

Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee Meeting held on 26 July 2019

Present: Ian Parry (Chairman)

Attendance

Julia Jessel
Kyle Robinson
Jessica Shulman

David Smith
Bernard Williams

Also in attendance: Philip White

Apologies: Tina Clements, Mike Deakin, Keith Flunder, Syed Hussain, Ian Lawson and Simon Tagg

PART ONE

62. Declarations of Interest

There were none at this meeting.

63. Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 20 June 2019

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 20 June 2019 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

64. Education and Skills Strategy: A Partnership Framework for Staffordshire

Members were informed that OFSTED had judged that 84% of schools in Staffordshire were good or outstanding. However overall outcomes for Staffordshire's young people remained below average, particularly at Key Stage 4 and 5. There were many examples of good practice, but too much variation between schools. Staffordshire was in the bottom quartile for too many performance measures when compared to statistical neighbours. Improving Education and Skills "so that more people gain the training and qualifications they need to succeed" was one of the County Council's strategic priorities. There was now a complex mix of relationships and accountabilities which meant that no single institution or organisation could impose or affect significant, system-wide change on its own. The County Council championed better outcomes for children and young people but did not have the authority, responsibility, control or resources to determine those outcomes.

The partnership framework was co-produced with a reference group reflecting the range of education providers in Staffordshire. It proposed a shared leadership approach that was evidence based, outcomes focused and underpinned by peer support and challenge.

Members noted that there were concerns about fragmented provision and a disconnect between early years, schools and colleges and gaps in transitions, particularly from primary to secondary. The committee considered the 2018 Education Annual Report which provided detailed breakdowns of pupil attainment. They expressed concern over the drift in performance as pupils progressed through the education system. The inaugural meeting of the Education and Skills Strategic Group had taken place on 20 June, with three key themes of performance, inclusion and aspiration. In wide-ranging discussion members questioned whether the Group would have an impact which would be real and measurable and encouraged it to have robust discussion with two or three action points from meetings. They were assured that agenda would be limited to two or three items and that it would be obvious fairly quickly if the Group was effective.

Members were pleased to see that the role of parents was highlighted in the Strategy but suggested that the key role, powers and responsibility of governors in cases where schools were failing should also be recognised in it. They were reassured that there were representatives from Governing Bodies on the Strategic Group.

The Committee queried whether there was good communication with the Regional Schools Commissioner around poorly performing academies and were informed that the authority had a good working relationship with the Commissioner, although there were concerns over the size of the geographic footprint which they operated over.

It was acknowledged that there was a need to improve careers advice and guidance and the way that sixth form provision was configured to make it fit for purpose, open and transparent for pupils. It was agreed that more work needed to be done to ensure impartial advice was given and the right courses made available to provide pupils with an appropriate pathway into further education, apprenticeships and employment. This would be an important workstream for the Strategic Group. The Cabinet Member stated that OFSTED had introduced new inspection standards and it was unclear what impact this would have on educational outcomes. There was a need for more resources and he had made a case to Cabinet for more funding for maintained schools and for SEND. The Cabinet Member also agreed to expand on the role of business in the Strategy.

RESOLVED That:

- a) The content of the final Education and Skills Strategy: A Partnership Framework for Staffordshire be noted;
- b) The Strategy should include a paragraph on the role of governors and that open, honest and clear language be used;
- c) The 2018 Staffordshire educational attainment data used as part of the baseline of performance measures to evaluate the impact of the partnership framework be noted; and
- d) The size of the geographic footprint be raised with the Regional Schools Commissioner.

65. Capital Funding for New Schools

Members were informed that, whilst the role of local authorities had diminished as the autonomy and accountability of individual schools and trusts and the Regional Schools Commissioner had increased, the County Council still retained the duties to manage the supply and demand for primary and secondary schools places in its area and to secure

a place for every child of statutory age who wants one. By September 2019 the County Council would have successfully opened six new free schools at a cost of around £60 million (in addition to the value of land used for the schools).

