

## **Cabinet Meeting on Wednesday 15 November 2023**

### **Staffordshire Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2030**



**Councillor Philip White, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills said,**

*"Staffordshire already has an enterprising, resilient, and inclusive economy. But for the county to continue to thrive, and for residents and businesses to fully experience the benefits, it's vital to recognise the importance of skills for employment and the need to support people of all ages into work, to progress or change careers, so businesses can access the skills and talent they need to diversify and grow.*

*That's why stakeholders from across the county have come together to create our Employment and Skills Strategy, putting in place the vision and priorities to deliver our united economic vision for Staffordshire. And it will make sure our workforce is equipped not only to weather economic shocks such as global pandemics, but also to thrive and grow, with the digital skills to embrace technological transformation and the green skills to achieve net zero by 2050.*

*What makes this strategy different is that it's built on partnership and shared endeavour. Those contributing to it are committed to making our ambitions a reality. We want people from all backgrounds and abilities to fulfil their potential and as devolution plans develop, we look forward to working with partners across Staffordshire and beyond to capitalise on the talent and highly skilled workforce that already exists here.*

*But above all, we're committed to making sure Staffordshire is a place where everyone can thrive; harnessing and growing our skills base to enable residents and businesses to maximise future opportunities and make prosperity a reality for all."*

## **Report Summary:**

Our new Employment and Skills Strategy outlines the County Council's vision and priorities for developing the skills of our residents to create the workforce needed to deliver our Economic Strategy and Strategic Plan. Our work to improve local skills over the last decade has seen significant improvement in skill levels and more local people working in higher value, better paid jobs. This has ensured that our economy continues to grow through a more productive and economically active working population.

To further build on this success we have developed the Employment and Skills Strategy. Although the Strategy is a County Council strategy, we have worked closely with key stakeholders to put in place the vision and priorities to deliver our united economic vision for Staffordshire. We have also conducted a 4-week public consultation to provide the opportunity for wider partners, local stakeholders, residents, and businesses to help shape the Strategy.

We will of course strive to take full advantage of the many opportunities to support the continued improvement in employment and skills, but we also recognise that there are challenges to address. Fundamental to our Strategy are the cross-cutting priorities of developing digital and green skills, to help adopt new technologies and to transition our economy to net zero. While we also recognise the need to ensure that more residents are economically active and in-work, provide access to inspirational careers advice, develop technical skills to drive productivity and growth and respond to business needs now and, in the future, support entrepreneurialism and business growth, and create a culture of life-long learning.

Our Employment and Skills Strategy has a clear focus on improving the skills of local residents to be able to access the more and better paid jobs being created but also supports the delivery of wider priorities including increased productivity, inward investment, innovation and entrepreneurship to achieve greater economic growth. This in turn can lead to improved prosperity, health and wellbeing of our residents across Staffordshire.

The timescales for the Strategy are up to 2030 to align with our Economic Strategy and the Government's missions for Levelling Up the UK, as set out in the Levelling Up White Paper (LUWP). The Strategy also recognises the importance of the Skills for Jobs White Paper and underpinning Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022. New Government policy announcement continue to emerge from these White Papers, and we will therefore keep the Strategy under review to consider any issues and opportunities that arise as and when necessary.

A final full designed version has been produced and will be published following any necessary changes being made and agreed with the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy & Skills and Director for Economy, Infrastructure & Skills. A summary version has also been produced, highlighting key aspects of the Strategy to sit alongside our Investment Prospectus.

### **Recommendations**

I recommend that Cabinet:

- a. Cabinet approves the Employment and Skills Strategy.
- b. Working with those Cabinet members with associated responsibilities, the Director for Economy, Infrastructure & Skills be authorised to progress the development of supporting delivery plans, working with our partners as appropriate.



