

Statement of the Leader of the Council

1. Older People Adult Social Care Commissioning Strategy 2024-2029

The Cabinet have approved the proposed new Older People Adult Social Care Commissioning Strategy 2024-29. The Strategy, which has been produced with local organisations, older people and their carers, aims to promote well-being and independence for older people in Staffordshire and help them live at home for as long as possible. It will also help ensure that they know how to access support and that if they need adult social care there are good quality services available when they need them and at a cost we can all afford.

The Strategy is expected to commence from April 2024. An associated action plan will be produced to support implementation of the Strategy. The Care Commissioning team will monitor delivery of the Strategy and Action Plan.

(Cabinet - 13 December 2023)

2. Staffordshire Means Back to Business

Decision – That the 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 be noted:

- This month saw an increase of 405 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 15,165 and the claimant rate remains the same this month at 2.8% of the working age population. It is important to note 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 4.9%, 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 dedicated Jobs Brokerage service.
- The youth claimant count in Staffordshire saw a decrease of 25 claimants this month to a total of 2,860 young people. The proportion of young people in Staffordshire aged 18-24 that are claiming work-related Universal Credit remains the same at 4.6%. This is lower than the national rate of 5.1% and far lower than the regional rate of 6.8%. Whilst this decrease in the youth claimant count is positive our focus

continues to be to engage with our younger residents and support them to find employment or continue in education and training.

- One of our key economic priorities is supporting residents in being able to take advantage of high-paid job opportunities, and I'm therefore pleased to be able to update Cabinet on the recently released earnings data which gives a good indication as to why, at least partly, disposable income has increased within Staffordshire. The average weekly earnings of our residents are now the same as the national average, the first-time that this has been case. Over the last year, the average earnings of our residents have increased by over 12% compared to just 5% across the West Midlands Region and England as whole. Continuing to support the creation of highly paid, high-skilled jobs across Staffordshire and supporting our residents in gaining higher level skills will of course remain a key focus for us in 2024, ensuring we are doing all we can to put more money into people's pockets.
- Adapting to climate change is evidently already a key consideration for businesses and developers across Staffordshire, with the developer of the first units on the West Midlands Interchange scheme aiming for the highest possible rating for energy performance of the buildings, including through the use of solar panels on the roof, something we have increasingly seen throughout the county in recent years.
- Supporting energy efficiency of our businesses is nothing new to us as the Staffordshire Business & Environment Network (sben) has been operating for over 30 years and has provided advice and delivered countless support programmes since its inception. Last year saw the conclusion of our Low Carbon Business Evolution Programme (LCBEP) which ran for 7 years in partnership with sben and supported businesses to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. The programme is estimated to have reduced carbon emissions by over 2,250 tonnes annually, supported over 350 businesses, provided £1.1 million in grants and unlocked £1.3 million in private sector investment.
- Whilst LCBEP has now concluded, we remain committed to supporting businesses to improve their energy efficiency and adapt to climate change requirements. Our businesses can therefore now access our new Green Solutions programme which provides training, an energy efficiency review and a potential grant to implement energy saving measures. Currently this programme is being funded utilising UK Shared Prosperity Funding provided by a number of our district and borough partners, although I'll be updating Cabinet on the further development of this programme next month.

- Last month I updated Cabinet on our success in securing a Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) for Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent which has the potential to bring significant benefits including through access to support and future funding programmes. Establishing the LVEP will be a key goal for the coming year and on Friday we have our Tourism and Hospitality Conference at one of our most important attractions, Alton Towers. The event will give our businesses and partners an opportunity to learn all about how we are working directly with VisitEngland through the LVEP and feature guest speakers, workshops and opportunity to network with relevant people and organisations.

(Cabinet – 17 January 2024)

3. Carbon Sequestration and Woodland Creation

The Cabinet considered the report of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee's Climate Change Working Group on Carbon Sequestration and Woodland Creation. The Climate Change Working Group focussed on carbon capture and offsetting residual carbon in Staffordshire County Council. The Council is required to remove as much carbon from the atmosphere as it emits. The Council's Climate Change Action Plan shows that the Council is working well to reduce its carbon emissions, but the Working Group found that there would still be a need to offset 7,000-10,000 tonnes of residual carbon to balance the Council's carbon emissions by 2050. The working group focussed on what more could be done to achieve this. The Cabinet is to prepare an executive response to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the recommendation(s) of the Carbon Sequestration and Woodland Creation report.

(Cabinet – 17 January 2024)

4. Natural Environment Strategy

The Environment Act 2021 brought in new duties and requirements for local authorities in relation to biodiversity and the natural environment, including a strengthened duty to conserve and enhance biodiversity, the introduction of mandatory biodiversity net gain through the planning system, and the requirement to report on biodiversity delivery.

The Cabinet have approved the Natural Environment Strategy which has been developed to set out how the Council will deliver its biodiversity requirements and enhance the natural environment.

(Cabinet – 17 January 2024)

5. Here to Help - Progress Update

The Cabinet have received a progress update on the range of support, initiatives and signposting activities which have been undertaken by the County Council to enable our residents to manage cost of living pressures over the last 12 months.

