

Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee Meeting held on 4 September 2015

Present: Simon Tagg (Chairman)

Attendance

Len Bloomer	Geoff Martin
Maureen Compton	Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf
Tim Corbett	Sheree People
Carol Dean	Paul Woodhead
Ian Hollinshead	Candice Yeomans
David Loades (Vice-Chairman)	

Also in attendance: Ben Adams, Gill Heath and Mark Winnington

Apologies: Mike Worthington

PART ONE

13. Declarations of Interest

Mr Paul Woodhead declared an interest in minute number 16, in his capacity as “OurstoEnjoy” campaign organiser on the 38 Degrees website.

14. Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 24 July 2015

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 24 July 2015 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

15. Improving Attendance and Participation in our Schools and Settings

An officer attendance working group had been established in Spring 2015 to consider the range of issues around school attendance. Good attendance was critically important to successful attainment, achievement and progression into adult life. The working group had reviewed and analysed detail of participation and attendance in Staffordshire, producing a draft document “Improving Participation and Attendance at our schools and settings” which promoted a new approach to securing collective action to drive further improvement.

Staffordshire was one of the best performing authorities in participation rates for the early years Think2 programme. Think2 offered early education childcare places for disadvantaged two year olds and Staffordshire was currently the tenth highest authority, securing 74% take up as at January 2015. More recent locally held data indicated that Staffordshire had achieved 80% take up for two year olds by July 2015. Take up for

three and four year olds in January 2015 was 99%, 1% higher than in 2014 and also higher than the national average.

Members received data on attendance at primary, secondary and special schools. Primary absence rates were broadly in line with national and statistical neighbour authority averages but had slightly better persistent absence rates than national indicators. Staffordshire's secondary absence rates were also broadly in line with both national and statistical neighbour authority averages. Staffordshire Special Schools had performed better than national and had lower overall absence rates and lower persistent absence rates. Members also received details of attendance at Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), with Staffordshire's attendance 11.7 percentage points higher than the national average.

Attendance of vulnerable groups was largely in line with the national average except for Gypsy Roma and Traveller pupils where it was worse than nationally, although the gap had narrowed over the last three academic years. Members were aware that previously there had been Staffordshire schools that specialised in taking children from the Gypsy Roma and Traveller communities. Work with this community had previously been co-ordinated through the West Midlands Consortium. This was no longer the case and Staffordshire now commissioned support to work with these families and encourage take up of school places.

Members received details of the varying performance across the eight districts in Staffordshire on overall absence rates. In 2013/14 there was a range of 0.8 percentage points between the best performing and worst performing districts.

In 2013/14 Staffordshire had a rate of 0.08% permanent exclusions, this having increased for two consecutive years. Staffordshire was now worse than national and statistical neighbour averages. Early local provisional data also suggested that the actual number of permanent exclusions was likely to increase again in 2014/15. The proportion of fixed term exclusions had been around 3% since 2010/11 with a slight increase to 3.14% in 2013/14. Staffordshire's performance was below national and statistical averages since 2008, however the gap was narrowing. Members heard that there was an increasing trend in exclusions of looked after children, an issue which the working group would be considering.

Members asked whether the rise in exclusions was a national trend. This information was not available at the meeting but would be forwarded to Select Committee Members. Members also suggested that anecdotally in some instances support had not been given until after the exclusion had been made. Officers would investigate this. The support process had been changed, with the initial assessment now being undertaken by the school using the standard assessment format developed within Families First. This change to the initial assessment may have given an impression of less support, however it was felt that the school, who would already have a relationship with the pupil and their family, were best placed to complete that initial process. Support was then offered by LSTs and their partners where this was identified as necessary.

Post-16 participation rates in Staffordshire of 16 and 17 year olds in education or training for 2014 was 89.3%, slightly lower than statistical neighbours and national figures. The percentage of 16-18 year old NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or

Training) had reduced over the last two years to 4.5% in 2014. This was slightly higher than the statistical neighbour group average but slightly lower than the national average of 4.7%. Members heard that there was a rich offer at Post-16 in Staffordshire across sixth forms, colleges and apprenticeships.

There was no nationally published data for comparisons on Children Missing Education (CME) although Staffordshire had collected some benchmarking data. Authorities did not generally categorise CME in the same way and therefore it was not possible to draw comparisons. Children Missing Out on Education (CMOOE) were those pupils with a school place who were not accessing it fully, for example due to exclusions, non-attendance or a reduced timetable. A task group was looking at how to improve practices and reporting of CMOOE.

