

**Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee Meeting held on 15
January 2021**

Present: Ian Parry (Chairman)

Attendance

Tina Clements (Vice-Chairman)	Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf
Keith Flunder	Kyle Robinson
Syed Hussain	David Smith
Ian Lawson	Simon Tagg
Alastair Little	Bernard Williams

Also in attendance: Philip White and Victoria Wilson

Apologies: None

PART ONE

106. Declarations of Interest

Keith Flunder declared an interest in item 5: Economic Recovery, Renewal and Transformation – Quarterly Update, as a recipient of grant support.

107. Minutes of the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee held on 12 November 2020

RESOLVED - That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 November 2020 were confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

108. Protecting Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for Future Generations

The Cabinet Member for Culture and Communities had introduced proposals to protect Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for Future Generations to the Select Committee on 12 November and whilst accepting the need for mitigating action to protect the SAC, the select committee, mindful of the frustration of some user groups, had asked the Cabinet Member to look again at the consultation and reconsider whether it had been sufficiently robust and inclusive.

The proposals to protect Cannock Chase SAC from the impacts of increasing recreational pressure associated with housing growth included a car parking plan and a site user plan with improved infrastructure and capacity overall but seeking to reduce recreational pressure in the most sensitive areas whilst increasing capacity in more robust areas.

The Cabinet Member had undertaken her review and met with user groups and concluded that a significant and robust evidence base supported the proposals and provided a strong rationale for the suggested measures. Furthermore, she believed the consultation undertaken by SAC had been robust and inclusive and had helped shape the resulting proposals.

The County Council, in its consideration of the proposals on their land, had made some additional recommendations which further addressed and mitigated concern regarding carparking and with the SAC undertook to facilitate further public engagement as phases of implementation are brought forward.

Members noted that many of the 3m visitors to Cannock Chase came from outside of the county and a small parking charge would be a contribution to Staffordshire's economy. A member commented that there seemed to be more concern about car parking location and charges and less about preserving the ecology of the site. The Cabinet Member confirmed that in the new proposals there would still be 500 free car parking spaces.

A Member asked for assurance that the Cabinet Member had spoken to many groups personally since the November meeting. They remained concerned that the consultation process had not been inclusive, that some had found it to be confusing and misleading which could account for the poor participation rate. Furthermore, they were concerned about vulnerable use groups – those with sensory impairment for example – who were worried about the proposed car parking arrangements. The Cabinet Member assured members that she had had conversations with and listened to many interested parties and individuals via various media and was confident that there was support for her proposals. She reminded members that the SAC had conducted the consultation, not the County Council and that she was keen to engage further with people with disabilities over specific provision for them.

Another Member shared concern about the original consultation and urged the Cabinet Member to harness the energy of some user groups and involve them in implementing the proposals and that she should encourage and involve voluntary groups of interested people in the process.

Members accepted it was a difficult balance to protect the SAC whilst maintaining access to the country park for people to enjoy and that ensuring consultation reached the right people was difficult. The Cabinet Member reminded members that this was a 10-15 year plan with opportunities for public engagement along the way.

RESOLVED - That the Select Committee note the further consultation which had taken place into proposals to protect Cannock Chase SAC from the impacts of increasing recreational pressure and mindful of continuing concern of some user groups and support for the proposals from others, agree that a significant and robust evidence base supported the proposals and that their views should be fed back to Cabinet

109. Economic Recovery, Renewal and Transformation - Quarterly Update

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills outlined progress made against the Staffordshire Economic Recovery, Renewal and Transformation Strategy.

He acknowledged that despite the challenge of a third lockdown, the UK economy had shrunk by 2.5% - much less than economists had predicted. Furthermore, the EU trade deal struck before Christmas had ensured a smooth transition to Brexit, avoided interruption in trade and finally the continued roll out of the vaccination programme was cause for optimism. The Strategy had been considered by the Select Committee in June 2020 at which time the impact of the pandemic on the economy was unclear and that remained the case.

The Strategy and associated delivery plans were flexible enough to respond to whatever situation became a reality over the coming months. 'Live' assessments informed the development of the strategy and of interventions/projects/programmes. The Council continued to produce a new Economic Bulletin on a monthly basis.

Over all the proportion of working age Staffordshire residents on one of the Government support schemes was estimated to be just over 15%, slightly lower than the national average. The claimant count rate was also relatively low in Staffordshire (4.8%) compared to regionally (7.3%) and nationally (6.3%), however, it was young people, the lowest paid and part time workers who continued to feel the impact of the economic shock the most. The Cabinet Member highlighted youth unemployment as of particular concern and he outlined some schemes targeting this, including the Kickstart scheme now rolled out into Staffordshire.

