

Minutes of the County Council Meeting held on 8 February 2024

Attendance		
Jak Abrahams	Philip Hudson	Bob Spencer
Arshad Afsar	Syed Hussain	Mike Sutherland
Charlotte Atkins	Graham Hutton	Mark Sutton
Philip Atkins, OBE	Julia Jessel	Stephen Sweeney
Tina Clements	Peter Kruskonjic	Simon Tagg
Richard Cox	Tom Loughbrough-Rudd	Samantha Thompson
Mike Davies	Johnny McMahon	Carolyn Trowbridge
Mark Deaville	Paul Northcott	Jill Waring
Janet Eagland	Gillian Pardesi	Alan White
Ann Edgeller	Ian Parry	Philip White
Keith Flunder	Kath Perry, MBE	Mike Wilcox
John Francis	Jeremy Pert	Conor Wileman
Colin Greatorex	Bernard Peters	Bernard Williams
Philippa Haden	Jonathan Price	David Williams
Gill Heath	Robert Pritchard	Victoria Wilson
Phil Hewitt	Janice Silvester-Hall	Mark Winnington
Jill Hood	David Smith	Mike Worthington
Derrick Huckfield	Paul Snape	Nigel Yates

Also in attendance:

Apologies: Gill Burnett-Faulkner, Alex Farrell, Thomas Jay and Jason Jones.

Part One

8. Declarations of Interest under Standing Order 16

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

9. Confirmation of the minutes of the Council meeting held on 14 December 2023

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting of the County Council held on 14 December 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

10. Chairman's Correspondence

His Majesty King Charles III

On behalf of the Council and the residents of Staffordshire, the Chairman extended best wishes for a speedy recovery to His Majesty following the announcement earlier this week that he has been diagnosed with cancer.

Staffordshire residents recognised in His Majesty The King's New Year's Honours

The Chairman extended his congratulations to the following Staffordshire residents who had received honours in His Majesty The King's New Year's Honours:

Officers of the Order of the British Empire OBE

- Mr Kenneth Paul Newton, Stafford, services to Public Service
- Professor David Foskett, Burton-on-Trent, services to Hospitality Industry and Inclusivity

Members of the Order of the British Empire MBE

- Mrs Jacqueline Mary Gange, Cannock, services to Community in Cannock
- Mr Rowan Edwin Crozier, Lichfield, services to Manufacturing and Enterprise
- Mrs Jill Alcock (Clewes), Staffordshire Moorlands, services to The Arts and Charity
- Professor Miriam Bernard, Newcastle-under-Lyme, services to Ageing Research and to Older People
- Dr Catherine Emma Baxter, services to Higher Education

Medallists of the Order of the British Empire BEM

- Mr Martin Peter Wild, Barton under Needwood, services to Community in Tamworth
- Mr Herbert Proctor, Stoke-on-Trent, services to Community in Audley
- Mr Stephen Roger Lees JP, South Staffordshire, services to Community in Himley, Swindon and South Staffordshire
- Mrs Elaine Hutchings, Lichfield, services to Community in Lichfield during Covid-19
- Mr Peter Stewart Clemson, Burton-on-Trent, services to Performing Arts and the Community in Burton

Recognising Our Unsung Heroes

The Chairman informed the Council of the introduction of his "Unsung Heroes" initiative to recognise the contributions made by volunteers across Staffordshire. The first of these events took place on 15 December and included representatives from eight voluntary groups from the Cannock and Lichfield areas, all of whom had been nominated by local Members. The next Unsung Heroes event is to be held on Friday, 19 April to which local voluntary groups from Stafford and South Staffordshire are to be invited. Over the next 12 months it is proposed to hold a further two events covering the Newcastle, Staffordshire Moorlands, East Staffordshire and Tamworth districts/boroughs.

Gift from former Chief Executive, John Henderson CB

On behalf of Members, the Chairman extended the Council's thanks to its former Chief Executive, John Henderson CB, for his generous gift to the Council of a framed Staffordshire County Council Coat of Arms painted on Vellum by Frau Doktor Marianne Voss. Mr Henderson's gift is now hanging on the wall at the top of the main staircase in County Buildings. Upon retirement from Staffordshire County Council, John Henderson received a gift from Members and Officers of the Council of a bespoke Stafford Knot cast in bronze and plated in silver.

Former County Councillor David Nixon

The Chairman informed Members of the recent death of Former County Councillor David Nixon.

Mr Nixon was first elected to the County Council in 2001 representing the Thistleberry Electoral Division (Newcastle) until 2005. He served on the former Social Care Scrutiny Committee and was also a member of the Regulatory Committee.

In 2009 Mr Nixon was re-elected to the County Council representing the Cross Heath and Silverdale Electoral Division (Newcastle) until 2013. He served on the former Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Committee and Planning Committee.

