

Minutes of the County Council Meeting held on 14 December 2023

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

Apologies: Jak Abrahams, Janet Eagland, Colin Greatorex, Thomas Jay, Ian Parry, Bernard Peters, Jill Waring, Ian Wilkes and Bernard Williams.

Part One

1. Declarations of Interest under Standing Order 16

There were no declarations of interest on this occasion.

2. Confirmation of the minutes of the Council meeting held on 12 October 2023

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting of the County Council held on 12 October 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

3. Chairman's Correspondence

Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme Gold Award

The Chairman informed Members that the Council had recently received an Armed Forces Covenant Employer Recognition Scheme (ERS) Gold Award. The Gold Award is the highest badge of honour for organisations who have signed the Armed Forces Covenant and

demonstrated outstanding support for those who serve and have served.

The ERS Gold Awards recognise employers who actively support the Armed Forces community in their workplace and also encourage others to follow their lead. The award scheme attracts entries from companies in every part of the country and in the private and public sectors.

Kings Award for Voluntary Services 2023

Members extended their congratulations to the eight voluntary organisations from Staffordshire who had been awarded The King's Award for Voluntary Service in this year's honours.

This prestigious award recognises outstanding work by local volunteer groups, charities and organisations, who benefit their local communities. It was created in 2002 to celebrate Queen Elizabeth II's Golden Jubilee and, following his accession, His Majesty The King emphasised his desire to continue the award.

The winning groups from Staffordshire this year include:

Burton HOPE, Burton-upon-Trent
The Jill Clewes Academy for Theatre Arts, Newcastle-under-Lyme
Just Family CIC, Stoke-on-Trent
AEDdonate, Stone
Home-Start in Tamworth
Ruff & Ruby Urban Youth Charity, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent
Friends of the Allied Special Forces Memorial Grove, Kings Bromley
The Marsh Recreation Ground and Community Centre Trust, Kinver

4. 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.

Staffordshire Means Back to Business - Oral Update

(Paragraph 1 of the Statement)

Councillor Pert spoke about the low claimant rates in the County, which were 2% less than the regional average; job vacancy rates across various sectors of the local economy; the vital role played by the Council in supporting regeneration and local businesses; and how colleges and universities were equipping people with the skills needed by employers.

Councillor Yates welcomed the recommencement of the highway works at

the Chatterley Valley West employment site and also the ongoing discussions in relation to access to the Wharf Road Business and Housing site in Biddulph.

Councillor Charlotte Atkins enquired as to why the figures on disposable household income showed that Staffordshire was outperforming regional and national averages. She also stated that despite these figures, many people were still reliant on food banks. In response, Councillor Philip White indicated that further work needed to be done to get a better understanding of the reasons for the disposable income figures and that he would be happy to bring the findings back to Council in due course.

Strategic Vision for Early Years

(Paragraph 3 of the Statement)

Councillor Charlotte Atkins enquired as to whether there were sufficient providers in Staffordshire to meet the additional demand arising from the Government's move to extend the provision of funded childcare. In response, Councillor Sutton explained that the Safeguarding Overview and Scrutiny Committee had recently discussed this issue and that the Sufficiency Team was also focussing on early years provision. He added that the Council would work with providers to ensure that sufficient places were available to meet demand.

Climate Change Annual Report (2023) and Draft Climate Change Action Plan, revision 3 (November 2023)

(Paragraph 4 of the Statement)

Councillor Yates welcomed the 50% reduction in the Council's carbon emissions that had been made since declaring a Climate Change Emergency in July 2019. He added that the Council was showing leadership in this regard, and he hoped that other organisations would follow in the Council's steps. He also welcomed the upgrading of street lighting across the county and that it was important that the Council continued to look at new ways of reducing its carbon emissions. In response, Councillor Deaville referred to the opportunities available from the use of the Council's Property Estate.

Councillor Philip Atkins spoke about carbon sequestration in the agricultural sector and the siting of solar farms on land which would be better used for food production. He added that the view of the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE) was that solar panels were best placed on buildings.

Councillor Smith referred to the opportunities for quarry sites due for restoration to be used for "green purposes" such as the production of green energy. He also spoke about the cost of connecting electric vehicle

charging stations to the National Grid; and the tree planting which is taking place in his division.

