

Minutes of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 19 October 2022

Present: Tina Clements (Chair)

Attendance

Graham Hutton
Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf

David Smith

Apologies: Philippa Haden, Syed Hussain, Peter Kruskonjic and Bernard Williams

PART ONE

26. Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

27. Minutes of meeting held on 29 September 2022

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 29 September 2022 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

28. Economic Strategy Delivery update

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills updating them on progress made in the delivery of Staffordshire's Economic Strategy 2022-2030 (schedule 1 to the signed minutes).

Members heard that the Primary focuses of the Strategy were:- (i) Town centres; (ii) Higher skilled and higher paid workforce; (iii) 'Start-up' and 'step-up' businesses; (iv) The development of investment ready projects and; (v) Strategic corridors. In addition, various other priorities and themes were identified as being important in supporting the future growth of the economy. These included:- (i) Innovation; (ii) Supporting businesses on their journey to net zero and; (iii) Maximising the use of investment to unlock external funding.

Following Cabinet's approval and scrutiny by the Committee in March 2022, a four-week public consultation exercise had been held in May 2022 in order to give residents, businesses and wider stakeholders the opportunity to comment and shape the strategy prior to it being finalised.

Feedback from the consultation was overall supportive with ambitions for the regeneration of Town Centres being cited as the most important.

The Cabinet Member updated them on the potential impact of recent national and global economic headlines on the County and the Authority's ability to deliver the various priorities set out in the Strategy. However, he updated them on the activity undertaken to date towards achieving the Authority's various ambitions, as follows:-

Priority (i): Town Centre/High Street Regeneration

Ambition: "By 2030, we will tackle the challenges faced by many of our town centres and strive to create places that we can be proud of".

(i) Delivery of Central Government's Future High Streets Fund, Town Deals and Levelling-Up Fund in the eight Staffordshire District/Boroughs by assisting with the development of business cases; (ii) Work related to the appointment of a Development Partner for the Stafford Eastgate Regeneration Programme.

Priority (ii): Higher Skilled, Higher Paid Workforce

Ambition: "By 2030, we will address the low levels of skills across some parts of the County and support more of our residents to gain the high-level skills needed to take advantage of many better paid job opportunities".

(i) Launch of the Staffordshire Jobs and Careers Brokerage Service to support local residents and employers by providing free recruitment and support services including an on-line digital platform; (ii) Continued delivery of Staffordshire's Apprenticeship 500 programme which had so far resulted in 205 local businesses take on 400 Apprentices; (iii) Continuation of Staffordshire's Ignite initiative, designed to encourage a greater understanding of entrepreneurialism and enterprise amongst young people in their final year of college, which had so far trained over 12,000 students; (iv) Assistance given to skills providers in the County to further develop their facilities; (v) Continued delivery of Multiply, a £4.2m programme to develop numeracy skills regardless of age or profession together with various other adult learning initiatives.

Priority (iii): Supporting Start-Up and Step-Up Businesses

Ambition: "By 2030, we will create the conditions to allow more people to start and grow their business within Staffordshire, thereby addressing our relatively low levels of business start-ups across large parts of the County".

(i) Commissioning of independent research to identify how 'start-up' and 'step-up' businesses might best be supported; (ii) Continued delivery of Staffordshire's Get Started and Start-Up Loan schemes which had a target of supporting 120 businesses by March 2023; (iii) Significant investments made by the Authority to increase provision of high-quality business premises in the County including Shire Hall, Stafford and extension to Knutton Enterprise Centre, Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Priority (iv): Developing Investment Ready Projects

Ambition: "By 2030, we will play our part in supporting the substantial planned growth within the County through the development of investment ready projects and securing funding for our infrastructure and services".

(i) Continued partnership working with District/Borough Councils and other stakeholders to support the planned growth of the County through eg the preparation of refreshed Local Plans; (ii) Stimulation of the necessary conditions for growth through the Authority's Economic Growth Programme (which had already enabled an additional 11,000 jobs and 4,500 homes to be created since 2014) by eg the promotion of the Chatterley Valley West Development; (iii) Launch of new initiatives to support better digital connectivity across the County, funded through gainshare expected from the successful delivery of Superfast Staffordshire.

