

## **Statement of the Leader of the Council**

### **1. Staffordshire Means Back to Business**

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:

- This month saw an increase of 320 claimants in Staffordshire, whilst at the same time we have seen increases both regionally and nationally. The total number of claimants in the county now stands at 15,290 and the claimant rate has increased this month from 2.8% to 2.9% of the working age population. However, it is important to note that the claimant count rate in Staffordshire is still one of the lowest in the West Midlands, far lower than the average for the region of 4.9%, and also lower than the average for England of 3.8%. We will continue to support those residents that unfortunately find themselves out of work to access employment through our dedicated Jobs Brokerage service.
- The youth claimant count in Staffordshire saw an increase of 60 claimants this month to a total of 2,895 young people. This is in line with increases also seen regionally and nationally. The proportion of young people in Staffordshire aged 18-24 that are claiming work-related Universal Credit has increased this month from 4.5% to 4.6%. This continues to be lower than the national rate of 5.1% and far lower than the regional rate of 6.9%. Our focus continues to be to engage with our younger residents and support them to find employment or continue in education and training.
- Creating the conditions to support the growth of our economy remains one of our top priorities, including supporting the development of our key industrial sectors which continue to thrive within the county. This includes our visitor economy and ensuring that we are taking full advantage of the fact that Staffordshire is home to numerous nationally renowned attractions.
- Next month we will celebrate and champion these attractions and our tourism and hospitality businesses through our Enjoy Staffordshire Tourism & Good Food Awards, taking place at the National Memorial Arboretum. The awards have been growing year-on-year and in total we received a record number of entries for this year's awards, with over 140 entries received across nineteen categories. Our awards are now the largest tourism awards competition in the Midlands and the second largest in England, with only the South West competition, which covers the whole region and not just one county, receiving

more entries. The finalists for the event have recently been announced and many of the winners will go on to represent Staffordshire at the national VisitEngland Awards for Excellence in June 2024.

- At the end of last year I updated Cabinet on our success to secure a Local Visitor Economy Partnership for the area which will work to support and grow the visitor economy and has the potential to bring significant benefits to the county, including through access to support and future funding programmes. We are now recruiting for a chair for the board who will help set the vision for the partnership and will be integral to raising the profile and quality of our visitor product, delivering a green sustainable tourism offer and successfully positioning Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent as a great place to live, work, visit and enjoy. The deadline for applications is the 1st March and I hope to be able to further update Cabinet on the successful applicant and work of the partnership in the coming months.
- Next month I'll be making a number of recommendations to Cabinet related to the integration of the responsibilities of the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership into the County Council. Since its inception in 2011, we have been a key partner of the LEP and acted as its accountable body, securing a great deal of national investment through the LEP that has helped to deliver some of our most successful programmes and create new jobs, invest in our infrastructure and greatly improve local skill levels. However, last year the Government made the decision to cease funding LEPs from April 2024 and to transfer their responsibilities to the local authorities, and the LEP has therefore already made an in-principle decision to close in the coming months. Firstly, I'd like to take the opportunity to thank everyone who has been involved in making our LEP a success, including all the private sector business leaders who have given up their time for the benefit of the local economy. We of course want to ensure that we continue to engage with our local businesses on our plans for supporting the growth of the Staffordshire economy, and we are currently considering how best to do this in the future and I'll be updating Cabinet on our plans in due course.
- Over recent years the Council's Growth Hub has delivered many positive outcomes, but more recently issues including uncertainty over resources and the Government decision to no longer provide funding to LEPs has affected the effectiveness of the Hub. The County Council, working alongside Stoke-on-Trent City Council, has now taken over full control of the Growth Hub and a great deal of work has been ongoing to meet the requirements of Government for the current financial year whilst also ensuring we are developing our plans and putting the Hub on a sound footing for the future. The

integration of the responsibilities of the LEP into the County Council presents us with a significant opportunity to align our economic programmes such as the Growth Hub with our range of business support functions, ensuring that they are as effective as possible.

