

Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee Meeting held on 3 October 2019

Present: Ian Parry (Chairman)

Attendance

Tina Clements (Vice-Chairman)	Jessica Shulman
Syed Hussain	David Smith
Julia Jessel	Simon Tagg
Ian Lawson	Bernard Williams
Kyle Robinson	

Also in attendance: Mark Winnington

PART ONE

67. Declarations of Interest

There were none at this meeting.

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

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 26 July be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

69. Draft Strategic Infrastructure Plan

The Chairman welcomed Professor Martin Jones, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Staffordshire University and Matthew Lowe, Policy Manager at Staffordshire Chambers of Commerce, who had been invited to attend the meeting to assist members in their consideration of this item.

The Select Committee were offered the opportunity to shape the work around the draft Strategic Infrastructure Plan (SIP) as an important component in developing a clearly defined strategy for Staffordshire County Council engagement in housing policy and strategy delivery to support the implementation of housing schemes, both directly and indirectly. The Committee would also be able to select any specific infrastructure themes for consideration and comment in more detail at future meetings. It was also an opportunity to shape and influence the extent to which the SIP would form part of the Housing Strategy that would be brought to the Committee in late winter 2019/20. A copy of the SIP had been circulated to members in advance of the meeting in order to give sufficient time for it to be read in detail.

The Cabinet Member for Economic Growth informed members that this was an important document for Staffordshire and its private and public partners. It was noted

that it was a living document and would sit with a suite of other strategies. It provided an indication of infrastructure needs going forward and would be useful in evidencing a funding gap. He informed the Committee that he was proud of the work which had been done on the document by officers and partners. Members were informed that it was essentially an assessment of the infrastructure requirements, looking at the cumulative need across the County and around its edges and was an inward and outward looking document and was primarily intended as a lobbying piece. The Chairman questioned whether there was an opportunity to use this as an asset to encourage investment into the County. The Cabinet Member responded that this was definitely the case, and District and Borough Councils would be asked to look at the SIP when putting together their local plans and consider how these interact, together with other partners.

It was queried what the life expectancy was of the document. The Cabinet Member responded that although it stated 2038 he would expect it to be refreshed on a regular basis. Although the stated intention was to review it every four years, dependant on the traction which the document gained this period would be reduced.

Professor Jones asked for clarification of the legal basis of the document, in terms of planning legislation this was not a structure plan, was this a way of combining all the local plans to have that single conversational device with government over growth and other deals and also to highlight the funding gap. It was not a legal document but rather a way of having a consolidated conversation. Professor Jones was aware of five other instances of such plans and said that the County Council should be congratulated as this was an enormous piece of work. It would be helpful to establish the legal basis of the document in planning terms and how this would help in bidding for external pots of money. Officers confirmed that the document as it stood today had no statutory basis it was a policy piece and an evidence base for local plans. A member commented that this did not affect its validity as a policy document in terms of its potential and influence. Whilst welcoming a co-ordinated approach to infrastructure, a member expressed concern that planning and development took a very long time and they were not sure that the document was visionary and ambitious enough. Members were informed that information from the District and Borough local plans the likely employment growth and housing number requirements were extrapolated forward up to about 2038. The point was to show the local planning authorities the level of growth they were likely to get to encourage them to think longer term about investment and take a step away from piecemeal incremental development. A member commented that there were existing constraints, for example the capacity and lack of investment in the A38 trunk road, which was a strategic piece of infrastructure, was now having a major impact on the economic prosperity of the eastern part of the County and suggested that the document needed to reinforce the message of existing shortcomings in infrastructure. Officers responded that the document was not project specific, but would be used as a tool to provide a baseline to build on.

A member sought assurances that the SIP had the buy-in of District and Borough Councils. They also asked if Neighbourhood Plans formed part of the work around the SIP, as local people had a lot of local knowledge and a lot of work had already been done on the ground. Officers confirmed their involvement in shaping Neighbourhood Plans and their co-ordinating role.

Professor Jones commented that there was an obvious tension in the document between the problems that the County Council knew it faced based on road transport and the everyday based on extrapolation into the future and what the vision is. Certain assumptions were made in the document about economic growth and also the contraction of the economy and then calculations made around investments in infrastructure, business parks, housing sites etc. and questioned whether this would lead to the economic shift that the County Council wanted in terms of conversations with government around growth deals etc. There was no mention in the document explicitly around the industrial strategy. He commented that he was struggling to find an economic vision that was not just moving forward the realities of where the County was currently, and that this was political reality and political compromise versus an economic vision. There was an opportunity in this document, because it wasn't statutory, to make that claim. He questioned whether this was an economic vision or was this the reality of managing the everyday extrapolated forward to 2038, based on the tensions currently known. In looking at the Gross Value Added (GVA) figures for Staffordshire he questioned whether the economic strategy in the document was going to lift that by £8,000 - £10,000 a year to reach the average. The Cabinet Member responded that one of the Council's main priorities was around economic growth. As unemployment was now at 1.8% the focus was now on a quest for higher paid, better skilled jobs which would increase the GVA figures.

