how the Council was reliant on local residents to identify and report issues.

Armed Forces Covenant

(Paragraph 7 of the Statement)

Councillors Clements, Hudson, Cox, Tagg and Eagland welcomed the announcement that the Staffordshire's Leaders Board had joined together to pledge support for the armed forces communities by re-signing the Armed Forces Covenant. They also paid tribute to the work of the Armed Forces.

Councillor Alan White indicated that he was delighted to sign the Armed Forces Covenant on behalf of the County Council (and as a former member of the Armed Forces) and he also encouraged all Members to visit the National Memorial Arboretum near Alrewas and to reflect on the sacrifices made by servicemen and women.

New History Centre

(Paragraph 8 of the Statement)

Councillors Trowbridge and Francis welcomed the commencement of the work to build the new history centre in Stafford. Councillor Sutton added that the work would include the creation of additional storage to provide capacity for an additional 55 years of archives.

Councillor Alan White spoke about other investments planned for Stafford including the redevelopment of the Market Square.

Staffordshire Day

(Paragraph 9 of the Statement)

Councillors Oates and Clements referred to the activities planned in Tamworth as part of Staffordshire Day.

School Places

(Paragraph 10 of the Statement)

Councillor Yates spoke about the lack of SEND provision in Biddulph and Councillor Hudson expressed similar concerns about provision in the Uttoxeter area. In response, Councillor Price indicated that the Council was currently undertaking a review of its SEND provision.

Councillor Hudson indicated that he wished to dispel the myth which was circulating about a shortage of school places in Uttoxeter and he referred to the construction of a new First School at Bramshall Meadows and the capacity to extend two of the middle schools in the area.

Councillor Philip White paid tribute to the Cabinet Member for Education (and SEND) following the recent announcement that, this year, 92.5% of parents were allocated their first choice of secondary school for their children.

In response to comments made by Councillor Eagland concerning a SEND case she had become involved in where the child had been allocated a place at a school three miles away from their home, Councillor Price indicated that he would be happy to discuss this matter with her outside of the meeting.

New Chapter for Business Start-Ups

(Paragraph 11 of the Statement)

Councillor Philip Atkins referred to the difficulties which could be encountered when starting-up a new business owing to the complexity of regulations and added that this needed to be considered as part of the support the Council provides to new businesses.

Councillor Yates paid tribute to the free 1-2-1 support which was available to those starting-up a new business.

Councillor Francis informed the Council that the Stafford Business Innovation Centre was to close in April.

Councillor Sutherland spoke about the success of the Enterprise Centre in Rugeley which was now fully occupied.

Councillor Philip White added that Staffordshire was a great place to start a business, partly as a result of the County Council working in partnership with the business sector and the District/Borough Councils, and also for the wrap around support that was available to start-ups.

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

53. Recommendations to the Council

(a) Staffordshire Electoral Review - Staffordshire Boundary Proposals

The Council was informed that in March 2022, the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) initiated an Electoral Review of Staffordshire. The rationale for undertaking an Electoral Review was both due to our changing population which had led to electoral inequality, and the length of time since the last review in 2012.

There were two key stages to an Electoral Review:

- Stage 1 – which considers the Council Size
- Stage 2 – which considers division arrangements

Stage 1 commenced in June 2022 and was completed in November 2022.

Stage 2 was a consultation led and conducted by the LGBCE. The County Council and other interested parties, including members of the public, had 12 weeks to submit their initial proposals for new Division arrangements. These proposals would need to include where the boundaries lie between Divisions, the number of elected members for each Division, and the names of Divisions.

During the preparation of the Council's division proposals, there had been a range of opportunities for elected members to input and shape the formulation of the proposals. The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee had also provided scrutiny and oversight of the process.