Priority (v): Strategic Corridors

Ambition: "By 2030, we will ensure we do not miss substantial opportunities afforded by our location in the centre of the Country by developing our key strategic A50/A500 and A38 corridors, including securing increased investment in innovation activities".

(i) The appointment of consultants (Deloitte) to liaise with primary manufacturers along the route in order to develop an investable, private led proposition for consideration at regional and national level.

Priority (vi): Supporting the Economy to Become Net Zero

Ambition: "By 2030, we will put climate change at the heart of all that we do, including supporting businesses on their journey to Net Zero".

(i) Formation of the Staffordshire Sustainability Board to facilitate collaborative working across the County towards Net Zero as defined by the Authority's climate change emergency declaration; (ii) the

identification of Green Growth (with a special focus on green skills) as a priority by Staffordshire Leaders' Board; (iii) Continued delivery of the Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme in providing grants to businesses for the implementation of energy efficient measures.

During the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued, Members gave detailed scrutiny to the update, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising issues of concern as necessary, including:- (i) the scope of Priority (v): Strategic Corridors above to also include the A500/A34 corridor between Junctions 14 and 16 of the M6 owing to its importance for local businesses; (ii) the need to focus on improving literacy as well as numeracy in Priority (ii): Higher Skilled, Higher Paid Workforce; (iii) the specifics of Priority (iv): Supporting the Economy to Become Net Zero above in the advice provided by the County Council to high energy business users for reduction of their carbon footprint by adopting sources of green energy; (v) further measures to improve engagement with wider stakeholders in order to secure Priority (i): Town Centre/High Street Regeneration and; (vi) improving digital connectivity in rural areas.

In conclusion, the Committee welcomed the significant progress which had been made in the delivery of the County Council's Economic Strategy and confirmed their agreement to the various Priorities contained therein. However, they were mindful of the considerable challenges ahead arising from adverse national and international circumstances beyond the control of the Authority. In addition, they emphasised the importance of mitigating climate change and the achievement of Net Zero by 2030.

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

(b) That the good progress made towards delivery of the County Council's Economic Strategy 2022-2030, be welcomed.

(c) That further updates on the various ambitions set out in the Strategy and targets in the accompanying Delivery Plan be brought to the Committee at six-monthly intervals.

29. Delivering a Future Vision for the Countryside Estate

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture giving further details of the proposed new Vision and Delivery Plan for the County Council's Countryside Estate (schedule 2 to the signed minutes).

At their meeting in February 2022, Members considered revised proposals for the management of the estate following the significantly changed context brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, which entailed its retention in-house. The new Vision was for the Estate to support the

wider Vision set out in the County Council's Strategic Plan 2022-2026 for, "an innovative, ambitious and sustainable County where everyone has the opportunity to prosper, be healthy and happy". At that time, they requested further details of the Authority's investment proposals/Delivery Plan so they could give pre-decision scrutiny prior to their consideration by Cabinet.

During her presentation of the report, the Cabinet Member highlighted the key actions contained in the Delivery Plan for supporting each of the Priorities included in the Strategic Plan, as follows:-

Priority 1: Support Staffordshire's economy to grow, generating more and better paid jobs.

(i) Enhance catering offers at Country Parks; (ii) Explore increased provision of business units and business opportunities that linked to the Parks' offer; (iii) Parks Promotion Plan – improved website, social media and promotion of the Parks' offer, including linking with local businesses and cultural industries that complement the offer, leaflets and signage; (iv) Placements and traineeships to support growth of the green sector and address skills shortage; (v) Major redevelopment of café and visitor centre facilities at Marquis Drive and; (vi) Expansion of facilities at Chasewater.

Priority 2: Tackle climate change, enhance our environment and make Staffordshire more sustainable.

