

Minutes of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 7 June 2023

Present: Tina Clements (Chair)

Attendance	
Philippa Haden	David Smith
Philip Hudson	Samantha Thompson
Graham Hutton	Ross Ward (Vice-Chair (Scrutiny))
Peter Kruskonjic (Vice-Chair (Overview))	Bernard Williams
Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf	

Also in attendance: Darryl Evers, Anthony Hodge, Jonathan Lindop and Philip White

Apologies: Charlotte Atkins and Simon Tagg

Part One

1. Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

2. Minutes of meeting held on 27 April 2023

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 27 April 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

3. Highways Transformation Progress and Performance Quarterly 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 the progress made with regard to the Highways Transformation Programme.

NOTE BY CLERK: In the absence of the Cabinet Member, the Director for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills presented the report and took questions from Members.

During the presentation and report the Director highlighted:- (i) the Future Highways Delivery Model (including Infrastructure Plus – Strategic Partnership); (ii) Transforming Our Offer (ie the measures to be taken improve the current configuration of service); (iii) Capital Investment 2023/24 and 2024/25 and; (iv) Investment (Revenue)

2023/24 and 2024/25.

In the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave detailed scrutiny to the progress made in the Programme to date, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising areas of concern as necessary, including:- (i) progress towards development of Geographic Information System for Highways Assets in the County; (ii) staff perceptions of the Highways Transformation journey; (iii) details of the future Preventative Maintenance Programme including joint working with landowners in respect of flooding on the Highway; (iv) barriers which had prevented Divisional Highway Programme Budgets from being fully utilised; (v) weed control; (vi) workforce planning; (vii) performance of the County Council's current strategic contractor; (viii) management responsibilities in the reconfigured service and how these might be changed to improve customer focus; (ix) future joint working with statutory undertakers to improve the quality of highway re-instatements and; (x) the importance of effective communication with 'Local' Members and the public.

In response to requests, the Director undertook to liaise with the Members concerned regarding:- (i) potential carry-over of Divisional Highway Programme capital budgets and; (ii) weed control in Cannock Villages County Electoral Division.

In conclusion, the Committee agreed that satisfactory progress had been made in the Highways Transformation Programme to date but urged the Cabinet Member to have regard to their comments and concerns particularly in respect of performance management of the Authority's existing strategic partner. They welcomed news of the additional significant investment which had been secured for the Highways network over the next two years and the opportunity to participate in functional level commissioning for 24 individual service areas.

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

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

(c) That the Cabinet Member be urged to have regard to the above-mentioned comments in his work to implement the new future delivery model for Staffordshire Highways.

(d) That Highways Functional Service Level Commissioning be added to their Work Programme for the meeting on 6 July 2023.

4. Staffordshire County Council's Economic Strategy – Delivery

Update

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills updating them on progress made in the delivery of Staffordshire's Economic Strategy 2023-2030 (schedule 2 to the signed minutes).

The Primary focus of the Strategy was:- (i) Town centres; (ii) Higher skilled and higher paid workforce; (iii) 'Start-up' and 'step-up' businesses; (iv) The development of investment ready projects and; (v) Strategic corridors. In addition, various other priorities and themes were identified as being important for the future growth of the economy. These included:- (i) Innovation; (ii) Supporting businesses on their journey to net zero and; (iii) Maximising the use of investment to unlock external funding.

Since scrutiny given at their meeting in October 2022, the final version of the document had been published on the County Council's website.

The Cabinet Member then updated them on the potential impact of recent national and global economic headlines on the County and the Authority's ability to deliver the various priorities set out in the Strategy. In addition, he updated them on the activity undertaken since October 2022 towards achieving the Authority's various ambitions, as follows:-

Priority (i): Town Centre/High Street Regeneration

Ambition: "By 2030, we will tackle the challenges faced by many of our town centres and strive to create places that we can be proud of".