Staffordshire's division proposals needed to be submitted to the LGBCE by 20th March 2023. The Commission would then have a further 12 weeks to analyse all the representations made and produce their draft recommendations. It was expected that their draft recommendations would be published on 27th June 2023. The Council would then have eight weeks to respond to the draft recommendations, prior to final recommendations being produced in November 2023.

Councillor Smith indicated that he found some of the Council's proposals difficult to support, particularly the one which would see an urban area in

Lichfield become part of his Division which was predominantly rural. Mr Worthington added that he also had concerns about the proposals for his Division.

In response, Councillors Huckfield, Winnington and Philip Atkins indicated that the Council's proposals would be considered by the Boundary Commission, along with other submissions, and it would be for the Commission to make the final decision.

Councillor Alan White indicated that the process for coming up with the Council's proposals to the Commission would not satisfy all Members of the Council and that any Member was able to submit their own proposals for consideration. He also paid tribute to Katie Marshall who had supported Members in compiling the Council's submission to the Commission.

Resolved – (a) That the progress made to date on the County's Electoral Review be noted.

(b) That the proposals for Staffordshire's boundary changes be agreed:

- i. Requests a single member per division review
- ii. Review the boundary changes proposed
- iii. Removal of one elected member in Tamworth
- iv. Addition of one elected member in East Staffordshire

(c) That the Leader of the Council and the Deputy Chief Executive and Director for Corporate Services be authorised to finalise the proposals prior to submitting to the Boundary Commission.

(b) 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 was 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 2023, including recommendations on the Members' Allowances Scheme for 2023/24. As part of their deliberations and in response to feedback from Members of the Council, the Panel proposed that:

- (i) the allowance for the Chairmen of the Council is frozen for the next four years.
- (ii) to reduce the allowance awarded to the Vice-Chairman of the Council so that it equates to 35% of the amount awarded to the Chairman (in line with all other Chair/VC proportions as recommended and agreed in last year's report).
- (iii) the Members' Allowance Scheme within the Council's Constitution be amended to include rules regarding use of toll roads by elected Members.

As part of their deliberations, and in response to feedback from Members of the Council, the Panel have proposed to review next year travel and subsistence allowances paid to elected members, basic allowance for Members to compare how SCC fares with other local authorities after the pay award has been settled and SRAs of Cabinet Members and Chairpersons of Regulatory Committees.

Two of the serving members of the IRP had completed their four-year term. It was therefore proposed that the Audit and Standards Committee be requested to convene a Special Panel for the purpose of recruitment of new Independent Remuneration Panel Members.

Councillor Alan White extended his thanks to the members of the Independent Remuneration Panel for the work that they do. He also explained that, each year, the allowance paid to Members increased in line with the percentage pay award agreed for staff. In October 2022, employers agreed with the unions a pay increase to local government officers of £1925. At the request of the IRP, analysis was undertaken on what the £1925 pay award would be in percentage terms when using the average pay of staff which was found to equate to 3.49%. It was therefore proposed that pay increase on the basic allowance for Members be set at 3.49%.

Councillor Alan White also referred to the proposals to freeze the allowance paid to the Chairmen of the Council for the next four years and to reduce the allowance awarded to the Vice-Chairman of the Council so that it equated to 35% of the amount awarded to the Chairman so as to move towards the average of the 12 "nearest neighbour" benchmarked authorities. He explained that he was of the view that it would not be appropriate to move the Chairman's and Vice-Chairman's remuneration to the average for the benchmark group without also looking to move the allowance paid to all Members to the average. For this reason, he was unable to support the Panel's proposals relating to the remuneration to be paid to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Council and therefore wished to withdraw the proposals in this respect.

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

(b) That the following recommendation be agreed:

- (i) the Members' Allowance Scheme within the Council's Constitution be amended to include rules regarding use of toll roads by elected members.

(c) That the following recommendations be withdrawn:

- (ii) the allowance for the Chairmen of the Council is frozen for the next four years.
- (iii) to reduce the allowance awarded to the Vice-Chairman of the Council so that it equates to 35% of the amount awarded to the Chairman (in line with all other Chair/VC proportions as recommended and agreed in last year's report).

