

Statement of the Leader of the Council

1. Improving the Way We Work

The Cabinet has noted the progress that is being made to transform the county council into a more effective and efficient organisation focused on delivering better outcomes for the residents of Staffordshire and the place they live in.

The Cabinet reshuffle announced at the Council meeting in February reflects our focus on clear priorities, putting the economy of Staffordshire right in the centre and creating new employment opportunities.

We believe local services are an essential part of this. Against a national backdrop of council closure programmes, Staffordshire's libraries continue to thrive and we remain committed to the vital services they provide to the community.

Staffordshire continues to be recognised nationally as a leading light in reforming health services. While other parts of the UK are debating whether it can be done, in Staffordshire, GPs, Health and Social Care professionals and others are getting on and doing it.

We recently held our inaugural volunteer awards, honouring volunteers across the county. The awards reflect the wide range of ways that people are making a real and vital difference to the community.

Staffordshire County Council's new office and customer reception in Stafford will now be known as Staffordshire Place. The name for the buildings has been chosen to reflect a county that is proud of its heritage and confident in its future.

(Cabinet – 16 February 2011)

2. Joint Third Quarter Performance and Budget Monitoring Report

In our Strategic Plan we have set out a challenging and ambitious agenda for the County Council. Our vision is one of a County Council always striving for excellence, delivering at pace, and being innovative. It is therefore important that we regularly monitor our performance to see whether we are on course to achieve this.

The Cabinet have considered details of the Council's performance as at the third quarter of 2010/11. In terms of successes, it is really pleasing to note that Ofsted have rated Staffordshire's Children's Services as a grade 3, which means that the authority performs well. In addition, the large majority of early years settings are good and 98% of the county's schools are outstanding, good or satisfactory. The county council also provides good services for the county's most vulnerable children.

On the financial side, the figures now suggest a projected overspend of £5.748m for quarter 3, which is less than predicted at the end of quarter two.

One of the key underlying issues behind the overspend is the ever increasing demographic pressure on our social care and health services. Rather than simply cutting the service to meet the budget we have taken the view that we need to protect and invest in services for vulnerable people.

(Cabinet – 16 February 2011)

3. Staffordshire Transport Asset Management Plan

The Cabinet have recently approved the Transport Asset Management Plan (TAMP) which sets out the Council's approach to the allocation of resources for the management, operation, preservation and enhancement of the highway infrastructure in Staffordshire to meet the needs of business and the travelling public.

Under the TAMP, there are to be District-wide divisional highway programmes which reflect the local circumstances in each area. To ensure that County Councillors have an opportunity to influence these, district road shows are being scheduled for February and March.

The TAMP will also be supplemented with individual lifecycle plans (LCPs) for a range of the Council's highway related assets such as Carriageways, Footways, Footpaths and Cycleways, Traffic Signal and Management Systems etc and will identify the most economical way of maintaining those assets over their expected life

The Council has committed £30 million additional highway maintenance funding over the period 2009/10 to 2012/13 which has allowed us to accelerate the structural and preventative maintenance programme. However, bearing in mind the current financial situation, it is clear that the County Council will not be able to fund all desired schemes after 2011/12 and decisions will need to be taken about where to focus our limited resources. Members will be involved the prioritisation.

(Cabinet – 16 February 2011)

4. Staffordshire Passenger and Accessibility Management Plan – Young Persons Travel Card and Concessionary Fares

The Cabinet have approved the arrangements for the introduction of a Young Persons' Travelcard and the extension of the concessionary travel scheme.

The introduction of a Young Persons' Travel Card scheme will assist young people in travelling to training, employment and leisure activities as well as providing a reliable proof of age. As a universal "One Staffordshire" card, the Young Persons' Travel Card could also be configured now to enable future "add-ons", such as entry to leisure centres, young persons' discounts in stores, etc. Discussions with local bus operators have identified a high level of support for this initiative and operators are clear that it is only by improving the offer to young people that growth in the public transport market can be achieved

At its meeting on 17 November 2010, Cabinet approved a Travel Concession Scheme for Elderly and Disabled People which provides for free travel to eligible people after 09.30, Monday to Friday and all day at weekends and Bank Holidays. Cabinet also agreed to enhance the scheme to provide free travel for companions of disabled people who would otherwise be unable to travel. Following negotiations with the bus companies and discussions with representatives of District Councils, the Cabinet have agreed to extend the scheme to allow travel 24/7 at all times of the day, particularly including prior to 09:30 on Mondays to Fridays.

(Cabinet – 16 February 2011)

5. Partnerships for Care

The existing contributions framework, which determines what share of a person's care costs are borne by the county council and what share the care user must bear, is outdated, inequitable and fails to promote independence. A fundamental review of the contributions framework has therefore been undertaken in consultation with service users, carers and other stakeholders.

Cabinet have approved the introduction of a new contributions system which will be phased-in over the next three years in order to limit the financial impact of the proposed changes on existing service users.

Cabinet have also asked that further work be undertaken to explore the potential for raising the capital limit for full cost contributors above the current £25,000, allowing individuals to keep more of their capital.

(Cabinet – 16 February 2011)

6. Portfolio Holder Delegated Decisions

Portfolio holders have recently taken decisions in respect of the following matters:

- The granting of a six year tenancy of Holding No. 1, Yarlet.
- The rates to be paid to early years providers in the private, voluntary and independent sector and to maintained schools from April 2011 in respect of early years education for 3 and 4 year olds; including the continuation of transitional protection at a reduced rate for a further 12 months.

7. Forward Plan

The Cabinet have approved the Forward Plan for the period 1 March to 30 June 2011, which contains details of the decisions which the Cabinet are expected to take during that period.

8. Sport in Staffordshire

In early February 2011 I was delighted to meet the Baroness Campbell, Chair of the Youth Sport Trust down at the House of Lords. I was pleased to tell her that in Staffordshire we are confident that our plans will see more people participating in sporting activities. This will help deliver healthy lifestyles for our residents; one of the key outcomes of our Strategic Plan.

We will need to think creatively and I would like to consider how we use the best practice from the Schools' Sports Partnerships and link this with leisure centres and local sports clubs. This will significantly increase the number of people enjoying sport activities and provide more participants for the many clubs ran by enthusiastic volunteers across the county.

9. "Healthy Lives, Healthy People" – Public Health White Paper

Together with Robert Marshall, Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Public Health, I attended an event at Keele Hall organised by the regional Strategic Health Authority to input into the consultation regarding the above White Paper, published on 30 November 2010. The participants considered the government's proposals to ensure the reduction of health inequalities, improved health and protection from serious health threats.

The event was very well attended by public and community sector partners, including GPs. There was lively debate during the workshop sessions and the valuable input from those attending will hopefully help to shape the future direction of the public health strategy. Members will be aware that the proposals include the transfer of the strategic lead for public health back to upper tier local authorities.

10. JCB Academy

The JCB Academy opened its doors to its first students at the start of the 2010/2011 academic year. However, the "official" opening by the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall took place on 18 February 2011. I was delighted to attend as this was a true celebration of a magnificent achievement. The renovation of the Tutbury Mill, (built in 1871) is superb; blending the old and the new in an imaginative and eye catching fashion.

As well as the high level of academic provision by the academy, it also provides a much needed resource for local people. It puts the school right at the heart of the village and is a hub for bringing the community together, the young, the old and those in between!

P.E.B. Atkins
Leader of the Council