

Minutes of the County Council Meeting held on 20 July 2023

Attendance		
Jak Abrahams	Philip Hudson	Bob Spencer
Charlotte Atkins	Graham Hutton	Mike Sutherland
Philip Atkins, OBE	Thomas Jay	Mark Sutton
Gill Burnett-Faulkner	Julia Jessel	Stephen Sweeney
Tina Clements	Jason Jones	Simon Tagg
Richard Cox	Peter Kruskonjic	Samantha Thompson
Mike Davies	Tom Loughbrough-Rudd	Carolyn Trowbridge
Janet Eagland	Johnny McMahon	Ross Ward
Ann Edgeller	Paul Northcott	Alan White
Alex Farrell	Jeremy Oates	Philip White
Keith Flunder	Gillian Pardesi	Conor Wileman
John Francis	Ian Parry	Bernard Williams
Colin Greatorex	Kath Perry, MBE	David Williams
Philippa Haden	Bernard Peters	Victoria Wilson
Gill Heath	Robert Pritchard	Mark Winnington
Phil Hewitt	Janice Silvester-Hall	Mike Worthington
Jill Hood	David Smith	Nigel Yates
Derrick Huckfield	Paul Snape	

Apologies: Arshad Afsar, Mark Deaville, Syed Hussain, Jeremy Pert, Jonathan Price, Jill Waring and Mike Wilcox.

Part One

14. Declarations of Interest under Standing Order 16

The following Members declared an interest in accordance with Standing Order 16.5:-

Member	Minute Nos.	Interest	Reason
John Francis	17	Personal	Local Member for the Division in which the proposed centre for Asylum Seekers is located.

15. Confirmation of the minutes of the Council meeting held on 18 May 2023

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting of the County Council held on 18 May 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

16. Chairman's Correspondence

Pat Flaherty

On behalf of the Council, the Chairman welcomed Pat Flaherty, the Council's new Chief Executive, to his first meeting of the Council. Members were informed that Mr Flaherty was born and raised in Staffordshire and had served as the Chief Executive at the London Borough of Harrow and also as Chief Executive at Somerset County Council. Pat had worked in local government for 30 years, including 16 years at Councils in Staffordshire.

Staffordshire residents recognised in His Majesty The King's Birthday Honours

On behalf of the Council, the Chairman extended his congratulations to the following Staffordshire residents who had received honours in His Majesty The King's Birthday Honours:

- Mike Cherry, Burton upon Trent. Lately Chair, Federation of Small Businesses. Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) for services to business and international trade.
- Linda Cobb, Burton upon Trent. Principle Manager, Decent and Safe Homes, Derby City Council. Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to housing.
- Suzie Hutchinson, Stafford. Chief Executive of Little Hearts Matter. Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for services to Children, Adults and their Families with congenital heart defects.
- Lorna Millington, Cannock. Future Networks Manager, Cadent Gas. MBE for services to business and the environment.
- Terry Tricker, Lichfield, MBE for services to communities in Staffordshire.
- Claire Bond. Medallist of the Order of the British Empire (BEM) for services to women policing and communities in Staffordshire.
- Dr Naomi Forrester-Soto, Newcastle. Reader in Vector Biology, Keele University. BEM for services to public communication during Covid-19.
- Kim Smith, Burton Upon Trent. BEM for services to the community in Winshill, particularly during Covid-19.
- George Wright, Stafford. President, Stafford Branch Royal British Legion. BEM for voluntary services to Veterans in Staffordshire.

Fundraising – Chairman's Charity 2023/24

The Chairman informed the Council that his chosen charity for 2023/24 was the Katherine Allport Foundation. Established in 2019, the foundation

celebrated the life of Katherine Allport, who passed away with a rare form of breast cancer aged just 32. The Foundation, established by Katherine's husband and mother, create free, personalised hampers for those starting chemotherapy who live or are receiving treatment in Staffordshire. The hampers ensure the recipient was "chemo ready" as they contain many essential items such as moisturisers, anti-sickness bands, blankets, neck pillows, hand sanitiser and much more. The Chairman added that he would be running a series of events over the next 12 months to raise funds for the charity and would very much welcome Members' support.

