

Statement of the Leader of the Council

1. COVID-19

The Cabinet have received an update from the COVID-19 Member led Local Outbreak Control Board and noted the following matters:

- Covid case rates remain high, however the number of people in hospital with Covid has fallen and deaths are at or below pre-pandemic levels for this time of year. Health and care services remain under significant pressure due to Covid and winter illnesses, as well as staff absences, but there are some signs that this is starting to abate.
- The ongoing course of the Covid pandemic is difficult to predict and there is a need to be prepared for a range of scenarios. A major risk is the emergence of a new variant that escaped the protection afforded by vaccination. Covid cases rates were likely to remain high and there may be a degree of seasonality with cases lower in the summer and higher in the winter. Vaccination should protect most people from the more serious complications and whilst the illness will be unpleasant it should be manageable without unsustainable pressures on health and care services.
- Government policy for ongoing pandemic management is not yet clear, but some insights are available through informal discussions to allow planning for 2022/23. Public spaces and workplaces are likely to be advised to take sensible precautions to limit transmission in order to protect staff and customers: ventilation, hand hygiene, a degree of social distancing. There is likely to be ongoing guidance for enhanced infection prevention and control measures in health and care settings such as hospitals and care homes. There may be further booster vaccinations, perhaps limited to higher risk people, for example the groups who are offered an annual flu vaccination.
- The legal requirement for isolation of cases is to end on 24 March 2022 and people are likely to be advised to stay at home if they are symptomatic to avoid spreading the virus. Symptomatic testing is likely to be limited to people admitted to hospital and residents of care homes. Population wide asymptomatic testing and contact tracing is likely to be discontinued in favour of focusing these activities in support of management of outbreaks and community clusters. Local authorities are likely to be asked to lead and support outbreak management – for example in care settings, as well as in schools, businesses and communities where there are high attack rates and/or high numbers of hospitalisations or deaths. Mass testing

may be required in the event that a new variant is identified in order to find and isolate other cases.

- The Council has plans in place to maintain a proportionate Covid response during 2022/23 and is prepared for a range of scenarios. Routine outbreak management operations can be sustained without significant impact on other priorities, and contingencies are in place to escalate the response if required.

This month marks two years since the first identified case of Covid in Staffordshire, and sadly too the first death from the virus.

But 2022 will also be remembered as the time when the tide appeared to turn against the pandemic. Once again we have started to enjoy the greater freedoms we have worked so hard to regain.

While the pandemic is not over and we still need to do everything, we can to reduce the risks and need to be prepared for potentially new variants, the vaccination has allowed us all to be optimistic that the worst is behind us.

It is therefore timely to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has stepped up, made sacrifices and shown kindness during the pandemic.

I am incredibly proud of Staffordshire's co-ordinated response to this pandemic, and I thank everyone for the part they played to get us where we are today.

2. Staffordshire Means Back to Business – Oral Update

The Cabinet have received an update on "Staffordshire Means Back to Business" activity including the following matters:

- The proportion of young people in Staffordshire aged 18-24 that are claiming work-related Universal Credit continues to fall and now stands at 4.2%.
- Our claimant rate has seen a further reduction to 3.1% of the working age population in January compared to 5.5% regionally and 4.5% nationally.
- The overall number of company insolvencies increased by 88% in November 2021 when compared to the same month last year and is now 11% higher than two years previously. We have seen a rapid increase over recent months with levels now above pre COVID due at least in part to government support measures which were put in place to reduce insolvencies having now largely ended. Help is available to

businesses through our own Staffordshire Means Back to Business website or the Staffordshire and Stoke Growth Hub.

- As seen nationally, in December we continued to see an increase in job vacancies in Staffordshire, however the increase is slowing. This is reflective of the increasing demand we are seeing for workers across most parts of the economy to aid the recovery from the pandemic which has been further heightened by seasonal job opportunities. Staffordshire saw vacancies increase by 1% between November and December equivalent to over 400 more job vacancies, this was in line with the increase seen nationally.
- Staffordshire is well placed to work with government to drive forward the Levelling Up Agenda, working closely with our Districts and Boroughs. We have already demonstrated our willingness to invest in supporting business to deliver more higher paid and higher skilled jobs. Our investment in strategic employment sites, infrastructure and skills is extensive and was clearly evidenced only recently when we set our budgets and have allocated an additional £1M to support our economy.
- The Government are to ask Homes England to play a wider role in supporting us as local government to drive forward our ambitions for new affordable housing and regeneration of our respective areas. Our Business & Enterprise Service is to have early discussions with Homes England to understand how they can support us, to not simply provide us with money, but to deliver opportunity.
- The Council is continually looking for opportunities to bring in new employers or HQ relocations as demonstrated by the significant Pets At Home development at Redhill. The "We Are Staffordshire Investment Prospectus," to be submitted to Cabinet in March, will be launched on an international stage at the forthcoming MIPIM event by our Officers. This will be followed up by our attendance at the significant UK Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum to be held later in the year in Leeds. Working closely with our Districts and Boroughs we have brought together our collective regeneration priorities as a County under one document. This document represents strong Staffordshire branding, a place that is confident and creates opportunity. It demonstrates to investors and developers that we are a connected County, an investment in one locality will benefit from the wider opportunities of being part of the Staffordshire family.
- We will shortly be going out to consultation on our Economic Strategy for Staffordshire and alongside it our Rural Economic Strategy which recognises the specific requirements of our non-urban areas. These

plans will provide a clear way forward to build our success, addressing the challenges and opportunities that lie before us.