Councillor Tagg and Councillor Philip Atkins paid tribute to the contribution made by Mr Nixon during his time on the County Council, following which Members stood and observed a one minute silence in his memory.

11. Medium Term Financial Strategy 2024-29 and 2024/25 Budget and Council Tax

The Council received a joint report by the Leader of the Council and the

Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources on the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2024/29 and 2024/25 Budget and Council Tax proposals.

Cllr Ian Parry moved, and Cllr Alan White seconded, the recommendations contained in the report before the Council.

In presenting the report, Councillor Parry informed Members that, despite the well-documented financial challenges facing local authorities, thanks to long-term planning, imaginative change, and careful management of its resources, the Council remained financially stable. It was that stability which enabled the authority to meet its statutory responsibilities and also to look to the future by investing in the County's economy, infrastructure and communities.

Councillor Parry indicated that, in line with most other local authorities, the County Council was requested to approve a 4.99 per cent council tax increase for 2024/25, comprising 2.99 per cent for general purposes and 2 per cent ringfenced for social care. This meant that the increase for a Band D property would be £73.41 per annum.

Councillor Parry also extended his thanks to the Council's Director of Finance and his team, his fellow Cabinet Members, the Council's Senior Leadership Team and the Members of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the MTFS Working Group for their support in compiling the MTFS and Budget proposals.

Councillor Charlotte Atkins, together with Councillor Yates, also extended their congratulations to the Council's Finance Team in achieving a balanced budget whilst facing huge financial challenges; but added that it was not sustainable, in the long term, to continue to use reserves to fund gaps. They added that the pressure from social care, both for adults and children, and also from special educational needs and disabilities, could not be discounted. They, together with Councillor Hussain, also referred to the need for the central government to find a long term solution to the funding for social care and the dedicated schools grant and added that it was estimated that one in five local authorities would submit a Section 114 notice either this year or next unless these issues were addressed.

Councillor Sutton referred to the Council's funding for children and family services which stood at £194m for 2024/25.

Councillor Yates also referred to the financial impacts of climate change and the need for more funding to be allocated to the Divisional Highways programme Budget. Councillor Yates moved, and Councillor Charlotte Atkins seconded, the following amendment by way of an additional recommendation:

“That the Council redistributes any Council Tax levy (e.g. empty houses premium, second homes premium) imposed within their district or borough proportionately to their Members (of the District or Borough raising the levy) as an enhancement to each of those Members’ Divisional Highways Programme budget.”

On consideration of the amendment, the Council’s Monitoring Officer, after consulting the Director of Finance, declared that the amendment was invalid as it did not fall within the remit of the County Council.

The Council then debated the substantive recommendations as contained in the report during which, Councillor Loughborough-Rudd, Councillor Sutherland, Councillor Snape, Councillor Philip Atkins, Councillor Deaville and Councillor David Williams spoke in support of the proposals and how the Council was using its funding wisely and prudently.

Councillor Wilcox spoke about the role played by the MTFs Working Group in scrutinising the budget proposals and explained how they had undertaken this work. He also extended his thanks to those officers who had supported the working group’s deliberations.

Councillor Pardesi referred to the construction of the new Staffordshire History Centre and indicated that this was a flagship project for the County which she hoped other Members would support.

Members also paid tribute to Rob Salmon, the Council’s Director of Finance, who had recently announced his intention to retire.

Councillor Alan White thanked Members for their comments and added that the Council’s ability to present a balanced budget was as a result of the authority taking difficult decisions over many years.

In accordance with statutory requirements, the Chairman called for a named vote to be taken in relation to the approval of the recommendations contained in the report, the result of which was as follows:

Those Members voting in support of the recommendations:

Jak Abrahams
Philip Atkins, OBE
Tina Clements
Richard Cox
Mike Davies
Mark Deaville
Janet England

Graham Hutton
Julia Jessel
Peter Kruskonjic
Thomas Loughborough-
Rudd
Johnny McMahon
Paul Northcott

Mike Sutherland
Mark Sutton
Stephen Sweeney
Simon Tagg
Samantha Thompson
Carolyn Trowbridge
Jill Waring

Ann Edgeller
Keith Flunder
John Francis
Colin Greatorex
Philippa Haden
Gill Heath
Phil Hewitt
Jill Hood
Derrick Huckfield
Philip Hudson

Ian Parry
Kath Perry
Jeremy Pert
Bernard Peters
Jonathan Price
Robert Pritchard
Janice Silvester-Hall
David Smith
Paul Snape
Bob Spencer

Alan White
Philip White
Mike Wilcox
Conor Wileman
Bernard Williams
David Williams
Victoria Wilson
Mark Winnington
Mike Worthington

Those Members voting against the recommendations: Nil

Those Members abstaining from voting:

