

Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee Meeting held on 5 September 2014

Present: Brian Edwards (Chairman)

George Adamson
Ann Beech
Len Bloomer
Tim Corbett

Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf
Martyn Tittley (Vice-Chairman)
Diane Todd
Paul Woodhead

Also in attendance: Ben Adams and Philip Atkins

Apologies: Maureen Compton, Geoff Martin and Geoff Morrison

PART ONE

6. Declarations of Interest

There were none on this occasion.

7. Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 25 July 2014

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 25 July 2014 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

8. Strategic Economic Plan and Growth Deal Update

The Select Committee had helped shape the early development of the Strategic Economic Plan (SEP) at their meetings of 17 October and 20 November 2013. They now considered the significant progress made.

In March 2014 the Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (SSLEP) submitted a long-term (2020) SEP for the area. The Plan had been developed with a range of partners and had five central objectives: connected county; competitive urban centres; growth in key sectors; a skilled workforce; and Stoke-on-Trent as a core city.

Following negotiation with the Government the SSLEP Growth Deal had secured £82.2m investment in the following eight key economic projects that would deliver 4,900 jobs.

- Build a new access from the A500 to reduce congestion and improve access to the Etruria Valley Enterprise Area and the City Centre.
- Bridge widening and local road improvements in Lichfield to access the Cappers Lane employment area and the Lichfield Park employment site.
- A new roundabout junction on the A34 to improve access to the Meaford employment site.
- New traffic controlled access and road widening for the Bericote Four Ashes employment site.

- Improvements to the Branston Interchange including signalisation of the roundabout and widening of the A38 slip roads.
- Build the new Stafford Western Access Route to ease congestion in Stafford and facilitate further employment and housing growth.
- A Local Sustainable Transport Package for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire which will improve connectivity and reduce congestion, including projects to introduce smart ticketing, improve bus punctuality and improve city centre and urban traffic management.
- An Advanced Manufacturing Skills Hub that will provide the skills and engineers required for local priority sectors and grow traineeships and apprenticeship opportunities.

The Growth Deal represented a successful opportunity to secure economic growth and create quality jobs across the whole of Staffordshire.

Mr Philip Atkins, Leader of the Council, updated Members in detail on the progress made. He emphasised the need for a locally skilled work force that was able to take advantage of the jobs created. He thanked the team behind the Growth Deal for their expertise and dedication. There was a need to evidence each projects' success in order to access further funding.

The Chairman queried what scrutiny Stoke-on-Trent City Council had undertaken on the SEP and whether there would be benefit to joint scrutiny between the two councils. A protocol had been established with regard to joint scrutiny of the SEP. There had been one joint meeting at which the LEP Chairman attended. Officers were not aware of scrutiny on the City Plan, however City Council officers were more likely to have been involved in any such scrutiny work.

Members felt the Growth Deal was good for both Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent. There was some disappointment expressed as Cannock had not been included in the first round of the Growth Deal, however there was a hope that they would benefit from round two. However Cannock had benefitted from developments with the Mill retail construction with the creation of 600 jobs.

Some concern was expressed at the comparatively low levels of innovation in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire, being ranked 35th out of 39 LEP areas. Universities were centres for innovation and work was already being developed at Keele and Staffordshire Universities. There was a need to further develop the work between local businesses and the universities.

RESOLVED – That: a) the opportunities provided by the Strategic Economic Plan and the Local Growth Deal in unlocking economic growth be recognised; and b) the Select Committee considers the timescale for undertaking scrutiny of the delivery of the Growth Plan projects as part of their work programme planning.

9. The Ofsted Focused Inspection in Staffordshire

As part of its desk-based review and regular data monitoring Ofsted could identify a theme or performance issue in a local authority area that they consider needed further investigation. In such circumstances a focused inspection would be carried out. On

Monday 11 March Ofsted notified the authority of their intention to undertake a focused inspection in Staffordshire. Ofsted's concern for Staffordshire centred around progress made by pupils as they moved through primary schools, prompted by schools performance data showing progress made between early years through to Key Stage (KS) 2. This area of concern had already been identified through the authority's own analysis of school performance and was reflected in the school improvement priorities already shared with schools, including at the District events held early in spring 2014.

The Focused Inspection looked at 19 primary school inspections selected by Ofsted, an anonymous telephone survey of 22 good or better schools and a sample 18 schools inspected. The sample of schools inspected represents 6% of the total number of Staffordshire primary schools (295). The feedback presented a mixed picture, with Inspectors noting a number of strengths, reflecting on some variability of views and a number of key areas for development. The Inspections also took place against a different and tougher inspection framework with different inspection criteria underpinning the judgments, therefore preventing direct comparisons.

The Cabinet Member, Learning and Skills highlighted that the inspection had not included any discussion with the local authority or with their stakeholders. He felt that this had allowed a level of misinformation to exist, for example around the relationship between Human Resources and their part within Entrust. This confusion could have been avoided if Ofsted had included discussions with the local authority.

