

News You Can Use on the Doorstep

Leader's Monthly E-Newsletter for January

From the Leader of the Council

Making Do with Less as We Start the New Year



As we look ahead to elections in May and the possibility of a Referendum on Europe there is a lot of work to do now the festive season is over. The overall impact of the local government finance settlement on the County Council is a very challenging

scenario for Staffordshire Conservatives and one that needs close scrutiny to see no stone is left unturned.

The County Council remains highly supportive of the government's need to reduce the national deficit, while ensuring our public finances are sustainable in the long term to be both sufficient to drive reform and economic growth and a sensible deal for the taxpayer both now and in the future. Let's not forget how Labour left the national finances in 2010 under Gordon Brown and how the new Labour Leader rides rough shod over measures to curb the deficit.

Let's take some comfort here as we gird our loins for the weeks ahead. Our strong track record of delivering for Staffordshire whilst managing an efficient and sustainable financial strategy is evidence of our commitment to sound public finances; we



have reshaped the Council to manage demand on services, reduced costs by £156 million over the past five years, and have looked for creative, more affordable ways of making a positive difference to the lives of Staffordshire people. The strategy is working and we are not giving up now.

You will know this has required tough, and at times unpalatable, decisions and I expect that these will continue. There have also been many successes. I also believe that while we have achieved much in a managed and sustainable way, we need to see the future challenges we face within a wider set of public sector reforms. That means working closely with partners and standing up for Staffordshire.

Our focus remains on future outcomes, building on our track record of working with partners across the county, the Midlands and nationally to create the right conditions for Staffordshire's economy to flourish and create more well-paid jobs for local people. And there's the rub.



The final local government settlement for Staffordshire surprised us as our planning assumptions based on the Autumn Statement left us with even more difficult decisions ahead of next month's county council budget setting.



A brief word now on our reserves which have been spotlighted in the national media along with other county councils. In terms of our wider financial position our General Reserve currently stands at £14.8 million with approximately £43.5 million in earmarked reserves for specific spend such as a planned IT replacement programme and insurance claims. Additionally, we are the custodians of around £45.2million of School Reserves which we, for obvious reasons, cannot utilise. We have used our County Council reserves in recent years to support major transformation across the County Council, and to protect the finances of Staffordshire people during the most difficult years of the recession. I am sure you would agree this is a prudent strategy to follow.

The County Council welcomes the return of Business Rates to local government and we await the fine detail on what additional responsibilities will accompany the funding. Along with the social and care precept, the return of business rates should not be seen as some sort of cure all to the increasing demographic pressures we face as an upper tier authority. Business Rates returning to the County Council brings a series of questions such as how this will be divided between the Districts and the County Council.



I hope you agree with me that the leadership the County Council has delivered for Staffordshire and its residents; we have made considerable capital investments over recent years to support our local economy, working with partners to secure developments such as nationally important projects like i54 South Staffordshire to many other more local countywide projects such as the



recent opening of Liberty Park in Lichfield, alongside a City Deal and we are ambitious to continue to move forward with future growth sites. Finally, with our health economy our CCGs and local authorities have agreed to undertake a strategic review of healthcare in Staffordshire—as the largest democratically elected body in the county we will play our full part.

Over the coming weeks we will be actively communicating with you on how we spend taxpayers' money across Staffordshire by ensuring that we put clear and unambiguous information into the Council Tax bills to explain to residents what their money is going on.

Philip Atkins

Leader of the Council

As a Past U.S. President Said ‘It’s the Economy...’

Forgive me for remembering where we came from with our local economy. When we took control after 28 years of Labour in 2009, just after the 2008 recession, Staffordshire was economically the worst performing sub region of the worst performing region in the country.

Our local economy had been going backwards under Labour at a time when everyone else was enjoying growth. A daunting task to correct, which at the time most thought would take a generation to correct.

The thinking was it would take 30 years; 10 years to halt the decline, 10 years to get to the same speed as the UK economy and 10 years to catch up, which is why when we took control from Labour we immediately made putting the Staffordshire economy right our top priority. It still is.

We all know Staffordshire people think highly of their communities, are resourceful, innovative and are willing to work if given the chance and the tools to do the job. In turn, if people are gainfully employed they are less reliant on public sector services.

An independent consultancy specialising in applied economic modelling and data analysis techniques has projected that the Staffordshire economy will increase in size by 15 per cent or £2,232 million by 2020, 29 per cent or £4,273 million by 2025 and 51 per cent or £7,345 million by 2032. This projected growth is faster than the growth projected for the region and the UK as a whole.

But you will ask quite rightly what does this actually mean for Staffordshire and how do we turn this into success at the ballot box?

The issues we face in the future are complex. Remembering in 2008 it was thought it would take 30 years to turn the ship around and catch the rest of the country up; we have made an excellent start on the job over the past seven years.



Growth remains high on our agenda with our commitment to develop and create new employment sites in the county, which should in turn, generate even more jobs and a higher skilled workforce. Whilst economic measures are expected to continue to increase above the national rate, we still have some way to go. We still have more work to do on those better jobs based in Staffordshire and getting our people skilled up to do them.



We have identified that ensuring Staffordshire's continued economic growth will be dependent on various factors. Whilst educational attainment is currently above the regional and national level, improving educational outcomes for young people, particularly the poor achievers will be essential to provide the skilled workforce these new advanced businesses we want in Staffordshire are dependent upon.