(d) The Independent Remuneration Panel be requested to:

- (i) Review Travel and Subsistence allowances paid to elected members.
- (ii) Review basic allowance for members to compare how SCC fares with other local authorities after the pay award has been settled.
- (iii) Review SRAs of Cabinet Members and Chairpersons of Regulatory Committees.

(e) That the Audit and Standards Committee convene a Special Panel for the purpose of recruitment of new Independent Remuneration Panel Members.

(b) Pay Policy Statement 2023/24

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 2023/24.

RESOLVED – That the Pay Policy Statement for 2023/24 (as set out in Annex A to the report) be approved.

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

In response to a question from Councillor Charlotte Atkins concerning difficulties for the Police in accessing CCTV data held by other organisations such as local authorities, Councillor Cox indicated that he would raise the issue with the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner.

RESOLVED – That the report be received.

55. Questions

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

Question

In Perrycrofts Division there is a stretch of road that carries a huge amount of Tamworth's daily traffic. The road, known as Upper Gungate, frequently suffers from potholes due to the volume of daily traffic. The road has just had more temporary repairs to address the latest batch of potholes. Can I ask the authority to consider this stretch of road for a complete resurface as soon as funding becomes available?

Reply

Yesterday, 15 March 2023, Cabinet approved the annual Highways and Transport capital programme for 2023/24.

As part of that decision Cabinet announced an additional £30m of capital investment in local road maintenance will be made over the next two years, together with provisional list of priority locations for maintenance treatment.

Amongst that list of priorities £900k is allocated for structural maintenance and resurfacing of both A513 and B5493, Upper Gungate and Aldergate in Tamworth.

Precise details of the extent and timing of these works will be available shortly once the design is complete and co-ordination with any nearby local developments, planned upgrades to private utility infrastructure and any other local events has been confirmed.

Councillor Hood asked the following question of the Leader of the Council whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

During the construction of the Stone Railhead, HS2 intends to use Pirehill Lane as a Haul Road for up to 42 HGV's a day carrying heavy loads to its Yarlet embankment satellite compound. In the immediate area there are two first schools, a middle school and three nurseries where families are told road safety is a priority and are encouraged to walk their children to school helping reduce their carbon footprint. It is a heavily populated residential area leading to the Eccleshall Road which is heavily congested, added traffic will be a hazard to the surrounding area and its users. Air quality will soon deteriorate with queueing traffic and will threaten the environment and health of residents. Could the Leader intervene and persuade HS2 to find an alternative route?

Reply

Pirehill Lane was identified as a lorry route by HS2 Ltd in the Environmental Statement, which was published when the High Speed Rail (West Midlands to Crewe) Bill was deposited with Parliament in July 2017. During the Bill phase, all proposed lorry routes were reviewed and scrutinised by officers and the Council supported local communities and individuals with their petitions to Parliament. The Bill secured Royal Assent and became an Act in February 2021. The Act provides limited grounds for the Council to refuse a lorry route, these being: road safety; amenity; free flow of traffic; and historic environment. In addition, there must be a viable alternative route available.

Officer discussions with HS2 Ltd have highlighted that the current Pirehill Lane proposal is not suitable. It is recognised however that a lorry route is required for construction works in the local area that will enable a haul road to the A34 near Yarlet to be constructed.

Officers will continue to engage HS2 Ltd and the main works contractor (once appointed) on detailed matters relating to lorry routes in this area. The Council will advocate for the local community and urge HS2 Ltd and its contractors to find the best solution within the constraints of the Act.

Following the Government's announcement on 9 March that construction on HS2 Phase 2a will be rephased by 2 years, the Council is seeking urgent clarification on the implications to the main works Schedule 17 lorry route approval process and timescales.