Arshad Afsar
Charlotte Atkins
Syed Hussain

Gillian Pardesi
Nigel Yates

Resolved – (a) That the following be approved:

- i. a net revenue budget of £666.671m for 2024/25 as set out in Appendix 11 to the report;
- ii. planning forecasts for 2025/26 to 2028/29 as set out in Appendix 11 to the report;
- iii. a contingency provision of £15.000m for 2024/25;
- iv. a net contribution to reserves of £4.552m for 2024/25;
- v. a budget requirement of £671.223m for 2024/25;
- vi. a council tax requirement of £459.123m for 2024/25;
- vii. a council tax at Band D of £1,544.64 for 2024/25 which is an increase of 4.99% when compared with 2023/24; This results in council tax for each category of dwelling as set out in the table below:

Category of Dwelling	Council Tax Rate £
Band A	1,029.76
Band B	1,201.39
Band C	1,373.01

Band D	1,544.64
Band E	1,887.89
Band F	2,231.15
Band G	2,574.40
Band H	3,089.28

vii. that the Director of Finance be authorised to sign precept notices on the billing authorities respectively liable for the total precept payable and that each notice states the total precept payable and the council tax in relation to each category of dwelling as calculated in accordance with statutory requirements;

ix. the Financial Health Indicators set out in Appendix 10 to the report.

(b) That the following recommendations, which are included within the Capital and Minimum Revenue Provision Strategy 2024/25, the Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25 and the Commercial Investment Strategy 2024/25 (Appendices 9a to 9c to the report), be approved:

- i. Approve the Minimum Revenue Policy for 2024/25 as contained within the Capital and Minimum Revenue Provision Strategy 2024/25 in Appendix 9a to the report;
- ii. Approve the Prudential Indicators as set out within the Capital and Minimum Revenue Provision Strategy 2024/25 at Appendix 9a to the report;
- iii. Approve the 2024/25 Treasury Management Strategy, based on the 2021 CIPFA Codes (Prudential Code and Treasury Management Code), and 2018 MHCLG (now DLUHC) Guidance (on Local Government Investments and on Minimum Revenue Provision);
- iv. Adopt the Annual Investment Strategy (AIS) 2024/25 detailed in paragraphs 63 to 109 and Annex A and Annex B of the Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25 (Appendix 9b to the report);
- v. Approve the policies on reviewing the strategy, the use of external advisors, investment management training and the use of financial derivatives as described in paragraphs 110 to 120 of the Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25 (Appendix 9b to the report);
- vi. Approve the proposed borrowing strategy for the 2024/25 financial year detailed in paragraphs 41 to 62 of the Treasury

Management Strategy 2024/25 (Appendix 9b to the report);

- vii. The Treasury Management Strategy recommendations will operate within the prudential limits set out in Annex C of the Treasury Management Strategy 2024/25 (Appendix 9b to the report) and will be reported to the Cabinet Member for Finance, with respect to decisions made for raising new long-term loans, early loan repayments and loan rescheduling;
- viii. Approve the Commercial Investment Strategy for 2024/25 (Appendix 9c to the report) and note the circumstances under which commercial investments can be made;
- ix. Approve the governance arrangements that are in place for proposing and approving commercial investments;
- x. Approve a maximum quantum for commercial investments of a further £20 million in 2024/25;
- xi. Approve a maximum limit for an individual service investment loan of £10 million in 2024/25;
- xii. Any upwards change in the amounts of the limits specified in recommendations x and xi above be delegated to the Director of Finance in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources.

(c) That the Director of Finance be authorised to adjust the contingency provision to reflect any grant and local taxation changes announced in the final 2024/25 Local Government Finance Settlement.

(d) That Cabinet Members and the Senior Leadership Team begin the process of identifying savings and service transformation to be incorporated into the budget at the appropriate time.

12. Statement of the Leader of the Council

The Leader of the Council presented a Statement outlining his recent work since the previous meeting of the Council.

In moving consideration of the Statement, Councillor Alan White updated the Council on the following matter:

Electoral Review of Staffordshire County Council: Further Limited Draft Recommendations

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England has opened an

additional public consultation in its review of Staffordshire County Council's electoral division boundaries. The Commission is now undertaking a further limited consultation on proposals for Lichfield District. The Commission is satisfied with the evidence received for the rest of the County and is therefore not seeking further opinions and comments (submissions) on areas other than Lichfield District.

The Commission would welcome submissions on the further draft recommendations by 12 March 2024. Their final recommendations for the whole of the council area will now be published on 14 May 2024.

As the deadline for the consultation falls before the date of the next Council meeting (14th March), it was recommended that the Director for Corporate Services, in consultation with the County Councillors from Lichfield (as a collective) are given delegated authority to respond to the consultation on behalf of SCC.

