

Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee Meeting held on 18 December 2014

Present: Brian Edwards (Chairman)

George Adamson
Ann Beech
Len Bloomer
Maureen Compton
Tim Corbett
Geoff Martin

Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf
Geoff Morrison
Martyn Tittley (Vice-Chairman)
Paul Woodhead
Candice Yeomans

Also in attendance: Ben Adams, Ian Benson, Gill Heath, Tina Randall, Clive Thomson and Mark Winnington

Apologies: Sheree People

PART ONE

17. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

18. Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 16 October 2014

RESOLVED- That the minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 16 October 2014 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

19. Children Missing Out on Education

The Vice Chairman presented the report of the Working Group. He reported that he was confident that the Council had robust systems in place for tracking children who are missing out on education but had concerns regarding those that were not known to authorities who may be at risk. He thanked officers for their role in preparing the report.

RESOLVED – That a) The report was accepted.

b) It was agreed that the Vice Chairman should follow up his communication with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs regarding information sharing and report back to the Committee at a future date.

20. Improving Connectivity in Staffordshire

The Cabinet Member and County Commissioner for Connectivity presented a progress report to the Committee on the review of public transport commissioned in Staffordshire following a previous report to the Committee in October 2013. Details of partnership working, investment in new buses and future planned activity such as introducing a Voluntary Quality Network Partnership in the urban areas of Staffordshire.

The Council needed to have sound engagement with operators since eighty per cent of buses in Staffordshire were commercially operated. Whole area reviews of services had been undertaken in parts of Staffordshire over the last 18 months and the network had been re-shaped as a result. Discussion had taken place with operators and communities to meet the needs of users in this commercial environment. However, it was not possible to meet every single travel need and to put in a bespoke solution for everyone. Developer money had been used to introduce new services and work had been ongoing to ensure its future commercial viability.

In regard to network redesign, Members were keen to see more connectivity between rural areas and Stafford, so that the County becomes more prosperous. The primary focus will be in encouraging operators to invest and to encourage public use of buses in and around Stafford. It was noted that there is a long-term Stafford review. Further work was being done on understanding local intelligence on demand patterns and there is a real challenge to provide a service in rural areas to an affordable subsidy level. Members also stated that changes to rural bus services in East Staffordshire had been controversial and consultation time compressed as Hoar Cross and Needwood Forest Parish Councils had not realised that they were part of the Stone Network and had not participated in the public consultation events. Consultation was vital to understand what is required in rural areas.

In regard to Independent Travel Training (ITT) for SEN pupils, the Cabinet Member stated that as part of the transport review it had been established that the core transport offer was first and foremost bus or rail public transport. It was recognised that to date ITT was carried out on a voluntary basis and he would welcome the Committee's views on how to take this forward.

Members asked if there was any evidence of the impact of moving from direct transport to public transport on truancy rates. Officers explained that extensive discussions with schools and operators had shown that in some cases direct transport services were overlaying commercial bus services, or there was commonality of route and there were opportunities to flex commercial bus services to promote and enable greater independence for pupils, such as facilitating attendance at extra curricular activities and preparing pupils for life after school. Schools had raised concerns regarding pupil safety, but to date there had been no reported incidents of untoward behaviours towards children who had transferred to public transport. The transport team were working with schools in Staffordshire Moorlands and with faith schools to support this transition in September 2015. It was noted that many thousands of children already use the public transport network and children are able to travel into towns using the Your Staffordshire card. In some areas additional usage had led to extra services being put on by operators that benefitted everyone.

More than 1400 mainstream pupils/students have been transferred from bespoke contracted services to the public transport network and are now travelling independently; these young people did not receive specific travel training, albeit travel training support was available as required. It was noted that to date 20 SEN pupils had received independent travel training (ITT) training and as a result a number of SEN pupils have transferred to public transport on a voluntary basis, often making use of the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme, with financial savings to the Council.

The Cabinet Member stated that ITT by SEN pupils was a voluntary initiative with parents putting forward their children for training. In some cases parents who had tried ITT had suggested that it was inconvenient for them (the parents) and had asked to revert to bespoke transport. The Cabinet Member sought the Committee's views on whether travel assistance guidance for SEN pupils should be voluntary or compulsory.