The Chairman also invited Councillor Snape to say a few words about the fundraising for his chosen charities during his term as Chairman of the Council. Mr Snape expressed his thanks to those people who had supported his fundraising and confirmed that he had raised £6,953 in total of which £5,000 had been given to the Army Benevolent Fund and £1,953 to the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust.

17. Statement of the Leader of the Council

The Leader of the Council presented a Statement outlining his recent work since the previous meeting of the Council.

Staffordshire Means Back to Business - Oral Update

(Paragraph 1 of the Statement)

Councillor Charlotte Atkins enquired about the progress of the Council's Employment and Skills Strategy and how it would support small businesses. In response, Councillor Philip White indicated that the Strategy was currently out for public consultation and there were therefore opportunities for Members to submit their views and comments. Councillor Alan White added that, in due course, the Skills Hubs would be coming back to the County Council from the Local Enterprise Partnership.

Councillor Smith spoke about the employment opportunities available to the County through promoting the "Green Agenda". In response, Councillor Philip White indicated that he would be bringing an update on the Green Agenda to a future Cabinet Meeting. Councillor Alan White added that Councillor Smith may wish to meet with Councillor Tagg to discuss his thoughts on the opportunities available through the "Green Agenda".

Councillor Yates requested that the Leader of the Council fully engages with the Staffordshire Leaders' Board following changes in the political leadership of some partner authorities following the recent local elections, so as to maximise the opportunities to unlock sites for development. In response, Councillor Alan White indicated that the County Council and the District and Borough Council's working together under the auspices of the

Staffordshire Leaders' Board was the best way of securing their future with Central Government. He added that, since the recent local elections, he had met with all of the new District/Borough Council Leaders across the County.

Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRC) Consultation Feedback, Policy Changes, Re-use and HWRC Network Improvements to Date

(Paragraph 2 of the Statement)

Councillor Yates referred to the announcement, on 18 June by the Environment Minister, that charges for disposal of DIY materials by households were to be abolished. He also spoke about the opportunities for the Council's Household Waste Recycling Centres to take trade waste so as to offset the loss of income from the disposal of household DIY materials. In response, Councillor Tagg indicated that the Council was awaiting the publication of the relevant legislation changes in relation to the abolition of the charges.

Councillor Thompson indicated that she welcomed the proposed introduction of a permit scheme for Staffordshire residents with vans or trailers and that, in future, sites would only accept trade waste from within Staffordshire. She also welcomed the decision to allow parish councils to dispose of hedge trimmings etc at no charge.

Household Support Fund (HSF)

(Paragraph 3 of the Statement)

Councillor Sutton informed Members about how the £27.5m awarded to the County Council under the Household Support Fund over the last two and a half years had been distributed, together with the plans for this years' funding of £11m.

Volunteering for Staffordshire County Council

(Paragraph 4 of the Statement)

Councillor Charlotte Atkins and Councillor Yates welcomed the Council's nine new 'volunteering principles' together with practical guidance documents for staff, and expressed the hope that other local authorities would follow in the County Council's footsteps.

Councillor Trowbridge paid tribute to fellow Members for the voluntary work they undertook, for example as school governors and as Parish Councillors. She added that the electorate did not recognise the voluntary work that elected members did. Councillor Alan White also paid tribute to those unpaid volunteers who cared for family members.

Councillor Snape also paid tribute to those organisations who had been recognised under the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service.

Councillor Flunder indicated that there was still work to do in supporting new volunteering groups.

Councillor Cox spoke about the health and wellbeing benefits which could be derived from volunteering.

Councillor Wilson thanked Members for their comments and indicated that there were 4,600 volunteer hours working within the Council's Archives and Heritage Team; 9,944 volunteer hours working in the Council's Countryside Estate; and 500 regular volunteers across the Council's services.

Joint Coroners Service - Legal Framework and Financial Protocol (Paragraph 5 of the Statement)

Councillor Pardesi enquired as to how the new Framework/Protocol would help to reduce the backlog of cases. In response, Councillor Alan White indicated that he would look into this issue and that the Council would work closely with the Coroner's Office to see what could be done to expedite matters.