Supplementary Question

I feel that this Council is waiving a white flag to HS2. There are two viable alternative routes available. In 2017 this Council said that the use of Pirehill Lane was unacceptable. I ask that this Council and the Leader make sure that Pirehill Lane is not used as a route for the HGVs; and when clarification is given on Schedule 17 lorry routes, if it goes to planning, I will have your support, and the Council's support, to calling it in?

Reply

To say that we have raised a white flag to HS2 completely misjudges the work we have done over the past 13 years. We continue to work hard to make sure that HS2, and indeed their contractors, do the minimum damage to the County while they are working here. We understand the impact of HS2; the idea that this Authority would raise the white flag is not something we would even countenance. We will be supporting you in your efforts to ensure that HS2 doesn't do any unnecessary damage in your division.

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

Question

I am very concerned about the increase in fly tipping incidents around my division, invariably these are small quantities of building debris, including bricks, concrete, and plaster.

Can you please confirm the annual gross and nett proceeds for these charges imposed at my local recycling centre (Bemersley Road), so that I can undertake a cost versus benefit calculation taking into account fly tipping management charges incurred at Staffordshire Moorlands District Council?

Reply

The 14 Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC) Staffordshire network provides a valuable service to residents to enable the recycling of some 42 different household material streams.

Since November 2016 the HWRC service has allowed residents to deposit non-household waste (which is a non-statutory function) for a modest fee which contributes to actual disposal costs. A report was considered by the relevant scrutiny committee in 2018 which evidenced that the introduction of charges had had no material impact on fly tipping activity in Staffordshire.

In addition, with the exception of the Biddulph HWRC, commercial waste is accepted at all other Staffordshire HWRC's for a fee to cover disposal costs. It should be noted that this is also a non-statutory function. Numerous commercially operated waste sites are also available in Staffordshire for the disposal of commercial waste.

Fly tipping is an illegal activity and is monitored by District and Borough Councils. We have had no reports of an increase in fly tipping in the Staffordshire Moorlands District Council area, but we are always willing to work with District/Borough Councils to prevent illegal fly tipping activity.

Supplementary Question

My question asked for a value and your reply fails to address that. May I ask you to answer my question.

Reply

As it says in the response, with the exception of the Biddulph HWRC, commercial waste is accepted at all other Staffordshire HWRC's for a fee to cover disposal costs. But I will share one figure with Councillor Yates, Staffordshire Moorlands have received a grant of £32,000 from the fly-tipping intervention grant which will help to tackle fly-tipping across the Moorlands.

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

Question

The Government is keen to get people, who have been inactive, back to work after the pandemic to fill job vacancies. Has the County Council had difficulty filling job vacancies? If so, in which roles? Which employment incentives are most likely to encourage people back to work in Staffordshire?

Reply

Like many other local authorities and large employers across the country, Staffordshire County Council experiences regular staff turnover, which is partly reflected in the number of recruitment adverts we place as an organisation.

There has been considerable effort over the last 18 months to create a more distinctive profile for the County Council reflecting it's status as a modern and forward looking employer with the introduction of

'WeRecruit' our new applicant tracking system and our revamped careers website.

Over the last year the County Council has placed 956 adverts and advertised more than 1500 positions, and, whilst some of these positions will have been filled by internal candidates, we have appointed almost 750 new starters.

Since the launch of the 'WeRecruit' platform on 31st October, from a total of 211 appointments, 63 (or around 30%) were taken by internal applicants, with around 70% of recent appointments taken by new starters.

We currently average around 10 applicants per vacancy although find it difficult to recruit to certain roles such as social workers and lawyers, in common with many other local authorities.

Focusing in particular on lawyers, we operate in an exceptionally competitive market place where the private sector is often able to offer higher remuneration, and more recently than in the past, can now compete with the County Council around a flexible work offer.

Working with the People Services team our Legal Services team has developed '**Brand Legal**' using feedback we had received that we had not always highlighted the exciting scope of services and work available within a local authority legal service.