Members congratulated the Cabinet Member on the performance figures but asked for clarification on how attendance issues and reporting would work in future with academies. The local authority had a number of statutory duties around providing pupils with a suitable education, promoting good attendance, inclusion and safeguarding children's welfare, fulfilling duties for those excluded from school, serving penalty notices and school attendance orders and investigating the whereabouts of pupils who have poor attendance or are at risk of being deleted from school admission registers. Whilst the governance and funding of academies differed from maintained schools attendance was key to all schools, with poor attendance impacting on results.

Sue Coleman, Interim Strategic Lead Targeted Services, informed members that working with whole families through Families First Local Support Teams (LSTs) was key to supporting good attendance irrespective of the type of school a pupil was placed in. School attendance was one of the priorities for Families First, working with the whole family to improve attendance. Where work with families did not result in attendance improving to an acceptable level notices may be served.

The Cabinet Member highlighted the Tamworth PRU and the fantastic job it did in re-engaging pupils in education. He noted that schools in a locality tended to work together as a community in tackling issues such as school attendance, with academies and maintained schools working together to address any local issues. He also informed Members of a conference being held in December for schools and governing bodies to help consider the issue of attendance.

Members noted in Appendix D "Attendance Working Group Task Log", the mapping of current spend on attendance had not yet started. The Working Group's July meeting had not taken place and it may be that work had started but that this progress had not been reported as yet on the task log. This would be clarified after the meeting.

At present the Cabinet Member currently notified local members of schools within their area where there may be issues of concern. Members asked whether performance figures on school attendance could also be circulated to local members. The Cabinet Member agreed to investigate whether this information was available on a school by school basis.

Members understood why the draft document for consideration, "Improving Participation and Attendance at our Schools and Settings: Our Principles and Priorities for 2015-

2017” was written at a fairly high strategic level, however they felt that examples of specific intervention would be helpful in showing how these priorities and principles would be implemented. Members asked for examples to be shared at a future meeting.

Members asked what the cost implication of this initiative was likely to be and whether any identified extra funding was in place. At present work was cost neutral, with those involved supporting the work through existing budgets. For example Entrust sponsoring the room for the December conference.

The issue of pupils being removed from school during term time for holidays was a national concern and Members asked whether this was a concern in Staffordshire schools. The Cabinet Member explained that whilst this was not a significant issue within Staffordshire a recent policy change had been made, giving schools more opportunity to deal with persistent absences and it would be interesting to see what difference this change would make. It was hoped that school leadership teams and governing bodies would be able to use discretion and flexibility in implementing the policy.

The Select Committee were aware that changes to Post 16 education had resulted in English and Maths being required to be taught to those pupils who had not gained level 2 by the end of their schooling pre-16. There was concern that this may disengage some pupils in their post-16 curriculum. The need to gain a certain level of competence in English and Maths was understood, however this would need to be taught in a more inventive way to engage those young people who had previously been disengaged with these subjects. A creative and intelligent approach to this would be needed, with the teaching and monitoring managed effectively. Learning in a context was key. Members also heard that there were excellent examples of good practice in teaching maths within the County.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) Members welcome the progress made by Staffordshire’s Attendance Working Group;
- b) Clarification on whether mapping current spend on attendance has started as part of the attendance working group task log and this be forwarded to Members;
- c) Examples of specific intervention to illustrate how the priorities and principles set out in the draft document be shared with members at a future meeting;
- d) Comparison National data on exclusions be forwarded to Members;
- e) The Attendance Working Group be advised of the Select Committee’s concerns over academy accountability around attendance; and
- f) Further reports be included on the work programme on:
 - Progress of the Attendance Working Group, including examples of specific intervention to highlight how the principles and priorities worked in practice;
 - Post-16 changes and any impact these have had on take-up; and
 - Pre-exclusion preventative support through LSTs.

16. Countryside Estate Review

At the beginning of considering this item the Cabinet Member, Economy, Environment and Transport, read out a statement previously posted on 17 June 2015, which stated

that Cannock Chase and Chasewater would not be sold. He felt there had been a misrepresentation around the consultation which had caused concern. However the countryside estate was costly to maintain and there was a need to ensure best value for the public money used. He thanked all those who had written raising their concerns and was encouraged that so many people cared so passionately for the estate. He also thanked those Select Committee Members who had visited the sites prior to consideration at this meeting.

At their meeting of 18 December 2014 the Select Committee had considered the strategy for reviewing the countryside estate and had agreed the proposed critical success factors. Members now received a presentation on the review.