Community Learning Ofsted Inspection and Accountability Agreement 2023-2024 (Paragraph 6 of the Statement)

Councillor Philip White extended his congratulations to the Community Learning Team on the outcome of the Inspection and the achievement of the "Good" rating.

Framework Agreement for Maintenance and Minor Works (Paragraph 8 of the Statement)

In response to a question from Councillor Charlotte Atkins concerning the scope for local procurement under the Framework Agreement, Councillor Alan White indicated that, where possible, services were procured from local providers.

Centre for Asylum Seekers in Stafford (Paragraph 9 of the Statement)

Councillor Wilson spoke about how she was proud to live in this Staffordshire and how the County welcomed those fleeing persecution.

Councillor Pardesi enquired as to what evidence there was to suggest that

the Centre would house young single adults. In response, Councillor Trowbridge stated that this had been highlighted by the King's Counsel during the three-day public inquiry.

Councillor Spencer referred to the difficulties in managing the sensitivities around emotive issues such as this and asked his fellow Members to exercise control when discussing the matter. Councillor Loughborough-Rudd added that it was important that Members remembered the responsibilities placed on them as elected members.

Councillor Trowbridge referred to the Council's past experiences in helping to settle refugees but indicated that she was opposed to the proposed Centre for asylum seekers in Stafford due to the unsuitability of the proposed location. Councillor Francis added that he supported Councillor Trowbridge's views.

Councillor Greatorex indicated that it was not for the Council to debate the Planning Inspector's decision but to consider how the Authority could best work with Serco, Stafford Borough Council and other partners to ensure local services could manage and that the asylum seekers received the support they needed during their time in the county.

Councillor Winnington spoke about the need to keep local residents informed.

Councillor Alan White referred to the need for the Council to reflect on the implications of the opening of the Centre on local residents including matters such as ensuring access to local services. He also added that he was working hard with the Home Office regarding the importance of all parts of the UK carrying their fair share in accommodating those seeking asylum.

Ironman 70.3 Staffordshire (Paragraph 10 of the Statement)

Councillor McMahon expressed his disappointment at the Ironman Group's decision to discontinue the event in Staffordshire and suggested that the County may wish to put on its own "homegrown" event. He also spoke about the public health legacy arising from such events. Councillor Parry also expressed his support for Councillor McMahon's suggestion.

Councillor Alan White spoke about the positive impact of the Ironman event on the local economy and expressed the hope that the County would attract similar events in the future.

Armed Forces Day and Windrush 75 (Paragraph 12 of the Statement)

Councillor Clements referred to the events which had taken place in Tamworth in celebration of Armed Forces Day. She also expressed her thanks to the County Council and the District/Borough Councils for signing-up to the Armed Forces Covenant.

Fostering Communities

(Paragraph 13 of the Statement)

Councillor Flunder, Councillor Wilson and Councillor Edgeller paid tribute to the County's Foster Carers for the vital work they did. They also stated that they would encourage anyone who had an interest in becoming a foster carer to come forward.

Councillor Sutton spoke about the recent Foster Carer Awards which celebrated the contribution made by the County's Foster Carers who, collectively, had 651 years of experience. He also referred to the Council's "Mockingbird" programme whereby experienced Foster Carers provided advice and support to those new to fostering.

School Crossing Patrols

(Paragraph 14 of the Statement)

Members extended their congratulations and thanks to the school crossing patrol service which celebrated its 70th year this year. Councillor Parry spoke about the difficulty in recruiting school crossing patrols in some areas and also encouraged anybody interested in working for the service to come forward.

Councillor Tagg and Councillor Williams asked that their congratulations and thanks also be extended to all those in the School Crossing Patrol Service.

The Samaritans

(Paragraph 15 of the Statement)

Councillor Edgeller, Councillor Yates, Councillor Philip White and Councillor Alan White paid tribute to the Samaritans who would be celebrating their 70th Anniversary in November this year. Councillor Edgeller suggested that, in order to show appreciation and recognition of their work in Staffordshire, she would encourage all Members to work with their local communities to plant a tree in all 60 of the County's Electoral Divisions.