Older People Adult Social Care Commissioning Strategy 2024-2029

(Paragraph 1 of the Statement)

Councillor Charlotte Atkins enquired as to how the Council intended to attract sufficient care staff in order to fulfil the aims of the Strategy without increasing rates of pay. She also referred to the Council's proposals to develop two new care homes in the south of the County and enquired whether there were any proposals for new care homes in the north of the County. In response, Councillor Jessel indicated that the Council was working with care providers which had led to significant improvements in the market. She also explained how the Council was working hard to improve the status of the care industry in order to attract more people into the sector. With regard to the provision of care/nursing homes, Councillor Jessel indicated that a business case was being prepared and, in due course, would be submitted to Cabinet for consideration.

Staffordshire Means Back to Business

(Paragraph 2 of the Statement)

Councillor Flunder referred to the success of the recent Tourism and Hospitality Conference held at Alton Towers which had attracted over 100 businesses.

Councillor Yates spoke about the need for more business units for Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

Councillor Philip Atkins referred to the claimant count rate in Staffordshire which continued to be one of the lowest in the West Midlands and was far

lower than the average for the region; and that over the last year, the average earnings of the County's residents had increased by over 12% compared to just 5% across the West Midlands Region and England as a whole.

Councillor Smith informed the Council that Lichfield District Council had recently granted planning consent for 30EV charging points and 30 acres of hi-tech manufacturing which would bring high value jobs to the area. He also spoke about the high cost of connecting electric vehicle charging stations to the National Grid.

In responding to Members' comments, Councillor Philip White spoke about the Council's ongoing work to bring about improvements to the local economy including increasing the number of better paid jobs. He also referred to the national recognition of the County's tourism sector.

Carbon Sequestration and Woodland Creation

(Paragraph 3 of the Statement)

Councillor Smith commended the report of the Working Group but indicated that there needed to be a wider plan for the County and, by way of an example, he indicated that the report did not refer to the value of hedgerows in capturing carbon. Councillor Yates added that he supported the comments made by Councillor Smith and he also enquired as to whether the Council was aware of a "competition" relating to the creation of a new forrest. He also enquired as to which other agencies the Council was engaging with regarding extending tree cover in the County. Councillor Yates also referred to how the authority could take a lead by, for example, planting trees on land which was not economically farmable in the Council's Farms Estate. In response, Councillor Tagg indicated that the Council worked closely with the National Forrest and also looked at opportunities for planting trees on Business Parks.

Councillor Thompson and Councillor Tagg extended their thanks to the Members who served on the working group and also to the officers who supported them.

Councillor Francis spoke about the opportunities for tree planting as part of new housing developments but added that the cost of ongoing management of those areas was an issue which needed to be taken into consideration. Councillor David Williams added that the Council was trialling tree planting and wilding on highway verges but there were additional cost to be considered such as in maintenance and inspection.

Councillor Winnington referred to the need to improve the electricity distribution infrastructure in the UK.

Councillor Huckfield enquired as to the number of trees which had been planted in the County in recent years; and, along with Councillor McMahon, expressed the view that the planting of trees could help to improve air quality and public health. In response, Councillor Tagg indicated that around 850 trees had been planted in the Silverdale area.

Councillor Heath and Councillor Philip Atkins spoke about the implications of planting trees on agricultural land, particularly in relation to food production/food security.

Natural Environment Strategy

(Paragraph 4 of the Statement)

Councillor Tagg commended the Strategy to Members and also highlighted some of the case studies set out in the document.

Councillor Alan White extended his thanks to Councillor Tagg for his hard work in bringing forward the Strategy.

Here to Help - Progress Update

(Paragraph 5 of the Statement)

Councillor Sutton and Councillor Wilson highlighted some of the Council's activities as part of the Council's support for local communities including the work of the Family Hubs, the Holiday Activity and Food Programme, the Warmer Homes Scheme, the Community Support Fund and the information advice and guidance available on the Council's website.

Ofsted Report

(Paragraph 7 of the Statement)

Councillor Loughborough-Rudd enquired as to the timeframe for addressing the recommendations in the Ofsted report; would those recommendations be dealt with in the order of priority; and, with regard to partnership working, would there be direct input from young people.

Councillor Charlotte Atkins referred to Ofsted's findings regarding the lack of effective partnership working and enquired as to what the Council intended to do to address this.

In response, Councillor Sutton indicated that the Council accepted Ofsted's findings and was fully committed to improving its services. Plans were being put in place to address the findings in the report and would be overseen by the Children's Improvement Board. He added that, at no point did Ofsted raise any concerns about the safety of children in the Council's care.

Councillor Alan White commended the work of those staff working in Childrens' Services who were involved in looking after those 5,000 children in the Council's care.