Councillor Francis referred to the limitation of solar panels over the winter months and also during adverse weather conditions. He also expressed the view that if everyone was to switch to an electric vehicle, the energy distribution network could not cope.

Councillor Winnington spoke about the role of wind farms in energy production and also how solar farms would be best sited on brownfield sites and buildings.

Councillor Hussain highlighted the carbon emissions arising from air travel and the need to send a message to Government about the detrimental impact of air travel by officials.

Councillor Hudson referred to the new technologies being used by JCB including its investment in hydrogen engines which may prove to be a better solution than electric vehicles. Councillor McMahon spoke about technological advancements in the search for greener energy.

Councillor Tagg thanked Members for their comments and indicated that, although a lot had been achieved in reducing the Council's carbon emissions, there still remained many challenges to overcome. Councillor Alan White also spoke about global investment in renewable energies.

Staffordshire Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2030

(Paragraph 5 of the Statement)

Councillor Wileman extended his congratulations to Burton and South Derbyshire College which had recently been rated as outstanding following an inspection by OFSTED.

Councillor Afsar referred to labour shortages and asked whether there were any specific sectors being targeted under the Strategy. In response, Councillor Philip White indicated that the priority areas identified in the Strategy included construction, advanced logistics, health and social care, the digitisation of services and new technologies.

In welcoming the Strategy, Councillor Sutherland spoke about successes being achieved locally in Cannock Chase including the construction training being provided by Cannock College, the jobs fairs taking place across the district and the low level of unemployment in the area. Councillor Smith also referred to the 2500 nurses currently in training at Staffordshire University.

Councillor Philip White spoke about the five aims of the Strategy and also

why Staffordshire was a good place to learn. he added that discussions were taking place with Government around skills funding and the need for that budget to be devolved to local Councils.

Treasury Management Report for the half-year ended 30 September 2023

(Paragraph 6 of the Statement)

Councillor Sutherland commended the work of the Council's Treasury Management Team and also referred to the early repayment of £50 million of PWLB loans which would save the County Council £199,000 p.a. based on current interest rates.

Local and National Government Budgets

(Paragraph 7 of the Statement)

Councillor Charlotte Atkins enquired as to whether the Leader of the Council agreed with the Local Government Association that the Chancellor's Autumn Statement failed to provide the funding needed to protect local services which people rely on. She referred in particular to the rising cost of Children's social care, early years and also SEND provision.

Councillor Philip Atkins referred to the number of local authorities who were heading towards issuing Section 114 Notices due to the financial difficulties they were facing. He added that, fortunately, Staffordshire was not in that position and that the Council managed its finances well; although there was a need for more funding from Central Government to meet the rising cost of Children's Services. Councillor Ward, Councillor Deaville and Councillor Loughborough-Rudd also referred to how well the Council managed its finances despite all the challenges it faced.

Councillor Alan White spoke about how the Council had restructured and transformed its services to ensure effective delivery. He added that, although the Secretary of State recognised many of the challenges faced by local government, these were not addressed in the Autumn Statement and there was still the need for the Council to continue its lobbying for additional resources.

Good news for Stafford

(Paragraph 8 of the Statement)

Councillor Pardesi spoke about public transport links and the issue regarding the current shortage of bus drivers. She also referred to the proposed improvements to Stafford Town Centre.

Councillor Trowbridge also welcomed the the news that the borough

council had been successful with its bid for £20m to help deliver proposals for Stafford. She also expressed her thanks to the MP for Stafford for her support in helping to secure the funding.

Councillor Winnington spoke about the Handsacre Link that would eventually connect the HS2 to the existing west coast main line, enabling HS2 trains to stop at existing stations, including Stafford.

Councillor Edgeller referred to the site of the former Marks and Spencer store in Stafford and indicated that a developer had recently shown an interest in the site. She added that she hoped that the Borough Council would pursue this further. Councillor Edgeller also referred to the need for better bus services to serve the town.

Councillor Pert referred to Stafford Station Gateway and paid tribute to the officers and members involved in bringing forward the proposals. He also referred to other recent investments in Stafford including the Stafford Western Access Route and the improvements to Victoria Park and the Shirehall.