Resolved – That the Statement of the Leader of the Council be received.

18. Recommendations to the Council

(i) Independent Remuneration Panel - Recruitment

The Council's approval was sought to the appointment of the following candidates to serve on the Independent Remuneration Panel.

- Colin Agar
- Gemma Shepherd-Etchells

Councillor Worthington commented on the high quality of the applicants who had put themselves forward for consideration for membership of the Panel.

Resolved – That Colin Agar and Gemma Shepherd-Etchells be appointed to the Independent Remuneration Panel for a four-year term.

(ii) Updates to the Scheme of Delegation in relation to Staffordshire County Council's responsibilities under Section 53 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

The Council's approval was sought to changes to the processes for handling Definitive Map Modification Order applications to help to address the backlog of applications.

In response to a comment from Councillor Winnington concerning the work of the Panel and the back-log of applications awaiting determination, Councillor Alan White explained that the County Solicitor was looking at the allocation of resources to enable the Panel to better fulfil its role.

Resolved – That the proposed changes to the Scheme of Delegation in relation to the Council's responsibilities under s53 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, as set out in paragraphs 4-9 of the report, be supported; and that the Constitution and Scheme of Delegation be updated accordingly.

19. Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2022-2023

Councillor Greatorex moved consideration of the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2022 – 2023.

Councillor Heath, Councillor Clements, Councillor Spencer and Councillor Edgeller gave a brief overview of some of the work which had been undertaken by their respective Overview and Scrutiny committees during 2022 - 2023. The Members also extended their thanks to officers, including the Council's Scrutiny Team, for their support and also to Cabinet Members for engaging in the scrutiny process.

Resolved – That the Overview and Scrutiny Annual Report 2022 - 2023

be received.

20. Staffordshire Corporate Parenting Panel - Annual Report 2022-23

Councillor Sutton moved consideration of the Staffordshire Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report 2022-23.

Councillor Silvester-Hall, Councillor Thompson and Councillor Kruskonjik commended the report and also the work of the Panel.

Councillor Sutton extended his thanks to Members for their comments and also to his fellow Panel Members and the officers who supported them, for their work and commitment. He also informed the Council that the Panel had seen a change in direction over the past twelve months with the young people now choosing and leading on the various workstreams.

Resolved – That the Staffordshire Corporate Parenting Panel Annual Report 2022-23 be received.

21. 2022 Community Fund - 2022/23 Report and Next Steps

Councillor Wilson moved consideration of the report.

Councillor Edgeller, Councillor Cox and Councillor Northcott spoke about how the Fund was valued by local communities and also high-lighted how some of the funding had been utilised in their respective areas.

Councillor Philip Atkins outlined how the funding could be used to pump-prime projects and also extended his thanks to Peter Barker for his work in setting-up and administering the Fund.

Councillor Eagland expressed the hope that the Fund would continue for many years.

Councillor Wilson extended her thanks to Members for their comments and also referred to how the Fund had been utilised by communities to support local Platinum Jubilee celebrations in 2022 and also the King's Coronation celebrations this year. She added that, during 2022/23, the Fund had supported 180 different groups at a total cost of £932,000.

Resolved – That the report be received.

22. Report of the Chairman of the Staffordshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel

Councillor Pardesi enquired as to whether the piloting of Fire crews of three was still on-going. She also referred to a sentence on the third page

of the report which stated that “economic factors also had an impact on delivery” and enquired as to what these factors were. In response, Councillor Peters indicated that he would take these matters up with the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner.

Councillor Spencer indicated that he welcomed the report and, in particular, the increased emphasis on road safety.

Resolved – That the report be received.

23. Questions

Councillor Yates asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Communities and Culture whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

Up until Autumn 2022, Staffordshire Moorlands District Council (SMDC) managed, under contract, the County section of NCR55 Biddulph Valley Way. When SMDC returned the contract due to transferring their countryside officer and associated country parks to the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, routine maintenance reverted to County, there is no evidence that any routine maintenance has been undertaken since. What is the County’s position with conducting routine maintenance on this route, as I am aware of three interested and competent parties who would like to consider taking over this contract to manage this important national cycle route?

