

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

Present: Ian Parry (Chairman)

**Attendance**

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

**Also in attendance:** Philip White and David Williams

**Apologies:** Kyle Robinson, Jessica Shulman and Simon Tagg

**PART ONE**

The Select Committee paid their respects to the late HRH Prince Phillip by holding one minutes silence.

**118. Minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2021**

RESOLVED That the minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2021 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

**119. The Relationship between Training and Skills and the Future Staffordshire Economy**

The Select Committee were given an opportunity to comment on the training and skills interventions by the County Council and partner organisations to improve the skills of the workforce to enable economic recovery and growth. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills described the recent economic and skills achievements leading into the pandemic and the major investments and skills and employability programmes that had been put in place in response. The report considered where growth was expected in the future economy of Staffordshire and what the strategic workforce skills priorities were likely to be needed for our future skills and employability programmes to meet the changing demand.

The economy and skills required were rapidly changing and the impact of the pandemic had accelerated many trends which had been emerging previously. New digital technologies and the requirement for clean growth to address climate change, growth in e-commerce and working from home were changing the way we live. The economy was becoming greener and more digital across all sectors.

In terms of the future response, the Redundancy and Recruitment Triage Service is tasked with supporting businesses who have had to restructure and individuals affected to match skills and qualities with demand. The countywide redundancy task group had been established as the vehicle to address the effects of job losses on individuals through collaboration with partner agencies and the promotion of local and national employability programmes. A range of initiatives and programmes had been created to support economic regeneration.

In the longer term, in anticipation of significant job losses resulting from the pandemic, the need to upskill and reskill individuals would remain a priority. In the transition to the new normal, there would be opportunities to be more transformative with programmes that address longer term skill issues. Delivery of substantial capital programmes such as HS2 and the West Midlands Freight Interchange provided clear opportunities for skills and employment in the area.

Based on the extensive assessment of evidence gathered to support the development of the SAP Skills Strategy, LIS and Covid-19 Strategies, there was agreement in identifying a number of sector skill priorities. Future economic growth and strategic skills priorities were identified around Digital; the Green Economy; Advanced Manufacturing and Engineering; Modern Methods of Construction; Advanced Logistics; and the Health and Care Sector.

The Chairman asked about the current employment profile of the county. The Assistant Director for Skills and Employability said that the overall profile had changed over the last 10 years seeing a significant increase in manufacturing (50% growth) and with construction – these sectors remained the strongest. Transport and logistics had also increased especially linked to the manufacturing sector. Broadly it was a balanced picture with some key strengths.

A Member asked about the service sector and the opportunity that re training provided to encourage positive messages.

The Cabinet Member was aware that the future economy would require higher skill sets and he had a responsibility to ensure training offered by providers was suitable. Trainers base their offer on demand and the County Council must ensure they are accurate in their assessment of need. The LEP Skills Panel has a role here and informative exchange is important. Furthermore, the County Council's Adult Education offer must be relevant and upskilling.

A Government pilot on upskilling before the pandemic had been effective and engagement had demonstrated a strong appetite for upskilling although barriers were cited as cost of courses and time available. There had since been a rapid increase in the delivery of digital platform learning.

A Member asked about people unable to upskill. The Cabinet Member said that there had been a reduction in the number of people with no formal qualifications but there

would always be some people happy with their situation with no desire to upskill. It was important to market and promote training opportunities so people could choose. While the County Council had a role in brokering training there had to be some personal responsibility and personal appetite for it.

A Member asked about the Ignite programme. The Cabinet Member said the objective had been to promote Staffordshire as a great place to set up a business. The initiative recognised that young people don't have experience of the working world so it offered a blend of support for business start up with an element of mentoring. The Assistant Director explained that the initiative had come from discussion with FE colleges in response to the pandemic and there had been a considerable amount of interest. A Member felt that young people could benefit from the experience of those at the end of their careers.

The Chairman asked to what extent the pandemic had impacted on the apprenticeship scheme. The Cabinet Member said there had been a reduction in apprenticeship start-ups which was to have been expected. It was difficult to deliver some types of training and it was expected there would be an increase soon.