This alongside modernisation of job descriptions will enable us to facilitate options for staff to transfer more easily between legal disciplines which will promote individual development and make us more resilient to changing demands from our client base.

Ensuring that we are competitive within the wider recruitment market is crucial to ensuring we are properly resource. Using market rates wider intelligence we are creating talent pools in conjunction with our People Services team and we have had great success in recently appointing a number of Educational Psychologists and a substantial number of Social Workers over the past 12 months.

We strongly believe in growing our own people and looking to the future, we are working with People Services to design relevant apprenticeship plan and job descriptions to open up pathways for new entrants to the County Council. For example in our legal services team we take students from further education and support them, in five to six years, to qualify as lawyers.

This approach to growing our own will help us in ensuring that we are able to recruit the very best talent available, including from those cohorts who have traditionally not had university as an option that they feel is open to them.

Through our Open Door programme, we continue to successfully encourage people who are out of work into the labour market through structured 12 week voluntary placements many of which are within the County Council, giving people the confidence and skills they need to enter the world of work. In the two full delivery years of pre-pandemic Open Door delivery (2018-20) the Council supported 136 candidates with 31 (23%) gaining employment. Following the pandemic, the Open Door programme has seen 39 candidate starts since April 2022 and with 8 of these gaining full-time employment and the interest in the programme continues to grow.

Our structured approach to training and development helps us to retain our staff and grow their skills and rising through the business. We're seeing a positive increase in the number of people who are likely to recommend SCC as an employer, with our Net Promoter Score increasing from +11 in Q4 of 2021/22 to +19 in Q1 of 2022/23 which is considered a good score.

The top positive themes arising from the most recent eNPS results indicate that employees value the support and encouragement they receive from their line manager and senior manager; that the workplace is a friendly and warming environment, and that the council has a very positive culture.

In addition, the January 23 SMART survey demonstrated a direct positive connection between smart working and our ability to recruit and retain people as it enables us to draw from a much wider pool of people. Flexibility in our work offer is considered a highly attractive feature of working for the council.

Staffordshire as a whole, performs better than many areas in terms of Economic Inactivity rates which in the latest data (October 2021 to September 2022) stood at 16.3% of the working age population compared to 21.2% in England.

Similarly our Employment Rate (81.0%) and Unemployment Rates (3.3%) from the same data series are also better than the England averages.

Recognising the link between job vacancies and activities to bring people back into work, our new Staffordshire Jobs & Careers brokerage service is now fully live and currently staffed by a team of 6 dedicated Employment Brokers. This service is designed to match local people with employer

vacancies, to fill jobs and provide people with the jobs and careers they need. It is responsible for the management and delivery of free recruitment and support services to businesses, supporting Staffordshire residents into work. The team is now ready to help with tailored support and practical help. Their job is to help put together and support clients with a bespoke package of support for the right job, career, and training path for them, working with and alongside our partners.

The Staffordshire Jobs & Careers service website is a comprehensive single point that provides information on jobs, training, and career opportunities all in one place. The website has become quickly established since launching in November 2022 and it is currently promoting around 12,000 job vacancies and continues to grow in usage with 6,546 website engagement activities doubling during January 2023 to February 2023, resulting in 10,620 page views.

The brokerage service also supports wider government programmes such as DWP's Plan for Jobs, and it will also target the linking of opportunities with key employment sites such as the West Midlands Railfreight Interchange in South Staffordshire, HS2, i54 Western Extension and recent investments such as the Pets at Home Distribution Centre in Stafford.

The County Council, supported by the 8 District and Borough Councils, invested £6.9m on the 'Staffordshire Means Back to Business' programme that supported businesses and residents through the pandemic. This programme delivered: 418 new Apprentices, 321 companies supported with free training, 187 businesses supported through the business start-up/step up programmes, 28 start-up loans made, and 13,500 students received training in starting a business.