(i) Delivery of Central Government's Future High Streets Fund, Town Deals and Levelling-Up Fund in the eight Staffordshire District/Boroughs by assisting with the development of business cases; (ii) Continued investment in high quality premises to support businesses to start, grow and remain in Staffordshire; (iii) Work related to the appointment of a Development Partner for the Stafford Eastgate Regeneration Programme.

Priority (ii): Higher Skilled, Higher Paid Workforce

Ambition: "By 2030, we will address the low levels of skills across some parts of the County and support more of our residents to gain the high-level skills needed to take advantage of many better paid job opportunities".

(i) Development of a new Employment and Skills Strategy for

Staffordshire; (ii) Continued support given to the County's skills providers to further develop their facilities through the promotion of 20 capital projects; (iii) Commissioning of a study to capture the current landscape of education and skills, programmes and training courses that promoted enterprise with a view to identifying any gaps; (iv) Continuation of Staffordshire's Ignite initiative, designed to encourage a greater understanding of entrepreneurialism and enterprise amongst young people in their final year of college, which had so far trained over 13,500 students; (v) delivery of education and support by the Community Learning Service specifically aimed at improving skills and helping people into work; (vi) Continued delivery of Multiply, a £4.2m programme to develop numeracy skills regardless of age or profession together with various other adult learning initiatives.

Priority (iii): Supporting Start-Up and Step-Up Businesses

Ambition: "By 2030, we will create the conditions to allow more people to start and grow their business within Staffordshire, thereby addressing our relatively low levels of business start-ups across large parts of the County".

(i) Continuation of the Staffordshire Start up Mentoring Programme which had so far supported 548 people, 253 of which had decided to start their own business; (ii) promotion of Staffordshire's Get Started and Grow initiative which had so far supported in excess of 160 business owners with professional services such as Accountancy and Marketing; (iii) Launch of a series of peer to peer Networks specifically for new Businesses who wanted to grow and develop and; (iv) promotion of the My Own Boss scheme aimed at entrepreneurs who were struggling to launch new businesses by providing a bespoke coaching service.

Priority (iv): Developing Investment Ready Projects

Ambition: "By 2030, we will play our part in supporting the substantial planned growth within the County through the development of investment ready projects and securing funding for our infrastructure and services".

(i) Continued partnership working with District/Borough Councils and other stakeholders to support the planned growth of the County through eg the preparation of refreshed Local Plans; (ii) Stimulation of the necessary conditions for growth through the Authority's Economic Growth Programme (which had already enabled in excess of 11,000 additional jobs and 4,500 homes to be created since 2014 by eg the promotion of the Chatterley Valley West Development etc.).

Priority (v): Strategic Corridors

Ambition: “By 2030, we will ensure we do not miss substantial opportunities afforded by our location in the centre of the Country by developing our key strategic A50/A500 and A38 corridors, including securing increased investment in innovation activities”.

(i) Appointment of consultants (Deloitte) to liaise with large scale employers along the route to understand their views of what will be required to support continued growth, increased levels of innovation and greater productivity; (ii) Development of an investment proposition that will enable the County Council and various stakeholders fully realise the opportunities which existed across the corridor.

In the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave detailed scrutiny to the progress made in realising the Strategy to date, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising areas of concern as necessary, including:- (i) the valuable work being done by local universities to innovate new technologies and the potential future benefits for Staffordshire’s economy; (ii) Communication links needed to support the development of the West Midlands Rail Freight Interchange; (iii) work to promote the use of hydrogen powered vehicles pioneered in the County and the potential future benefits to the Staffordshire Economy and; (iv) additional opportunities which existed for the promotion of the above-mentioned initiatives in Staffordshire schools.

In conclusion, the Committee welcomed the significant progress which had been made in the delivery of the County Council’s Economic Strategy and re-affirmed their support for the various Priorities contained therein. However, they remained mindful of the challenges ahead arising from adverse national and international circumstances beyond the control of the Authority. In addition, they emphasised the importance of mitigating climate change and the achievement of Net Zero by 2030.