(i) Increase carbon sequestration to help meet net zero through tree planting and habitat enhancement; (ii) Support nature recovery through habitat enhancement linked to the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS); (iii) targeted species recovery work linked to LNRS; (iv) Promotion, education and behaviour change – events and activities to raise awareness of climate change and nature recovery and what people can do to help and; (iv) Greening the Countryside service – electric/Hydro-treated Vegetable Oil (HVO) vehicles and equipment, renewable building technologies installed and adaption measures developed.

Priority 3: Encourage good health and wellbeing, resilience and independence.

(i) Develop a Healthy Parks Programme to include health walks, mindfulness walks, activity promotion, outdoor gyms, etc. and explore social prescribing models. Link to Better Health Staffordshire plus groups already linked to sites for addiction recovery, mental health support etc. to expand offer; (ii) Undertake a programme of site improvement to improve accessibility and reduce barriers to use, including access for all

facilities, dementia-friendly status etc. Ensure improved promotion of information about site accessibility and the site offer was available to target audiences; (iii) Provide an enhanced community/cultural/ arts offer including through volunteers and through externally funded programmes; (iv) Develop Volunteer Strategy and expand the volunteer programme to include volunteer wardens for key sites and broader volunteering to include conservation work, litter patrols, visitor welcome, fire watch, health walk leaders, guided walk leaders; (v) Support Friends Groups and develop a Parks Supporter Scheme.

Priority 4: Fix more roads, and improve transport and digital connections.

(i) Continue to support Highways with deer/vehicle collision reduction and management – deer safety project and emergency response work; (ii) Support sustainability through provision of EV charging at key park locations; (iii) Manage greenways and rights of way across parks to provide leisure and utility routes; (iv) Enhance digital connectivity at Cannock Chase County Park and potentially other main parks to enhance both staff operational efficiency and support improved visitor facilities and connectivity.

Priority 5: Offer every Staffordshire child and young person the best start in life, and the chance to achieve their potential.

(i) Develop a programme with family support teams, including walks, events and activities. Link to Holiday Activities and Food programme providers; (ii) Support and expand outdoor learning, forest schools etc. and; (iii) Work with providers to develop activities for children and young people – junior ranger sessions, orienteering etc.

In addition, she highlighted the key priorities from those listed above which were intended for implementation over the proceeding six to twelve months as follows: - (i) enhanced catering offers at main country parks; (ii) complete feasibility study for Chasewater Country Park; (iii) extension of pay and display to the north of the county; (iv) Parks Promotion Plan – online presence and welcome signs/orientation; (v) nature recovery work for designated sites and target species and planning work for woodland creation for net zero; (vi) greening the service – electric/HVO vehicles, charging points etc. (vii) sustainability promotion and behaviour change; (viii) commence development of Healthy Parks Programme and deliver Wayfinding Project at Cannock Chase (partnership scheme funded by Sport England); (ix) access audits and work to enhance access where funds currently available – bid for further funding; (x) develop volunteer strategy and recruit additional volunteers; (xi) deliver fibre broadband to Cannock Chase County Park and; (xii) Deer safety project and callout.

In the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave further detailed scrutiny to the proposed future Vision for the Countryside Estate together with the various key actions in support of the County Council's Strategic Plan 2022-2026 asking questions, seeking clarification and raising areas of concern, as necessary, including: - (i) the implications (if any) of the proposals on Staffordshire County Farms; (ii) opportunities which existed from the development of windfarms within the Countryside Estate; (iii) anticipated yields from the expansion of parking charges at County Parks and potential effect on usage; (iv) opportunities for re-wilding within the Countryside Estate; (v) the valuable contribution made to date by volunteers towards the management of the Countryside Estate and how this was to be recognised and further developed in the future.

In conclusion, the Committee welcomed the proposals and looked forward to their successful implementation. In addition they urged the Cabinet Member to have regard to their comments particularly in respect of opportunities for re-wilding and green energy generation.

Note by Clerk: The meeting became inquorate during consideration of this Agenda item following departure of a Member from the meeting room. However, a quorum was restored once the Member had returned and before the following decisions were made.