The Chairman asked whether the impact of AI in displacing jobs and the green agenda had been analysed. The Cabinet Member recognised AI as a threat to jobs which bolstered the need to upskill appropriately and to attract businesses into the county which require humans. The green agenda presented opportunities and the county's central location was attractive to many green energy companies.

RESOLVED That the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills be congratulated on a comprehensive report which worked to ensure the workforce was prepared to meet future needs of the Staffordshire economy and that he report to the Select Committee on progress against the report on a three monthly cycle.

## **120. Economic Recovery, Renewal & Transformation – Quarterly Update**

The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills updated members regarding delivery against the Staffordshire Economic Recovery, Renewal and Transformation Strategy. The unprecedented nature of the pandemic had meant the County Council had had to respond very quickly to support businesses and residents. The Strategy was flexible to respond to a range of scenarios. The Select Committee had an important role in scrutinising delivery of the Strategy.

Detailed 'live' assessments of the impact of the crisis continued to inform and shape delivery of the Strategy which set out priorities over the next 5 years. Several key issues cut across themes including the need to meet carbon neutral targets, supporting inclusive growth to ensure all residents benefit from the development of the local economy, and communicating and engaging effectively with residents and businesses creating a strong Staffordshire identity.

Overall the proportion of working age Staffordshire residents on a Government support scheme was lower than the national average and the claimant count (universal credit) was also relatively low compared to the West Midlands. There remained however a considerable number of employments furloughed. Whilst the furlough scheme had been extended until September there was still uncertainty around the future economic health of these employments.

The Cabinet Member updated members on the various ongoing and completed interventions directly undertaken by the County Council to support businesses and individuals. The local interventions were communicated through an enhanced ongoing communications campaign 'Staffordshire means Back to Business'. The Strategy aimed to identify opportunities as they arise to grasp and hasten the development of the Staffordshire economy.

A Member asked about income support and whether all people were able to access support. The Cabinet Member said there were some gaps in the offer. He acknowledged unprecedented levels of support but accepted that there would still be some who fell between the gap.

The Chairman asked about the furlough scheme and whether it continued to mask employment levels. The Cabinet Member agreed that was the case and the 'hard stop' was expected but so far in Staffordshire there had not been large scale redundancies. As businesses start to re-open they would get a feel of the emerging situation. The LEP would monitor the impact and emerging redundancies.

RESOLVED That the update on delivery against the Staffordshire Economic Recovery, Renewal and Transformation Strategy be received.

#### **121. Staffordshire Community Learning Service Annual Self-Assessment (2019 – 2020)**

Staffordshire Community Learning Service provided learning to residents aged 19+ through a range of formal and informal learning programmes across the county. It supports and develops individuals and groups for whom formal learning may have been a barrier in the past and works with them to build confidence and realise potential. Learning was delivered in part through the Direct Delivery Unit and 95% commissioned to a range of sub-contracted partners.

In response to the pandemic, the service had transferred a proportion of learning to online platforms to maintain services. The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) (who fund the service) implemented some flexibilities due to the pandemic and had agreed not to recover an underspend of £391,325 which would be reinvested to support economic recovery.

The programme was focussed on upskilling and reskilling adults in a vocational context. The services purpose was to improve peoples' lives through lifelong learning and

training leading to employment or increased personal fulfilment supporting the growth of Staffordshire's economy and society. Ambition and intent was demonstrated through a four year Community Learning and Commissioning Strategy and the Community Learning Framework (2019-23) and provided a range of programmes to meet the needs of Staffordshire residents. At a strategic level there was a strong intent to allocate provision across the county influenced by the local and regional priorities identified by the LEP and Skills Advisory Panel.

The pandemic had contributed to a significant reduction in learner enrolment and performance and had presented many challenges in terms of learner recruitment and engagement. In 2020-21 the Community Learning service were experiencing high volume visits to the webpage and their facebook page had experienced growth. However, learner enrolment was down in this first term compared to last year but this was due to continued lockdown restrictions. The service continued to work with sub-contractors to develop their digital offer.

The service was dedicated to continuous improvement and had identified areas for further development.