## **Cabinet – Wednesday 15 November 2023**

### **Staffordshire Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2030**

#### **Recommendations of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills**

I recommend that Cabinet:

- a. Cabinet approves the Employment and Skills Strategy.
- b. Working with those Cabinet members with associated responsibilities, the Director for Economy, Infrastructure & Skills be authorised to progress the development of supporting delivery plans, working with our partners as appropriate.

#### **Local Member Interest:**

N/A

### **Report of the Director for Economy, Infrastructure and Skills**

#### **Reasons for Recommendations:**

##### **Background**

1. Our [Economic Strategy](#) was considered by the Scrutiny Committee and agreed by Cabinet in March 2022 and outlines the County Council's vision, ambitions, and priorities for the Staffordshire economy up to 2030, aligned to our Strategic Plan and national Government policy such as the Skills for Jobs White Paper and underpinning Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022.
2. Our Strategic Plan outlines those outcomes that the county council most wants to achieve, including that, "Everyone in Staffordshire will have access to more good jobs and share the benefits of economic growth."
3. The Economic Strategy recognises that in order to achieve this we are uniquely placed to support a whole-system approach to continuing recovery and growth of our economy, due to our responsibilities for transport, infrastructure, environment, education, skills, and health.
4. To support the delivery of the economic vision and priorities our new Employment and Skills Strategy has a clear focus on improving the skills of local residents to be able to access the more and better paid jobs being created but also supports the delivery of wider priorities including

increased productivity, inward investment, innovation and entrepreneurship to achieve greater economic growth. This in turn can lead to improved prosperity, health and wellbeing of our residents across Staffordshire.

5. The development of this Strategy will ensure that we have the right skills and workforce locally to support our plans for the renewal and long-term transformation of the local economy. It will ensure that our interventions are targeted on the right employment and skills priorities for Staffordshire and allow us to influence/shape the approach taken by Government working closely with the Department for Education, the Midlands Engine and local partners including FE and HE such as informing the new accountability statements required from education providers and the development of the Local Skills Improvement Plan (LSIP) for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. It will aid with securing funding and powers to deliver our overall ambitions, including through the various Government policy agendas.
6. By outlining the County Council's employment and skills priorities in the coming years, the Strategy will also guide any future work and discussions with our partners and Government on opportunities for further devolution to the local area. Any County Deal agreed with Government has the potential to provide further powers and resources that will allow us to deliver our employment and skills priorities more quickly and effectively and is being considered through the Staffordshire Leaders Board.

## **Context**

7. Through strong partnership working and significant capital and revenue investment e.g., City Deal, Growth Deal, ESF, Getting Building Fund etc. over recent years Staffordshire has seen significant improvement and success in developing local skills. Staffordshire has seen faster improvement in reducing the number of working age residents with no formal qualifications compared to nationally, with 7,900 fewer residents with no qualifications in 2021 compared to 2016 equivalent to a 19.5% reduction compared to a 17.0% reduction nationally. This significant improvement means that in 2021 there were 6.3% of working age residents with no qualifications which was just below the national rate of 6.4%.
8. Staffordshire has also closed the gap to the national for working age adults with higher skills. We have seen adults with Level 3+ (A Level equivalent or above) increase by 30,500 between 2016 and 2021, equivalent to 10.8% rise compared to a 9.0% rise seen nationally. The latest position for 2021 now shows 60.2% of adults in Staffordshire now



have Level 3+ qualifications just behind the 61.3% seen nationally. We have also closed the gap to the national average for Level 4+ qualification (Degree equivalent or above) where we have seen an increase of 39,200 adults with such qualifications between 2016 and 2021, equivalent to 22.1% rise compared to a 15.0% rise seen nationally. In 2021 41.7% of adults in Staffordshire had Level 4+ qualifications closing the gap to the national average of 43.1%.