Several members raised the green agenda and the Chairman asked Professor Jones if he felt that environmental impact had been given due consideration in the document. Professor Jones referred members to the summary data on page six of the document which identified where the funding gaps were, and to pages 52 and 53. There was reportedly no funding gap around active modes and a funding gap of only £130,000 on public transport, and this would not move the County to being a healthy and active living world. Looking at page 8 there wasn't an ask there for public transport and active modes. He recognised that this was because the Council didn't have a walking and cycling infrastructure plan, as acknowledged on page 53. It was disappointing that more money was being asked for a roads project when there were such challenges around well-being and active lifestyles and felt that this was a lost opportunity. If this was a document which was going to be an ask to government through to 2038 it at least needed to acknowledge the fact that there was an agenda around public transport and active modes that needed to be pushed.

Referring to comments about the SIP being prior to the formulation of a local industrial strategy, which it would have an influence on, Professor Jones cautioned the Cabinet Member and officers against the local industrial strategy being based just on the SIP, as this would not get a growth deal. His fundamental critique of the document was that it was an ask around infrastructure required with no foundation at all about what kind of jobs would be created, which still begged the question of direction and economic vision.

It was reiterated that the work had been based on local plans produced by the local planning authorities, aggregated these up and looked at the impact on the entire infrastructure required to deliver these, working with the districts with their local plans. The reason for having a Local Enterprise Partnership that develops a local Industrial Strategy in partnership with everyone to set out that bold economic vision which meant that the local plans and the SIP which underpins those. The Local Industrial Strategy would be fundamental in providing direction.

The Chairman asked Matthew Lowe how valuable the document would be as a tool to support growth in the Staffordshire economy. He responded that for the average business in the County it would not mean anything to them. The document sets out the assumptions of the current situation and when read by itself it lacked bold vision, and it would perhaps be helpful to introduce it as a policy piece. There was an issue with the timing, in a few months' time it would have fitted nicely into the hierarchy of strategies which would be set out. The Executive Summary should be read when the Executive Summary of the Industrial Strategy was available, which would then provide a lobbying piece. There was some concern that businesses found it difficult to identify their place in the number of different local plans, particularly in the knowledge that these would change. He suggested changing the date to four-year periods to reflect the fact that it would keep evolving and changing. A member asked whether businesses would find a value in seeing patterns in economic growth or population or housing, given that they would be working in that landscape. Mr. Lower responded that very few businesses based their business plans on local authority economic growth plans and look at the policy evidence base to decide where they wanted to be in ten years' time. There was a real mis-match between the way businesses wanted to plan for the future and how the local authority had to plan for the future. A senior management team would not go through the SIP in detail when making decisions about growth plans or invest any surplus capital expenditure into their business but would look for headline figures, which were that there were not enough homes, the population was going to increase and there wasn't enough funding for the roads. Officers responded that it was not intended for everyday business use, but was much more a strategic piece.

Professor Jones questioned if the superfast roll-out programme provided the County with the connectivity it needed, whilst it was highly innovative he questioned whether it was superfast, what the business connectivity was, what it would cost with BT owning the network to obtain a terabit connection. Other innovative economies had gone for public ownership of these type of networks. He commented that by going down the route of working in partnership with BT may be limiting potentials and would encourage the Council to think around a 5G solution in addition to superfast broadband argument in the document. He felt that there was a digital button that was worth pressing slightly harder and be more forward looking in terms of 5G connectivity. Professor Jones said that the County Council should be congratulated for bringing this so far and commented that some local authorities could not even get this to the table due to political in-fighting. The document raised a number of questions, which was inevitable, but that this was a document within documents and should be seen in that way and executive summaries were needed for different audiences. Officers responded that the document recognised what the situation was today, but that work was being done with Staffordshire University to develop a Digital Infrastructure Plan that went beyond superfast and looked at full fibre, 5G and all the other potential technologies.