Highways Investment

(Paragraph 8 of the Statement)

Several Members commended the excellent work of their local highway teams and their swift response to issues raised. Members also welcomed the additional investment in the County's highway network.

Branston Interchange Project

(Paragraph 9 of the Statement)

Councillor Jessel and Councillor Philip White spoke about the benefits arising from the Branston Interchange project including the infrastructure for new homes and employment development at Branston Locks.

National Apprenticeship Week

(Paragraph 10 of the Statement)

Councillor Philip White highlighted the importance of apprenticeships and indicated that the county council had more than 100 apprentices covering 35 different subjects and a further 100 apprentices working in the County's grant-maintained schools.

Dignity in Care Awards

(Paragraph 11 of the Statement)

Councillor Loughborough-Rudd, Councillor Pardesi and Councillor Jessel welcomed the Awards and added that they were important in recognising the contributions made by those working in the care sector and also unpaid carers.

Councillor Northcott indicated that, over the last ten years, in excess of 1,000 people had been nominated for the awards. He, together with Councillor Jessel, asked Members to encouraged people to nominate individuals for the Award.

Councillor Alan White paid tribute to Councillor Jessel for the contribution she had made whilst serving as the Council's Cabinet Member for Health and Care and indicated that, following her recent announcement of her intention to retire from the post, Councillor Mike Wilcox had been appointed to lead the portfolio.

Extra Support for Children in Schools

(Paragraph 12 of the Statement)

Councillor Hudson welcomed the increased support for early intervention which had been launched for children needing support in the classroom.

Councillor Charlotte Atkins expressed her disappointment that, whilst some schools “stepped-up to the plate”, others did not want to be known for supporting pupils with SEND and enquired as to what the Council was doing to ensure that schools were meeting the needs of all of their pupils.

Councillor Edgeller spoke about how early intervention was important in helping to address children's mental health issues.

Councillor Francis referred to the excess demand for places at Marshlands Special School in Stafford and the need to expand the school.

In responding to Members’ comments, Councillor Price spoke about the importance of children with SEND being supported in their local school where appropriate.

Resolved – (a) That the Statement of the Leader of the Council be received.

(b) That the Director or Corporate Services, in consultation with the County Councillors from Lichfield (as a collective) are given delegated authority to respond to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England’s consultation on behalf of SCC.

13. Questions

Councillor Yates asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

Last week I came across a vehicle parked on Zig-zag lines adjacent to a pelican crossing on Biddulph High Street. This is an all too frequent occurrence. I took a photograph and logged the time and date in order to report it. Unfortunately, I could not find an appropriate reporting form on either the Staffordshire County Council or Staffordshire Police Website. On conducting an online search to ascertain how to proceed I was directed to “Fix My Street” which does have the reporting capability for such an offence. Unfortunately, Staffordshire County Council do not accept reports from this organisation – can the Cabinet Member please confirm the policy for accepting reports of Highways (and parking issues) from third party organisations and whether they will consider accepting reports from these “user friendly” options?

Reply

As part of the county council's digital strategy the ability to accept reports from third-party applications has previously been investigated and at that time was considered unsuitable. Whilst they do offer some advantages, such as nationwide application, there are also many added complications to these systems, including:

- Allowing users to report issues on private and unadopted roads.
- Limited customisation with no ability to provide users with further information about the issue, including self-help advice.
- Low user rating on both Apple and Google platforms; and
- Having significant set-up cost and ongoing operating costs, which at that time were up to £62,000 per year.

However, as part of the ongoing highways transformation programme a new Customer Relations Management (CRM) solution is currently being developed and as part of this work it is right that should review the case for accepting reports from third-party applications. This work will be conducted over the summer months with the findings available later in the year.

In the meantime, we will also review the front-end of the Report-It system to see if we can make it easier for users to navigate to the relevant parking report pages. The ability to report parking offences on pedestrian crossing zig-zag lines does exist on the county council's webpages for enforcement by our Civil Parking Enforcement officers, however enforcement of this offence by local Policing units allows endorsement with 3 penalty points.

Supplementary Question

What I'd like to see is an improvement to our reporting system. Can you benchmark with other authorities as I am aware that Kent County Council has a very good app?

Reply

We will always look to see what we can do to improve the system.

Councillor Sweeney asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Change whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

The noxious stink from Walleys Quarry Landfill in Newcastle under Lyme has been causing distress and concern to residents in my Division and

beyond for a number of years. In recent months it has returned with a vengeance with complaints from residents numbering into the hundreds since November 2023.

Can the Portfolio Holder confirm that Staffordshire County Council stands shoulder to shoulder with Newcastle Borough Council and local residents in holding the Environment Agency and site operator to account for their failings over a long period? Does he also agree with me that the landfill should be closed down, capped off and restoration be carried out to the site?

