

Statement of the Leader of the Council

1. Update from COVID-19 Member Led Local Outbreak Control Board

The Cabinet have received an update from the COVID-19 Member Led Local Outbreak Control Board and have noted that the number of new cases nationally and in Staffordshire has been rising over the last four weeks, largely due to the emergence of the delta variant of the virus; the Covid vaccination programme is continuing to make excellent progress with 1,000,000 doses being administered to Staffordshire residents with uptake of two doses being close to 95% in over 65s, and 80% in 50 to 64 year olds; and the Council's plans to maintain Covid defences for at least the next financial year.

(Cabinet – 16 June 2021)

2. Staffordshire Means Back to Business – Oral Update

The Cabinet received an update on “Staffordshire Means Back to Business” activity including the following matters be noted:

(i) Whilst the delay in easing restrictions by central government was understood, the impact on the hospitality sector was of deep concern.

(ii) The number of people on some form of government job support scheme in Staffordshire was estimated to be lower than the rest of the country, 16% compared to 19% nationally, and had decreased slightly over the last month as more workers on furlough and Universal Credit returned to work.

(iii) Figures released this week showed that 4.4% of the county population claimed out-of-work benefits in May, a fall from the previous month, when the figure was 4.6%. The regional figure is 7% and national 6.1%.

(iv) The economic recovery could also be seen in the job vacancy figures which increased by 9% in Staffordshire between April and May, equivalent to 2,100 more job vacancies. This improvement in recruitment had seen vacancy levels rise above those seen prior to the start of the pandemic.

(v) The key areas of support for the Staffordshire economy through the Staffordshire Means Back to Business strategy including:

- Staffordshire Start-Up Loans - Launched in December 2020 - £250,000 pilot to support businesses
- Staffordshire To Thrive Grants - Supported by our partners Newcastle under Lyme, Staffordshire Moorlands Borough Council, South Staffordshire Council and Tamworth Borough Council - £370,000
- Staffordshire Apprenticeship 500 initiative - Pays a grant of £5,000 to employers who recruit a new apprentice

- Nil Cost Training Top Up - an initiative that enables small and medium employers to access training that is needed to help reskill or upskill their employees and supports the businesses in their recovery from Covid restrictions or to access new markets and ways of working.
- Ignite - a new 3-year programme of free advice, workshops mentoring and support for students in year 12/13 looking to set up their own business in Staffordshire.

(Cabinet – 16 June 2021)

3. Executive Responses for all Party Working Groups

The Cabinet have approved the initial Executive Responses from the portfolio holders with regards to the recommendations from the two All Party Working Groups and the investigations focusing on Aspiration, Future Economy and Enterprise and Communities and Isolation, which identified a number of issues for Cabinet to consider.

The All-Party Working Group investigations and overview focus has helped to inform the shaping of policy and the reform of public services, Portfolio holders have initially considered the findings and recommendations of each All-Party Working Group and have prepared their responses and outline action plans which will be implemented and monitored as necessary on behalf of Cabinet, helping to plan for and address some of the long-term issues that affect the communities of Staffordshire.

(Cabinet – 16 June 2021)

4. Final Financial Outturn 2020/21

The Cabinet have considered the 2020/21 final financial outturn position of the county council including delivery of the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

They noted that the final outturn position was a saving of £1.924m after allowing for carry forward requests. (The quarter 4 forecast was a saving of £1.770m). Since the 2020/21 budget was set, Covid 19 had become a global pandemic requiring a combined response from public sector services and which was also having a severe impact on the economy. Central Government had issued four payments of general grant to local authorities, plus grant to compensate for lost income, totalling £48.6m for Staffordshire, to support the additional pressures of continuing to provide vital services during the pandemic while protecting both workforce and local residents.

The capital outturn was £132m which represented continued investment in schools, highways and economic regeneration.

The Cabinet have approved a request for £591,000 to be carried forward from the Health and Care underspend for future commitments.

(Cabinet – 16 June 2021)

5. National Bus Strategy – Enhanced Partnership

On 15th March 2021, the government published its National Bus Strategy for England “Bus Back Better”, announcing £3b transformational funding for those authorities that engage in the strategy. The Strategy offers this authority an opportunity to work with operators to bid for money to update old vehicles, improve passenger facilities and encourage bus companies to innovate for the future. The Strategy makes clear that there is a commitment to long term increased funding for bus services, both for local authorities and bus operators alike. However, access to funding streams is contingent on the Council having a Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) and entering into either an Enhanced Partnership (EP) or franchising arrangement to deliver the objectives set out in the BSIP.

The Cabinet have agreed that the County Council should commit to developing an Enhanced Partnership (EP), as outlined within the National Bus Strategy (NBS).

(Cabinet – 16 June 2021)

6. Covid-19

The lifting of Covid-19 restrictions this week is a welcome relief to people and businesses across Staffordshire, who have all sacrificed so much over the last 16 months. We all want to see people getting back to normal life, and our hospitality and visitor attractions welcoming back customers. The lifting of restrictions is thanks to the sacrifices people have made, the steps they have taken to support the vulnerable, and the success of our extraordinary vaccine roll-out programme.

However, while many of us welcome these freedoms, we all need to remember that for some, life does not return to normal. While vaccines have broken the link between covid infections and hospital visits or deaths, case rates are still worryingly high in Staffordshire, especially among teenagers and young adults. For many, such as cancer patients, or people who are immune-suppressed, they are still at significant risk from covid, even if they have been vaccinated.

So over the coming weeks, I urge people and businesses to keep thinking about what they can do to stop the spread of covid, and to follow guidance, for instance wearing masks on public transport or continuing to wash hands regularly and ventilate indoor places. I also call on people to take regular tests. But most importantly, if you are yet to be vaccinated or are waiting for your second dose, book it as soon as you can.

7. Superfast Staffordshire

A countywide broadband partnership, which has enabled nearly every household and business in Staffordshire to connect to superfast speeds (speeds of up to 80 megabits per second), has been completed. The final village – Ellenhall near Stafford - was recently connected thanks to the Superfast Staffordshire programme - a partnership made up of the county council, the Government’s Building Digital UK (BDUK) and Openreach.

When the programme began in 2013, just 65 per cent of properties were able to connect to faster speeds. Now, more than 97 per cent can benefit, with tens of thousands already choosing to do so. Over the course of the programme, more than 82,500 premises have gained access to superfast speeds. This investment in our digital connectivity makes Staffordshire and ever more attractive place to live and work.

8. Euro 2020

While England fell agonisingly short in the final of Euro 2020 this month, Gareth Southgate and his team have lifted the entire nation. Much of the coverage in the build up to the final either came from the National Football Centre at St George's Park, near Burton-on-Trent, or highlighted how the outstanding facilities have contributed to England's on pitch success. St George's Park is one of many outstanding facilities across our county that help make Staffordshire the nationally valued centre of England. I hope Gareth's outstanding leadership continues in the build up to next year's World Cup, and that ultimately the Three Lions can go one better in Qatar.