Committee Members supported ITT and the move for SEN pupils to transition from bespoke home to school transport and the planned expansion of Personal Travel Budgets with the proviso that pupils' safety should be fully considered. Members stated that the child should be at the centre of this decision and there were benefits for the child to using public transport, such as social interaction, which could have a long term benefit in terms of the child's confidence.

In discussing partnership working and future planned activity Members valued the new bus services that had been introduced in the Cannock area and the bus shuttle service between Cannock and Wolverhampton hospitals and Cannock and I54 connections which are currently out to competitive tender. Members stressed the importance of the expansion of real-time travel information for passengers. Real-time information was being rolled out in Staffordshire with pump priming coming from successful Local Sustainable Transport Fund bids, but ultimately it relied on the bus driver making it work. Technically this was a highly complex project, but it was achievable. Further bus routes were now being investigated and the Council were inviting added-value options from the bus companies.

The Vice Chairman asked if the information screens in bus shelters in Lichfield Rural West could be speeded up.

RESOLVED - That: a) The report was accepted.

b) The Cabinet Member note the Committee's views on Independent Travel Training and home to school transport for children with SEN.

21. High Speed Rail 2 (HS2) Update

The Cabinet Member introduced an update on the Council's position in regard to Phase 1 Hybrid Bill of HS2 and Members were shown maps of the scheme.

The Cabinet Member stated that the government has made it clear that the project will move forward. The Council's position would now be to concentrate their efforts on mitigation on the impact that the proposed scheme has on the environment and the lives of local residents and ensure that those affected get the appropriate level of compensation.

The Council has engaged with communities and facilitated a number of meetings so that all views could be heard. The Council has submitted some 70 petitioning points to HS2 Ltd although there were four key items. Following detailed discussion/negotiation with HS2 Ltd agreement on the 4 key petitioning points had been achieved and discussions continued on the remaining issues. It was noted that the council was working in collaboration with a number of other local authorities on noise mitigation.

It was noted that in respect of HS2 Phase 2, the government have issued consultation on the safeguarding of the route from Fradley to Crewe. The Council will be submitting a response to that consultation that ends of 6 January 2015.

The Vice Chairman raised concerns on behalf of the residents he represents regarding the construction of Handsacre junction with the West Coast main line – now being classed as part of Phase 1, which gave residents little time to petition against the proposal. As a result mortgage providers had rejected applications. The Cabinet Member stated that representations should be made to the local MP and mortgage providers. He offered to raise this matter with HS2 Ltd.

Members asked whether there was a possibility that the scheme would only be built as far Curzon Street. The Cabinet Member responded that it was his personal view that the first phase would be from London to Crewe by 2026 as reflected in the recent Higgins report.

Given the existing good speed of travel from Stafford to London, Members queried the benefits to Stafford residents of HS2. The Cabinet Member responded that he wanted to ensure that the Stafford to London service was not denigrated. The County Commissioner added that the Hybrid Bill focussed on building railway infrastructure but the Bill could have an impact on the excellent railway service network that already existed for Staffordshire residents. The Hybrid Bill was not the appropriate mechanism for petitioning against rail services because they were asking for permission to build infrastructure. It was important to raise this matter at a later stage in the development to ensure that Staffordshire enhances its future rail capability.

Members asked if connectivity with the motorway network had been considered. The managed motorway network would be extended further north and would help with this. Projects were due to be completed in 2026 to ensure a direct link from Crewe Parkway to Stoke and the west of Staffordshire. Members were advised to read the Higgins report for full details of the proposed scheme.

RESOLVED – That: a) the report was received.

b) The Cabinet Member would raise the mortgage matter regarding the Handsacre junction with the West Coast Main Line with HS2 Ltd.

c) Members be advised to read the Higgins report to get full details of the proposed Phase 2 of the HS2 scheme.

