

News You Can Use on the Doorstep

Leader's Monthly E-Newsletter for February 2019

From the Leader of the Council

You may recall that before Christmas, I gave you an overview of the scale of the financial challenge the County Council faced and our plans to achieve a balanced budget in 2019/20.

At the County Council budget meeting on February 14th we approved proposals to close the £35m shortfall in our budget next year, made possible by a combination of early and decisive action, a tight grip on our finances and effective lobbying of Government. We are now on track to deliver a balanced budget for 2019/20 and have a robust medium term financial strategy for the next five years and we are still the third lowest county council tax in England.



Before Christmas we received our funding settlement from the Government, and there was some positive news in the shape of a business rates pilot, and one-off funding from Government for both social care and roads which will help ease immediate pressures, but we have made it clear that a long-term national solution for funding care must be urgently addressed and we will continue to work with our MPs to press the Government on this.

We also need to keep up the pace of our transformation, finding new ways to achieve results by working with partners and with communities, embracing digital technology and data, and keeping a tight grip on our costs. The additional funding coming our way will help in the short term only. It does not provide a long-term answer to how we care for a growing ageing population, or how with less money and fewer staff, we make things happen in our communities in the future.

We recognise the impact this may have on our partner organisations and on local communities, but we are completely committed to open and honest dialogue as we make the necessary changes.



It was good to see a new 10-year plan unveiled for the NHS, but if we want to deliver a long-term sustainable health service then how we fund social care as a nation must go hand in with this. In Staffordshire, as in other parts of the country, we have seen our care bill soar by more than £100m in the last decade and together with partners we continue to press the Government for a long-term solution.

The rising cost of adult social care is one of the issues increasing the pressure on the county council's finances – and communities will still need to play their part in plugging gaps in some local services. To support a growing ageing population, increasingly we will all have to do more and pay a little more to continue to protect the most vulnerable in our communities.

As Conservatives we believe in personal responsibility, that people should keep most of their hard-earned pay and that government, whether local or national, should support those who really need our help. While the county council can no longer do or fund everything we would like to, we remain focused on supporting communities to find their own local alternative and affordable options to help themselves, their families, their friends and their neighbours.

We remain hugely ambitious for Staffordshire and are committed to enabling growth in the economy, creating more skilled jobs and supporting people to lead healthier and more independent lives, all with the third lowest county council tax in England.

It is also clear from Parliamentary votes that Brexit will be an enduring theme nationally this year. Here in Staffordshire it is important we ready ourselves for life after our withdrawal from the EU, and this work is ongoing, but this year we will continue to lobby Government on the pressing issues affecting our communities: health and care, the economy, housing, schools and education, and how public services are paid for in the future.



Regardless of the permutations of the UK's exit from the EU, our top priority will remain Staffordshire's economy. Creating the right conditions for the economy to grow and create more, better paid jobs. Our role is the county council is to plan and prepare for the long term and ensure this county has the right sites, roads and transport, services, skills and ambitions for business to flourish and offer our residents the jobs and opportunities to prosper.

One extremely positive vote came in South Staffordshire, where the district council granted planning permission to extend the hugely successful i54 South Staffordshire. The proposed 100-acre extension promises to create a further 2,700 jobs on the site, doubling the numbers currently employed there. The county council and partners invested in this award-winning business park in the middle of the last recession, as we knew the long-term benefits it would bring.

Philip Atkins

Leader of

Staffordshire County Council

Staffordshire starts 2019 with near full employment

Mark Winnington said it had been an encouraging start to the new year for Staffordshire's economy with near full employment and more business development on the way. Latest statistics show that just 1.3% of the county population are claiming out of work benefits – lower than both national and regional rates.



Mark added that the news followed approval of the i54 South Staffordshire western extension, which could generate up to 1,700 jobs and lever in £300 million investment at the site. "This will support our drive for better paid, higher skilled jobs in Staffordshire and release up to £3m a year in business rates – essential in funding our public services going forward. Half of the 2,700 people working on the current i54 site live within a 10-mile radius so this really will make a difference. With sites like Four Ashes in South Staffordshire and Redhill in Stafford nearing full occupancy and more major projects getting off the ground, we are confident of continued long-term growth, increased investment and employment opportunities."

Economic growth programme gathers pace

Business development sites currently under construction in Staffordshire with county council involvement will generate over £10m a year in business rates. And figures show the county is also developing a skilled local workforce to meet the growing demands of business.