The Cabinet have noted how the County Council has enabled Staffordshire residents to manage cost-of-living pressures and have agreed the following proposed next steps:

- Use the data collated by the Staffordshire Centre for Data Analytics (SCDA) Project and work with partners to support targeted activity.
- Measure the impact of the Winter Here to Help campaign.
- Continue to work jointly through the Cost-of-living Partnership Group, providing an update to the Staffordshire CEOs Group and Leaders Board.

(Cabinet – 17 January 2024)

6. Service Provision of Temporary and Interim Staff Resources

The County Council is one of the largest employers in the county, employing 3,366 Full Time Equivalent. The County Council makes use of temporary and interim Human Resources for a variety of reasons but in the main to provide the right flexible cover across all directorates and sub-units including regulated services in the organisation.

The Cabinet have approved the arrangements for the future provision to supply temporary and interim human resources (agency workers) to the County Council to provide cover for vital frontline services.

(Cabinet – 17 January 2024)

7. Ofsted Report

The Cabinet have considered the final report following the OFSTED Inspection of Staffordshire Children's Services in November 2023. The report found that although the experiences and progress of children in our care was rated as good, Children's Services overall have been rated as Requires Improvement to be Good. There are four key recommendations from this inspection where improvements need to be made are:

- 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 position 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 even for a short period of time.

The Cabinet have noted that the results of the OFSTED inspection will now be considered as part of the finalisation of the Medium-Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). It is clear that the council's financial plans need to contain sufficient flexibility to be able to support the development and implementation of the improvement plan.

(Cabinet – 17 January 2024)

8. Highways Investment

Good roads are important to residents, businesses and this county council, but as with every other authority, it is an ongoing challenge to manage expectations with the budget that is available.

In Staffordshire, we have one of the largest networks in the country, so that challenge is even more significant.

This council is investing an extra £50m in the next three years to speed up repairs and improve the network. We have also brought forward the start of our main pothole repair season, so we can get to work on more repairs now.

It is important for everyone to remember that our crews are also busy dealing with winter highways operations and as much as we would love to fix every single pothole, we do have to prioritise the most urgent repairs on the busiest roads.

Not only that, we will also be delivering major improvement schemes throughout the winter. Work is already underway on the A52 Ash Bank Road, Werrington, on the A53 Newcastle Road, Loggerheads and on the A511 Horninglow Road North, Burton and other significant schemes are due to start in the coming weeks.

9. Branston Interchange Project

It is great too to see a scheme bringing major improvements to a key Staffordshire gateway junction and support long-term future economic growth get underway this month.

The multi-million-pound A38 Branston Interchange project will ease congestion and increase capacity. In addition to improving traffic flow around the junction, the project provides key transport infrastructure for the ongoing homes and employment development at Branston Locks and Burton's future economic growth.

We are pleased the Government recognised the significance of this project, which was outlined in our submission bid. A £6million allocation from the Government's Levelling Up Fund and a significant contribution from the main developer of the Branston Locks site, Nurton Developments, are funding the scheme and work is set to be completed next spring.

10. National Apprenticeship Week

This week we are also celebrating National Apprenticeship Week and in Staffordshire, apprenticeships continue to play a vital role in growing the local economy and last year 6,300 people started an apprenticeship.

The county council has more than 100 apprentices covering 35 different subjects and a further 100 apprentices working in our grant-maintained schools.

It really is fantastic to see so many people now choosing the apprenticeship route and I would encourage any Staffordshire employer to find out more about the benefits of taking on an apprentice.

The county will also be hosting its ninth Apprenticeship Graduation Ceremony in the summer which allows apprentices to graduate putting them on an equal footing with a university route to success.

11. Dignity in Care Awards

This year will also mark the 10th anniversary of our Dignity in Care Awards. This is our opportunity to say "thank you" to our army of unsung heroes.

In partnership with Staffordshire University will once again recognise the best of the county's care sector.

Anyone working in adult care, paid or unpaid, along with care providers can be nominated in one of the nine different award categories.

For the 10th year we have some new categories. Firstly, we are celebrating the impact Mental Health practitioners have in the county, and we are pleased to announce the second new category had been chosen by our partners for the award, Staffordshire University with celebrating the Commitment to Learning.

The awards launched last week to coincide with Dignity Action Day, a national celebration to make sure people who use care services are treated as individuals and with dignity. So please do nominate anyone you feel has gone above and beyond to help our more vulnerable adult residents.

12. Extra Support for Children in Schools

Finally, as a county council we want to help ensure that everyone, young and old, gets the right support they need at the right time.

That's why increased early intervention has been launched for children needing support in the classroom. The funding will help schools to step in at the first opportunity to help children with special educational needs progress at their local mainstream school.

And it's estimated up to 800 children might benefit across the county each year at a time when the demand for special educational needs support in Staffordshire schools has risen by 30 per cent in the last five years, surpassing the national average.

Parents have told us they would like to see their children educated close to home with their friends and in 2024 we will be continuing to do all we can to support this and keep children in mainstream schools wherever possible.