Reply

From the outset Staffordshire County Council has been adamant that our communities should not have to suffer the consequences of the operator's failings at Walleys Quarry Landfill while the Environment Agency tried to find solutions in its role as statutory regulator.

In June 2021 this Council wrote to the then Prime Minister Boris Johnson calling for the Government to take immediate action, using emergency powers, if necessary, to intervene on residents' behalf.

The Environment Agency remains the body responsible for regulating the site's operation and closing it if necessary. Since 2021, the County Council has worked closely with partners, including Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council and constituency MP Aaron Bell, to press for the Environment Agency and the Government to act and bring this problem under control if the operator could not.

In October 2023 the Leaders of both Staffordshire and Newcastle Councils wrote to then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs calling not only for a public inquiry into the Environment Agency's performance at Walleys Quarry, but to investigate the wider issue of how landfill sites are managed, regulated and how the community may seek redress for the breaches.

That call remains and we continue to do all we can to support residents frustrated, disappointed, and angered by recent events.

As a local member I do agree with Cllr Sweeney that it is now well past time for the Environment Agency to issue a Closure Notice on Walleys Quarry Landfill.

Supplementary Question

Newcastle Borough Council are arranging a meeting with a view to calling on the Environment Agency to suspend the licence for Walleys

Quarry and also close the quarry. Does the Cabinet Member agree with me that this proposal is in line with residents wishes?

Reply

Yes, as the local member and resident in Newcastle, I agree with you.

Councillor Charlotte Atkins asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

After the County Council's substantial investment in the Transformation of Children's Services, why have Children's Services been downgraded from good to requires improvement? How much did the Transformation cost the Council, including the redundancy costs of all the senior managers?

Has the Transformation of Children's' Services achieved the savings that were promised or have reinvestments been required to refill posts/re- establish posts deleted in the Transformation Plan?

How much is the Council paying in interim/agency/non-Staffordshire employed managers, social workers and support workers per month compared to before the Transformation?

Reply

Ofsted Outcome

Staffordshire Children's Services was inspected by OFSTED in November 2023 and received an overall rating of requires improvement to be good:

- The quality and effectiveness of management oversight of contacts, referrals and assessments in the 'front door'.
- The effectiveness and impact of performance data and quality assurance to drive practice improvement.
- The effectiveness and oversight of allegations against those in positions of trust undertaken by the local authority designated officer (LADO) service.
- The effectiveness of partnership working, particularly with housing and health partners, to improve children's access to dentistry and for children in care with more complex health needs to get timely assessment and support and ensure that care leavers are not placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation.

Whilst the inspection outcome is not what we would have wanted there were many positives acknowledged including:

- Our arrangements to determine the suitability of elective home education (EHE) and to ensure children missing full-time education are able to access education as quickly as possible. The inspection concluded that these are well-considered, well-implemented and ably managed. As part of the overall transformation, additional resource was provided for EHE as this was identified as an area for improvement at the previous inspection.
- The effective partnership between education providers and our virtual school help children make good progress from their starting points. The inspection recognised that children in care attend school regularly.
- There were examples of excellent practice for UASC such as the Amity Hub which supports children with a broad range of skills and services for Children in Care which maintained good overall.
- The inspection recognised that no children were found to be unsafe in Staffordshire and the majority had their plans progressed in a timely manner, these are massive achievements given the scale of change that we have experienced.

Transformation

- The Children's Transformation was a significant change which we anticipated would take five years to embed. We recognise that we have more work to do and remain confident that the next inspection will demonstrate the scale of activity and staff commitment to get us to good.
- All of our District Leads and first-line managers in Social Care are now permanent (this was not the position prior to the transformation), the number of permanent social workers is increasing (this is different to the position across most local authorities in England), staff satisfaction rates are increasing, staff sickness rates are decreasing.
- For children and families, the district model of combining our social care and education offer reduces duplication and ensures we have a holistic approach to providing the right services and support which we remain committed to securing.
- Between 2016 and 2019 Cabinet received papers outlining proposed changes to the wider children's system to develop a whole system approach, bringing together children's social care, SEND and Inclusion, the Place Based Approach and commissioning. This approach was informed by best practice, an evidence base from outstanding local authorities, research and performance data.
- In order to facilitate that change, additional investment was

required and provided for c £8.1m over the years 2019/20 – 2025/26.

- The majority of this was temporary short term funding front loaded for the initial years 2019/20 to 2022/23 for £6.3m that has now been removed; however, there is also an on-going amount of c £0.6m for the continuing provision of family group conferencing and additional support for virtual school.
- The savings were estimated to be £17 million based on reducing the number of children in care. During 2023 there has been a steady reduction however the anticipated financial impact is yet to be realised.
- This was exacerbated by covid and the significant change that followed the staffing restructure. The number of children in care have not reduced as initially intended, however as the changes we made have been embedded and staff retention has improved the number of children in our care has reduced over the past 12 months seeing a reduction virtually every month during 2023, as we are able to work more restoratively with families keeping them together and return more children to their families when it's safe to do so.