Reply

The highways team have continued to inspect the sections of the Biddulph Valley Way that are the responsibility of the County Council throughout the period and where required have been arranging repairs.

Following the surrender of the lease by SMDC the county council’s highways team have been in contact with the Wildlife Trust and are awaiting information on what they are able to offer in future.

Supplementary Question

Can I have the name of an officer who has the authority to award a contract to a body that is prepared to work with the community to maintain and improve this national cycle route, so we can get on and ensure that it gets the maintenance it deserves?

Reply

The Council has continued to arrange the repairs where required and I will ensure that you can get hold of an officer's name who you can liaise with; but remembering that this is one of many routes the Council maintains.

Councillor Afsar asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

Is the cabinet member aware of the widespread dissatisfaction of residents with the urban grass verge cuts being reduced from ten to six and often these schedules not being met, resulting in rat infestations and other unpleasant circumstances in several parts of the county? Will he revisit the 10-times approach in collaboration with the district and borough?

Reply

To start with a correction, the change in the number of grass cuts was from 8 to 6 cuts per season, which was introduced in 2020 to help support the council's Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS).

A wide range of different highway grass cutting delivery arrangements exist across the County, including the use of private local contractors, 4 Borough and District councils and 17 Parish and Town Councils. One of the big benefits of local councils delivering highway grass cutting is that they have the flexibility to choose to provide additional cuts at their own cost at any time throughout the year.

All of the county council's delivery arrangements are closely monitored to ensure that the county council's highway grass cutting specification and minimum number of cuts is delivered and there have been no occasions when scheduled cuts have not been provided.

However, following changes to some historic delivery arrangements there has been a relatively small number of cases where grass that was previously cut by one of the local Borough or District Councils was not cut at the start of this season because it wasn't clear if it was part of the highway verge, an area of privately owned land or public open space that continues to be managed by the respective local Borough or District Council. We believe that all of these areas have now all been identified and interim mowing arrangements are in place whilst ongoing responsibility is resolved.

With regards to future grass cutting frequency and delivery arrangements, I'm pleased to confirm that a business case is currently

being developed to allocate the resources needed to carry out a widescale review of highway verge management specifications. Starting later this year with digitisation and Quality Assurance of over 4.5 million sq.m of highway verge, the aim of this review is to enable more flexibility over local grass cutting specifications and delivery arrangements – meaning that they can be adapted to best meet the needs of local residents, maximise potential biodiversity, reduce CO2 emissions and improve their contribution to flood risk management.

Councillor Charlotte Atkins asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Education (and SEND) whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

What is the current level of pupil absence in Staffordshire schools? How does that compare with pre Covid pandemic levels of absence? Are there areas where attendance is particularly poor or good? What impact does socio economic factors and pupil age have on attendance?

Reply

Overall attendance in Staffordshire compares favourably with the national and regional averages. Although there is no current validated data to make comparisons, the DfE is publishing unvalidated data that can be used to compare Staffordshire attendance data. The latest information available indicates that attendance in the primary phase is 94.9% compared with the national average of 94%. In secondary schools the attendance rate is 90.5% compared with 87.9% nationally and in Staffordshire special schools the latest attendance rate is 90% compared with the national rate of 85.9%.

The current overall absence rate is 7.2%. Whilst attendance has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels, it has improved since last year which was 7.6% and we continue to support schools where there are concerns about pupil absence.

As you will see from the above information, absence rates are higher in secondary schools.

In the latest published data (2022) Staffordshire is ranked in the second quartile for attendance with an absence rate in line with the national average and below both the regional and statistical neighbour averages.

Supplementary Question

Are there particular areas of the County where attendance is

particularly poor or good? My concern is that however many children are not in school, we don't want them to be "out of sight and out of mind". As a County Council, we should be concerned about their welfare. Do we have a means of that those children are self and well?

