

Minutes of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 26 May 2022

Present: Tina Clements (Chairman)

Attendance

Philip Hudson	Jessica Shulman
Syed Hussain	David Smith
Kruskonjic (Vice-Chairman (Overview))	Ross Ward (Vice-Chairman (Scrutiny))
Ian Lawson	Bernard Williams
Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf	

Apologies: Philippa Haden

PART ONE

1. Declarations of Interest

2. Minutes of meeting held on 14 April 2022

The Chairman paid tribute to the former Vice-Chairman (Overview), Cllr Keith Flunder for his valuable work on the Committee during 2021/22 Municipal Year.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting held on 14 April 2022 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

3. Rural Economic Strategy

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills regarding the draft Staffordshire Rural Economic Strategy 2022-2030 which had recently been published for consultation (schedule 1 to the signed minutes).

The Strategy set out how the Authority intended to deliver their wider Economic Strategy in rural areas, recognising their significance to the County's economy and that of the wider West-Midlands region as a whole. Understanding the specific opportunities and challenges which they faced was seen as key to ensuring future interventions by the Council and their Partners were appropriate, co-ordinated and timely. To this end, the Strategy, its evidence base and Implementation Plan had been jointly developed with Warwickshire Economics and Development.

Staffordshire was approximately 80% rural by area with 27,000 registered businesses operating across a diverse range of sectors including farming, forestry, tourism and manufacturing. However, the County faced challenges typical of rural areas including peripherality, physical isolation and weak telecommunications. In addition, housing affordability was often an issue with particular implications for younger and elderly residents.

During his presentation of the report the Director highlighted the five strategic priorities included in the strategy document, summarised as follows:- (i) Stimulate enterprise and innovation to increase productivity, competitiveness and resilience across all sectors of the rural economy, including in overseas markets to enable high quality high-wage job retention and growth and to enable transition to net-zero carbon emissions; (ii) Support sustainable intensification in agriculture whereby agricultural productivity is enhanced, whilst also creating environmental and social benefits through productivity investments and business support for improved viability, diversification, carbon reduction and succession; (iii) Recover and grow the visitor economy, including 'green tourism', by supporting tourism businesses and developing an on-trend visitor offer, including a high-quality accommodation offer, drawing on Staffordshire's rich countryside and heritage assets; (iv) Improve rural digital connectivity and access to opportunities for rural businesses, workers, residents, and visitors, and develop digital and low-carbon energy infrastructure and; (v) Support the regeneration of the five Rural Hub Towns (Leek, Cheadle, Stone, Uttoxeter and Rugeley) to unlock investment opportunities, develop their visitor offers, and improve their resilience via high-quality place management.

The Director explained that the Strategy was to be co-ordinated and managed by the existing Funding, Business and Enterprise Team within his Directorate and that the emerging Implementation Plan would contain a range of projects and initiatives aligned to the above-mentioned priorities to be delivered by the County Council and their Partners. In addition, the Strategy was to be used to provide a context for Central Government funding including UK Shared Prosperity Fund under the 'Levelling-up' Agenda. He also highlighted the Strategy's alignment with Priorities Nos. 1, "have access to more good jobs and share the benefit of economic growth" and; 2. "live in thriving and sustainable communities", of the County Council's Strategic Plan 2022-2026.

During the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued, Members gave detailed scrutiny to the draft Strategy, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising specific areas of concern as follows:- (i) the importance of 100% broadband connectivity to the success of the strategy and the measures which the County Council intended to take in

order to achieve it; (ii) the implications of the conflict in Ukraine on Staffordshire's farmers, the rural economy as a whole and associated impact on Rural Hubs Towns; (iii) the need for close partnership working with Staffordshire District and Borough Councils in order to tackle the lack of affordable housing in rural areas; (iv) the opportunities for generating renewable energy in Staffordshire arising from its predominantly rural land-use profile; (v) the need for the Strategy to reflect recent demographic changes and increased costs within the rural sector arising from geo-political and other factors; (vi) the Government's methodology for the identification of Rural Hub Towns and their reasoning behind similar towns within the general locality having not been identified.

In conclusion the Committee expressed their support for the draft Strategy and its five priorities and urged the Cabinet Member to have regard to their comments in the final version (and its Implementation Plan) expected to be published in late Summer/early Autumn 2022.

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

(b) That the County Council's draft Rural Economic Strategy 2022/2030 be supported.

(c) That the Cabinet Member have regard to the above-mentioned comments in the final version (and its Implementation Plan) expected to be published in late Summer/early Autumn 2022.

(d) That further update reports on the progress made in implementing the Strategy be brought to the Committee on a quarterly basis.

4. Developing the Work Programme

The Committee considered a report by the Scrutiny and Support Officer (Schedule A to the signed minutes) highlighting:- (i) their remit; (ii) key considerations for them in the development of their Work Programme for 2022/23 Municipal Year; (iii) the various outstanding matters carried forward from their previous year's Work Programme; (iv) the various methods of scrutiny available to them in implementing their Work Programme and; (v) the need for the Work Programme to be kept under regular review having regard to any new issues which might arise requiring priority consideration.

In addition they received oral reports/presentations from Cabinet Members and Directors setting out the Authority's priority areas for 2022/23 Municipal Year.

During the discussion which ensued Members noted:- (i) Cabinet's Forward Plan of Key Decisions 18 May 2022 - 21 September 2022

attached at Appendix 1 to the report; (ii) a draft Work Programme for 2022/23 Municipal Year attached at Appendix 2 to the report (which included items identified during the previous year) and; (iii) their completed Work Programme for 2021/22 Municipal Year attached at Appendix 3 to the report.

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

(b) That the draft Work Programme for 2022/23 Municipal Year be approved subject to the addition of the following matters/programmed meeting dates:-

Item	Meeting Date
Schools White Paper	To be confirmed
OFSTED 2022 Inspection No. 2 Progress Plan – Education for All Pupils Including Specialist Provision	To be confirmed
Countryside Review - Update	Early Autumn - To be confirmed
Staffordshire History Centre - Update	Early Autumn - To be confirmed
Library Services Relocation/Reconfiguration	Early Autumn - To be confirmed
Highways Transformation Progress and Performance Quarterly Update	29 September 2022
Local Transport Plan Refresh	To be confirmed
Digital Infrastructure Plan Progress Update	To be confirmed
Tourism and Visitor Economy	To be confirmed

5. Date of Next Meeting - Wednesday 15 June 2022 at 2.00 pm, County Buildings, Stafford

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

Chairman