

# Minutes of the Prosperous Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 13 December 2023

Present: Tina Clements (Chair)

Attendance	
Charlotte Atkins	Peter Kruskonjic (Vice-Chair (Overview))
Graham Hutton	Rev. Preb. M. Metcalf

**Also in attendance:** Anthony Hodge, Jonathan Lindop, Tim Moss, Jonathan Price, Simon Tagg and Philip White

**Apologies:** Hannah Gallimore, Philippa Haden, Philip Hudson, David Smith, Samantha Thompson and Bernard Williams

## Part One

### 39. Declarations of Interest

There were no Declarations of Interest made.

### 40. Minutes of meeting held on 22 November 2023

**RESOLVED** - That the minutes of the meeting held on 22 November 2023 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

### 41. Natural Environment Strategy

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Environment, Infrastructure and Climate Change regarding the production of a draft Natural Environment Strategy for the County (schedule 1 to the signed minutes). The Strategy was to be considered by Cabinet at their meeting on 17 January 2024 and therefore the Cabinet Member had requested pre-decision scrutiny by the Committee.

Members heard that Central Government had launched its 25-year Environment Plan in 2018 with the aim of helping the natural world regain and retain good health. A 5-year review of the plan was subsequently undertaken in 2023 which resulted in a refreshed Environmental Improvement Plan containing the following key Commitments:-

- Halt the decline in species abundance by 2030;
- Protect 30% of UK land for biodiversity by 2030;
- Increase species abundance by at least 10% from 2030, surpassing 2022 levels by 2042;

- Restore or create at least 500,000 ha of a range of wildlife rich habitats by 2042;
- Reduce the risk of species extinction by 2042 and;
- Restore 75% of our one million hectares of terrestrial and freshwater protected sites to favourable condition, securing their wildlife value for the long term by 2042.

In addition, The Environment Act 2021 had brought in new duties and requirements to support the ambitions of the 25-year plan including the following measures in relation to biodiversity:-

- Developing Local Nature Recovery Strategies;
- A strengthened biodiversity duty;
- Mandatory minimum 10% biodiversity net gain through the planning system and;
- A requirement for local authorities to produce a report on their action for biodiversity.

In response, the County Council had developed a draft Natural Environment Strategy which took account of the Authority's statutory duties, guidance issued by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, national targets set by Government, and Nature Recovery Declaration made in February 2022.

The strategy set out a mission statement and ten high level objectives to conserve and enhance biodiversity and the natural environment as follows:-

**Mission Statement** - "We will directly support nature recovery in Staffordshire, through targeted action across our land and functions, and as a champion for activity across the county".

- (i) Develop and deliver a Local Nature Recovery Strategy Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent;
- (ii) Ensure coordinated delivery of biodiversity net gain;
- (iii) Ensure our policies, strategies and operations consider biodiversity;
- (iv) Ensure all designated sites in our ownership have management measures in place to achieve favourable condition by 2042;
- (v) Manage and protect 30% of our land (excluding highways) for biodiversity by 2030;
- (vi) Develop a wildlife-friendly management approach to roadside verges;
- (vii) Develop a suite of species recovery measures for our land;
- (viii) Use nature-based solutions for mitigating and adapting to climate change wherever possible, to maximise benefits to

- both wildlife and climate;
- (ix) Enhance and restore landscape character and quality and support landscape-scale nature recovery and;
- (x) Raise awareness and support the active involvement of communities in caring for our natural environment.

In the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave detailed scrutiny to the draft Strategy, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising areas of concern as necessary, including:- (i) the danger to wildlife from the County's Highway network and the need for measures to reduce 'road-kills' through the Local Nature Recovery Strategy; (ii) engagement with local communities required to implement the Strategy and the role of 'Local' Members; (iii) the opportunities available to increase biodiversity along Highway verges; (iv) the need for the strategy to recognise the importance of all classes of indigenous fauna rather than only birds as highlighted in the presentation slides and; (v) the joint working between Cabinet Members and stakeholders necessary to achieve the aims of the Strategy.

In conclusion Members welcomed the production of the draft Strategy particularly having regard to recent reports regarding nature depletion in the Country. In addition, they undertook to monitor progress against the various timelines for Actions listed in the accompanying Action Plan and give further scrutiny as required, when necessary.

**RESOLVED** – (a) That the report be received and noted.

(b) That the draft Natural Environment Strategy be welcome that that further scrutiny be given to the progress made against the various Actions contained in the accompanying Action Plan, at the appropriate time, as necessary.

## **42. Staffordshire County Council's Economic Strategy – Delivery Update**

The Committee considered a report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills updating them on progress made in the delivery of Staffordshire's Economic Strategy 2023-2030 (schedule 2 to the signed minutes).

The Primary focus of the Strategy was:- (i) Town centres; (ii) Higher skilled and higher paid workforce; (iii) 'Start-up' and 'step-up' businesses; (iv) The development of investment ready projects and; (v) Strategic corridors. In addition, various other priorities and themes were identified as being important for the future growth of the economy. These included:- (i) Innovation; (ii) Supporting businesses on their journey to net zero and; (iii) Maximising the use of investment to unlock external funding.

