

**Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee Meeting held on 12  
May 2014**

Present: Brian Edwards (Chairman)

George Adamson  
Ann Beech  
Len Bloomer  
Maureen Compton  
Geoff Martin

Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf  
Geoff Morrison  
Martyn Tittley (Vice-Chairman)  
Diane Todd

**Also in attendance:** Ben Adams and Mike Lawrence

**Apologies:** Mark Deaville

**PART ONE**

**57. Declarations of Interest**

There were none on this occasion.

**58. Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 24 April 2014**

**RESOLVED** – That the minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee meeting held on 24 April 2014 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

**59. Achieving Excellence: Libraries in a Connected Staffordshire (part 2)**

The Cabinet Member, Children, Communities and Localism, explained to Members that the work being undertaken was to future proof the library service in Staffordshire. There was a need to make the library offer more relevant to the different communities it served.

Members received a presentation on the methodology being used to assess the library offer.

The Library Service had been designated a statutory service following the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. Since then the Library Service had significantly changed the way it operated to take account of differences in the way people access information and learning. It had also successfully delivered £1.1m savings over a 5 year period without any building closures or reductions in opening hours. However there was now a need to find a further £1.325m saving by 2016/17 as part of the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). There was therefore a need to remodel the Service to reflect changing needs, meet the County Council's outcomes and give communities a voice in the future of their service.

On 15 January 2014 Cabinet had agreed the tiered model for Staffordshire's library offer which included: a virtual (online) offer; a physical offer at a locality/town level; and a

physical offer at a community level. A first engagement phase was held during February 2014 and Members heard that there had been immediate and positive feedback from this initial phase. In response to the feedback received the offer levels were clarified, with the following levels being recommended:

- Virtually – Library Plus
- Physically at a locality level – Library Extra
- Physically at a town level – Library
- Physically at a community/village level – Library Local

Members received details of the approach being taken to review the Library offer, with the project currently at assessment stage, evaluating each individual library against agreed critical success factors.

Members felt that the importance of reading in promoting self discovery should be included in the critical success factors. There was also a concern that there had been a reduction in new book and DV/CD stocks. The importance of reading was implicit in the critical success factors, however this could be amended to be more explicit. A strategic decision had been taken to reduce the DVD/CD stocks resulting from a reduction in need, as people were now accessing films and music differently, through downloads. The new book stock fund had been maintained and Officers were surprised at the perception that there were less new books on the shelves. The savings had been gained from reducing back office staff rather than any reduction in new book purchasing.

The online offer had increased with the provision of e-books and emagazines which could be accessed from a residents own home. One of the commitments of the Service was to enhance the virtual online offer, giving greater access to e-books and magazines.

Libraries were a vital part of the community, contributing positively to the mental and physical health of Staffordshire residents and helping to combat loneliness. Whilst accepting that the provision of on-line books was necessary for the changing needs and wishes of some parts of the population, it was important not to lose sight of the social aspects of a library.

Members asked where the £1.3m of savings would be found and asked if there was an intention to use volunteers to run local libraries. The Cabinet Member agreed that libraries were a vibrant part of a community with lots of activities taking place within the library space. However it was hoped that this review would help ensure that the service was still in place into the longer term. Communities would be asked what type of service they wanted and some savings could be found through the use of volunteers. Where communities were unresponsive further work would be done to help identify possible ways forward.

There was an aspiration that libraries would remain a focal point within their communities. Who would be running those libraries was a conversation that needed to be had with the communities themselves. It could be that volunteers would be best placed to run these services. There was also a need to look at making best use of the spaces, looking at partnership working and sharing building spaces. Presently a large income was received from organisations renting part of the library space and this was an area of business that they hoped to increase. There was also a need to consider

whether each library was in the right place, possibly looking at co-location and making the space work harder to help generate savings.

Members shared concerns around the number of volunteers available, the time they would be able to give, their reliability, how knowledgeable they might be in terms of supporting library users and their reliability. Finding enough volunteers of the right calibre and with the right spirit over a long term would be a challenge. There was a finite number of volunteers and many of these were already volunteering for other organisations. Where volunteers were found there was no guarantee that they would stay.

The Cabinet Member acknowledged that it would be easier to choose to close a number of libraries, however his aspiration was to increase rather than reduce the library offer. There was a need to get the balance right but also to invest in what people want for the future of the Service. Any volunteers working within the libraries would be supported by professional staff.

The use of volunteers would reduce the number of paid staff and Members asked if there were likely to be redundancies. The Cabinet Member said there would be some redundancies, although the precise number would not be known until after the review process had been completed. There was a risk of library closures if there was not sufficient reasons given from the local communities for the service to be maintained.

Members asked who would be undertaking the review and how consistency of decisions would be guaranteed. Initially the District Teams would be asked to complete a SWOT analysis, identifying strengths and weaknesses for each of the library offers within their District. The same small team of three officers would consider this analysis against the critical success factors and score provision against these. This work would then be double checked by the project board.