9. By developing local skills, we have helped ensure that more residents can access better paid jobs and play an active and productive role in the local economy. In 2022 average annual resident earnings in Staffordshire stood at £32,386 which was just below the UK average of £33,000. Between 2017-22 Staffordshire saw faster improvement in resident earnings than nationally, with 16.5% growth compared to 14.2% for England.
10. Our unemployment and economic inactivity (worklessness) rates remain well below the national average meaning that significantly more of our residents are in work and fewer are reliant on state support. Staffordshire's unemployment rate for the latest available period of Oct 2021-Sep 2022 was estimated at 14,700 or 3.3%, which was below the national rate of 3.8% and significantly below the regional rate of 5.0%. While Staffordshire's economic inactivity rate for the same period was estimated at 16.3% equivalent to 87,800, which was significantly below the national rate of 21.2% and regional rate of 22.2%.
11. Overall, this recent employment and skills improvement and success has contributed to greater local economic growth and increased productivity, with more businesses choosing Staffordshire as a place to invest and operate creating more better paid jobs for the people of Staffordshire.

## Approach

12. We are now looking to build on this recent employment and skills improvement and success across Staffordshire and ensure that the county has the highly skilled workforce it needs to reach its full potential.
13. Fundamental to our strategy are the **cross-cutting priorities of developing digital and green skills to support the adoption of new innovative and productive technologies and to transition our economy to net zero.**
14. Beyond these cross-cutting priorities, we recognise the similarities but also the diversity that exists across the county and with this in mind our employment and skills priorities are:

15. **Priority 1: Ensuring All Are Work Ready and Can Access Employment** – working with key partners such as the DWP, Job Centre Plus and Skills Providers across our communities we will look to provide employment and skills support to create a more inclusive local economy with opportunities for all and support business growth through reduced labour shortages with increased economic activity and transition to work.
16. **Priority 2: Providing Inspirational Careers Advice** - we will continue to develop inspirational Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance (CEIAG) through our Careers Hub to ensure that all residents have access to the information and advice they need to make informed career choices and manage their career.
17. **Priority 3: Developing Technical Skills to Drive Productivity and Growth** - through our strong Colleges and Universities, we will increase the supply of higher-level technical skills and develop new skills needed by businesses in our priority sectors, with a particular focus on cross-cutting digital skills development through new state-of-the-art provision and green skills vital for the county's net zero ambitions. We want the needs of business to be at the heart of transformation and seek to forge new and lasting partnerships to make this happen. Key to this is building on the recent development of the £16m Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Institute of Technology (IoT), with business and education providers increasingly working together to deliver the facilities and technical provision needed in Staffordshire to provide the future skills for growth.
18. We will also look to ensure that there are fully effective pathways for all learners to achieve higher technical qualifications. An important aspect of this will be addressing the current progression issues from level 2 to level 3 and the requirement to reform level 3 alternative academic and technical qualifications that sit alongside A Levels, T Levels and apprenticeships in order to support progression and attainment for all students. This will provide the opportunity for all students to move into high-skilled jobs, either directly, or through progression into good quality higher education courses.
19. **Priority 4: Supporting Innovation and Enterprise** - we also want to ensure that residents have access to the support and provision in order to develop entrepreneurial and innovation skills that support greater local enterprise.
20. **Priority 5: Creating a Place of Learning** - Staffordshire is resilient and we have put in place skills support for our residents and workers to deal with change and access support and training when they need it. This includes ensuring that those people more adversely affected by economic shocks such as Brexit, the pandemic and energy/cost-of-living crisis

(young people, women and those with lower-level skills and workers from hardest-hit sectors) are front and centre of our plans for the future. Transferable skills are at the heart of this, especially for those leaving rapidly shifting sectors such as retail and hospitality.