Councillor Philip White informed Members that the County Council was continuing to work in partnership with the Borough Council following the recent change in political administration. He also added that the Council was in discussion with Central Government concerning support for bus services in the County.

Investment in Highways

(Paragraph 9 of the Statement)

Councillor Hudson welcomed the Government's announcement that investments, totalling £186 million, would be coming to Staffordshire over an 11-year period. He also stressed the need for investment in highway infrastructure across East Staffordshire including work to tackle potholes.

Councillor Hussain spoke about the need to reduce waiting times for highway improvement schemes and Councillor Huckfield referred to the condition of Cemetery Road which served Whalley's Quarry.

Councillor Yates asked that additional funding be made available to improve footways and "safer routes to schools."

Councillor Cox referred to complaints about potholes and indicated that he was seeing a reduction in the number of issues reported. He, together with Councillor Smith and Councillor Deaville, also paid tribute to the work of the local highway teams.

Councillor Edgeller welcomed the start of the improvement works on the

A34 at Radford Bank in Stafford.

Several Members expressed their thanks to Trevour Mellor who had recently retired from his role as Community Highways Engagement Officer with the Authority.

Councillor David Williams thanked Members for their comments. He also spoke about the on-going trialling of new technologies.

Longest Night

(Paragraph 10 of the Statement)

Councillor Charlotte Atkins spoke about young people's mental health and referred to the need for mental health support in every Middle and High School as some people were waiting for up to two years for support from child and adolescent mental health services (CHAMS). Councillor Edgeller added that every school needed a "quiet place" and a dedicated person with knowledge about mental health for pupils to talk to. She also paid tribute to all those persons working to support people with mental health issues.

Several Members spoke about the excellent work of the Samaritans and Councillor Edgeller informed the Council that, on 22 December, hundreds of corporate and landmark buildings across the country would be illuminated in green in support of the Samaritans annual Longest Night appeal and she encourage people across the County to also take part. Councillor Alan White expressed his thanks to Councillor Edgeller for all the work she does as the Council's Mental Health Champion.

Councillor McMahon referred to how volunteering could help to improve a person's mental health and wellbeing.

Councillor Sutton informed the Council that many people who took their own lives were not known to services and that it was incumbent on everyone to look after others in need. Councillor Alan White also spoke about the importance of social interaction.

Christmas Message

(Paragraph 11 of the Statement)

On behalf of Labour Group on the Council, Councillor Hussain extended his best wishes for a Merry Christmas to his fellow Members, Council staff, partnership organisations and residents.

Resolved – That the Statement of the Leader of the Council be received.

5. Report of the Chairman of the Staffordshire Police, Fire and Crime Panel

Councillor Pardesi referred to the reference in the report that “officer experience was highlighted as an area of concern due to the age of new recruits” and indicated that this did not come as a surprise to her in view of the loss of experienced officers. She also referred to the Fire and Rescue Service Safety Plan and the Commissioner’s confirmation that the three-person crewing trail would continue to be monitored and added that this was despite the Fire Service Trade Unions’ opposition.

Councillor Hussain paid tribute to the Remembrance Services which took place across the County and added that antisemitism was racism and had no place in society.

Resolved – That the report be received.

6. Questions

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

Question

In specific regards to Biddulph Town Footpath 89 which was logged by Biddulph Town Council with the County as a footpath dispute under the Highways act 1980 section 130 (6) on Thursday 31st January, 2019 (almost five years ago), could the cabinet member give an update on the backlog of applications in relation to the definitive map: time taken to resolve; waiting list; etc. As a follow-up (or as context) you could report the progress to date on footpath path 89 that my residents are particularly concerned about?

Reply

Public Footpath No 89 Biddulph Town is recorded as a cul-de-sac footpath on the County Council’s Definitive Map of Public Rights of Way with no connection between Mill Cottage and Hurst Road. However, an application made under section 53 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 has been submitted to the County Council.

At the present time the route from Mill Cottage to Hurst Road is not a public highway and the status of this route is in question. Previous case law states that we ought not to take action to remove any obstructions until its status has been determined via the s53 process.

The section 53 application is currently being worked on with a view to

the draft report being circulated for informal consultation in the New Year and will hopefully go to the Countryside and Rights of Way panel in the spring, subject to any further comments/evidence which may be received following the informal consultation.