The Cabinet Member acknowledged the significant challenge the pandemic had created for the Community Learning Service and their excellent achievement in responding to it. The case for a future blended offer of face to face and on line learning had been demonstrated.

The Head of Adult learning agreed that the future offer would be a blended approach, prioritising the most vulnerable learners. She said that family on-line learning and learning for children to catch up over the summer holidays were new offers.

A Member asked what support was available in terms of IT equipment to support learners. The Head of Adult Learning said that some retained funds and investments from sub contractors had enabled the service to respond to some need. There were some small grants for businesses to purchase digital equipment. A Member suggested making more use of community buildings for face to face learning.

In terms of learner progression – the learner journey would be monitored both transition and outcomes - with a starting point as the learner's objective. Paid employment was not always the desired outcome – this could be a community role, voluntary sector or just becoming a more confident citizen.

RESOLVED That the report be received, that the Community Learning Service be praised for their response to the challenges of the pandemic on delivery of their service and that future reports include information on appraisal of outcomes.

## **122. Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan**

The Department for Transport (DfT) had issued guidance that specifies a six stage approach to producing a Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP). The draft LCWIP had been published for consultation in February 2021 and included a £31m 10 year programme of investment for Burton on Trent, Cannock, Lichfield, Stafford and Newcastle under Lyme.

In response to the consultation, it was proposed that the final LCWIP recognise that the £31m is a minimum investment requirement necessary to meet the government standards in local transport note 1/20 on delivering high quality cycle infrastructure.

Government had announced that future funding for walking and cycling was more likely to be secured by local authorities who had a published LCWIP that followed Government criteria. Going forward every opportunity would be taken to secure additional funding for walking and cycling and the LCWIP would be the basis of future funding bids.

The Senior Strategy Officer explained that the intention was to encourage cycling and walking as it was known that over 70% of car travel was for journeys of less than 5 miles. The Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport said that people would be safer cycling, healthier and air quality would improve.

Members were disappointed that despite Staffordshire being a rural county, only urban areas were included in the scheme. They hoped that there would be links networking rural and urban areas and that District Councils and other groups should be involved.

The Cabinet Member said he was already working on another bid for funding from the DfT which could be used to expand areas of the LCWIP and would involve some network planning incorporating smaller towns and villages.

A Member regretted that his division would not benefit at all from the current LCWIP even though it was a popular area for cyclists and walkers. When normal commuting traffic resumed it would be necessary to deal with 'rat running' traffic through village lanes to avoid accidents.

A Member raised a particular concern regarding a cycle route in Burton which was regularly blocked by parked cars and the Cabinet Member agreed to take the matter up outside of the meeting.

A Member asked how the investment would be monitored and felt that accompanying hardware such as secure lock ups at train stations was necessary. The Senior Strategy Officer said that monitoring outcomes was a prerequisite of the funding and authorities would need to demonstrate this.

**RESOLVED** That the process for undertaking the Staffordshire Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan be noted and the comments made by members be considered prior to publishing the 2021 version of the LCWIP.

### **123. HS2 Update**

The Select Committee had requested regular updates on progress regarding HS2 and feedback from HS2 Ltd on both the construction programme and the impact on prosperity in Staffordshire. Members felt that communication with parish councils was lacking. The Cabinet Member for Transport proposed that HS2 brief the Select Committee quarterly to ensure a substantive update with both HS2 Ltd and contractors attending.

RESOLVED That quarterly updates on HS2 be included in the Prosperous Staffordshire Select Committee work programme going forward to comprise:

- An update on the construction programme for both Phase 1 and Phase 2A
- An economic prosperity update for both Phase 1 and Phase 2A
- Responses to any specific queries received from members prior to the meeting.

### **124. Work Programme**

RESOLVED That the Work Programme be noted

### **125. Exclusion of the Public**

RESOLVED That the public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business which involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in the paragraphs of Schedule 12(a) (as amended) of the Local Government Act 1972 indicated below

### **126. Exempt minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2021**

(exemption paragraph 3)

RESOLVED That the exempt minutes of the meeting on 26 February 2021 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

**Chairman**