The Cabinet Member then updated them on the potential impact of recent national and global economic headlines on the County and the Authority's ability to deliver the various priorities set out in the Strategy. In addition, he updated them on the activity undertaken since June 2023 towards achieving the Authority's various ambitions, as follows:-

### **Priority (i): Town Centre/High Street Regeneration**

**Ambition: "By 2030, we will tackle the challenges faced by many of our town centres and strive to create places that we can be proud of".**

(i) Establishment of a task force comprising local, regional and national Partners to co-ordinate support following the closure of Wilko shops in the County; (ii) continued delivery of central Government initiatives including Future High Streets and levelling-up Funds and Town Deals; (iii) establishment of a steering group to work with key Partners on delivery of the County Council's Rural Economic Strategy including regeneration of RuralHub Towns and; (iv) progress in the procurement of a Development Partner to assist in the design and delivery of the Eastgate Regeneration Scheme.

### **Priority (ii): Higher Skilled, Higher Paid Workforce**

**Ambition: "By 2030, we will address the low levels of skills across some parts of the County and support more of our residents to gain the high-level skills needed to take advantage of many better paid job opportunities".**

(i) Significant progress towards completion of major local capital projects eg Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group Skills and Innovation Centre and Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Institute of technology; (ii) support given to local communities to access employment opportunities arising from the construction of the West Midlands Interchange development including recruitment of two dedicated Employment Brokers; (iii) growth in referrals to the Staffordshire Jobs and Careers Service via their on-line offer and attendance at various events throughout the County; (iv) continued delivery of courses by the Staffordshire Community Learning Service (SCLS) aimed at helping people into work or to up-skill; (v) receipt of £4.2m grant aid for the delivery of the national Multiply Programme aimed at boosting residents' numeracy skills both at home and at work.

### **Priority (iii): Supporting Start-Up and Step-Up Businesses**

**Ambition: "By 2030, we will create the conditions to allow more people to start and grow their business within Staffordshire,**

**thereby addressing our relatively low levels of business start-ups across large parts of the County.**

(i) Continued delivery of various business support programmes and 'start-up' space across the County eg Shire Hall Business Centre; (ii) support given to over 500 members of the public through the Staffordshire Start-up mentoring programme; (iii) support given to 194 business owners by the Staffordshire Get Started and Grow scheme which provided help with marketing, accountancy and other professional services; (iv) successful launch of a series of peer to peer networks for new business who wanted to develop; (v) continued delivery of support to 130 residents through the Staffordshire My Own Boss scheme which aimed to help residents launch their own business and; (vi) work to transfer the functions of the former Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Local Enterprise Partnership to the County and Stoke-on-Trent City Councils.

#### **Priority (iv): Innovation**

**Ambition: Build upon our existing strengths and future opportunities to increase innovation activity throughout the county, both within our businesses and innovation institutions.**

(i) Engagement with the Hydrogen Valley Programme being delivered by Cadent and National Gas Transmission with the aim of establishing the hydrogen economy, attracting investment and exploring how infrastructure can secure long-term, low-cost hydrogen and; (ii) Commissioning of a study to consider the opportunities and feasibility of developing a further science park in the County to complement the Park already located at Keele university.

#### **Priority V: Developing Investment Ready Projects**

**Ambition: By 2030, we will play our part in supporting the substantial planned growth within the county through the development of investment ready projects and securing funding for our infrastructure and services.**

(i) Continued work with Partners to support planned growth in the County; (ii) progress in the delivery of the A38 Branston Interchange through funding secured from round two of the Levelling-up Fund; (iii) a successful bid for grant-aid from the Levelling-up Fund for the re-development of the Stafford Railway Station area; (iv) development of the Chatterley Valley West scheme to unlock a 43-hectare employment site which aimed to generate approximately 1,700 new jobs.

#### **Priority (v): Strategic Corridors**

**Ambition: “By 2030, we will ensure we do not miss substantial opportunities afforded by our location in the centre of the Country by developing our key strategic A50/A500 and A38 corridors, including securing increased investment in innovation activities”.**

(i) Co-ordinated lobbying by senior politicians for further investment along the A50/A500 corridor following the announcement of the Network North Plan and; (ii) work on a publicity campaign to raise awareness of the opportunities presented by the A50/A500 with Central Government.

In the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued Members gave detailed scrutiny to the progress made in realising the Strategy to date, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising areas of concern as necessary, including:- (i) the areas of greatest deprivation in the County and how they could assist in delivering the Strategy particularly in those neighbourhoods; (ii) the correlation between take-up of courses offered by the Staffordshire Community Learning Service eg Multiply and areas of high deprivation; (iii) the need to ensure a greater availability of affordable premises for small businesses; (iv) the opportunities for promoting life-long learning and further education to residents through the SCLS and; (v) how the County Council were supporting the development of new vehicle technologies eg hydrogen combustion, some of which were being pioneered in the County.

In response to (i) above, the Cabinet Member undertook to supply them with further information on the areas of high deprivation in the County.

