

Minutes of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 14 April 2022

Present: Tina Clements (Chairman)

Attendance

Philip Hudson
Graham Hutton

David Smith
Bernard Williams

Apologies: Keith Flunder, Philippa Haden, Syed Hussain, Ian Lawson, Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf and Jessica Shulman

PART ONE

52. Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

53. Minutes of meeting held on 23 March 2022

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 23 March 2022 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

54. Digital Connectivity in Staffordshire

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Environment Infrastructure and Climate Change updating them on the progress made in delivering Staffordshire's Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework (Schedule 1 to the signed minutes).

Members heard that a key priority of the County Council's Strategic Plan was to improve digital connections and use digital technology to connect, inform and support Staffordshire's residents. Specifically, their mission was to:- "Accelerate delivery of gigabit technologies, maximising the opportunities and benefits for the businesses and residents of Staffordshire to enable the growth of our digital economy". Accordingly, a Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework (DISF) was adopted in March 2021 setting out the following five key objectives:- "(i) To enable and accelerate delivery of gigabit capable technologies and infrastructure to provide full access; (ii) To maximise the opportunities and benefits of Fifth Generation Technology Standard (5G) across Staffordshire; (iii) To enable rural and digitally isolated communities where market intervention has failed; (iv) To enable the growth of the digital economy in Staffordshire

and; (v) Demonstrate the benefits of gigabit technology to business and communities.

The DISF set out a framework for delivery up to 2030 at which point it was hoped that 100% gigabit (or 1,000 Megabits per second (Mbs)) connectivity of all premises in the County would be achieved.

Various national and local initiatives were being supported/pursued by the Authority in order to achieve their ambitions with regard to digital connectivity. At a national level, the Council were participating in the Government's Project Gigabit which aimed to connect premises currently unserved with gigabit capable broadband by the commercial market. Consequently, 75 potential public sector GigaHubs including rural schools, doctor's surgeries, libraries etc in the County had been identified and work was underway in partnership with Midlands Engine to bring these into operation.

The County Council had worked with rural communities across Staffordshire to access the UK Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme which sought to provide immediate financial help to people experiencing slow broadband speeds in rural areas. As a result of their £1m investment (plus that of Central Government), 96.95% of all premises now had broadband connectivity and a further 1,238 sites were scheduled for connection before the programme was due to end.

At a local level, the Superfast Staffordshire Programme had been developed in partnership with Building Digital UK (BDUK) and Openreach to deliver Superfast Broadband across the County. Since its inception in 2012 approximately 83,400 premises had gained access to broadband internet connectivity with greater than 24 Mbs. In addition, coverage had increased from 65% in 2013 to 96.95% in March 2022 which meant that over 400,000 premises County-wide now had access to this service.

However, whilst the fibre deployment contracts phase of the programme was now complete it was estimated that approximately 7% or 30,000 premises in Staffordshire were still without access to superfast broadband and approximately 1.05% or 4,500 premises had connectivity below 10 Mbs. Furthermore, 1% of premises Countywide were designated Very-Hard-To-Reach (VHTR) owing to their rural proximity. Therefore, the County Council were investigating alternative technological solutions in order to reach these areas.

The County Council's investment in the Superfast programme was forecasted to return approximately £4m in gainshare funding of which £1.5 had already been received. Whilst £1.1m had been invested in the Rural Gigabit Voucher Scheme, it was recognised that enabling further

access to gigabit connectivity required continued shaping and influencing of the market for which additional investment was required.

During the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued, Members gave detailed scrutiny to the progress made to date in meeting the ambitions set out in the Strategic Plan regarding digital connectivity, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising issues of concern as necessary including:- (i) the options available to the Authority in an attempt to persuade network operators to connect to 'VHTR' premises; (ii) issues with connections to premises already served by broadband arising from the use of outdated copper based technology; (iii) the need to identify all Staffordshire premises without an adequate broadband connection and improve services as soon as possible; (iv) the need to use new, alternative technologies to achieve the Authority's ambition of 100% 5G coverage by 2030.

In conclusion, Members agreed that substantial progress had been made by the Authority in achieving their vision through the DISF. They were satisfied that steps were being taken in order to resolve current gaps in service provision and that these gaps only affected a relatively few locations in the County.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be received and noted.

(b) That the progress made in delivering the County Council's Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework be welcomed.

(c) That efforts to achieve 100% gigabit connectivity in Staffordshire by 2030 continue at pace.

(b) That a further update on the progress made with regard to Digital connectivity be brought to Committee in 12 months' time or sooner if required.

55. Highways Transformation Update

The Committee considered an oral report and PowerPoint presentation (slides attached at Appendix 1 to the signed minutes) of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport updating them on progress made with regard to the Highways Transformation programme.

During his presentation the Cabinet Member highlighted:- (i) his New Vision and Ambition for the service; (ii) the three key elements of the Programme ie Future Highways Delivery Model, Transforming Our Offer Now and Highways Investment Strategy; (iii) Programme Governance; (iv) Improvements to Date; (v) Where We are Now ie current performance benchmarked against other similar Highways Authorities;

(vi) Members' Operational Goals; (vii) the Council's Strategic Goals for the Highways Service; (viii) Rebalancing Highways Services; (ix) Highways Investment Strategy; (x) Extra Capital Investment 2022/23 (£15.5m); (xi) Extra Revenue Investment 2022/23; (xii) Transforming Our Offer Now; (xiii) Future Delivery Models-Options Longlist Analysis; (xiv) Shortlist Selection; (xv) Terms of Reference; (xvi) Future Delivery Models: Options Appraisal and; (xvii) Timescale.