In response to requests, the Cabinet Member undertook to:- (i) provide Members with an update on the development of the West Midlands Rail Freight Interchange (including indicative timing for its completion) and; (ii) investigate the opportunities for the promotion of Multiply and other similar initiatives through Staffordshire Schools.

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

(b) That the good progress made towards delivery of the County Council’s Economic Strategy 2023-2030, be welcomed.

(c) That further updates on the various ambitions set out in the Strategy

and targets in the accompanying Delivery Plan be brought to the Committee at six-monthly intervals.

(d) That the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills arrange for Members to receive an update on the development of the West Midlands Rail Freight Interchange.

(e) That the Deputy Leader investigate the potential of promoting some of the initiatives available in support of the Economic Strategy, as set out in the report, through Staffordshire Schools.

5. Digital Infrastructure in Staffordshire Update

The Committee considered a report and PowerPoint presentation of the Cabinet Member for Environment Infrastructure and Climate Change updating them on the roll-out of digital infrastructure in Staffordshire (schedule 3 to the signed minutes).

NOTE BY CLERK: In the absence of the Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Change, the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills presented the report and took questions from Members.

During his presentation of the report the Cabinet Member highlighted:- (i) the national context; (ii) progress which had been achieved in Staffordshire since their last update in November 2022 with regard to Project Gigabit, the national Gigabit Voucher Scheme, local voucher schemes, Gigafast Staffordshire website and work of the County Council's Digital Infrastructure Team and; (iii) news regarding withdrawal of existing analogue lines by 2025.

In the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued, Members gave detailed scrutiny to the efforts made by the Authority to ensure broadband connectivity across the County since their last update, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising areas of concern as necessary including:- (i) the importance of and progress achieved in connecting vulnerable residents to the digital infrastructure network; (ii) the continued difficulties experienced by some households in accessing full fibre networks despite their proximity to service boxes; (iii) the need to improve residents' digital skills so that they were able to take full advantage of upgraded services when they become available; (iv) the criteria for accessing the Gigabit Voucher Scheme and; (v) how the County Council disseminated information on the various digital initiatives available to the public in Staffordshire.

In response to a request by the Committee, the Cabinet Member undertook to circulate further information regarding the Gigabit Voucher

Scheme and availability of Digital courses, to Members, for information.

In conclusion, the Committee were encouraged by the progress which had been made towards achieving the targets set out in the Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework to date whilst stressing the importance of achieving fast and reliable digital connectivity across all Staffordshire, as soon as possible.

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

(b) That the County Council's approach to deploying the Digital Infrastructure Strategic Framework continue to be supported.

(c) That a further update be brought to the Committee in six-months time.

6. Work Programme Planning

(a) 2023/24 Work Programme

RESOLVED – That, subject to the inclusion of "Strategy for Special Provision", in the list of items to be considered at their meeting on 7 July 2023, the updated Work Programme be approved.

(b) Proposed Scrutiny Review – Civil Parking Enforcement

The Committee considered a report of the Scrutiny and Support Manager regarding the outcome of an Inquiry Day on Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) held on 17 April 2023 with the aim of:- (i) understanding how the current CPE arrangements in Staffordshire were working; (ii) learning of key performance data for the existing CPE service and; (iii) informing the scope of work by a proposed Civil Parking Enforcement Working Group.

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

(b) That a Civil Parking Enforcement Working Group be established to pursue the various key lines of inquiry identified at the Inquiry Day held on 17 April 2023, as set out in the report.

(c) That, the above-mentioned Working Group be constituted with non-Executive Members from as wider geographical area within Staffordshire as possible.

(d) That the Scrutiny and Support officer seek expressions of interest from Committee Members as to their participation in the above-

mentioned Working Group with view to holding their first meeting as soon as practicable.

(e) That the final size and composition of the above-mentioned Working Group be decided by the Lead Member (Vice-Chairman (Overview)), in consultation with the Chairman.

7. Date of Next Meeting - Thursday 6 July 2023 at 10.00 am, County Buildings, Stafford

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

Chair