In conclusion, the Committee welcomed the significant progress which had been made in the delivery of the County Council’s Economic Strategy and re-affirmed their support for the various Priorities contained therein. However, they remained mindful of the challenges ahead arising from adverse national and international circumstances beyond the control of the Authority. In addition, they emphasised the importance of mitigating climate change and the achievement of Net Zero by 2030.

**RESOLVED** – (a) That the report be received and noted.

(b) That the good progress made towards delivery of the County Council’s Economic Strategy 2023-2030, be welcomed.

(c) That further updates on the various ambitions set out in the Strategy and targets in the accompanying Delivery Plan be brought to the Committee at six-monthly intervals.

(d) That scrutiny of the Authority’s Employment and Skills Strategy be undertaken at the appropriate time with advise from the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Employment and Skills.

### 43. Review of Schools Performance

The Committee considered a report of the Cabinet Member for Education (and SEND) giving details of Educational Achievement in Staffordshire schools for the period September 2022 – July 2023 (Schedule 3 to the signed minutes).

Members noted the following key highlights from the available data:-

- As at November 2023, the percentage of Staffordshire's Schools designated Academies had increased to 69.6% ie 282 with 123 continuing to be maintained by the County Education Authority;
- The majority of all schools, both academies and maintained had been judged to be 'Good' or 'Outstanding' by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) (ie 89%) a figure which was in line with the national average;
- Pupils in Staffordshire started well with high levels of attainment recorded in early years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 (KS1) compared to national averages. However, outcomes were below those seen prior to the Covid-19 pandemic;
- Staffordshire was showing improvement in the percentage of pupils achieving a Good Level of Development (GLD) in EYFS and at a higher rate than recorded nationally;
- 69% of pupils at the end of EYFS achieved a GLD compared to 67% nationally;
- At the end of Year 1, 81% of pupils achieved the expected level of phonics decoding compared to 79% nationally;
- Staffordshire performed above the national average in reading, writing and mathematics at KS1. However, whilst outcomes had increased when compared to the figures for 2022, all three areas were below those recorded in 2019;
- Staffordshire was ranked 21st and in quartile A for reading; 33rd and in quartile B for writing and; 24th and in quartile B for mathematics at the expected standard when compared to all local authorities nationally;
- 2023 Key Stage 2 (KS2) results indicated that Staffordshire pupils remain above the national averages for reading, writing, mathematics and combined reading, writing and mathematics at the

expected standard;

- The expected standard in reading was in line with 2019 outcomes. However, writing and mathematics remained below pre-pandemic levels;
- KS1 to KS2 pupils in Staffordshire made less progress than that seen nationally.
- Staffordshire's outcomes at the end of Key Stage 4 (KS4) GCSE remained inconsistent. The proportion of students achieving grade 9 – 4 in English and Mathematics was approximately the England All Schools average but below the state-funded average. Staffordshire's results in both English Baccalaureate and English and Mathematics GCSE (Grade 5 or above passes) were below the national average and;
- KS4 outcomes in 2023 were in line or above those in 2019.

During the full and wide-ranging discussion which ensued, Members gave detailed scrutiny to the statistics, asking questions, seeking clarification and raising issues of concern as necessary, including:- (i) performance having not recovered to pre-pandemic levels in certain key areas and the remedial measures available to the County Council to ensure improvements in future years; (ii) the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) ratings of individual schools in Members' Divisions and the progress being made to improve areas of weakness as a matter of urgency; (iii) the progress made in accommodating pupils with Special Educational Needs in Staffordshire schools through the new arrangements which had previously been endorsed by the Committee and; (iv) the further analysis required to better understand the various key messages which had been highlighted eg pass rates being below the national average in English and Mathematics whereas KS4 performance was better.

In conclusion, Members were disappointed that the encouraging results in certain areas had not been more consistent. However, they welcomed the joint working being undertaken between schools aimed at improving performance and inclusivity and looked forward to these measures being reflected in future performance data. In addition, they urged the Cabinet Member to continue working in partnership with the Regional Director in respect of Schools Causing Concern.

**RESOLVED** – (a) That the report be received and noted.

(b) That the Cabinet Member undertake further detailed analysis of the Educational Achievement in Staffordshire schools results September 2022



– July 2023 in order to better understand the reasons for the various key messages with a view to ensuring appropriate remedial measures were implemented where possible.

(c) That further scrutiny of Educational Achievement in Staffordshire schools be undertaken at the appropriate time, as necessary.

#### **44. Work Programme**

The Chairman reported that she had received a request from the Cabinet Member for Highways and Transport for the item entitled:- “North Staffordshire Air Quality Action Plan – Ministerial Direction – Update”, listed for the meeting on 2 February 2024, to be withdrawn owing to “extended timescales in the Joint Air Quality Unit”.

**RESOLVED** – That, subject to the above-mentioned item being withdrawn, the Work Programme (schedule 4 to the signed minutes) be approved.

#### **45. Date of Next Meeting - Thursday 11 January 2024 at 2.00 pm, County Buildings, Stafford**

**RESOLVED** – That the date, time and venue of the next meeting be noted.

**Chair**