And finally, if businesses are successful they will enjoy increased profits, invest more and create more jobs. This in turn will continue low unemployment, increase the opportunities for local people and raise local standards of living - which, in turn, means that local people will spend more with local businesses and hopefully healthier for longer and be less of a burden on the state.

I am sure you will agree that as Conservatives we should be proud that we have turned the Staffordshire economic ship around and heading in the right direction at a faster rate than we thought possible just seven years ago. But we must continue this work as there is more to do.

Keep An Eye out for Your Neighbour in Winter

Winter can be a tough time for many elderly people living on their own, so please remember to keep an eye out for your older friends and neighbours, maybe popping round every now and again to make sure they are OK. There is lots of advice and tips on staying safe and healthy and keeping warm and well during colder weather at www.staffordshirecares.info.



And Here's Some Good News...

Good news in Cannock at the Kingswood Lakeside Business Park as plans are approved for the development of a new unit for the First Choice Group. The company, which supplies spares for the catering sector nationwide already employs 130 people at the site.



The new HQ could now expand its operations in the new larger premises, enabling it to potentially double the number of employees, providing a welcome boost to the local job market.

Kingswood Lakeside is now one of the county's leading business sites and home to national leaders such as environmental firm Veolia and APC Overnight – the UK's largest delivery company. This is further evidence of the County Council's success in attracting and supporting business expansion in Staffordshire and bringing with it more quality jobs.

Looking Ahead to Our First Staffordshire Day



Looking ahead to 1 May and with the county to celebrate its first ever Staffordshire Day, I want to remind community groups about some funding that is being made available. Staffordshire Day is our first ever celebration of all things great about the county and will see a host of special events

taking place on the day. But as well as this we also want people to organise their own community activities and this is where our community arts funding can help. Grants of between £100 – £1000 for arts based activities are being made available. You can find out more at www.staffordshire.gov.uk/communityartsfund The closing date for applications is 1 March 2016.

The date for Staffordshire Day was chosen to mark the creation of Staffordshire's world-famous Wedgwood pottery company on 1 May 1795.

And, for heritage buffs, 2016 is also the year we celebrate the 1000th anniversary of the first recorded mention of Staffordshire in the Anglo Saxon Chronicle.

Looking Over Our Shoulders as We Move into 2016

As we move into 2016, it is a good time to reflect on both the achievements and highlights of the past year and some of the challenges we will face this year.

Last year, together with our partners, the county council continued to work hard to deliver what is best for the people who live and work in Staffordshire. That is better jobs, better health, better care and better lives.



On the economic front we have seen major projects supporting new jobs and growth take shape right across the county, notably

the continued success story of i54 South Staffordshire, Liberty Park in Lichfield, IC5 at Keele and the Redhill Business Park in Stafford. It is also fantastic to have ended the year with news that the number of people claiming Job Seekers' Allowance in Staffordshire is at its lowest since records began more than 20 years ago. This didn't happen by accident—it results from our hard working workforce and the support for enterprise from the County Council.

While our role in education is changing, we still have a role to play in helping ensure students make the best choices for them with the best opportunities to access the education and skills they need to get even better jobs, matching the requirements of our businesses in Staffordshire.

Further highlights in 2015 included the huge success story of our first Ironman 70.3 Staffordshire, the opening of our new high-tech library in Stafford and the continuing rollout of superfast broadband to a further 40,000



properties. We also welcomed a new Chief Executive in John Henderson who is helping shape and oversee the delivery of our priorities.

But the dominating theme of 2015 and one that will continue in 2016 has undoubtedly been health and social care and how the public sector can all work better together to help people be well, keep well and where necessary hopefully get well as quickly as possible.

We need to do more to support people to help themselves, their families and their communities by giving people the good choices to be active, healthy and stay independent for as long as possible.

In 2016 we will continue to champion the cause of Staffordshire and ensure that people's voices are heard loud and clear on major infrastructure projects such as HS2. We will also continue to explore with partners how wider devolution could work for Staffordshire around our key priorities.

As we continue through 2016, our focus must not be on the problem, but on the solutions, and working even more closely with our partners will lead us to better outcomes for you, our residents who we all serve.

LGA Briefing Session for Conservative Councillors



The Conservative Group of the Local Government Association, with the Conservative Councillors' Association, holds a series of political briefing meetings across the country as part of a programme of engaging councillors with others in their own locality. Now it's Staffordshire's turn.

The next briefing meeting will take place on Friday 12 February 2016, from approximately 10.00am in the Council Chamber at County Buildings, Martin Street, Stafford, ST16 2LH. The seminar will finish around 3.00 pm.

There will be several topical sessions on the day relating to current local government issues and campaigning, and an opportunity for you to feedback directly to both the LGA Conservative Group and CCA.

The day will also provide an ideal opportunity for councillors to come together, catch-up, and discuss issues of importance, not only with colleagues from their own council, but with those from neighbouring councils. All Conservative councillors are invited to attend, and we hope to get a good attendance from all authorities.

The event is free of charge, and refreshments and lunch will be provided.

To help with catering numbers and for name badges, I would be most grateful if you could email us, indicating the names of those wishing to attend, at lgaconservatives@local.gov.uk<<mailto:lgaconservatives@local.gov.uk>>