

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 10 DECEMBER 2020

**Question to Cllr Philip White
Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills**

By Cllr Northcott

Question

My Division is mainly rural but across the district of Newcastle it's a mixed picture with the urban areas such as the Towns of Newcastle and Kidsgrove having similar needs. I would like to ask the Portfolio holder how is the County working with the Districts to support the self-employed, SME's and start-up businesses through the economic uncertainty we find ourselves in today and the work required to aid the regions recovery moving forward?

Reply

Supporting our economy is a top priority for Staffordshire County Council. Our Economic Recovery Strategy, Staffordshire Means Back to Business, approved by Cabinet in June 2020, builds on how Staffordshire can continue to be one of the best places in the UK to recover and grow. This strategy is a roadmap of how we'll further support business by continuing to invest in the conditions all businesses need to thrive, and how we'll renew the economy by supporting the creation of those clean, digital, highly-productive businesses that will provide the jobs of the future.

Our partnership with the Districts/Boroughs is key. We are operating on an open dialogue basis to ensure there are no delays in identifying issues in addition to ways that we can work together to find solutions. We have weekly briefings with our District Regeneration and Economic Development Directors to ensure they have appropriate assistance to deliver the various support mechanisms being channelled through them by central government, most recently Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG).

From the start of the Covid 19 crisis, communications were considered essential and enhanced campaigns including 'Staffordshire Means Back to Business', #ShopSafelyinStaffs and #EnjoyStaffordshireSafely were launched through traditional and social media sources in partnership with District and Borough Councils, promoting the County and importantly town centres and their reopening. In response to their request for information, we have also developed a monthly Bulletin, providing detailed data on the issues facing our economy.

The Growth Hub, which we are a key partner to, publishes weekly newsletters and news bulletins which are shared with nearly 8,000 Staffordshire Businesses and partners. These publications are shared widely across Stoke-on-Trent and

Staffordshire and information is included on Local Authority schemes as well as national government initiatives.

Measures have been put in place by partner organisations including the SSLEP, Growth Hub and District/Borough Councils which have been heavily promoted by the County Council. Some of the main interventions made so far include:

- a. £143m of Government grant being passed through to businesses by Districts and Boroughs;
- b. The Countywide Redundancy Task Group where more than 20 local partners are working together to support businesses and employees with potential redundancies.

Responding to information relating to how businesses were struggling, the County Council has developed a new partnership with the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) to provide a business support package to small employers (1 to 4 employees). This is jointly funded between all the Districts and Boroughs and will start in January 2021.

Referring once again to ARG, the County had made a detailed proposal to our Districts and Boroughs relating to how they can utilise this grant support to work with the County Council on a number of its activities including business support and apprenticeships. All tailored to focus on those most heavily impacted by C19 including young people and those in the tourism, leisure and hospitality sectors.

Turning to rural areas, we are working to develop a Rural Economic Strategy, in conjunction with partners, to ensure that businesses based in rural areas are provided with the support they need to grow and diversify. This will be considered by Cabinet early in 2021 and be the subject of consultation with District and Boroughs and wider stakeholders.

In all the County Council is working closely with our partners, both rural and urban, to deliver our Staffordshire Means Back to Business strategy and to once again enable our businesses to thrive.

Cabinet will receive the first of a new monthly economic recovery update at their December meeting. The report is comprehensive and covers a range of activities the County Council and are partners are involved with, I would encourage all Members to read this important report.