

Statement of the Leader of the Council

1. Staffordshire Means Back to Business - Oral Update

The Cabinet have received an oral report of the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills giving an update on "Staffordshire Means Back to Business" activity including the following matters:

- This month saw an increase of 335 claimants in Staffordshire, at the same time we have seen increases both regionally and nationally, this is reflective of the challenging economic conditions businesses continue to operate in across the country. The total number of claimants in the county now stands at 14,955 or 2.8% of the working age population. It is important to state that the claimant count rate in Staffordshire continues to be one of the lowest in the West Midlands and is far lower than the average for the region of 4.8%, and lower than the average for England of 3.8%. We will continue to support those residents that unfortunately find themselves out of work to access employment through our Jobs Brokerage service.
- The youth claimant count in Staffordshire saw an increase of 40 claimants to a total of 2,900 young people. The proportion of young people in Staffordshire aged 18-24 that are claiming work-related Universal Credit now stands at 4.6%. This is lower than the national rate of 5.1% and far lower than the regional rate of 6.8%. This further increase in the youth claimant count highlights the importance of continuing to engage with our younger residents and supporting them to find employment or continue in education and training.
- The most recently released figures on disposable household income showed that Staffordshire is outperforming regional and national averages, with disposable income per head increasing by 4.4% in Staffordshire compared to 4% and 3.7% across the West Midlands Region and UK respectively. Whilst high levels of inflation continue to present challenges, this is now expected to fall substantially over the coming months whilst the County Council will continue to do all we can to support our residents in getting a higher paid job, thereby putting more money in their pockets.
- The highway works at the Chatterley Valley West employment site recommenced on 13th November following the appointment of our strategic infrastructure partner, Amey, to undertake these works. The site developer, Harworth Group has also appointed a replacement earthworks contractor to recommence plot preparation and servicing works. Although there may be a period of limited activity due to winter conditions, the development of the site will soon be fully back

underway, ensuring that the full benefits of the scheme, including the creation of 1,700 jobs, will be realised at the earliest opportunity.

- The Council has now supported 598 people through the Staffordshire Start Up Mentoring Programme, with 279 of those who have successfully completed the course deciding that self-employment is for them and having gone on to start their own business. For those people who have completed this programme, we recently ran a series of peer-to-peer networks to support them in ensuring that their new business is a success and to work through any difficulties they may be facing and help find solutions together. These sessions have proved very successful, and we are therefore looking to commission more to be launched in the next couple of months.
- Our Get Started and Grow programme has now supported more than 194 business owners who have been trading up to five years with professional services support in marketing, accountancy, digital marketing, legal or human resources consultancy. These are just a few examples of our current activity to support businesses to start and thrive within Staffordshire and this will of course remain a key focus as part of the delivery of our Economic Strategy.

(Cabinet 15 November 2023)

2. Integrated Performance Report - Quarter 2, 2023/24

The Cabinet have received an update on Quarter 1 activities for each service area: Health and Care; Families and Communities; Economy, Infrastructure and Skills; and Corporate Services. They noted the key challenges facing the Authority including:

- Children in Care: Continued pressures across Children's services, including the rising cost, higher than anticipated numbers and complexity of Children in Care, and ongoing placement pressures. The New Discharge Planning Team went live in August and would help progress exit activity.
- SEND: Increased demand for Education, Health and Care Plans. Capacity continued to be a challenge; however, all additional Senior Key Workers were now in post.
- Adult Social Care Demand: Safeguarding and Deprivation of Liberty Safeguarding (DoLs) requests remained high, with additional capacity being sourced and further options to streamline DoLs process being explored.

- Highways Performance: Levels of demand were high in Quarter 2, particularly in relation to high-risk defects, however timeliness of repairs was back on track following a dip in Quarter 1, and the council was continuing to deliver its Highways Maintenance and Transformation Programmes.

The latest revenue forecast outturn showed a forecast overspend of £7.7m (1.1%), compared to the quarter 1 forecast overspend of £9.5m (1.39%). There continued to be areas of financial risk in Children and Families as outlined above.

(Cabinet 18 October 2023)

3. Strategic Vision for Early Years

The Government's move to extend the provision of funded childcare is an opportunity for young children to enjoy high-quality play and learning to pave the way for later life.

The Cabinet have received an update on National and local changes that are planned or have changed the way we work in Staffordshire and have approved proposals to review the structure of the Early Years Service within Staffordshire County.

The proposals will improve outcomes for children and families through a more efficient, joined up and holistic services for our youngest children and their families so that they can:

- maximise their take up of provision
- have timely access to high quality early education and childcare provision

This will be achieved by ensuring that the team design and delivery is integrated into the Family Hub model so that we continue to build on this as the integrated access to Early Help services and support.