Where local population growth was forecast, largely from local plan housing by borough and district councils, more school places would be necessary through school expansion or new schools. The Committee were informed that there was a degree of complexity and uncertainty to the capital funding for school places and it was important that the County Council managed its capital programme well, gained best value from its investment and took advantage of partnership. Members discussed the importance of new school buildings being energy efficient and were reassured that this was the case. They also sought assurances that the authority received all the funding that it was entitled to under Section 106 Agreements with developers. They were informed that these contributions were pursued robustly, both in the case of new developments and school expansions.

A member commented that the opening of new schools could have a destabilising effect on the existing schools in the area. Members were informed that new schools were considered “free schools”, with the same legal status as academies, and could be opened by one of two routes:

- **Free school presumption** – a local authority-managed process, where the local authority seek applications from academy trusts to open a new free school and recommends a preferred sponsor to the DfE. However, the local authority would be responsible for any capital funding shortfall.
- **Free school wave** – a DfE-managed process, where the DfE invites applications to open new free schools and informs the local authority of the successful sponsor. Schools with less than 420 places must follow the presumption route.

Under both routes, the final decision on the successful sponsor is taken by the Secretary of State for Education. The churches representative informed members that the diocese was keen to offer parents the option of Church of England Schools. The Cabinet Member informed the Committee that any free school presumption had to be open and transparent and priority was not given to any sponsors.

The Committee considered forecasts of the funding which would be required to invest in new and expanded schools over the next 10-15 years. Whilst the five-year programme was forecast to be fully funded, it was essential that the County Council continued to negotiate contributions from developers and lobby for continued support from government.

It was suggested that it would be helpful to have a hierarchy of preferences for utilising Section 106 funding. It was agreed that there was a need for greater cooperation over planning in the County between the County Council, Districts and Boroughs to provide stronger, more unified responses. Members suggested that that officers investigate further the arrangements around Section 106 Agreements, particularly focusing on expansion and collaboration. In relation to a query about the quality of new school buildings and their lifecycle and longevity, members were assured that they were well constructed to clear specifications by experienced and knowledgeable contractors.

The Chairman referred to concerns about capacity around Pupil Referral Units, which were not included in the report but were on the Work Programme. The Cabinet Member undertook to bring an item on this to a future meeting, focusing on physical capacity and measures to ensure that the Units were operating in the right way.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) The work to date to open six new schools in Staffordshire, the forecast and funding for new schools over the next five years and beyond and the best value delivered in the building of new free schools be noted; and
- b) The Cabinet Member investigate the utilisation of Section 106 funding further to see if further collaboration between partners was achievable so that a County-wide agreement could be made.

66. Work Programme

Members considered their Work Programme for 2019/20. It was suggested that representatives from the National Grid (who were currently doing a series of national presentations) should be invited to speak to the Committee on their plans for this region, which would be paramount for economic prosperity as well as the environment. A member commented that the erection of new pylons was a controversial issue and required the appropriate infrastructure to be in place.

A member suggested that the Committee should look at potential issues around sewers, including capacity, their impact on flooding and the compatibility of ageing pipework with new builds. It was agreed that it would be helpful to have a representative from Severn Trent Water to be in attendance for this item, which would link with the item on housing which was on the Work Programme for the September meeting.

It was requested that the item carried over from 2018/19 on Community Transport and the Supported Bus Network be included on the agenda for the November meeting.

It was also suggested that the Regional Schools Commissioner be invited to a meeting to outline the process which was followed to address failing academies, and that an overview be requested comparing performance between academies and maintained schools and indicating how well academisation was working in Staffordshire.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) A representative from the National Grid be invited to speak to the Committee on their plans for this region;
- b) An item on sewers be included on the agenda for the September meeting and a representative from Severn Trent Water be invited to attend;
- c) The item on Community Transport and the Supported Bus Network be included on the agenda for the November meeting; and
- d) The Regional Schools Commissioner be invited to attend a future meeting of the Committee, which will also consider an overview comparing performance between academies and maintained schools.

Chairman