The estate was over 2000ha of public access land comprising six country parks with visitors centres, 12 picnic areas and small sites and three “greenways” (disused railways used as multi-user routes). Management of the sites was undertaken by the Rangers Service and Works Unit. The work combined with maintenance of the public rights of way network to maximise efficiency. There was also a significant voluntary contribution in managing the estate.

Members received a breakdown of activity across the estate and the multifunctional nature of the sites, with an estimated 3,000,000 visits a year.

The drivers for change were:

- Outcomes, with a need to ensure that the contribution the countryside estate makes to the outcomes is maximised and therefore is able to continue in a sustainable manner;
- Changing demands/uses, with visitor numbers increasing and therefore putting additional pressures on the budget with increasing site maintenance costs;
- Partnerships, with interest in pooling resources and finding economies of scale (with some smaller sites already managed by communities); and
- Market changes, with the maintenance of the country parks and rights of way within the scope of Infrastructure+ (Amey). Based on the outcomes of the review consideration would be given to where the Infrastructure+ Partnership could add value.

The following ten options were shared with members:

Option 1 – the council continues to manage the countryside estate supported by the existing voluntary contribution

Option 2 – the council continues to manage the countryside estate in-house, maintaining the status quo in terms of ownership but developing a strategy of realising more income from the individual sites

Option 3 – transfer the freehold of all of the sites to a single provider

Option 4 – transfer the management responsibility of all of the countryside estate to another public sector or charitable body. The management partner would be responsible for running and developing the estate via contract arrangements while the County Council would retain ownership. The County Council could reduce its financial input over a period of time by placing an expectation on the provider organisation to source its own funding

Option 5 – transfer the ownership and/or management of individual sites to more than one provider for example local community or voluntary sector groups such as Friends of

Groups, Parish Councils or other agencies via community asset transfer or long-term leases and agreements

Option 6 – establish a multi-agency partnership of landowners to actively manage all green space sites within a specific area

Option 7 – establish a partnership arrangement with a private sector company based on a contract for the management and/or maintenance of sites

Option 8 – a “hybrid model” whereby the County Council retains ownership and overall strategic management of the countryside estate but would work with other bodies to deliver certain services or site management activities eg woodland management, events, education etc

Option 9 – establish a charitable trust, community interest company or trading arm to run and develop the countryside estate

Option 10 – sell those sites which are not managed as country parks and have limited amenity value and potential for public access

A small group of Select Committee Members (Simon Tagg, Chairman, Carol Dean and Paul Woodhead, co-opted member) had visited countryside estate sites in both the north and south of the county over two days. A note was tabled at the meeting sharing this group’s observations and areas for further investigation identified from these visits. The Chairman informed members that the group had been very impressed by the Rangers service and those who work on the estates, their passion for the work they do and the sites they maintain was evident and the professionalism of the service was amazing. Partnership working and work with voluntary groups was impressive and well established.

The Chasewater innovation centre was an excellent example of this partnership working and promoting enterprise to increase value. However red tape in certain areas was stifling the expansion of some projects. Promotion and communication was an issue, with leaflets needing updating and an up to date, fit-for-purpose online resource required. The inconsistency of promoting events by the County’s communications team resulted in difficulty in planning and managing events. Any extra funding raised as a result of improvement should be fed back into the estate to help support its long-term sustainability. The group felt the council was already getting great value for money from the service provided by those involved in the estate management.

Of those members who attending the Ranger led visits to the countryside estate:

- the Chairman felt he could support Options 2 or 9. He noted that those involved in the estate already had many ideas to enhance the value of the parks if the time resource was available. He also felt there was merit in exploring a countryside estate membership supported by an interactive website.
- Paul Woodhead had concerns over any private management of the estate, stressing that the Staffordshire countryside estate asset was much more than the two large sites of Cannock Chase and Chasewater. He had grave concerns around options 7 and 10. Mr Woodhead had organised a petition through 38degrees, which currently had 11000 signatures and may be appropriate to bring to full council. He had found the visits extremely useful in highlighting the different personalities each site had. The reliance on volunteers and goodwill of the Rangers was evident. He also noted that the picnic sites, though small, were of great value to their communities. Mr Woodhead also raised the issue of the Chasewater innovation centre and red tape around Entrust and Chartwells

catering blocking potential income generation as a consequence of restrictions within the contract. He asked for confirmation that due diligence would be taken to identify the number of sites bequeathed to the council.