Although unemployment and those claiming benefits had recently declined there remained a considerable number of employees furloughed within the county (27,000 – 7% of the eligible population and in-line with the national figure). The Cabinet Member identified as a real positive, a significant uplift in recruitment with job vacancies in Staffordshire increasing by 15% between September and October.

The Cabinet Member outlined a number of interventions directly undertaken by the County Council supporting businesses and individuals. These included the new £0.360m small Business Start-up scheme which had supported 125 applicants so far and a Partnership with the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB), the county council and all District and Borough Councils providing back office support to very small employers.

A county wide Redundancy Taskforce had proved invaluable and had become a partnership of 24 organisations to support the co-ordination of services to help to redeploy, retrain, reskill, upskill and signpost people to new employment opportunities. Schemes for young people included Ignite your Entrepreneur which delivered in an engaging and interactive way through an online platform, dedicated resources and ongoing professional support.

The Cabinet Member accepted that this was a time of huge challenge nationally and locally but the County Council were playing their part in supporting businesses and shaping the way forward.

A Member asked why Staffordshire seemed more resilient in terms of job creation/retention. The Cabinet Member believed Staffordshire had a good long term track record of low unemployment and with support, determined to retain staff wherever possible. The Cabinet Member shared members concern regarding the hospitality, retail and tourism sectors which had been most adversely affected.

A Member acknowledged the importance of revitalising the high street in the recovery plans. The Cabinet Member agreed the importance of the retail sector that could not transfer to online and work was underway to support it. Reinvesting in high streets was an important element of recovery and £50m of investment had been announced for Newcastle and Tamworth town centre regeneration. He acknowledged the need for all town centres to benefit and recognised it as a considerable and ongoing workstream. He agreed that high streets needed to be innovative to offer an alternative experience to online shopping.

A Member alluded the county's core strategy which had centred on bringing high skilled, well paid jobs to Staffordshire and he asked if this remained the focus? The Cabinet Member agreed the important relationship between skill set and the future economy of the county and offered this as a theme for a future select committee. The focus had concerned improving the skills of the workforce and it continued to be important to ensure schools, colleges and universities performing well in terms of producing the skill sets required but also in retraining and reskilling the working population. He assured members that the drive remained to get more young people achieving level three or ideally, level four qualifications. The County Councils Open Door scheme offered work placements for young people with a particular focus on care leavers.

In response to a question about the changes of a third lockdown, the Cabinet Member acknowledged that despite the fast changing environment, the strategy was a reference point in terms of where we need to be and what we are accountable for. The challenge of lockdown had brought further funding opportunities. Cabinet were working hard to best utilise further funding announced in November to compliment what was already underway. A further 500 new apprenticeships would be able to be supported in partnership with the District and Borough Councils. The Cabinet Member assured the select committee he was constantly adapting and seizing new opportunities.

Members shared their concern about behaviour changes forced on through lockdowns – will confidence return sufficiently for people to visit hospitality venues. It was understood Government were considering appointing a Minister for Hospitality to support and restore the sector. The Cabinet Member agreed the hospitality sector required a focus across all tiers of government.

A Member believed the country to be resilient but acknowledged businesses needed to be flexible and innovative in terms of meeting emerging need.

In terms of behavioural science, the Cabinet Member was asked to what extent he recognised it as an issue. He agreed the importance of understanding any trends locally and nationally and as thoughts are turned to the future, local intelligence will be key to investing in the right areas.

Regarding business preparedness for the Brexit transition, the Cabinet Member said that despite some minor challenges, overall it had worked out well. He regretted the two years of uncertainty prior to the trade deal and acknowledged that what businesses most need regardless of Brexit or the pandemic, is stability and certainty.

RESOLVED - That (a) the Select Committee note the quarterly update provided on progress made against the Staffordshire Economic Recovery, Renewal and Transformation Strategy and note the interventions already made by the County Council and partner organisations,

(b) request the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills to continue to update the Select Committee on delivery of the Strategy every three months and

(c) the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills bring a report to the Select Committee on the relationship between training and skills and the future Staffordshire economy

110. Work Programme

The Select Committee agreed to include an item on the relationship between training and skills and the future Staffordshire economy in their work programme. They agreed that considering items on schools was not timely during periods of national lockdown and that such items should be postponed. The Select Committee requested an item on the work undertaken by the All Party Member Working Group on Future Economy and Enterprise, chaired by Simon Tagg, and any response to that groups report.

RESOLVED - That changes to the Select Committee's work programme be agreed.

Chairman