

## QUESTION 6

### COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 17 MARCH 2022

#### Question to Cllr Philip White Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills

By Cllr Afsar

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#### Question

Our County's Covid has had a disproportionate impact on certain communities. What more can the Council do to draw attention to long standing socioeconomic issues such as housing, male nutrition, low paying occupations, and child poverty especially during the current climate?

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#### Reply

It is important to the County Council that all Staffordshire residents have the opportunity to prosper.

Even before the pandemic we endeavoured to ensure that all those living in Staffordshire were able to have access to more good jobs and share in the benefits of economic growth. The County Council has worked hard to enable everyone to live in thriving and sustainable communities, and, in direct reference to your broad question; working with our partners – we strive to help our residents to live healthier, independent lives for longer. The pandemic, together, with the wider challenges that we are all facing, have brought many of the issues that you have raised into sharper focus. The County Council is already addressing many of these matters in practical ways.

We are working with our partners, such as the CCG, on several initiatives aimed at reducing health inequalities. This includes further development of our community champions programme and launching a programme of citizens enquiry to understand the views, behaviours and issues impacting on local people.

The existing healthy lifestyles service has been adapted throughout the pandemic to ensure continued support for local people around important issues such as smoking, weight management, NHS health checks, and workplace health. Part of this support has included expanding some of the eligibility criteria, as well as creating more flexible delivery models for services. As a sign of our ongoing commitment to this, we are in the process

of preparing to retender for this service - from Spring 2023, and the framework will allow for further focus and targeting of resources at those with the greatest health and care needs.

We are growing and developing our workplace health programme, linking it into networks such as the LEP and Chambers of Commerce, to better engage large and small employers; focusing on those settings with employees who tend to have poorer health outcomes and lower socio-economic groups for example - the unskilled, those in low paid jobs, manual workforces, and in specific reference to your question - male members of the wider workforce.

In terms of the socio and economic impacts of Covid-19, again there is a growing body of evidence that highlights that certain communities have been more adversely impacted by the socio-economic implications of Covid-19 than others.

The County Council has worked proactively to support all those in need of further assistance during these uncertain times. We are helping families through our Education Support Fund Scheme which provides nearly 27,000 eligible children with a £15.00 supermarket eVoucher per week out of term time. This scheme has been delivered every half term since October 2020 and will continue until Easter 2022. Alongside this there is support for families through the Household Support Grant for food and essential supplies for those facing substantial financial hardship.

The recent Staffordshire Covid-19 Survey, highlighted that younger residents, those unemployed or unable to work, and those with a disability, were most likely to have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. The County Council's efforts to transform the Staffordshire economy and reduce our reliance on low-wage, low-value industries over the last decade ensured, however, that we were well placed to remain resilient through the pandemic and rebound strongly afterwards.

Whilst challenges clearly remain, the delivery of local and national economic support measures since the start of the pandemic, alongside the vaccine rollout, have been hugely successful in averting the economic disaster that was predicted by many commentators, with GDP now already above pre-pandemic levels.

Through our Economic Recovery, Renewal & Transformation Strategy, the County Council delivered numerous projects and programmes to support those businesses and residents most adversely affected by the public health measures implemented over the last two years. These included an emergency grants scheme, the provision of PPE, support to start a business, and delayed rent payments at our Enterprise Centres to name just a few.

Through our Countywide Employment and Skills Task Group, the County Council continues to work with Government departments and local partners to support communities hardest hit by COVID and support those unfortunate to lose their jobs back into work. This includes enabling residents to reskill and upskill, thereby improving their career outcomes, pay and productivity to aid economic growth, increased prosperity, and better wellbeing. This work has contributed to the reduction in work-related Universal Credit claimants across all wards in Staffordshire during the last year.

Our hugely successful Staffordshire Means Back to Business programme, delivered in collaboration with all our District / Borough Council partners, is also continuing to deliver funding and support for businesses to recover and grow following the pandemic, to enable people to start their own business, to develop apprenticeship opportunities, and upskill employees. Many of these schemes were proactively targeted and promoted within areas where they were most needed and be of greatest benefit, including by local councillors.

Recognising that we are now in a far different and better place to what we might have been, it is the right time to set out our vision and ambitions for the Staffordshire economy in the coming years through our Strategic Plan and emerging Economic Strategy. This will require tackling a number of key challenges that remain, including that some parts of the county continue to lag behind.

All of our priorities will benefit communities across the county, such as our ambitions to transform our town centres and enable our residents to benefit from highly paid, high skilled jobs. We will continue to work with all our partners in delivering for communities across Staffordshire in the coming months and years, including with Government in achieving the ambitions set out within the Levelling Up White Paper.

This is supported by our Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. This identifies those wards with higher levels of need – for example with lower educational achievement, poorer health, and/or higher levels of crime.

We target our resources where possible to support those residents who most need our help, for example the Warmer Greener home programme which has funded heating and insulation for more than 500 of our poorest households.

We will continue to do our best to 'level up' the county, working with partners and communities and recognising that this is a long-term endeavour that requires action by national government, local agencies and the public.