21. Given the speed with which the economy is now changing we also recognise the need to develop a stronger culture of life-long learning in Staffordshire to ensure that all residents can continue to benefit from continued economic growth and the better paid jobs being created.
22. Models of delivery are changing, and we will support that change so that businesses, especially small ones, can be instrumental in crafting new courses in modular, bite-size, and on-demand formats. We want individuals to be able to access qualifications, especially for digital and green skills, at a time and in a way that suits them to upskill or reskill, improving social mobility, inclusion, and lifelong learning.
23. These better local skills and stronger workforce can support the delivery of our shared economic strategy and vision alongside the wide range of ambitious current and pipeline projects being delivered by our Local Authorities.
24. A significant amount of evidence continues to be compiled on the local labour market picture, primarily through the County Council's Economy and Skills Evidence Base and Economic Bulletin. Along with additional evidence produced by economic 'think-tanks' and alike, this locally produced evidence has underpinned the development of the Strategy and will continue to form the basis of our supporting plans and strategies in the future.
25. We recognise that the County Council does not operate in isolation and there are numerous stakeholders with a vital role in supporting the development of skills and growth of the Staffordshire economy, most notably our Colleges, Universities and District and Borough Councils. We have therefore conducted an extensive partner engagement exercise to help develop the Strategy and a 4-week public consultation, seeking views from stakeholders, businesses, and residents on the draft Employment and Skills Strategy.
26. Through the 4-week public consultation we have received very positive feedback on the strategy with 87% either strongly agreeing or agreeing with the vision for employment and skills in Staffordshire. For all 5 of the strategic priorities 91% or more strongly agreed or agreed with those identified. In addition to this we have received ongoing input and positive feedback from key partners throughout the development of the strategy either directly or through partner forums including the SSLEP Skills



Advisory Panel, LSIP Board and College Principals Group, with a number of colleges asking to feature more prominently in the strategy and submitting case studies of where they are having a positive impact in our priority areas.

27. We will ensure that we are continuing to engage proactively with our Colleges, Universities, Districts and Boroughs, businesses, residents, and partner organisations to provide an opportunity to help shape the Delivery Plan for the Strategy.

## **Delivery**

28. Our delivery approach for this strategy across Staffordshire and its districts and boroughs will be:
29. To work in partnership to leverage and align public sector investment e.g., the Local Skills Improvement Plan and associated Local Skills Improvement Fund, the Levelling Up Fund, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.
30. To match and maximise public and private sector investment e.g., Apprenticeship Levy.
31. To work with government on the opportunities for more powers and funding through devolution e.g., Adult Education Budget.
32. To maximise employer investment in skills and involvement in the design of skills provision.
33. To shape and influence the strategic commissioning of other funds and priorities e.g., HS2, West Midlands Freight Interchange, A50 A500 Strategic Corridor, the LSIP as a route to delivering technical skills.
34. The Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy & Skills has previously taken the draft Employment and Skills Strategy to the Prosperous Overview & Scrutiny Committee for consideration and input.
35. We will develop a Delivery Plan to support the Strategy and this will be used as part of the updates on delivery to Cabinet and the Prosperous Overview & Scrutiny Committee, including performance reporting and monitoring of KPIs included in the Strategy evidence base.
36. We will continue to manage and monitor our progress in the delivery of the Strategy through our existing governance arrangements, including regular Cabinet updates and 6 monthly reporting to and consideration by

the Prosperous Overview & Scrutiny Committee during the first year of the strategy and annually thereafter.

### **Legal Implications**

37. At this stage in the development of the Strategy there are no specific legal implications to consider.

### **Resource and Value for Money Implications**

38. There are no financial implications identified within the Strategy. Resource will be needed to deliver the Strategy, and this will therefore be considered as a part of the development of the associated delivery plan(s).

### **Climate Change Implications**

39. A fundamental cross-cutting theme throughout the Strategy is the development of green skills to support the achievement of net zero by 2050.

40. Not delivering the Strategy has the potential to hinder the development of green skills across Staffordshire and therefore limit our ability to address climate change and achieve net zero by 2050.

41. The Strategy recognises the importance of green skills to the economy and environment and will look to embed their development into a wide range of delivery programmes and projects.

### **List of Background Documents/Appendices:**

Appendix 1 – Final Full Employment and Skills Strategy

Appendix 2 – Final Summary Employment and Skills Strategy Brochure

Community Impact Assessment

### **Contact Details**

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