

Statement of the Leader of the Council

1. Staffordshire Means Back to Business – Oral Update

The Cabinet have received an oral report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills giving an update on "Staffordshire Means Back to Business" activity including the following matters:

- The publication of the Council's Economic Strategy, which sets out the Council's economic priorities in the coming years, namely:
 - Working with our partners to regenerate our town centres.
 - Enabling people to benefit from higher paid, higher skilled and high social value jobs.
 - Supporting people to start and grow a business.
 - Encouraging greater levels of innovation activity.
 - Developing those investment-ready projects that will be vital to the future of the county.
 - And, developing our A50 / A500 and A38 strategic corridors for transformational economic growth of national significance.
- The claimant count which this month saw a further increase of 265 claimants, with the total number of claimants in the county now standing at 14,700. This increase is higher than the rise seen nationally, with the claimant rates for Staffordshire increasing from 2.7% to 2.8%. However, the rate in Staffordshire remains one of the lowest rates in the West Midlands and far lower than the average for England of 3.7% of the working age population.
- The youth claimant count in Staffordshire saw a slight increase of 45 to a total of 2,685 young people. The proportion of young people in Staffordshire aged 18-24 that are claiming work-related Universal Credit has increased this month from 4.2% to 4.3%, although this remains lower than the national rate of 4.7%.
- The Council's success in supporting innovation, including the delivery of multiple business premises on Keele University Science & Innovation Park that are now home to many high-value, highly skilled companies.
- The Government's granting of permission for JCB's hydrogen-powered backhoe loaders to be used on UK roads. JCB's hydrogen project has already led to the creation of 150 new jobs with the promise of hundreds of more to come. We are now driving forward

plans to consider how the county council and our partners can best support our businesses and institutions to further increase innovation activities, improve connectivity and ultimately support growth in highly paid jobs.

- The Council's successful bid for £20 million of Levelling Up Funding. This will be used to improve a number of major roads around the county, reduce journey times, support operators to provide greener, cleaner buses on main roads, improve walking and cycling routes and, as part of the delivery of our Strategic Infrastructure Plan, support the substantial growth in jobs and housing planned to be delivered in the county.
- Staffordshire Moorlands District Council's success in securing £17.1 million to redevelop Leek town centre, including substantial investment in the Nicholson Institute, home to Leek's library, museum and art gallery. Together with Cannock Chase District Council's success in round one, this means that the Staffordshire local authorities have secured over £57 million for the county from the Levelling Up Fund alone.

(Cabinet – 15 February 2023)

2. Diversity and Inclusion – Progress Update

A great deal of work was undertaken during 2021 to review the Council's approach to delivering against the Public Sector Equality Duty. It was recognised that equality considerations were embedded across the organisation with a strong corporate focus on responding to, and addressing the Gender Pay Gap, together with improving collection and analysis of the workforce profile data. Key information through the Gender Pay Gap report and Workforce Profile was published annually on 1st April. A range of other activities and initiatives were also identified as having a significant impact on tackling inequalities both within the County Council and wider communities across Staffordshire.

It was however acknowledged that more could be done to strengthen the Council's approach. Therefore, in December 2021 Cabinet agreed to adopt a new set of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) principles and objectives, along with an associated delivery plan. feedback from the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee had helped further shape the EDI delivery plan.

An officer EDI Steering Group has been established within Corporate Services, which brings together lead senior officers, to co-ordinate, collaborate and monitor progress against the equality, diversity and inclusion delivery plan.

The Cabinet have noted the progress of the Council's work to further strengthen its approach to equality, diversity and inclusion, including delivery of the delivery plan; and have approved the emerging priorities for 2023/24.

(Cabinet – 15 February 2023)

3. Empowering Our Communities

Our communities and residents are at the very heart of what makes Staffordshire a strong and thriving county. Empowering our communities to help themselves and each other is a core part of our Strategic Plan 2022-25.

Recognising the importance of our work with communities, a Communities Position Statement has been the purpose of which is to review progress made in 2021/22, clearly articulate our plans for the next 12 months, and set out our longer-term aspirations.

The Cabinet have considered the Communities Position Statement, including a review of the progress made with partners and communities in 2021/22, and have approved the Communities Delivery Plan for 2023. They have also committed to engage with partners and communities to develop a long-term, innovative, and ambitious Communities Strategy for Staffordshire.

(Cabinet – 15 February 2023)

4. Integrated Performance Report - Quarter 3, 2022/23

The Cabinet have received an overview of Staffordshire County Council's progress, performance, and financial position in delivering against the Council's Strategic Plan and Delivery Plan.

They noted that significant progress had been made across the organisation during Quarter 3, however inflationary, recruitment and retention pressures continued. Levels of demand also remained challenging, particularly in Children and Families. However, there had been improvements in Adult Social Care. There also continued to be areas of financial risk in Children and Families.

The latest revenue forecast outturn showed a forecast overspend of £16.135m (2.74%), prior to additional funding for inflationary pressures being taken into account. Once this one-off funding is included and an allocation from the Inflation Reserve is assumed, the overspend reduces to £11.635m (1.97%). This is compared to an overspend of £6.408m reported at Quarter 2.