Redundancy Costs and Agency Staff

- 11 Senior managers (members of WLT or OMT) including associated actuarial strain was £1.3 million. None of these positions have since been reestablished.
- 10% of the current staff overall within Children's Services are agency staff.
- Nationally Children's Services have struggled with the recruitment and retention of Social Workers, Staffordshire comparatively performs well overall in the use of agency staff.
- In 2020/21 Childrens Service spent £3.8m on circa 70 temporary agency staff but in 2022/23 that had increased to £7.9m covering vacant positions within our structure this includes maternity and staff absence.
- This was recognised in the MTFS and significant additional resource brought into the budget this year (23/24) of £5.7m to address those concerns to provide for both additional resource and an increase in funding for social workers. The service has secured people within the majority of those roles and is actively recruiting to the remaining positions; however for the majority of this year Childrens services has continued to rely on more expensive agency support for essential service delivery.
- Whilst this has reduced from last year, the service continues to employ around 90 agency staff at present (includes c 20 staff for sickness/maternity cover) at a cost of c £0.5m / month. That is down from over 120 in the summer 2023 and we anticipate will reduce further over the next few months.

Supplementary Question

It is worrying that the Childrens Transformation project has neither delivered the expected savings or a positive Ofsted verdict; there is also a reliance on agency staff. Why do you think this is?

Reply

There is an awful lot of factors in this, including the delay in implementing the transformation, negotiations with the Trade Unions, the Covid pandemic and the complexity of cases. With regard to agency staff, they make up around 10% of the workforce at the current time which is a lot less than in other local authorities. Moving forward is the most important thing and we are working with partners to achieve this.

Councillor Pardesi asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

What are the MMR vaccination rates within Staffordshire? Have they declined in recent years? Are there any concerns about the increased incidence of measles among Staffordshire children?

Reply

As you probably know, the MMR vaccine is delivered as part of the routine childhood immunisation schedule. It is delivered in 2 doses: 1st dose at around 12 months, and 2nd dose around 3yrs 4 months (up to 5 yrs). One dose offers around 95% protection and 2 doses around 99% protection. Our uptake for dose one is pretty good, but we start to see this tail-off by the 2nd dose. (This trend is not specific to Staffordshire and in fact, coverage for MMR vaccine in the UK has fallen to its lowest level in a decade).

Staffordshire MMR coverage

Immunisation	Staffordshire 2022/23	Staffordshire 2021/22	Staffordshire 2020/21	West Midlands (22/23)	England (22/23)
MMR1 (1 st dose)	93.6%	93.8%	93.9%	88.9%	89.3%
MMR2 (2 nd dose)	89.3%	90.4%	90.6%	83.7%	84.5%

Coverage for MMR vaccine in Staffordshire is pretty good overall –

above the regional and national average. The latest full year data we have is for 2022-23, which shows **Staffordshire coverage for MMR (2nd dose) at 89.3%** (compared to England at 84.5%). This figure has remained fairly static for a number of years (see above table). The World Health Organisation target is 95% to reach satisfactory levels of 'herd immunity'.

However, there are pockets where we have much lower uptake, particularly in specific communities and populations. This is often seen in gypsy roma traveller communities, specific ethnic minority groups, children in care and migrant populations. We are working with the Integrated Care Board to review GP patient data and school data to identify pockets of lowest uptake across Staffordshire for targeted action.

There are also sections of our population who haven't been vaccinated for other reasons, such as children under 12 months and people who have weaker immune systems. This means we have pockets of susceptible children and adults who will be more vulnerable to catching measles and the potential for outbreaks in unvaccinated communities/populations.

Are there concerns about the increase of measles among children in Staffordshire?

During 2023 there was a resurgence of measles in England. Cases have predominantly been in Birmingham with smaller numbers in other West Midlands local authority areas. In the last few weeks, there have been a small number of confirmed cases in Staffordshire (<5). However, we do not get notified of every new case and there is a small lag in the release of this information (about a week behind). We know that measles is *the* most infectious disease that is spread through the respiratory route, therefore although every precaution is taken to minimise any further spread, it is likely we will see further cases amongst susceptible populations. We are doing what we can to minimise this risk.

Local action

Having seen the rapid increase in cases in London and the West Midlands, over the last few months we have been working with partners across the local health system to identify where we have low vaccine coverage, understand potential barriers to coming forward for vaccination, and developing targeted community-driven messaging and alternative vaccine delivery mechanisms to overcome these barriers.