- We are moving forward with our lobbying activity for the Fifty500 Corridor and we have delivered our ask of government, with letters of support signed by all of the local authorities and major manufacturers along the corridor. We are also sponsoring a reception at the Houses of Parliament for the Fifty500 Growth Corridor. The corridor is one of our most significant growth opportunities and the event, which will be hosted by Kate Kniveton MP, will provide an opportunity to meet and activate MPs to support our ask, as well as meet with business leaders, and representatives from universities and local authorities across the Midlands who are behind this project. We are now aiming to work with Government to develop our plans further and take full advantage of this unique opportunity to enhance growth, innovation and decarbonisation in a nationally important corridor.

*(Cabinet – 21 February 2024)*

## **2. Homes for Children in our Care**

Providing a safe and nurturing environment for some of our most vulnerable children is a priority for us. It is clear that most local authorities are facing challenges in this area, which is why it is important we plan effectively to help meet their needs.

The Cabinet have therefore agreed to take steps to increase the options available in the market through supporting three key developments:

(a) Endorsing the West Midlands Residential Framework: This will see us sign up to the WM regional framework. This framework will ensure SCC continues to be procurement compliant and enable SCC to access a wider market to increase the number of foster carers.

(b) Endorsing the West Midlands Fostering Framework. This framework will ensure the County Council continues to be procurement compliant and enable the Council to access a wider market to increase the number of fostering carers and eradicate the use of unregulated residential homes being used.

(c) Invest in six internal homes to disrupt the market and provide a home for our most complex children.

*(Cabinet – 21 February 2024)*

### **3. Green Solutions - SCC Delivery of the Pilot Business Energy Advice Service**

At the end of last year, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ) launched a pilot programme for SMEs with combined Authorities around the West Midlands, and Staffordshire was approached to see if it could deliver this programme in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent.

The Cabinet have approved proposals for the Council to become the Primary Delivery Partner for the Stoke and Staffordshire region, to deliver Energy Assessments and Grants on behalf of the Pilot Business Energy Advice Service (BEAS) programme in the Stoke and Staffordshire region. This will allow us to support 300 businesses with energy advice and £2M of grants to make improvements.

*(Cabinet – 21 February 2024)*

### **4. House Waste Recycling Centres - Equipment Replacement Programme**

The Cabinet have approved the undertaking of a procurement exercise in compliance with the requirements of the Public Contract Regulations 2015 (the "Regulations") for 11 new wheeled excavators (JCBs) for the Household Waste Recycling Centre equipment renewal programme.

This new machinery will help our continued commitment to a more sustainable, efficient and resident focused service.

*(Cabinet – 21 February 2024)*

### **5. Integrated Performance Report - Quarter 3 2023/24**

The Cabinet have received an overview of Staffordshire County Council's progress, performance, and financial position in delivering against our Strategic Plan, Corporate Delivery Plan and Medium-Term Financial Strategy.

They noted that the latest revenue forecast outturn shows a forecast overspend of £5.4m (0.9%), compared to the Quarter 2 forecast overspend of £7.7m (1.1%). Rising costs across the organisation, along with recruitment and retention pressures continue. Levels of demand and complexity of needs also remain challenging, particularly in children's and families services and in Special Educational Needs and Disabilities where transport costs are rising very significantly.

*(Cabinet – 21 February 2024)*

## **6. Adoption of Revised Civil Contingency Policy and new Business Continuity Management Policy for Staffordshire County Council**

The Cabinet have approved the refreshed Civil Contingencies Policy along with a supporting new Business Continuity Management Policy.

The Civil Contingencies Policy has been updated, along with a supporting new Business Continuity Management Policy, to reflect current guidance, learning and ways of working and is once again based on ensuring that the Council's civil contingencies arrangements continue to deliver three key outcomes in the event of an emergency:

- To safeguard people and assets;
- To maintain business critical services; and
- To restore full services as soon as is practicably possible.

*(Cabinet – 21 February 2024)*

## **7. Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion - progress update**

The Equality Act 2010 requires public bodies to show that they are advancing the equalities agenda under the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). 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. 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 action plan.

The Cabinet have considered progress against those principles and have approved proposed areas of focus for 2024 to further strengthen the Council's approach to promoting equality, diversity and inclusion both within the organisation and across Staffordshire.