With regard to the backlog of s53 work, the council currently has a backlog of 278 undetermined Definitive Map Modification Applications, and of those the number of undetermined applications on which it has been directed by the Secretary of State to determine within a specified timeframe is 49. These 49 applications have been prioritised. Of the determined applications, the Council has a backlog of 77 Definitive Map Modification Orders to be made and published.

Supplementary Question

Our local secretary of the Ramblers' Association is working with officers to see if we can get a volunteering policy authorised and have been assured that they will have a policy in Spring. Can I have the Cabinet Member's commitment that that policy will come through?

Reply

Volunteers already help out on our public rights of way across the County. Yes, the framework for volunteers is coming forward early next year.

Councillor Pardesi asked the following question of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills whose reply is set out below the question:-

Question

How can SCC help get the economically inactive back into suitable employment?

Reply

Staffordshire County Council (SCC) supports the economically inactive into suitable employment through a number of routes both directly by its own services, and through relationships with key partners. SCC delivers the Staffordshire Jobs & Careers Service, a single point of contact for residents to secure job opportunities and career ambitions. The service offers a bespoke offer to candidates including CV support, promotion of jobs fairs and the matching of skills and qualifications to job vacancies.

SCC also delivers Community Learning and Multiply programmes

through its direct delivery arm and delivery partners. The programmes provide adults with skills required to progress to employment. Community Learning courses are designed to provide adults with the skills to be connected to the digital world, improving employment opportunities, financial and social well-being. Multiply is aimed at those who may want to develop their numeracy skills for work or progression and those that want to brush up and develop their numeracy skills for everyday life and work.

SCC also works with the Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) and key partners to promote employability opportunities for residents. The [Work and Health Programme Pioneer](#) is DWP's contracted employment provision to support the economically inactive, persons who have a disability, the long-term unemployed and specified disadvantaged groups, to find sustained work.

SCC is also working with key partners to support programmes, recently announced under the governments back to work plan, particularly targeting economically inactive and those with mild to severe health conditions acting as a barrier to employment. Stoke-on-Trent & Staffordshire Integrated Care Board is preparing a submission for the [WorkWell Vanguard](#). Vanguard areas will design and deliver a new early-intervention assessment and support service. It will provide participants with light-touch holistic support for their health-related barriers to employment through return to/thrive in work plans, and a single, joined-up view and gateway into the services that are available locally to manage their specific needs.

Also the [Universal Support](#) programme has been announced by government that will provide employment support to help the economically inactive, people with disabilities, people with health conditions and people with additional barriers to employment, to progress into sustained work.

Supplementary Question

To what extent does this Council take into account that forcing unready people into ill-suited work is not the answer to sustainable employment?

Reply

This issue is principally outside my and the Council's remit and sounds to me like a matter for the Department for Work and Pensions. Within the activities of this Council, I would draw Councillor Pardesi's attention to the activities of our Adult Community Learning Service which, earlier this year, was rated good by OFSTED. I would also highlight our Open-

Door Scheme which has been running for many years now. This authority would not do anything which would look like a stick, but we do offer encouragement and practical support.

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

Question

When and how will bus services in Staffordshire Moorlands benefit from extra money from the Government as a result of the cancellation of the northern leg of HS2?

Reply

I can confirm that last week, the Department for Transport confirmed our Network North: Phase 3 BSIP funding allocation of £4,982,000 million of revenue funding to support delivery of our Bus Service Improvement Plan in 2024/25. This funding is in addition to our existing Phase 2 BSIP (BSIP+) funding allocation of £2,655,346 million that covered the period 2022/24. At the same time the government announced the BSIP+ extra funding, the previous Bus Recovery Grant payments came to an end (worth approximately £0.7M per year).

The Bus Recovery Grant (£0.7M) had been used to subsidise existing services that had become unviable as a result of passenger drop off post-covid. In addition, the funding to bus operators was changed resulting in their post-covid extra funding reducing by around 20% and more services therefore being deregistered as non-viable, which SCC have stepped in to support and maintain from the new BSIP+ funding.

