

Minutes of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 6 July 2023

Present: Tina Clements (Chair)

Attendance	
Charlotte Atkins	Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf
Philippa Haden	David Smith
Philip Hudson	Samantha Thompson
Graham Hutton	Bernard Williams
Peter Kruskonjic (Vice-Chair (Overview))	

Also in attendance: Jonathan Lindop and Jonathan Price

Apologies: Hannah Gallimore

Part One

8. Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

9. Minutes of meeting held on 7 June 2023

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

10. SEND Accelerated Progress Plan: Strategy for Special Provision

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Education (and SEND) regarding the progress made by the Authority towards implementing the various actions set out in their SEND Accelerated Progress Plan (schedule 1 to the signed minutes).

In January 2022, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills and Care Quality Committee made an inspection of the Authority with the purpose of determining whether sufficient progress had been made in addressing the areas of significant weakness as detailed in the Written Statement of Action. The subsequent Re-visit Inspection Report, published in March 2022, identified that significant progress had been made in addressing six out of the eight original weaknesses. However, the following areas still requiring improvement ie:-

- 'Co-production, particularly with parents';

- 'Quality of Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plans'.

In response, the local area established a task and finish group comprising representatives from The Parent and Carer Forum, The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information Advice and Support Services (SENDIASS), schools, local Clinical Commissioning Groups together with officers from the Social Care and Education Authorities in order to develop an Accelerated Progress Plan (APP).

The APP set out:-

- The governance and accountability structures and processes that would support the next phase of improvement;
- The actions the local area was now taking to respond to their outstanding concerns;
- The impact measures and milestones to which the local area was working including the improvements expected to be delivered in the next 3, 6 and 12 months.

Members heard that the Department for Education (DFE) and NHS England Advisers conducted a twelve month review of progress against the APP in April 2023 and concluded:-

"The local area's collective determination to making sustainable improvements to SEND services and to the lives of children and young people continues to be clear. Evidence was also available to demonstrate that progress is being made to improve coproduction, the Education Health and Care (EHC) needs assessment pathway and special provision".

The Cabinet Member then outlined the Authority's Strategy for Special Provision – a key workstream within the APP, which comprised the following two major components:- (i) the creation of additional provision in Staffordshire special schools based on a detailed analysis of need and; (ii) a pre-statutory Staffordshire Enhanced District Inclusion Support Model (SEDIS) accessed via an 'Enhanced Assess-Plan-Do Review Pathway' to provide mainstream educational settings with the resources and support to deliver the graduated response.

The County Council's vision was that:-

"all children and young people with SEND are given the opportunity to achieve everything that they can. They engage with the right support at the right time from their parents/carers, the community and the professionals that work with them to make this happen".

They noted that currently fewer children and young people with EHC Plans in Staffordshire attended mainstream schools than elsewhere in the country, (30% in Staffordshire whereas 40.5% nationally). In addition, children and young people with SEND did not achieve as well as other children in the County. Therefore, the Strategy aimed to ensure equality of access to education which met children's individual needs in local communities to give them the best start in life and a chance to realise their potential.

A public consultation had been undertaken on the SEDIS model between 17 May 2023 and 5 July 2023 and responses were currently being analysed.

In the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave detailed scrutiny to the outcome of the twelve-month review and proposed SEDIS Model asking questions, seeking clarification and raising areas of concern as necessary, including:- (i) the time taken to process applications for EHCPs and the options available for improving performance; (ii) the various reasons for the recent increase in demand for EHCPs in Staffordshire; (iii) mainstream schools' policies towards pupils with SEND having regard to their positions in educational attainment league tables; (iv) how the Strategy and SEDIS model aimed reduce demand for EHCPs and improve relationships between schools and parents and; (v) the arrangements in place to monitor the impact of the strategy.

In conclusion, Members welcomed the positive outcome of the twelve-month review and paid tribute to the Cabinet Member and his Team for their efforts in achieving satisfactory progress to date. In addition they expressed their support for the Strategy for Special Provision and SEDIS Model and looked forward to the Authority realising their vision for all Children and especially Children with SEND, as soon as possible.

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

(b) That the actions set out in Staffordshire's Special Education Needs and Disabilities Accelerated Progress Plan particularly in respect of Special Provision continue to be endorsed.

(c) That the positive feedback received from the Department for Education following their twelve month review of progress against the APP be welcomed and that the 'next steps' and further actions required by the next review be implemented as necessary.

(d) That the County Council's proposed Strategy for Special Provision be

endorsed.

(e) That the Cabinet Member continue his efforts to improve the processing of applications for statutory Educational Health and Care Plans so that pupils with Special Education Needs and Disabilities might have appropriate additional support, according to their needs, at the required time.

11. Future Highway Delivery Model – Functional Plans

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport regarding the development of Functional Level Service Plans (FLSP) under the Future Highways Delivery Model and Highways Transformation initiative (schedule 2 to the signed minutes).

At their meeting on 7 June 2023, the Committee received a quarterly progress update on the Highway Transformation Programme which included the future functional approach to be adopted as part of the move towards a Hybrid Mixed Economy operating model. At that meeting the Committee were asked to consider their role in agreeing annual FLSPs and in order to assist them with this, they requested early sight of an example draft plan.