Cabinet have approved that the £4m remaining in the Contingency budget be used to fund the pay award which has been agreed for 2022/23.

(Cabinet – 15 February 2023)

5. Conflict in Ukraine

Last month marked the one-year anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine – a milestone that nobody in this chamber wanted to see.

In Staffordshire, as always, communities have opened their homes and their hearts to the people of Ukraine, with many hundreds now making Staffordshire their home.

It is hard to imagine the impact the upheaval must have had on families, not to mention the human cost on loved ones left behind.

Despite all this, families appear determined to make the most of this desperately sad situation by getting on with their lives in the UK, whether this is educating their children or finding work.

Olena Serba and Kateryna Trushko both arrived in Staffordshire in April 2022 as part of the Homes for Ukraine scheme being co-ordinated by the county council.

I am pleased to say they have both now secured full time jobs in the Business Executive Support Team and Adult Social Care departments at the council...so welcome to Olena and Kateryna.

6. Highways Investment

Good, well-maintained roads are important to this council, to residents, to businesses and to growing the local economy.

With a huge rural network the size we have in Staffordshire, this is always going to be a costly challenge. I think we all recognise this, and the need to work too within our budget, while balancing this against other competing priorities.

The council's approach is to look for innovative, cost-effective solutions and to prioritise the roads which are key or well-used routes.

On top of extra investment we made last year, we are now looking to spend an additional £30m in the next two years to maintain and improve our network.

7. Armed Forces Covenant

I am incredibly proud of Staffordshire's links with the armed forces, something which is especially close to my own heart.

I was delighted to see that members of Staffordshire's Leaders Board joined together to pledge support for our armed forces communities by re-signing the Armed Forces Covenant.

The Covenant is a promise by the nation ensuring those who serve/have served and their families, are treated fairly ensuring all members of the Armed Forces community have the same access to public and commercial services as any other citizen does.

The declaration builds upon already strong relationships between partners to ensure the principles of the Covenant are upheld locally.

8. New History Centre

Work to build a new history centre for Staffordshire is now underway, thanks to the resourcefulness and determination of all those working behind the scenes on these exciting plans.

More than one thousand years of the county's history will be brought to life in this exciting new heritage project for the county – which has been made possible thanks to the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

The new centre will see an extension to the existing Staffordshire Record Office building in nearby Eastgate Street in Stafford, incorporating the renovated and redisplayed William Salt Library building.

A modern glazed entrance will link both buildings, creating a bright exhibition space to showcase museum, archive, and William Salt library collections. Additional strong rooms will provide space for a further 55 years of collections.

This is undoubtedly going to be a huge asset for the county and will also support learning and education of future generations for the years to come.

9. Staffordshire Day

It may only be March, but this year's Staffordshire Day is fast approaching with a packed programme of exciting activities and events in store for residents and visitors alike.

This year it falls on the first May bank holiday Monday and will be just days before the celebrations to mark the coronation of King Charles III.

On Monday 1 May, we'll be shouting about sustainability: from home-grown food to home-grown talent, we will be celebrating the many ways our county is doing our bit to reduce our impact on the environment and make Staffordshire more sustainable.

The popular Staffordshire Film Competition returns, and this year the theme is 'learn something new' - there are three categories for people to enter, including a brand new three-minute short film category.

We will also be unveiling a specially commissioned film to celebrate all things Staffordshire, which will be available to view online from 20 April. So definitely plenty going on, so please do get involved if you can.

10. School Places

All parents know how stressful it can be in applying for places for your child at high school.

In Staffordshire, we have an excellent track record of achieving well above the national average for first preferences, and for top three preferences as a whole.

I'm pleased to see that despite increased demand for secondary school places, we have once again been able to offer a first choice secondary school place to the majority of parents, with nine out of ten getting their preferred option.

In fact this year 92.5 per cent got their first choice compared to just 83 per cent nationally.

11. New Chapter for Business Start-Ups

Finally, in this county we really do have a jam-packed learning, training and skills agenda supporting people with their aspirations, and a major part of this is supporting people to start-up their own business and thrive.

Over the last few years, the county council has led the unique Staffordshire Means Back to Business scheme - a partnership of all the district and borough councils - to get more support, to more small businesses in the way that they need it, quicker, than ever before. An extra £4.2m was invested through this unique scheme. And we continue to support new businesses with initiatives, based around what they tell us they need – for example, our Get Started and Grow scheme now supports businesses up to five years old with the offer of fully-funded, expert, back-office support.

And to extend the support even more for those wanting to become self-employed, each library now has its own Staffordshire Start-up Hub where they can access self-employment resources including books, fact sheets, business plan templates and information. A move which will hopefully support even more businesses flourish in 2023.

It's this ongoing commitment to listening to residents and business, working in partnership and supporting SMEs by developing the right growth environment, that has led to some great news. The latest figures show that the number of new businesses in Staffordshire has improved substantially and is now in-line with the UK average – for the first time ever. And just as importantly, more survive the difficult first few years than most other places.

This is a huge positive for the county and is an area that will remain a strong focus for us in the coming months and years to help create a more dynamic, vibrant economy.