During the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave detailed scrutiny to the progress made to date and proposed future direction of the programme, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising concerns as necessary including:- (i) the need to improve the public's perception of the service wherever possible; (ii) the need for greater involvement of 'Local' Members in the operation of the service; (iii) the deficiencies of the online system currently provided for reporting Highway defects and the need to improve its customer focus and useability; (iv) the importance of benchmarking performance against value for money and customer satisfaction metrics; (v) the role of communication in managing expectations; (vi) inspection and monitoring performance of third party contractors; (v) 'pros' and 'cons' of the various potential future delivery models; (v) future traffic management strategies and the need to address problems caused by 'rat runs'; (vi) the need to target available budgets towards service improvement rather than bureaucracy and; (vii) potential opportunities for greater partnership working with Parish Councils in helping to maintain the highway network.

In conclusion, Members agreed that there was an urgent need to re-balance the Highways service by shifting away from the current risk-based model to one that prioritised and invested in customer need. They were mindful of the disadvantages of some of the models currently being considered for the re-configured service but expressed confidence in the processes being employed by the Cabinet Member for identifying the best option for Staffordshire.

RESOLVED – (a) That the report be received and noted.

(b) That satisfactory progress had been made to date in the Highways Transformation programme.

(b) That the various comments made by Members during the discussion be offered to the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport in order to assist him in developing the Highways Transformation Programme further.

(c) That further updates on progress with regard to the Highways Transformation Programme be brought to the Committee, as necessary.

56. Spotlight Review - Sexual Harassment in Schools January 2022

The Committee considered a draft report of the Chairman of the Spotlight Review on Sexual Harassment in Schools following work by representatives of Safeguarding, Prosperous and Health and Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee's to examine the extent of sexual harassment in Staffordshire's schools (schedule 3 to the signed minutes).

County Councillors Ann Edgeller and Kath Perry were in attendance as Members of the Spotlight Review Group.

The issue of sexual harassment in schools had recently gained national attention following the high number of testimonies included on the 'Everyone's Invited' webpage which provided 'a safe place for survivors (of sexual abuse) to share their stories completely anonymously'. In March 2021 the Government asked the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) to undertake a rapid review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges together with safeguarding policies, the results of which were published in June 2021.

In Staffordshire, a review group was established at the beginning of the 2021/22 Municipal Year following separate identification of similar work programme items by the three Committees. Owing to the cross-cutting nature of the subject and in order to avoid duplication, the Committees agreed to collaborate on a joint review and for the findings to be reported back to each prior to submission to the relevant Cabinet Member(s) for attention and any necessary action.

The recommendations of the Spotlight Review were: -

- "That the Cabinet Members for Education (and SEND) and for Children & Young People join with the three Overview and Scrutiny Committee Chairmen in writing to Central Government, welcoming the valuable work which is taking place to make fit for purpose and to bring into law the Online Safety Bill, and calling on the Government as a matter of urgency to consider what further action should be taken to protect children from online peer-on-peer sexual harassment and abuse".
- "That progress with this new initiative is monitored and the impact on schools be assessed in 12 months' time".
- "That a one stop shop resource bank, which includes details of support organisations, training, and teaching resources, be developed".

- “That a bank of case study good practice examples of how differing specific peer-on-peer abuse and harassment was dealt with be developed as a resource tool for headteachers, senior management and Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSL)”.
- “That the Cabinet Members for Education (and SEND) and Children & Young People consider the introduction of local DSL meetings as a way of sharing best practice, experience and addressing concerns amongst groups of schools”.
- “That a representative from the Health & Care and the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committees be invited to attend and take an active part in the scrutiny of the Staffordshire Safeguarding Children’s Board Annual Report for 2022”.
- “That the three Overview and Scrutiny Committees consider progress made from these initiatives and the impact for schools in 12 months’ time, with consideration that this could be undertaken by the current spotlight review Members”.

During the discussion which ensued, Members queried the role academies had played in the Spotlight Review and asked whether non-Local Authority schools were willing to collaborate in tackling the various issues raised. In reply, Members of the Review Group confirmed that representatives from Academy schools had actively participated in the Review by submitting information and attending the Spotlight Review Day (14 January 2022). In addition, Members were pleased to note the good work already being undertaken by schools in helping to address peer-on-peer sexual abuse and emphasised the importance of ensuring children were safe in all educational establishments irrespective of their Academy status.

RESOLVED – (a) That the draft report be received and noted

(b) That the recommendations contained in the draft report be endorsed.

(c) That the comments made by Members be reflected in the final report of the Spotlight Review.

(d) That the Spotlight Review Working Group be thanked for their valuable work in helping to address the various issues identified surrounding sexual harassment in schools.

(e) That the finalised report be forwarded to the Cabinet Members for Education (and SEND) and Children and Young People for their attention and any necessary action.

57. Work Programme

RESOLVED – That the updated Wark Programme (schedule 4 to the signed minutes) be approved.

58. Date of Next Meeting - Thursday 26 May 2022 at 10.00 am, County Buildings, Stafford

RESOLVED – That the date, time and venue of the next scheduled meeting be noted.

Chairman