Following feedback and under the governance of the Children's Improvement Board and the Ofsted Programme Board, a detailed action plan had been drawn up to address issues raised and Members received a copy of the plan. Over the last six weeks in particular a range of resources had been mustered to enable nearly all the actions to be completed or be underway. The Commissioner for Education and Wellbeing thanked the Council for their support in finding this resource. The launch point for these actions was September, at the start of the new academic year.

There was an expectation that school to school support would be used to share strengths and expertise. Members asked how such support was brokered. Such work was undertaken in a number of ways, with schools encouraged to learn from each other, working collaboratively without the need for any brokerage. Where the authority had concerns around school improvement they would broker this work and where there was a need to purchase support then this would be done through Entrust.

Members heard that the overall improvement in Staffordshire school performance, tracked over time and sustained across the last 12-18 months should provide a level of assurance and confidence that there was a school improvement partnership in place that worked and was developing rapidly. There had been a considerable step change in performance, with an improvement from 63% to 78% of all Staffordshire schools (maintained and academies) now being judged "good" or "outstanding", which was a faster rate of improvement than nationally. Whilst the Focused Inspection feedback supported consideration of important issues for the County it was not fully representative nor typical of Staffordshire trends in inspection outcomes. However, this inspection was seen as timely and helpful in its challenge, enabling focus for development on key areas.

Ofsted used two key measures, the percentage of schools graded good or outstanding and the percentage of children rated good or outstanding. Categorisation was used for all schools, both maintained and academy. Differences existed in communication and intervention between the categories of schools, with the local authority having no statutory right of intervention for academy schools. In instances where the authority had concerns over an academy they had a duty to notify the Department for Education (DfE). Staffordshire also invited the academy concerned to discuss the issues with the authority and as yet no academy had declined. Dialogue was established with the DfE over academy performance and progress, therefore enabling performance issues to be tackled hopefully before they developed.

The Cabinet Member, Learning and Skills, reminded Members that as the number of academies continued to rise the Government had identified the need for regional bodies to manage them more effectively. These eight regional bodies came into force from September 2014. One Staffordshire head had been elected by his peers to be on the body that oversaw academy performance.

Members received a list of those Staffordshire schools judged as “requires Improvement” or “special measures” (Ofsted grades 3 and 4 respectively). This was a shorter list than 12 months ago and Members were informed that work was underway with all schools to ensure they were on an upward trajectory. The school improvement systems were now sophisticated enough to identify issues for development. However schools remained on this list until Ofsted returned to re-inspect them irrespective of improvements made.

The robustness of the authority’s systems was crucial in supporting school improvement. Ofsted always commented on the level of local authority support and over the last 12 to 18 months this had been 95% positive.

Members asked whether the local authority enjoyed full co-operation from all Staffordshire schools. The focused inspection signalled that a range of views were held by schools. However the authority would be having conversations with schools that needed support and if they were not willing to engage then intervention was a possibility. There was an obligation on schools to have these conversations and in general this worked well as all parties wanted the best for Staffordshire children.

Members noted the mixed response from schools in terms of how well they felt the local authority new them. The Cabinet Member, Learning and Skills, explained that in the main this was an issue of perception that would be addressed through a range of methods including the September letter. This letter set out the authority’s relationship with the school in terms of the level of support required. It also set out contacts for a range of issues and listed key events. However there was also an obligation on the authority to encourage schools to work autonomously.

Members acknowledged the immense amount of work involved in this. They asked what the nature of the relationship was between the authority and both Ofsted and the DfE, and whether this was collaborative or hostile. Relations were positive, with examples given of a number of projects where Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) were working with the authority in developing expertise in school improvement. Projects included work in both Tamworth and Burton-upon-Trent looking at tracking progress of individual pupils.

A request had also been made to Ofsted for expertise in developing a programme around accelerated reading progress. At an Autumn term meeting between the DfE and the Commissioner for Education and Wellbeing, the DfE had commented on the positive relationship they had with Staffordshire local authority. The authority had regular conversations with the DfE. However in some instances it was more difficult for schools to understand that involving the DfE early in issues was positive in helping to tackle the areas of concern.

Work had been undertaken by the Commissioner for Education and Wellbeing with schools in the Cannock region in July and Members thanked her for her support in this area. There was a need to address performance in the District to ensure that the children in Cannock were given the best opportunities to reach their potential. The Cabinet Member, Learning and Skills, told Members that every Staffordshire child had the ability to do well but some improvement was not as quick as others, noticeably in Cannock and Tamworth. Whilst it was difficult to be specific on the reasons for this, there were issues around aspiration and ambition which were challenging. The introduction of the pupil premium should help in addressing some of these issues and local authorities would be challenging schools to show how their pupil premium had been spent and the difference this had made.

There had been some difficulty with engagement with some head teachers in the Cannock area which also needed to be addressed. In particular there had been some concern over communication with the head of one academy. Members asked how quickly the DfE acted where an academy was referred to them by a local authority. Where there was a concern with an academy the local authority would inform the DfE. There was no obligation on the DfE to share their response with the authority. However on the whole Staffordshire had a strong relationship with the academies which enabled discussions on school performance to take place.