**RESOLVED** – That the methodology being used to assess the library offer be agreed.

## **60. Learning and Skills Strategy**

The Cabinet Member, Learning and Skills, introduced the Learning and Skills Strategy 2014-16. The Strategy set out the Council's expectations and gave a plan for providing a good education which was far wider than simply being able to deliver under exam conditions. Education had changed significantly, with more schools being independent in some way, and continuing to work within financial constraints. It was important to adapt to this changing environment.

The Cabinet Member said he was very proud of the Strategy and the immense amount of work that had gone into this. He thanked Anna Halliday, Commissioner for Education and Wellbeing, and her team for this work and felt it gave a good foundation over the next five years.

The Commissioner for Education and Wellbeing told the Select Committee that this Strategy helped identify the main pillars for a good start in life. A good education underpinned the ability for an individual to fulfil their future potential.

There were seven key components to the learning and skills system in Staffordshire, each of which was critical to delivering the Council's aims. Throughout January and February 2014 meetings had been held with head teachers and chairs of governors considering the strategy.

Staffordshire had a great variation in school type and this diversity of schools could be a strength if the whole system worked together. It was essential that every education provider was the best they could be.

The role of Governors was critical in ensuring self-supporting and sustainable school governance. It would be necessary to work differently with governing bodies and work would be done to consider carefully how the commissioning strategy could be used to help support governors. Members shared examples of where Governors worked with teachers to challenge and improve performance. It was important that Governors were equipped to ask the challenging questions. A self help network had been set up following one of the January meetings. This network gave an opportunity to share good practice, with the local authority supporting these meetings.

Members indicated that head teachers seemed to be positive about this document. However they felt there was a long way to go and gave examples of a number of schools in the Stafford area whose Ofsted judgement had fallen. Concern was expressed at the ability of Entrust to support Staffordshire schools effectively in their improvement.

Between 75/76 percent of Staffordshire schools were judged as good or outstanding, however there was a target set for 90% of Staffordshire schools to be within these top two Ofsted judgements and the challenge this presented was recognised. The offer provided by Entrust would need to be relevant and high quality and schools had the autonomy to choose alternative providers if they were not happy with the Entrust offer. Staffordshire had a good track record in supporting failing schools to improve. However this was an ever increasingly raised bar, being incrementally more difficult to reach the good or outstanding thresholds.

The recent investigations by the working group on the Ofsted inspection of school improvement arrangements had been satisfied with the support systems in place. Members were reminded of the dashboard data base and its ability to show trend information across pyramid groups and districts. This was a very effective tool that enabled issues to be identified early and appropriate support put in place to address issues.

This improvement in communication would help in school improvement, and in particular with pupil transition between schools. Select Committee Members shared examples of where supportive transition work had been particularly successful in the Newcastle area.

Members felt that individuals only really had one chance at education, feeling that if the individual had a bad experience they were unlikely to return to education later in life. They had concerns that the local authority had less influence than ever before and therefore less opportunity to make a difference to school improvement. However Members were pleased to note the principle "straight As" for Staffordshire and the new approach that put Staffordshire's people in greater control of where and how they learn.

Raising aspirations was acknowledged as one of the most difficult areas to achieve but there was a need to be ambitious.

There was also a need to ensure that young people had the right skills to meet the needs of the skill shortage and Members asked how this would be achieved. In some instances schools with sixth forms may be too keen for their students to stay into their sixth form rather than enabling the young person to have impartial information about the range of options open to them. Ensuring young people were flexible and have the right attitude made them more employable and these skills should be fostered. Members were reminded of the work of the Education Trust and the work undertaken to improve communication between schools, young people and employers.

The recent £2m investment by Entrust on the four Outdoor Education Centres was raised as an example of how the new joint venture worked well. The Cabinet Member informed the Select Committee of the benefits this investment had made and the sense of achievement gained by those young people who attended activities at these centres.

**RESOLVED** – That a) the existing achievements of education partners be recognised; and  
b) the progress being made to bring about improvements in learning and skills in Staffordshire be endorsed.

## **61. Work Programme**

The Scrutiny and Support Manager updated Members on their work programme, as follows:

- Mr Tittley had met with Mary Ann Raftery in connection with the Freight Policy. It was anticipated this policy would be developed further and come back to the Select Committee following amendments;
- there were a number of carry-over items for the Select Committee to consider including on their work programme in the new municipal year;
- a briefing note had been offered on Higher Level Education, this could be circulated in July;
- the Minerals Local Plan Working Group had met on Friday 9 May and produced a report on their findings. This would be circulated after the Select Committee and forwarded to the Cabinet Member, Economy and Infrastructure;
- in light of the comments made by the Cabinet Member, Learning and Skills, Members requested a briefing note updating them on the outdoor education centres.

**RESOLVED** – That the amendments to the work programme be agreed.

**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.