Other factors which can influence economic inactivity include the cost of childcare, meaning that some low-income families can find themselves worse off in work, and also delays in NHS waiting lists, exacerbating health conditions among the population and potentially removing people further from the labour market. These are of course national issues, but we should note their potential impact on local economic activity.

Supplementary Question

Why have the issues in delays in health care and support with childcare been pushed to the last paragraph of the answer to my question? As I see it, no matter how much we advertise how much we make ourselves an attractive employer, surely it is money wasted if we do not quickly address the fundamental reasons as to why people are not applying for jobs in the first place? And the initiatives around childcare, for example, announced by the Chancellor yesterday are, as we know, not overnight fixes.

Reply

In terms of your views on the response that has been given, I would be happy to discuss those areas which you have highlighted with you further, and indeed with colleagues, to see what further information we could supply you with.

Councillor Charlotte Atkins asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

What assessment has the County Council made of the financial viability of the private nursery education provision in Staffordshire? Is the new nursery education funding rate of £4.52 per hour sufficient to meet the escalating costs of nurseries delivering up to 30 hours a week for three and four year olds in Staffordshire? What support is the County Council offering the sector?

Reply

The County Council currently has not carried out any financial viability, this is because a national study of all early education funded childcare was conducted to establish the national funding formula. In addition the scale of this study due to the complexity of the market for example, there are differing provider types with significantly differing overhead costs would be extremely challenging.

We do however meet with the Early Education Reference Group and the sector more broadly. We understand that the sector is facing rising costs which mean that the hourly rate they receive through the early education entitlements can feel lower.

- Living wage increases
- General inflation
- Energy and food prices
- Rent increases
- Increase in cost of consumables
- Reduction in private income as parent requirements change
- Recruitment and retention issues

The Local Authority has to operate within a National Funding Formula. We are mandated to pass out a minimum of 95% funding for 3- and 4-year-olds to settings. In recognition of the increased costs identified by the sector above the County Council has ensured a budgeted funding pass-

through rate of 96.2% to providers of the 3- and 4-year-old allocation. Staffordshire however is a low funded authority and therefore this may still feel insufficient to local providers and we are raising this issue with the Department for Education both regionally and nationally and via the LGA.

In addition any early years provider who claims early education funding is able to request support visits from one of our Sufficiency and Market Development Officers. The team provide advice and guidance bespoke to the setting context regarding matters such as:

- Marketing and promotion
- Sustainability
- Recruitment and Retention
- Setting up new childcare
- Early Years Entitlements
- Suitability of premises
- Governance
- Staffing
- Leadership and Management
- Accessing funding such as EYPP and DAF

We would like to offer any setting who is struggling this support so please tell them to get in touch if they are facing challenges.

Supplementary Question

It is good to see in the budget that, at long last, the Government has recognised the importance of childcare. My concern is, with that announcement, did we get any sought of idea that the national formula for funded places was going to go up as it needs to get closer to the real cost of delivering a quality childcare provision?

Reply

To support delivery, the Government is also going to provide an extra £2.4m in 2023/24 for an uplift in the funding rate. The Government is also going to change the staff ratio to match that in Scotland, from one career to four children to one career to five children. There will also be an increase to support those on Universal Credit and the national pathfinder scheme for wraparound childcare in England to stimulate the market. But, of course, the devil will be in the detail and officers are already working on that and are in conversation with the DfE. I hope that once officers start to work with DfE and understand the detail, we will be in a better position to understand exactly what the offer will be for parents and their children across Staffordshire.

Councillor Hussain asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Health and Care whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

What additional steps can be taken in the area of social care to assist care workers in establishing an effective career path and feeling satisfied at work?