(Cabinet 15 November 2023)

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

The Cabinet have considered the Council's Climate Change 2022/2023 Annual Report. The Report records the significant 50% reduction in the Council's carbon emissions that had been made since declaring a Climate Change Emergency in July 2019, demonstrating the pragmatic, action focussed approach by the Council.

The Cabinet have also approved the Climate Change Action Plan revision 3, November 2023 (CCAP), which contains specific actions to be undertaken by the Council prior to 2025 which will assist in our journey to become net carbon zero by 2050.

(Cabinet 15 November 2023)

5. Staffordshire Employment and Skills Strategy 2023-2030

The Cabinet noted that the work to improve local skills over the last decade had seen significant improvement in skill levels and more local people working in higher value, better paid jobs. This had ensured that our economy continues to grow through a more productive and economically active working population.

To further build on this success, the Council has developed the Employment and Skills Strategy. Although the Strategy is a County Council strategy, we have worked closely with key stakeholders to put in place the vision and priorities to deliver our united economic vision for Staffordshire.

The Cabinet have approved the new Employment and Skills Strategy which outlines the County Council's vision and priorities for developing the skills of our residents to create the workforce needed to deliver our Economic Strategy and Strategic Plan.

(Cabinet 15 November 2023)

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

The Cabinet have received a summary of the County Council's borrowing and investment activities during the first six months of the year. They noted that the County Council maintained a cautious approach to investments. The policy of using cash instead of borrowing continued to generate savings, helping reduce the average interest the County Council pays on its debt despite the increase in interest rates.

Overall, the County Council's borrowing and investment activities were being undertaken prudently and in line with agreed strategies in a very challenging environment.

The Cabinet noted that the County Council made an early repayment of £50 million of PWLB loans on 3 July 2023, as allowed by the Treasury Management Strategy Statement. This decision will save the County Council £199,000 p.a. based on current interest rates taking into account discount, interest savings and loss of investment income.

(Cabinet 15 November 2023)

7. Local and National Government Budgets

We welcomed the measures outlined in the Autumn Statement, which will help to put more money in people's pockets for example through reductions in National Insurance contributions – but recognise the importance too of still doing everything we can at a local level to promote greater opportunities and economic growth.

Like all local councils we are facing huge and increasing demand on both adult and children's services – a national funding issue to be addressed.

But despite these pressures, we are on track to deliver a balanced budget next year, as well as deliver on pledges to invest in growth, money for roads, support for new and existing businesses, rural broadband, public health and care and investing in our communities.

Our draft proposals were published last week and will be finalised and brought back to this chamber in the New Year after we receive the final local government settlement.

8. Good news for Stafford

With the cancellation of Phase 2 of HS2, our focus is greater than ever on working with partners to deliver economic growth and better transport links via developments such as high-speed rail to Stafford via the Handsacre Link and securing funding for the green A50/A500 corridor.

Michael Gove, came to Stafford recently to find out first-hand about the multi-million-pound Stafford Gateway project, of which the county council is a partner.

The secretary of state delivered the news the borough council had been successful with its bid for £20m to help deliver proposals which will include a hotel, up to 900 new homes, 30,000 square feet of commercial space, a 350-space multi-storey car park, along with retail and leisure facilities on 'underutilised brownfield land' around the railway station.

9. Investment in Highways

The Government has also announced that a total of £2.2 billion will be invested in improving road networks in the West and East Midlands alone, with more than £186 million coming to Staffordshire over an 11-year period.

The funding is part of the Government's Network North plan to spend the money saved by cancelling HS2 to the north and we are determined to

maximise the benefits through innovation, such as the recent investment in JCB's Pothole Pro.

Now winter is with us, and indeed we have already seen snow, I would also like to thank the highways crews who work day in and day out on our highways whether that is fixing potholes or gritting our major network.

10. Longest Night

Winter also brings with it the Longest Night, which we will be marking with Staffordshire Samaritans on December 22.

We want to use the date to remind anyone in need that the Samaritans are there for them during their darkest hours, including over Christmas and New Year.

Several county council buildings including the Shire Hall Gallery in Stafford will be lit up green and we're inviting individuals, organisations and businesses to join us by safely displaying a light in their window.

Last year, Samaritans volunteers responded to 244,254 calls in the UK and Ireland over the festive period and this year volunteers in Staffordshire will be there round-the-clock to make sure people who are struggling always have someone to turn to.

11. Christmas Message

Finally, I would like to end this update by thanking our staff, our partners, our fantastic volunteers and of course each and everyone of you, for your tireless efforts on behalf of the communities we all serve, a responsibility which is at the heart of what we do.

Despite the pressures, we are in good shape and remain hugely optimistic about what this county council can do on behalf of residents and businesses as we head into 2024.

So, please do enjoy a peaceful Christmas with your family and friends and I look forward to delivering more of our goals together in the year to come.