- Carol Dean thanked the Rangers for taking Members around the estate sites and was impressed by the service they provide and that of the volunteers who support this work. She reiterated the value of the sites to Staffordshire and to the local communities and more widely their educational value. She shared the concerns over stifling possible income generation at the Chasewater innovation centre. Mrs Dean also shared concerns around communication and felt the Ranger service should have ownership of the website. She supported options 2 and 9.

The Cabinet Member informed the Select Committee that he was aware of the contract limitations with Entrust and Chartwells, and that he would take these issues forward. Due diligence with regard to land bequeathed to the Council would be undertaken.

The Vice-Chairman had visited the sites separately. He said the enthusiasm Staffordshire people had for the sites was evident. It was difficult to measure the value of the sites and the benefits around wellbeing. He supported option 2 and 9.

Members acknowledged the need to be sustainable and balancing this with maintaining these valuable spaces. In general Members felt options 3 and 10 were unacceptable with options 2 and 9 being the most favourable. Members also acknowledged that some sites may not be used fully and may be putting a strain on resources. There was a need to consider how these could be made more sustainable.

Members felt strongly that the concerns shared around the review were as much around possible privatisation of the management of sites as they were around selling the two main sites. Clarification was sought on option 3, transfer the freehold of all of the sites to a single provider, asking in what way this option was different from selling a site. Option 3 referred to a possible transfer of a site ownership to a specific group (eg Parish Council, RSPB etc), not a land sale on the open market. The Select Committee felt this option was unclear and should be removed.

The Select Committee asked for further explanation of option 8, “a “hybrid model” whereby the County Council retains ownership and overall strategic management of the countryside estate but would work with other bodies to deliver certain services or site management activities eg woodland management, events, education etc”. This option could see other organisations such as the RSPB or Forestry Commission, help to maintain sites. On some sites this already took place, helping with economies of scale to enable best value. Many of the sites were located next to sites owned by other groups, such as the Forestry Commission on Cannock Chase or the RSPB in the Churnet Valley.

Whilst initially some Members had reservations over Option 5, on reflection there was acknowledgment that this may be worth exploring for specific sites. An example was shared by the Cabinet Support Member, Environment and Rural Issues, where Ipstones Parish Council helped to preserve and maintain the Froghall Wharf picnic site through a group of local volunteers. It was understood that the Parish Council would be interested in taking ownership of this site under Option 5. There was the option for other

organisations, such as parish councils, to access funding the County Council was unable to, for example lottery funding. Members felt the wording should be changed to focus on management rather than ownership.

Members asked whether any expressions of interest had already been received for the sale of any site. The Officers said they were unaware of any expressions of interest for the purchase of a site, although there had been interest in management from organisations such as parish councils. The length of a lease was also raised as an issue, with the suggestion that a break clause should be included to any long lease. Members also raised concerns that changes to the management of sites may have on opening times, parking charges and possible entry fees.

The Cabinet Member reminded the Select Committee that very often to access grant funding, such as lottery funding, an organisation needed to have a lease for at least ten years.

Members reiterated the health and educational value of these sites. To support their use better signposted routes and tracks would help users to explore the sites more widely.

RESOLVED – That:

- a) a further report be brought to the October Select Committee prior to Cabinet decision on any proposals;
- b) the Select Committee support consideration of Options 2, 8 and 9;
- c) the Select Committee support consideration of Option 5 if the wording is changed to “ Transfer the **management but retain the ownership** of individual sites....”
- d) The Select Committee do not support Options 3 or 10.

17. Work Programme

The Select Committee received a copy of their current work programme. Members agreed the following additions:

- Progress of the Attendance Working Group, including examples of specific intervention to highlight how the principles and priorities worked in practice;
- Post-16 changes (specifically the inclusion of English and maths for those not yet achieving level 2) and any impact these have had on take-up;
- A further report on the Countryside Estate Review in October prior to Cabinet decision;

The Chairman also updated Members on the issue of Bradwell Lane. Following a petition to full Council this had come to the Select Committee on 25 June 2014. The issue was due to come back to the Select Committee once the Coroners report was available.

Since then there had been a court case in which the accident had been judged to be driver error, with a charge of death by dangerous driving being given. To help resolve any outstanding issue Ms Meadon may still have the Chairman met with her, Sandra Hambleton and David Greatbatch (Community Infrastructure Liaison Officer). A table top

junction is being proposed, funded through Mrs Hambleton's Division Highways Programme funding.

RESOLVED – That the amendments to the work programme be noted.

18. Exclusion of the Public

Chairman