Reply

On 18 January Cabinet endorsed the Staffordshire Social Care Workforce Strategy. This has been co-produced by the Council, NHS, Local Economic Partnership, Skills for Care, local providers and other partners. This sets out how we will develop a more resilient care sector that enables more effective recruitment and retention by:

- a. Improving the usage of updated data and intelligence as a shared resource to support the social care workforce.
- b. Promoting available resources to providers more effectively and engage with providers who need the most support to use those resources.
- c. Developing an improved journey into work
- d. Implementing a co-ordinated partnership approach to learning and development
- e. Improving the positive recognition of social care as a valued career
- f. Increasing the level of capability to use digital and technology innovations.
- g. Supporting improved practice across the sector in recruitment and business continuity planning
- h. Seeking to reduce travel costs where possible across the partnership.

To improve the positive recognition of social care as a valued career we intend to:

- a. Develop and implement support networks for key leadership roles, supported by partners across the health and care system.
- b. Identify and progress reductions in bureaucracy where this does not adversely affect safe and effective care.
- c. Across local and national networks, make the case for promoting social care as a valued career, and for a fair and sustainable funding approach for the sector.

Supplementary Question

Would you agree that better pay and better working hours elsewhere is the main impediment to recruitment and retention in the care sector?

Reply

Certainly it is one of the factors but, actually, when we compiled this strategy and worked with partners, providers and people working within the industry, pay was certainly a factor but, actually, many of them derived huge personal satisfaction and loved doing the job. I think that working within social care/health care, we all need money to pay our bills, but you need to have that desire to work with people and help people – that was an extremely strong message that came through. This Strategy recognises that, as an employer, we have got to be very proactive, and we have made our recruitment process far quicker. There is also the factor of providing people with a career path and supporting them through that; and I would recommend to everybody to read this Strategy which sets out our journey.

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

Question

Outdoor walking and hiking in various streets, hills and open spaces are effective activities for the fight against obesity, isolation and mental health illnesses. What more can the County Council do to make these activities more popular with residents?

Reply

SCC is collaborating with a range of agencies (including Together Active) to develop partnership approaches in each of the districts and boroughs that focus on healthy eating and physical activity – known as **Better Health Staffordshire**, more information can be found here: [Better Health Staffordshire - Staffordshire County Council](#)

This is a relatively new initiative that is designed to operate over the long term – while there are no quick fix solutions, there is a huge range of opportunities across the county to encourage people to be more active. The plan is to work in partnership with those people who understand their communities best to maximise current facilities (leisure centres etc.) and resources (green spaces etc.) – not least by raising awareness of what is available and motivating people to take part by making activities easier to access and more enjoyable.

The **Environment & Countryside Service** promote access to Staffordshire's countryside estate of approximately 6000 acres of [country parks, open spaces and greenways](#), together with a [public rights of way](#) network of approximately 2500 miles. A series of [country trails and](#)

[promoted routes](#) are available to encourage use of the path network which include a series of circular walks centred on the Staffordshire Way.

SCC are the Lead Authority for the [Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty](#) partnership (AONB) **Cannock Chase AONB**. We promote walks for people to get out and about to explore the AONB, as part of our forthcoming 'Walking Cannock Chase' series. Partners provide activities for the local community and visitors to improve their physical and mental wellbeing. For example, Inspiring Healthy Lifestyles with Chase Fit in Cannock Chase District and the Friends of Cannock Chase provide a programme of guided walks.

The AONB is a partner with the **Wayfinding Project** led by Together Active, seeking to improve access for residents of North Hednesford to Cannock Chase, particularly those with health conditions and disabilities.

Our **Libraries & Arts** team promote local history walks from some libraries and are currently working with the AONB to develop information packs for children to encourage families to access Cannock Chase for well-being.

To encourage residents to access the outdoors, our activities are promoted via a range of communication channels: e.g. website, e-newsletters and social media. However, we will continue to work with our partners and our communications team to raise awareness of activities which promote healthy lifestyles.

56. Petitions

There were no petitions on this occasion.

Chairman