For now (as cases are still relatively low in Staffordshire), our focus is

on increasing MMR uptake in low coverage populations as we know this is the most effective protective factor. Vaccines are our best line of defence against diseases like measles and help stop outbreaks occurring in the community. In addition, we are taking steps to ensure the local system is as prepared and resilient as it can be if we were to see a rapid increase in cases. For example, last week we carried out a multi-agency table-top exercise with various possible scenarios to test our local measles pathways and outbreak mitigation/management arrangements.

Supplementary Question

To what extent is it being taken into account that there is some suspicion by certain communities about the use of vaccines?

Reply

MMR vaccinations are the responsibility of the ICB, not the County Council, and the question is better addressed to them; but I will endeavour to get an answer and will come back to you.

Councillor Hussain asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

There is a serious concern for the safety of pedestrians, especially schoolchildren, due to the road barriers being damaged on Evershed Way and Uxbridge Street. In addition, there have been ongoing issues with blocked gullies in several streets including Uxbridge Street, Broadway Street, Blackpool Street, Oak and South Oak Street, and South Broadway Street, as well as the surrounding areas.

Could the Cabinet Member provide assurance that they will conduct a comprehensive investigation to improve the safety of the street?

Reply

The safety of road users is taken extremely seriously and all damage to highway assets is prioritised for repair based on an assessment of the risk posed to the travelling public. Work to repair the guard rail at Evershed Way is planned and will be scheduled as soon as resources allow.

Extra resources are being brought in to undertake additional gully emptying as part of the increased investment into road maintenance. This work is planned using robust asset management criteria and the

residential areas surrounding Uxbridge Street are routinely cleansed on a cyclical programme. The Community Highways team are available to work with the local Member to ensure areas are cleared of parked cars, when the cleansing takes place, and will ensure any isolated blockages are added to work schedules as necessary.

Councillor Afsar asked the following question of the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

It has become an all too common occurrence for our Highways Contractors Amey, to selectively fix a singular pothole while overlooking nearby ones, some of which are in equal or worse condition.

Considering the substantial disruption borne by the residents of Burton on Trent owing to recent concurrent roadworks, leading to considerable traffic snarls and commuter delays, can the Cabinet Member for Highways please confirm that his much vaunted "whole place" approach to pothole repairs in a locality will actually be rolled out and when can we expect to see the benefits of such a policy?

Reply

Staffordshire county council has committed an extra £50m into local road maintenance over the next three years. Through this investment we will deliver an enhanced programme of capital maintenance schemes to replace sections of life-expired roads and carry out around 100 miles of pothole prevention surface treatments and 30,000 individual pothole repairs each year.

A 'whole place' approach is adopted when delivering our capital maintenance schemes. This means that other highway issues, such as drainage, barrier and signage repairs are also attended to at the same time.

Similarly, the extra investment is enabling larger repairs as part of our pothole hot-spot and pre-surface treatment patching programme. This means that it's not just the offending pothole that gets repaired, but also any surrounding area that has started to deteriorate and if left unchecked will later become a new pothole on its own.

Elsewhere, and in accordance with national codes of practice, individual pothole repairs are prioritised on a risk basis. Experienced county council highway inspectors identify and categorise each pothole defect, stipulating its repair timescale and treatment type, which the scheduling team then group together for repair in the most efficient and

effective way.

Complimenting this the dedicated £2m Member's pothole fund enables local Members to identify and prioritise particular local potholes for more urgent attention.

However, despite all these efforts there can still be many reasons why some pothole repairs are completed one-day and other nearby potholes have to left until a future return visit. These include things like:

- A number of emergencies, category 1 and category 2 defects in the local area are approaching the end of their statutory repair timescale and must be given priority.
- Different types of pothole repair treatment or traffic management is required – this is more common when adjacent pothole defects are located on or close to road junctions.
- The capacity of the attending repair crew has been reached e.g. all repair material has been used or spoil collected from earlier repairs needs tipping; and
- Changing weather conditions puts a halt to pothole repairs midway through the day.

The recent rainfall and freezing temperatures has seen a huge rise in high risk pothole defects this winter. Even with all our extra investment resources are finite and crews are pulling out all the stops to undertake holding repairs to the worst and most dangerous to help keep our roads as safe as possible. The main programme of road maintenance will then start in the spring when weather conditions are more favourable to creating long-lasting repairs.

Supplementary Question

Can you give me an update on the various trials of resurfacing technologies particularly in the use of JCB's Pothole Pro.

Reply

Yes, of course, I will endeavour to get officers to provide you with the information as soon as possible.

14. Petitions

Flooding along the access roads in Colton Parish

Councillor Cox presented a petition from local residents calling on the County Council to take action to prevent the flooding of the access roads in Colton Parish.

Chair