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

(b) That the key actions identified in the Future Vision for the Countryside Estate's Delivery Plan be supported.

(c) That progress against the various key actions and on-going performance of the service be monitored closely and further scrutiny be undertaken at the appropriate time, as necessary.

30. Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service 2022-25

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture regarding Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service's offer in support of the priorities contained in the County Council Strategic Plan 2022-2026 (schedule 3 to the signed minutes).

Members heard that the Library Service helped to connect communities, improve health and wellbeing, digital inclusion and promoted equality through learning, literacy and cultural activity, through the delivery of four national Universal Library Offers (ie:- (i) Health and Wellbeing; (ii) Reading; (iii) Culture and Creativity and; (iv) Information and Digital). In turn, these Offers were underpinned by two national Library Promises (ie the Children's Promise and the Print and Impaired People's Promise).

The Library Service had fully recovered their offer following the Covid-19 pandemic and was delivering a varied programme of physical and virtual activity to support County Council's strategic priorities including:- (i) the establishment and further development of Start-up Information Hubs with grant-aid from Arts Council England; (ii) delivery of various initiatives to improve adult literacy with funding from Central Government; (iii) delivery of the Be Your Health Programme with grant-aid from Health Education England; (iv) partnership working with NHS Knowledge and Library Service, University Hospitals of Derby and Burton NHS Foundation Trust and Midlands Partnership NHS Foundation Trust to design an initiative aimed at improving access to health and digital literacy information for young people in the Newcastle-under-Lyme and Burton-on-Trent areas; (v) participation the Moonbeams Early Years Action Research Programme investigating the development of language and communication through arts and creativity and; (vi) delivery of the national Green Libraries and Changing Climates, Changing Lifestyles initiatives.

In addition, members were updated on proposals for the development of library buildings in Burton-on-Trent, Tamworth, Cannock, Leek and Kidsgrove together with efforts by the Service to support residents through a period of dramatic rises in the cost of living.

During the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued, Members gave detailed scrutiny to the efforts being made by the Libraries and Arts Services to support the priorities contained in the Strategic Plan, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising areas of concern as necessary, including:- (i) how the Community Libraries offer could be further improved by harmonising services with those provided by Local Authority run libraries; (ii) the need to improve communication with 'Local' Members regarding library services within their Divisions (including Wilnecote and Shenstone Libraries) particularly in respect of visits by Central Government and other national bodies; (iii) promotion of Library buildings as warm spaces during winter 2022/23 having regard to the cost of living crises and; (iv) opportunities for promotion of healthy lifestyles in libraries.

In conclusion Members welcomed news regarding the Libraries and Arts offer and expressed their support for the overall direction of travel for the Service during the period covered by the Strategic Plan. However, they undertook to keep the service under close review and give further scrutiny in the future, as necessary.

Note by Clerk: The meeting became inquorate during consideration of this Agenda item following departure of a Member from the meeting room. However, a quorum was restored once the Member had returned and before the following decisions were made.

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

(b) That the future direction of travel for the Libraries and Art Service during the period of the Strategic Plan 2022-2026, be supported.

(c) That the Cabinet Member be urged to have regard to their comments in seeking to improve the operational performance of the Service, particularly in respect of communication with 'Local' Members.

31. Work Programme

RESOLVED – That, subject to the addition of the following items/meetings, the updated Work Programme (schedule 4 to the signed minutes) be approved:-

Item	Date of Meeting
Site visits to Household Waste Recycling Centres	Monday 7 November 2022 pm (additional meeting)
Electric Vehicle Infrastructure Strategy	Friday 16 December 2022
HS2 - Sixth Monthly Update	Friday 3 February 2023
Civil Parking Enforcement – Briefing Note	Friday 3 February 2023
Tree Planning Net Zero by Nature	Thursday 27 April 2023

32. Date of next meeting - Thursday 10 November 2022 at 10.00 am, County Buildings, Stafford

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

Chairman