In the Staffordshire Moorlands, BSIP+ funding has been allocated to introduce from February a Saturday service to route 94 alongside a new service (95) commencing on the 8th January that will serve Audley, Kidsgrove, Mow Cop, Harriseahead and Biddulph. The additional BSIP funding will enable these services and all services across the county that require subsidy to continue to at least March 2025 where it is anticipated that additional BSIP funding will be made available from the Department for Transport.

One of the challenges that we are aware that operators are facing is in relation to recruiting drivers even though hourly rates of pay have increased. The impact of this is that operators have been unable to tender for evening and weekend enhanced services.

Alongside ensuring existing connections are maintained, the Local Bus

and Community Transport Team and I welcome ideas that can be investigated for further enhancements to the Bus Network. BSIP funding expenditure will have a focus on accessibility when we are assessing local need as well as current and future provision. This funding cannot be utilised for capital expenditure for example bus stop upgrades to improve accessibility, however through our work to audit every bus stop across the county, a programme of improvements will be funded through the Capital Programme where possible.

Supplementary Question

I do hope that evening services will be looked at. To give an example, it is impossible to get a bus to and from Stoke-on-Trent after 8:00 pm. Not only does this mean that people are unable to access restaurants, cinemas and theatres, but there are also safety issues. The second issue which you highlighted in your answer was the shortage of bus drivers and I wondered what the Council is doing to work with operators to ensure that they can recruit and train more bus drivers? Thirdly, what I think is really important is that the Council works with other local authorities to adopt a more strategic approach to bus coverage.

Reply

We are working with bus companies across the County including those that are cross-border, to ensure that we get the best coverage. We are working with operators to ensure that they are able to get upgraded buses and we are putting in bids to be able to support them with this. They are private companies and as such we will support them wherever we can.

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

Question

The pavements on Anglesey Road, Uxbridge Street, and Branston Road have deteriorated in several areas, making it difficult for both wheelchair users and pedestrians to navigate. Additionally, there are issues with flooding along the roadside of these three streets. What reassurances can the cabinet member provide to address and resolve this problem?

Reply

Good roads, footways and cycleways are important to residents and businesses, which is why as a well-run council we will continue to invest in them.

Over the next three years, we will be investing an extra £51m on repairing and maintaining our 6,200km of roads and 4,500Kms of footways and cycleways.

The forward investment programme for 2024/25, which amongst other things includes funding allocations to footway and drainage repairs, is currently being compiled in accordance with the council's highway asset management plan and will be available in March ahead of the new road repair season.

To minimise the impact and disruption to local communities and businesses, and to protect our investment from the risk of being dug up again, the timing of individual maintenance schemes will also need to be co-ordinated with other planned works, including for example superfast fibre network providers.

Where the council's strategic maintenance programmes don't include a locally important maintenance need the local Member retains the ability to use their own local pothole fund together with Member's existing Divisional Highway Programme, to bring local footway and drainage repairs forward.

Supplementary Question

Can I assure the Cabinet Member that there are no superfast fibre networks issues on those roads as they were done some time ago. May I ask the Cabinet Member to look into the condition of the pavements along those roads?

Reply

We have had petitions from seventeen fibre companies and none of these companies will use the same trenches. So, we are making sure that we're doing the right thing and repairing pathways that do need repairs as and when appropriate.

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

Question

With the rise of Mental Health cases may I ask what actions the Council are taking to prioritise Mental Health Support services, both in terms of prevention and treatment for the residents of Staffordshire especially in light of the challenges posed?

Reply

We are seeing an increase in mental health problems in the wake of the Covid pandemic and as a consequence of the challenges facing people, the raised awareness of mental health and the lifting of any stigma which has so long been associated with poor mental health.

The Council and the local NHS have recently published the Good Mental Health In Staffordshire Strategy for 2023-28. This describes how we will aim to help everyone improve and maintain their mental well-being, help those who have short periods with problems to regain their mental health and well-being, and help people of all ages with severe long term mental health problems to live productive and fulfilling lives.

The Council will maintain support for those eligible under the Care Act or Mental Health Act. The NHS is responsible for diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions.

7. Petitions

Conflict in Palestine

Councillor Hussain presented a petition calling on the Council to urge the Prime Minister and relevant authorities to promptly initiate a ceasefire in Palestine and provide essential humanitarian aid.

Chairman