Members asked what focus had been given to special schools with regard to school improvement and the Action Plan. In particular they felt the Raiseonline information and the data dashboard were not a good indicator of progress for special schools and Members wanted to know how this would be addressed. Major reforms within the area of Special Educational Needs (SEN) were underway, with Education Health and Care Plans replacing statements of educational needs. These Plans would be specific to the child and identify clear progress measures that would enable an accurate assessment of progress to be drawn. Sharing best practice between special and mainstream schools was also key in driving improvement.

Members felt that the Action Plan evidenced a move from re-active to pro-active school improvement and they thanked the Commissioner for Education and Wellbeing for the work she had undertaken.

RESOLVED – That: a) the feedback from the Ofsted Focused Inspection be noted; and b) the comments recorded above by the Select Committee on the local authority response and action plan be noted and used to support the action to address areas for development highlighted in the focused inspection feedback letter.

10. Education Support Services - Commissioning and Contract Performance Report for School Improvement

At their meeting of 24 January 2014 the Select Committee had requested an update report reviewing the progress and performance of the education support services commissioning and contract arrangements with Entrust. Since the start of the new joint venture in April 2013 significant steps had been taken to secure a robust, effective and efficient commissioning and delivery of school improvement services. These steps included; the development of a Service Delivery Agreement with clear service specification, outcome measures and key performance indicators; the establishment of contract monitoring mechanisms and performance reporting formats that support review of activity against key outcomes and enable continuous improvement; and a schedule and structure of commissioner-provider meetings established that secured effective strategic and operational management of the services.

The traded offer from Entrust was not covered within the report but was a significant part of their work. The school improvement element of their work focused on five key school improvement priorities. Every time a piece of work was commissioned it was linked to one of these priorities. Although some work addressed more than one priority there was no multiple recording. The authority was close to completing their annual self-assessment which would include how successful commissioning delivery had been.

Members received details of the key performance indicators (KPIs) around intervention and support, curriculum development and governor services. Over the last 18 months robust governance arrangements had been developed to look after contracted arrangements, with the Joint Operations Board working alongside Entrust colleagues to monitor progress on a monthly basis. The August report showed that all contractual KPIs were working.

The Cabinet Member, Learning and Skills, informed Members that the real work was what lay behind the figures, having dialogue and explanation to move forward.

Emma Pearson, Chief Executive, and Sharon Kelly, Director of Education Services, attended the Select Committee from Entrust. They shared infographics setting out key facts and statistics, areas where a difference had been made and moving forward to 2015. The Select Committee found these very useful and suggested they be shared with all county councillors to help illustrate to work of Entrust.

An incredible job had been done with regard to the structure of the new organisation and its governance and Members were informed that the transition had been smooth.

Examples of Entrust investment were shared, with £6m invested in Outdoor Education Centres (OEC) to update facilities that now catered for a wider age range, delivered clear programmes and opened all year rather than term time only. There was now a key need as well as a key outcome to everything Entrust delivered. Entrust had a dialogue with schools to ensure they matched delivery with needs, with the business advisory group (made up of Staffordshire head teachers) helping to develop the offer and give feedback.

Customer R Management (CRM) visits were undertaken with schools. These were normally between the chair of governors, head teacher and/or bursar and a representative from Entrust at Director level. The meetings were to ensure that commissioning was successful with the right package for the individual school. 91% positive comments had been received with regard to school improvement, however there was a need to continue to develop and improve the offer. New offers and new ways of working included around school improvement via school to school support. A body of associate consultants had also been established to enable the right support to be available. This included a national market for education within the resource and allowed the consultant base to grow and be reactive and flexible.

Members queried how communication would be improved to ensure schools understood better the services involved. The first year of the new company had focused on the smooth transition and there was now a need to build on relationships with the breadth of schools. CRM visits would help with this. The timing of the focused inspection was helpful in highlighting possible improvements in communications and addressing issues around perception.

RESOLVED – That a) the progress in developing the approach to commissioning and contract managing school support services be noted; and
b) the update on education support services contract performance be noted.

11. Work Programme

Members reviewed their work programme. Following today's meeting items would be included on:

- a 6-9 month progress report on following the Ofsted focused inspection
- the impact of the SEND reforms

Members also asked what progress had been made in connection with the Bradwell Lane Petition from their 25 July meeting. The Coroners report had not yet been published, however once this was available the issue would be considered again by the Select Committee. The Petition lead and the local Member had been informed that this was the position and that they would be invited to attend when the issue was re-visited. Bradwell Lane would be included on the work programme.

RESOLVED – That the above amendments to the work programme be agreed.

Chairman

Documents referred to in these minutes as Schedules are not appended, but will be attached to the signed copy of the Minutes of the meeting. Copies, or specific information contained in them, may be available on request.