

Minutes of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 22 November 2023

Present: Tina Clements (Chair)

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

Also in attendance: Darryl Evers, Jonathan Lindop and Victoria Wilson

Apologies: Charlotte Atkins, Hannah Gallimore and Bernard Williams

Part One

33. Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

34. Minutes of meeting held on 9 November 2023

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 9 November 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

35. Staffordshire History Centre Update

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture updating them on progress with regard to the development of the Staffordshire History Centre (schedule 1 to the signed minutes).

Staffordshire County Council and William Salt Library had been working in partnership since 2025 to create and deliver the Staffordshire History Centre project. The Project, which was part funded by the National Heritage Lottery Fund, envisaged a new facility located on Eastgate Street, Stafford. The Centre was to become a key part of the County's cultural and heritage visitor offer, bringing three collections together for the first time and delivering a four-year programme of activities. It was anticipated that it would be opened to the public in Autumn 2024.

During the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued, Members gave detailed scrutiny to the progress made in the Project, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising areas of concern as necessary including:-

(i) the efforts being made to reach-out to local communities and new people who might not have previously engaged with the Arts and Archives service; (ii) the specific measures planned to mark the opening of the Centre including eg siting of a time capsule; (iii) the importance of having a co-ordinated communications strategy which included joint working with other local and national bodies eg the National Trust.

In conclusion Members were pleased with the progress which had been made to date and welcomed the key findings of the independent Evaluation report. They thanked the Cabinet Member and her Team for the opportunity to visit the construction site of the Centre prior to the meeting and agreed that its completion would be a significant addition to Destination Staffordshire.

In reply, the Cabinet Member undertook to provide Members with copies of:- (i) Archive and Heritage Service Newsletters; (ii) Staffordshire History Centre Project blogs and (iii) Lockdown Tour of the William Salt Library Revisited – video to keep them informed and help them in their role championing Staffordshire.

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

(ii) That the key findings of the Independent Evaluation Report on the Staffordshire History Centre Capital Works progress be welcomed.

(iii) That consideration be given to the citing of a Time Capsule at the Staffordshire History Centre, as part of the celebrations to mark its opening in 2024.

36. Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service Performance 2022-2023

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture regarding performance of the Staffordshire Libraries and Arts Service during the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023 (schedule 2 to the signed minutes).

Members heard that during the period, efforts had been focused on recovering the physical service offer following reduced provision during the Covid-19 pandemic. They noted that library performance had improved post pandemic with significant increases in visits by the public, book issues, and new members joining being achieved. In addition, the service had actively supported the County Council's strategic priorities of supporting Staffordshire's economy; tackling climate change and; encouraging good health and wellbeing.

Keeping people and communities connected had been an important part of the Service's work during the Pandemic. The lessons learned in providing

digital services had helped inform the development of a hybrid offer in order to reach-out to new and existing clients. Notwithstanding this, there had been continued development of the Services' estate in particular the libraries located at Burton, Leek, Tamworth and Womborne.

During the discussion which ensued, Members gave detailed scrutiny to the work and performance of the Service, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising issues of concern as necessary, including:- (i) the need for libraries to share best practice having regard to the variation in service provision noted by Members around the County; (ii) the need to include Community Libraries in some of the future initiatives being promoted at County managed facilities eg Summer Reading Challenge and; (iii) the need to make Staffordshire's voice heard during the review being undertaken by Baroness Elizabeth Sanderson of Welton.

In conclusion, Members were encouraged by news of the significant post pandemic recovery and highlighted the valuable contribution made by the Service in achieving the County Council's Strategic outcomes and priorities. They noted the diversity of services on offer at Staffordshire Libraries and contrasted them with other Shire Authorities whose provision was less comprehensive.

In reply to a request by Members, the Cabinet Member undertook to provide them with a short handout/briefing note listing the various services and initiatives on offer at Staffordshire Libraries and highlighting some of the successes, for dissemination to residents in their Divisions, as necessary.

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

(b) That the overall direction of travel for the Staffordshire's Libraries and Arts Service, as set out in the report, be supported.

(c) That the performance of the Service continue to be monitored and further scrutiny be undertaken at the appropriate time, as necessary.

37. Work Programme

Members noted the long list of items scheduled for their December 2023 and March 2024 meetings (five and nine items respectively).

The Chairman said that she would seek further clarification of the required timeframes for Scrutiny from the relevant Cabinet Members with a view to having a more manageable Work Programme and report back to the Committee, as necessary.

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

38. Date of Next Meeting - Wednesday 13 December 2023 at 2.00 pm, County Buildings, Stafford

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

Chair