Reply

This is a matter which we are examining through the Childrens Improvement Board in some detail. The concerns you have expressed are the concerns we feel as well. It is concerning that children are being "rolled-off" from schools under the guise of elective home education and I have myself, on a number of occasions, encountered 13/14 year old boys in particular in an afternoon who I have challenged as to why they are not in school and they have replied that they are being home educated. It is a really important point that you raise. We will be awaiting the returns from schools in the new term to clarify precisely what the situation looks like; and we will continue to press government ministers for a route through to ensuring that children who are at home are safe and well and are getting the appropriate level of education.

Councillor Pardesi asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

Ahead of the rollout of the Government's extension of 30 hours free childcare, how confident is the Council that it will meet the requirement when nine out of ten councils now fear that nursery closures this year will undermine capacity?

Reply

In the Government's spring budget, the Chancellor announced transformative reforms to childcare for children and families. The new entitlements will be introduced in phases beginning in April 2024. From:

- April 2024, all working parents of 2-year-olds can access 15 hours funded childcare per week
- September 2024, all working parents of children aged 9 months up to 3-years-old can access 15 hours funded childcare per week
- September 2025, all working parents of children aged 9 months up to 3-years-old can access 30 hours funded childcare per week

This provides a significant challenge for local authorities due to the

short timeframe from the announcement to implementation. Staffordshire are working at pace to prepare and plan for the extended entitlements, ensuring as many families as possible in Staffordshire will benefit.

The Childcare Act 2006, Section 6 places a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure there are enough childcare places available for families. The Early Years Team already work relentlessly, carrying out a variety of market management activities to ensure this statutory duty is met.

Understanding the Childcare Market

Our highly developed understanding of the childcare market is underpinned by the following activities:

- The Early Years Team consistently collates and analyse a range of data including places and vacancies data for each provider which is recorded by district and ward. This is used to inform future planning and priorities.
- Sufficiency monitoring provides a framework for action in each ward. For example, if a ward is identified as causing concern the team prepares actions plans to develop new provision or extend existing provision to meet demand.
- The team provides a range of consultancy support to the sector including advice regarding sustainability. This is available free of charge to all Staffordshire providers. This service is bespoke and supports settings to consider a variety of options/working models, therefore mitigating against potential closures.

This market management activity has been recognised as an example of effective practice by the Department for Education and Ofsted.

Staffordshire has seen some nursery closures, although a smaller number than originally expected following the pandemic. In a significant number of cases alternative childcare by another provider has been set up on the same sites. Where nurseries announce their intention to close, use of accurate data, the team's knowledge and excellent relationships with providers means the team respond quickly to scope out new opportunities to ensure families are able to access the places required.

Preparation for the Extended Offer

In preparation for the implementation of the extended entitlements the Early Years Team have completed two pieces of work:

- A sufficiency audit to survey all Staffordshire providers who offer early education entitlements. The survey closed on Friday 14th July with a return rate of 99.5%.
- An analysis of datasets enabling estimation of the number of additional places required for two-year-olds in each district.

This information provides a firm foundation from which to develop detailed action plans to support future sufficiency planning.

The team has excellent relationships with its childcare providers; through its Early Years Reference Group and relationships, the team remains well informed about the challenges and needs of the early years sector and is supporting them to respond.

Supplementary Question

Your answer states that we are working at pace to ensure that as many families as possible in Staffordshire will benefit. Do we take it then that there will be some families, irrespective as to whether they need it or want it, will be denied a free place?

Reply

The provision of childcare is not the responsibility of local authorities; it is the responsibility of private providers. Our responsibility is to work with the many providers to ensure that we have sufficiency of supply; so, it is almost impossible for us to be able to say, going forward, whether we will or won't be able to meet the demand which comes forward. Up until now, we have been able to do that particularly well in this county and we have not seen anywhere near the level of closures of private providers that has been seen elsewhere across the country. That gives me good confidence that the team will be able to work well so that we are able to fulfil our statutory duty.

24. Petitions

(i) Stop Parking Charges at Greenway Bank County Park

Councillor Yates presented a petition opposing car parking charges at Greenway Bank Country Park.

(ii) Brocton Crossroads

Councillor Francis presented a petition seeking improvements to the junction of Sawpit Lane/Teddesley Road with the A34 Stafford to Cannock Road (Brocton Crossroads).

Chairman