22. Countryside Estate Management Review

The Cabinet Member indicated his intention to review the most effective way of managing our estate including undertaking some soft-market testing from January and to identify and establish a range of alternative delivery models for managing our 6,000 acre countryside estate, which we currently manage in-house supported by local communities and volunteers. There was a desire to manage our estate more efficiently and to improve outcomes. The Cabinet Member invited Members' comments on using the same critical success factors and method of evaluation as had been used for Infrastructure+ and the libraries project with some slight amendments. This may involve

some voluntary organisations and volunteers working with the Council on projects. Voluntary organisations and Friends of groups could tap into additional financial resources that would enable the Council to manage the estate better.

Members asked if the various strategies that relate to tourism and country parks were aligned, and for an update on the press announcement on discussions that were taking place between the Council and the National Trust. The Cabinet Member reassured Members that the Tourism Strategy, Destination Partnership and Countryside Estate Management strategy were interlinked.

The future of Shugborough was being considered outside the scope of this review, but discussions with the National Trust were ongoing. Members supported these discussions.

In regard to Chasewater and Marquis Drive. Chasewater are now interlinked and present excellent opportunities for future growth.

Members asked for further detail regarding the strategic partnership set up with AMEY to manage country parks. The Cabinet Member responded that this did fall within the scope of remit of the Infrastructure+ project and that one option may be that AMEY staff may undertake some work in regard to the maintenance of Cannock Chase. Members asked for reassurance that Cannock Chase would not be sold. The Cabinet Member indicated that he had no plans to sell Cannock Chase.

RESOLVED - That Members agreed the adoption of the proposed critical success factors and requested a further report in March 2015.

23. Flood Risk Management - Progress update

The Cabinet Member and County Commissioner for the Sustainable County summarised the progress with regard to the Council's responsibilities as Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) for Staffordshire. Staffordshire County Council (SCC) was now in the final stages of making an inter-authority agreement with Shropshire County Council. Of particular note was the establishment of Schedule 3 of the Flood and Water Management Act that could establish the Council as a SUDS (Sustainable Drainage Systems) Approving Body. The legislation is not yet written and the planned introduction of SUDS has been cancelled and has gone out to consultation again. The responsibility for implementing SUDS could go back to the borough/district council planning authorities and the County Council could become a statutory consultee, but awaits notification from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) on the Council's role. This could have financial and skills resource implications for the authority, particularly if the Council is given a short timescale for implementation.

Details of the partnership funding mechanism were given. A six year programme of bids is now required by the EA and the submission date moved forward to the Spring. Infrastructure+ will be delivering this work.

Members commented on the need for close partnership working with local councils, EA and STW.

The Environment Agency (EA) have withdrawn from making bespoke comments on planning applications outside of the larger river flood zones and on surface water management for new developments. Although the LLFA is a non- statutory consultee on the planning process, the EA has referred developers and local planning authorities to the LLFA for advice. This has had a resource and cost implication for the Council. Members asked if this was slowing the planning process down. The intention was that the developer will have put the SUDS scheme in before the planning application is submitted and will be considered in parallel with the planning application. However, the controversial SUDS proposals may delay planning. Members asked if the SUDS schemes on the six year plan take into account what the EA are doing.

The LLFA sit down with EA and Severn Trent Water Authority (STWA) regularly and go through the schemes and STWA investment programme to investigate how they can invest and work together. This is particularly important where flooding is caused by a number of different reasons. The Council also comment on EA river modelling and advice and investigate highways flooding.

Members were reassured that the Council works with partners in regard to flooding on arable land.

RESOLVED: – That the report be accepted.

24. Work Programme

Members requested a further update on the Countryside Management Review in March 2015.

RESOLVED – That the update listed above be added to the Work Programme.

25. Exclusion of the Public

RESOLVED – That the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business which involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the paragraph of Part One of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 as indicated.

26. Public Services Network Service Level Agreement in Staffordshire Schools (exemption paragraph 3)

Chairman

Documents referred to in these minutes as Schedules are not appended, but will be attached to the signed copy of the Minutes of the meeting. Copies, or specific information contained in them, may be available on request.