The Cabinet Member outlined the purpose of the Functional Level Specifications with reference to that for highway urban and highway rural grass cutting, as appended to the report. He explained that the Specifications set out the base level service for all delivery areas, irrespective of the provider, to ensure that the County Council were fulfilling their statutory duties safely and relevant information was available to answer queries from Members of the Public.

Functional Level Service Specifications were to form part of a wider suite of documents for service commissioning and were to be updated annually to reflect any changes required through the Transformation process and budgets set by the Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

In the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members considered their future role in the setting of Functional Level Service Specifications asking questions, seeking clarification and raising areas of concern as necessary, including:- (i) the need for greater consistency in service provision across the County; (ii) the need for clear lines of communication between commissioners, contractors, and the public and; (iii) the ability of agreed Specifications to incorporate innovation/new ways of working as and when required.

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

(b) That the proposed new approach to the development of Functional Specifications for the delivery of highway works including the 'Main Headings' set out in the presentation, be welcomed.

(c) That the Committee's concerns regarding the need for improved communication (especially with 'Local' Members'), responsiveness of third-party contractors to service requests, performance monitoring and enforcement, partnership working with other Public Sector organisations and actions to improve consistency, sustainability and tackle climate change be addressed in future revised Specifications across the range of Highway Works, as necessary.

(d) That the Committee welcome the opportunity to input into the annual development of revised Functional Level Service Plans and Specifications and that further consideration be given as to what this should involve, at the appropriate time, having regard to their other Work Programme priorities.

12. Staffordshire Bus Strategy

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport regarding a review of the Staffordshire Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) which was being undertaken following feedback received from the Department for Transport (DfT) following submission to them in October 2022 (schedule 3 to the signed minutes).

The BSIP set out how the Authority intended to work closely with bus operators and local communities to address the various challenges identified in the National Bus Strategy. In response to a request by Cabinet in September 2021, the Committee identified a list of priorities which they recommended should be included in the draft BSIP ie:-

- "Improvements to be made to Roadside Information and Infrastructure including bus shelters, bus stops, timetable information and real time information etc.
- Passenger information provided to be consistent and accurate at all locations.
- Improvements to be made to the timing and reliability of local bus services.
- Links to be made to other strategic agendas and policy areas, including climate change and access to education.

- Engagement to be maintained with bus users and local communities as the BSIP and Enhanced Partnership are developed, particularly in the most rural areas of the County.
- Residents to be encouraged to use local bus services in order to improve the financial viability and sustainability of services”.

However, following submission, the Plan failed to attract the necessary funding from Government (£106m over 3 years and a further £7m to cover lifetime costs) and a full review of Staffordshire’s BSIP was therefore required based on feedback received from the DfT. In addition, BSIP+, announced by Government on 18 May 2023, identified a further £150m in support of the passenger transport sector between April 2024 and April 2025. Whilst the County Council had been awarded £1,327,673, the DfT advised that to receive their full allocations, Local Transport Authority’s (LTAs) should update their Enhanced Partnerships (EP) (the formal agreement between LTAs and bus operators).

Members heard that significant progress had been made towards reviewing both the original BSIP submission and completion of an EP for Staffordshire with the support £874,538 Capacity Grant from Government. The contents of the draft EP (as set out in Appendix 2 to the report) had been subject to a formal 28-day consultation process ending on 11 May 2023 during which no objections had been received. Therefore, Members’ views were required on the contents of the original BSIP and draft EP in light of the above-mentioned developments.

In the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave detailed scrutiny to the County Council’s BSIP submission and draft EP, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising areas of concern as necessary, including:- (i) the alternative strategies available for rural areas where demand for bus transport was relatively low; (ii) the impact of concessionary transport schemes on the financial viability of certain bus routes; (iii) the various reasons why demand for bus transport had not returned to pre-pandemic levels; (iv) the vital role of bus services in providing essential transport for vulnerable groups in the community; (v) whether the BSIP and EP were adequately ambitious in their aims to increase bus usage having regard to the Authority’s climate change agenda; (vi) the need to work collaboratively with other Local Authorities across the region; (vii) the various reasons why the County Council’s original BSIP submission had been unsuccessful; (viii) the future role of competition in the local bus sector and; (ix) how the BSIP and EP could encourage greater use of ‘zero emission’ vehicles.

In conclusion, whilst Members expressed disappointment that the original BSIP bid had been unsuccessful, they were encouraged by news of the additional funding which had been made available under the BSIP+ initiative.

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

(b) That the proposed Enhanced Partnership (EP) and full review of the previously agreed Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) be welcomed having regard to the likely availability of future Government funding for public transport.

(c) That the Cabinet Member consider revised ambitions for the new BSIP aimed at ensuring both rural and urban areas in the County are better served by public transport having regard to the feedback received from Government following the previously unsuccessful bid and County Council's Strategic Priorities.

(d) In establishing an EP, the Cabinet Member prioritise Partnership working and communication with 'Local' Members particularly in respect of future significant service reconfigurations.

13. Work Programme

RESOLVED – That, subject to the inclusion of the following additional items, the updated Work Programme be approved:-

28 September 2023:-

- Local Nature Recovery Strategy;
- North Staffordshire Air Quality Action Plan.

14. Date of Next Meeting - Thursday 28 September 2023 at 10.00 am, County Buildings, Stafford

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

Chair