(Cabinet – 16 February 2022)

3. Business Case for Home Care Developments

Cabinet previously agreed the principle of Council owned older people's nursing homes to provide additional nursing beds in Staffordshire and endorsed the development of a business case and exploration of sites to build extra nursing home capacity. Since then, the Covid pandemic has had a huge impact on care homes and there is a need to review the need for extra nursing home capacity as well as the potential location of homes. The Cabinet have therefore requested officers to re-evaluate the previous recommendation to develop two Council owned care homes taking into account the quality and sustainability of the current market in Staffordshire and to present a Business Case for Council owned care homes, with nursing, to Cabinet once the outcome of work is confirmed.

(Cabinet – 16 February 2022)

4. Integrated Performance Report – Quarter 3 2021/22

The Cabinet have received an overview of Staffordshire County Council's progress, performance, and financial position in delivering against its Strategic Plan and Delivery Plan. They noted that significant progress had been made across the organisation during Quarter 3, however challenges remained in relation to capacity and demand across all service areas. There continued to be areas of financial risk in Adult Social Care and Families and Communities.

The latest revenue forecast outturn showed a forecast saving of £3.963m (0.7%). This was compared to the previous forecast of a saving of £1.992m (0.4%) at Quarter 2.

(Cabinet – 16 February 2022)

5. Potential Joint Coroners Service, Business Case

The Cabinet have considered proposals for the creation of a new joint service for Stoke and Staffordshire Coronial jurisdictions. The proposed new joint service would follow national policy established by the Ministry of Justice and supported by the Chief Coroner to merge smaller coronial areas, and to reduce the overall number of Coronial jurisdictions in England and Wales. It is expected that the merger will improve services for bereaved families and provide opportunities for future efficiency savings as the joint service is embedded, ensuring that the service is sustainable and fit for the future. Inquests will continue to be heard in both Stafford and Stoke-on-

Trent, and there is the potential to use other sites and locations as part of the new joint service.

The Cabinet have endorsed the business case for submission to the Chief Coroner and Ministry of Justice, subject to a similar resolution being passed by Stoke-on-Trent City Council. It is also proposed that the name for the new service will be 'Staffordshire and Stoke-On-Trent Coroners Service'.

The Assistant Director, Culture, Rural and Safer Communities has been given delegated authority to take all steps necessary to progress the Business Case to completion on behalf of Staffordshire County Council.

(Cabinet – 16 February 2022)

6. Major Improvements to A50/A500 Corridor

Good, connected roads are hugely important for Staffordshire, not just for getting people to where they want to go, but to act as a catalyst for investment and economic growth.

We know that people want to see improvements made to our roads and that's why this year we are investing an extra £15.5 million in our highways.

As a county council, one of our other key priorities is to improve our strategic transport routes and maximise the opportunities from being positioned at the heart of the country.

The plans from Midlands Connect to improve the A50/A500 corridor are therefore hugely welcomed and promise to create a £12 billion economic boost and help unlock over 12,000 jobs.

In its report, called *Levelling up Stoke, Staffordshire & Derby: The road to success* outlines a series of strategic recommendations for long-awaited upgrades, badly needed to alleviate bottlenecks along the 90km long A50/A500 corridor, which links Derby, Nottingham and Leicester to Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire and the North-West.

As a county council we will continue to be a key partner as these exciting plans develop.

7. Ukraine

We have all been horrified by the events which have unfolded in Ukraine and as a county stand with those affected.

As a county council and as a county we have a proud history of helping those who have had no choice but to flee war or persecution.

Only recently we welcomed almost 200 men, women and child evacuees from Afghanistan and are supporting many of the children in Staffordshire schools as the families try to rebuild new lives here in the UK.

Once again, we too will be here to support and help Ukrainian evacuees should our help be needed.

8. Queen's Platinum Jubilee

It is only Spring, but it looks like 2022 will be remembered for many things – not all of them good. However, one definite piece of good news is the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

Not many people will see in their lifetime a monarch who has reigned for 70 years. A truly remarkable achievement and an incredible example of a life devoted to public service.

It will be fantastic to commemorate this event with friends, family and neighbours.

In Staffordshire, we are all working together to make it as easy as possible for people to hold street parties and join in the celebrations over the extended Bank Holiday weekend.