

Local Members Interest
N/A

Prosperous Overview & Scrutiny Committee - Wednesday 23 March 2022

Economic Strategy

Recommendation(s)

I recommend that the Committee:

- a. Considers and comments upon the draft Staffordshire County Council Economic Strategy in terms of the vision, ambitions, and priorities it sets out to continue to support the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and address the key challenges for the Staffordshire economy in the coming years.
- b. Considers and recommends interventions that the Committee believes would help to enable the successful delivery of the Strategy.
- c. Invites the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills to bring an update on delivery of the Strategy to this Committee for scrutiny every 3 months.

Report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills

Summary

What is the Overview and Scrutiny Committee being asked to do and why?

1. The purpose of this report is to:
 - a. Provide the Select Committee with an opportunity to consider and comment upon the draft of the County's Council's Economic Strategy. The unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 crisis meant that the County Council had to react quickly to support our businesses and residents. However, thanks to support measures put in place through the successful delivery of our Economic Recovery, Renewal and Transformation Strategy, alongside the

vaccine rollout, we are now in a much more positive position than most economic commentators thought we would be. It is therefore the right time for us to consider our plans for supporting the development of the local economy by tackling those issues that will be of most benefit to the future of the local economy and to ensure we are delivering upon those issues our residents want to see addressed. This is therefore an opportunity for the Committee to help to shape the Strategy and the County Council's plans for the local economy up to 2030, in line with the Government's missions for Levelling Up the UK.

- b. The successful delivery of the Strategy in achieving the vision, ambitions, and priorities that it sets out will be dependent on many factors, not least the identification and delivery of appropriate projects and programmes. A range of interventions are already underway and continue to be delivered within the county, as has been reported to the Committee through regular quarterly updates. Further projects and programmes will be needed, and there is therefore an opportunity for the Committee to consider further areas of focus that could help to successfully deliver the Strategy.
- c. Monitoring the County Council's performance in delivering the Strategy will be vital to ensuring we ultimately achieve its vision and ambitions. The Committee has an important role in scrutinising our performance over the duration of the Strategy.

Report

Background

2. Our Economic Recovery, Renewal & Transformation Strategy was considered by the Scrutiny Committee and agreed by Cabinet early in the COVID-19 crisis (June 2020), setting out our immediate response to support Staffordshire's businesses whilst also taking advantage of opportunities presented by the pandemic to support our plans for the renewal and long-term transformation of the local economy. The ultimate impacts of the pandemic were always and remain somewhat uncertain, although what is clear is that the delivery of local and national support measures, alongside the vaccine rollout, have been hugely successful in averting the severe economic downturn that had been predicted by many. We are now currently in a very different position to what many economic commentators thought we might be.

3. The much changed and more positive economic outlook means it is now a pertinent time to develop our new Economic Strategy, aligned to the relevant priorities agreed through the refresh of our Strategic Plan and cognisant of emerging national policy. The Strategy outlines how we will continue to support the Staffordshire economy to recover from the crisis and address some of the key challenges that we face that will provide the maximum benefit to the local economy and our residents.
4. It is essential the County Council has its own Strategy to complement and respond to national policy. We are uniquely placed to support a whole-system approach to continuing recovery and growth of our economy, due to our responsibilities for transport, infrastructure, environment, education, skills, and health.
5. The development of this Strategy will not only ensure our interventions are targeted on the right priorities, but it will also allow us to influence/shape the approach taken by the Midlands Engine, Government, and numerous other relevant bodies. It will aid with securing funding and powers to deliver our overall ambitions, including through the various Government policy agendas.
6. By outlining the County Council's priorities for the economy in the coming years, the Strategy will also guide any future work and discussions with our partners and Government on opportunities for further devolution to the local area. Any County Deal agreed with Government has the potential to provide further powers and resources that will allow us to deliver our economic priorities more quickly and effectively and is being considered through the Staffordshire Leaders Board.

Approach

7. The primary focus of our Economic Strategy are the overarching priorities agreed through the development of our Strategic Plan, namely town centres, start-ups & step-ups, higher skilled & higher paid workforce, the development of investment ready projects and strategic corridors. There are several other priorities and themes that are identified as important in supporting the future growth of the Staffordshire economy including innovation, supporting businesses on their journey to net zero and maximising the use of our investment and unlocking external funding.
8. We will of course strive to take full advantage of the many opportunities to support the development of the local economy, but these priorities represent those key challenges to face. This is not to say that other challenges do not exist, but these are the main issues we want to tackle as being of most benefit to the future of the local economy and to ensure

we are delivering upon those issues our residents most want to see addressed.

9. A significant amount of evidence continues to be compiled on the local economic picture, primarily through the County Council's Economic Bulletin. Along with additional evidence produced by economic 'think-tanks' and alike, this locally produced evidence has underpinned the development of the Strategy and will continue to form the basis of our supporting plans and strategies in the future.
10. We recognise that the County Council does not operate in isolation and there are numerous stakeholders with a vital role in supporting the growth of the Staffordshire economy, most notably our District and Borough Councils. We will therefore ensure that we are continuing to engage proactively with our Districts and Boroughs, businesses, residents, and partner organisations to provide an opportunity to help shape the final Strategy.

Delivery

11. Achieving our vision and ambitions set out within the Economic Strategy will require the delivery of appropriate projects and programmes, set out within existing and future supporting delivery plans. Many of these projects and programmes will require us to continue the strong joint working with local stakeholders and enhanced two-tier working that has proven so successful in recent years, including the delivery of the i54 South Staffordshire Enterprise Zone and recent completion of the Stafford Western Access Route to name just two examples of many. We recognise that the priorities we have set will require large scale investment, however the County Council alone does not have the level of resources that will be needed to deliver our ambitions in full. We will therefore continue to work with our partners, including Government, to unlock external funding for delivery in Staffordshire.
12. As detailed within the Strategy, the County Council will therefore '*Lead*' on direct delivery, '*Collaborate*' on delivery with partners and stakeholders, and '*Advocate*' for the delivery of projects and programmes by other organisations that meet our own ambitions as appropriate. Where this includes investment by the County Council, we will need to continue to ensure that this achieves the maximum possible benefits in the delivery of the Strategy, including leveraging funding from other organisations and the private sector.
13. We will continue to manage and monitor our progress in the delivery of the Strategy through our existing governance arrangements, including

regular Cabinet updates and quarterly reporting to and consideration by the Prosperous Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

Link to Strategic Plan

14. The Strategy primarily relates to the 'support Staffordshire's economy to grow, generating more and better-paid jobs' Strategic Plan priority and all the associated priorities. However, there are aspects of the Strategy that cut-across all the Strategic Plan priorities with the need to tackle climate change, support increased investment in our infrastructure and increased prosperity in the County having the potential to have positive impacts on resident's health, safety, and happiness.

Link to Other Overview and Scrutiny Activity

15. The Economy, Recovery and Renewal Strategy was considered by the Committee in June 2020, and regular quarterly updates have been considered by the Committee since then. The range of activity that the County Council has progressed and continues to progress over the last couple of years, as has been reported to the Committee, remains relevant and will be important to the delivery of the Strategy.

Community Impact

16. The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis continue to be felt by some industrial sectors and therefore residents more than others. The Levelling Up agenda is a key theme that cuts across all the strategy and the aim is therefore for all residents to benefit from its delivery. A 'live' evidence base continues to be updated on at least a monthly basis, reported through our Economy Bulletin, to monitor the ongoing state of the local economy, whilst the strategy allows us to remain agile to respond as necessary as and when required.

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

Appendix 1 – Consultation Draft of the Economic Strategy

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