The Cabinet Member acknowledged the need to move forward with digital technology which was imperative in the modern world. He thanked officers for all the work which had been invested in the SIP. Moving forward it was important to look at green infrastructure to ensure that this is covered before the document goes through its final stage, and also how it links to the wider suite of documents. He thanked members and the invited speakers for their comments and requested a precis of these to take to the next Cabinet meeting to feed in to their consideration of the SIP.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) The comments of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee and invited speakers be fed back to the Cabinet when they were considering the Draft Strategic Infrastructure Plan at their meeting on 16 October 2019; and
- b) The final version of the Strategic Infrastructure Plan be brought to the Select Committee in late winter 2019/20, along with an overview of the progress made in forging strategic relationships with key infrastructure providers and external funding providers.

70. Economic Growth Programme Update

Members were informed that Staffordshire County Council's ambitious Economic Growth Programme was continuing to play a crucial role in Staffordshire's ongoing economic improvement. Claimant unemployment rates continued to be persistently below the averages for the West Midlands and Great Britain. This success story was likely to continue as the County Council worked in partnership to deliver priority projects with the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership and other key local stakeholders. Work was being done to identify further opportunities to increase the growth of housing and prosperity in Staffordshire and discussions were progressing well with Homes England to identify potential areas of mutually beneficial working. The Committee were informed that a key priority for the future would be to encourage further growth in higher value-added sectors, meeting the County Council's ambitions for creating "better jobs" while ensuring that there was a mixed and balanced economy in Staffordshire. All of this needed to be combined with a competitive and broad skills profile among local communities, able to support this growth, giving everyone the best opportunities to fulfil their economic potential.

The Committee considered a summary of the live and completed projects. The current total financial value of the Economic Growth Programme was £477.6m, of which £81.9m related to direct capital investment by the County Council. Members were provided with a brief update on the progress which was being made with a number of priority sites. A member queried what was happening at the Rugeley Power Station site. The Cabinet Member responded that several discussions had taken place with ENGIE, who were working closely with the County Council and Cannock Chase District Council on developing their part of the site. In response to a question on timescales officers confirmed that the developers were hoping to have the first houses completed in 2021 and that a planning application had been submitted. A member sought assurances around European Funding and was informed that the government had confirmed that the funding programmes would continue for the full term, up to and including December 2023.

A member commented that the report contained a lot of positive details around investment in Staffordshire, companies expanding and the County Council investing in schemes which were making a real difference. He questioned what the County Council was doing to promote more inclusive growth and address the issue of inequality and increasing living standards across the board, as there were pockets of poverty, and asked if there was evidence of lifestyles and life chances improving. He also commented that it was important to ensure that employment land was not swallowed up for the sake of residential development. Officers responded that the work around the

European Social Fund programme which was designed to help people back into the labour market. Through the programme over 18,200 residents had improved their skills and job prospects. Over 7,770 beneficiaries had either progressed into work, education, training, apprenticeships, or been upskilled to improve skill levels and productivity. Whilst a lot of the focus of the report was on big capital projects, part of the package was working with colleagues in the Skills and Employability Team to ensure that the people of Staffordshire had the right skills to take on the job opportunities that were being delivered through the economic growth programme. In some of the major projects the intention was to develop an Employment and Skills Plan identifying the key skills requirements and the opportunities to ensure that there were local opportunities for local people on these key developments. In response to the point about sites land, a Strategic Employment Sites Study was currently being undertaken, to identify which sites would be taken forward, to ensure sensible figures for both housing and employment.

Matthew Lowe informed members that the Chamber of Commerce worked with the County Council and the LEP to deliver the Growth Hub and had also established the Skills Hub, both of which acted as a signposting organisation. They undertook a skills diagnostic on businesses to point them in the right direction to address their skills needs.

The Cabinet Member thanked the Committee for their questions and comments. He informed them that it was important that the County Council did not stand still and that it was important to work with Stoke-on-Trent wherever possible to improve the prosperity of the whole area. He recorded his thanks to officers for their commitment and effort. The Chairman also thanked officers and the invited speakers for their help.

RESOLVED – That the Select Committee notes the work and progress of the Staffordshire County Council Economic Growth Programme.

71. Work Programme

In considering their Work Programme members were informed that it had been agreed to hold an Inquiry Day in March next year around Community Transport. Whilst it was acknowledged that running buses was not a County Council function it was recognised that transport issues can cause social isolation, and even marginal improvements would be worthwhile. Key contributors would be invited to participate and the Committee would act as facilitators.

The Chairman commented that it had been very useful to have the invited speakers at the meeting as it had stimulated debate and suggested that it would be helpful to repeat this in future when the Committee is considering items on the economy.

RESOLVED – that:

- a) Plans to hold an Inquiry Day on Public Transport be agreed; and
- b) The Work Programme be noted.

Chairman