*(Cabinet – 21 February 2024)*

## **8. Procurement of Gas Supplies**

The Council's current contract for the procurement of gas supplies is due to end on 31 March 2025 and the Council are required to serve notice on the current provider 12 months prior to the end date of the contract. The Cabinet have approved the arrangement for procuring gas supplies from 1 April 2025 (to the 31 March 2029) and have agreed that a contract be

awarded to Total Energies Gas and Power Limited using the Crown Commercial Services (CCS) framework.

*(Cabinet – 21 February 2024)*

## **9. Contract for the Supply of Electricity for Street Lighting and Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS)**

The Cabinet have considered proposals for procuring the supply of electricity for street lighting and Intelligent Transport Systems (ITS) assets and approved the entering into of an Electricity and Associated Services contract through Crown Commercial Services (CCS) framework for the period of 1 April 2024 until 31 March 2028, with EDF Energy. The contract will be for the supply of 100% renewable electricity.

*(Cabinet – 21 February 2024)*

## **10. Local Transport Fund**

As a county council, we know that a good, connected road network is important to the people and businesses of Staffordshire.

We have invested additional funding ourselves, but we are also committed to securing additional national funding which is being allocated after the changes to HS2.

I am pleased therefore that Staffordshire recently secured a further boost of almost £286million for local transport projects spanning over a seven-year period from 2025/26.

To mark the announcement, John Glen MP, Minister for the Cabinet Office, visited the Branston Interchange site - where we were able to showcase the improvements being made for the benefit of residents, businesses and the Staffordshire economy.

This project also secured a £6million allocation from the government's Levelling Up Fund and a £4million contribution from the main developer of the Branston Locks site, Nurton Developments. Work is set to be completed in spring 2025.

During the visit, the County Council's deputy leader Philip White also discussed wider plans including the fifty500 campaign to invest in the A50/A500 growth corridor.

## **11. Walleys Quarry**

While most of us are not directly affected by this issue, as a county council we have championed, together with partners, the cause of the local communities affected.

The Environment Agency, which is the principle regulatory body for the site, has issued a suspension notice to Walleys Quarry Limited to immediately stop the acceptance and disposal of waste, except for inert wastes which do not contribute to the odour.

The notice also requires additional work to be carried out on site by later this month, before the suspension can be reviewed.

We will continue to monitor the situation closely and carry on supporting residents as best we can until a permanent solution is found.

## **12. Foster Carer Awards**

We have spoken many times in this chamber about the amazing support our dedicated foster carers offer to children in the county.

So, I am delighted that we have launched our first ever Fostering Star Awards to recognise and celebrate the role of our foster carers.

There are five categories:

- Rising Star - For carers who have fostered for less than two years
- Inspirational Person - Someone who inspires the children in their care to achieve their potential.
- Making a Difference – someone making a difference in the fostering community.
- Above and Beyond - Someone who goes above and beyond to support the children in their care or to support other foster carers.
- Makes Us/Me Smile - Someone who is always there for other foster carers, even on a challenging day.

So if you would like to nominate a foster carer please do. Nominations close on March 31<sup>st</sup>

## **13. Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme**

Our Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme is back for the Easter holidays, which this year falls at the end of this month.

The HAF programme is not only a huge success story for this council, but also for the eligible families it helps. Last year, the Staffordshire programme provided 73,164 places over Easter, Summer and Winter and made an incredible difference to so many parents, carers and children.

Booking opened on for this Easter on March 11 and more details of activities and how to apply are available [www.staffordshire.gov.uk/holidayactivities](http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/holidayactivities)

#### **14. School Places**

Finally, more good news for Staffordshire families with nine out of ten parents learning this month that they have been allocated their first choice secondary school in Staffordshire.

Of the 8,482 offers made for a Staffordshire secondary school at age 11, 90.8% per cent were for a first-choice school. The national and regional average is around 83 per cent.

In fact, nearly 99 per cent have been allocated one of their top three preferred schools.

It is great that we have such an excellent track record of being able to allocate well above the national average for first preferences, especially as demand for places increases.

A huge thank you goes to our admissions team who have been working hard since October to make this happen.