Sites such as Liberty Park in Lichfield, Four Ashes in South Staffordshire, Meaford near Stone and the McArthurGlen Designer Outlet in Cannock will bring in around £10.3m in business rates when completed. Half of this will be retained locally.



Work begins at £38m Liberty Park

Work has started on a £38million development in Lichfield that is set to create more than 700 jobs.

The county council built a replacement road access bridge over the West Coast Mainline on behalf of the local enterprise partnership.

Helen Fisher attended an event to mark the start of works. She said the project was further demonstration of public and private sectors working together to deliver results.



The success of this project is a real boost to our package of strategic industrial and commercial developments that are raising Staffordshire's profile nationally and internationally and driving economic growth across our area, from i54 in the south to Ceramic Valley in the north.

Clear evidence that our Conservative long term economic plans are working.

Migrants discovered in lorry on M6

The story of 27 migrants being found in a lorry on the M6 in Staffordshire dominated the news after the M6 was shut.

The county council's work was to look after four of the migrants who have said they are under 18, and the assertion that it's not just ports that have to deal with this issue, was featured on many news outlets.

Because of lorry tachographs and the need for legal driver breaks after the long journey from the ports, over 200 young people have been found at the M6 Service Stations in Staffordshire over the past few years.



Library volunteers wanted

A new campaign reminding people how they can play an important part in their local library. Volunteers help with a wide range of duties from organising books and resources, dealing with customers, to helping with activities.

Gill Health has spoken about volunteers, saying: "Volunteers play an important role in promoting the library in their local communities and encouraging more people to visit and use the services."



Successful applicants have been named to take on the management and day-to-day running of five more Staffordshire libraries. Contracts have been offered to a parish council, local community group, business enterprise organisation and two Rotary Clubs to take on the daily management and delivery of Staffordshire County Council's libraries at Cheadle, Cheslyn Hay, Clayton, Eccleshall and Penkridge.

Improvements to on-street parking aims to support our High Streets and town centres

Improved on-street parking is being looked at in town centres across the county. Potential initial locations include Stafford, Lichfield, Stone, Cannock, Leek, Cheadle, Biddulph and Uttoxeter.

Obviously traders have voiced concerns that some shoppers may be put off from parking where charges were introduced.

Helen Fisher said that any new traffic orders could mean free parking at certain times or variable charges, helping to promote local businesses and offering more short stay options.



However High Street businesses in Cheadle have expressed concerns about a rumoured proposal to introduce 25 pay-and-display parking bays in the town. Traders fear this would hit trade and deter shoppers.

"While the county council is looking at plans which could raise up to £225,000 a year over the next three years by introducing charges on some streets in Staffordshire towns, funding which would in turn be reinvested in highways", Helen Fisher said, "the aim was to improve people's behaviour in on-street parking and ease enforcement." She stressed no decision has been made. Staffordshire County Council are asking for new ideas and suggestions to solve problems. We all recognise we must do more to support and help our High Streets thrive and survive.

Crossing patrols funding set to continue

School crossing patrols are to continue to be funded by Staffordshire County Council. As part of measures needed to close the £35m budget shortfall in 2019/20, the council was considering moving to a community funded service.



After listening to the consultation and public and staff feedback, Cabinet members decided this is not the right time to pursue this option.

Helen Fisher said crossing patrols were highly valued in communities and thanked those who had taken part in the consultation. In addition and separate to this, the county council secured one off additional funding for care and highways as part of the Local Government Finance Settlement.

Gritter investment as bad weather looms

The county council's investment in new gritting machines has been featured nationally in newspapers as we looked forward to the predicted return of the Beast from the East. The nine new gritters will help keep the county's 1000 square miles of highway moving.



Helen Fisher said: "The new vehicles are all fitted with the latest safety and satellite technology to help make sure drivers can get around safely and that roads get exactly the right amount of grit."

Hopefully we don't need these machines, but it is right that we have them to keep our economy moving and our residents as safe as possible.

Shop owner handed suspended sentence over counterfeit tobacco

A shop owner in Rugeley has been handed a suspended prison sentence and ordered to do 150 hours of unpaid community work for selling more than 12,000 fake cigarettes after Trading Standards undertook a successful prosecution..

Gill Heath explained that illicit tobacco can be harmful to people's health as it does not comply with safety and consumer regulations.

It also evades tax, which ultimately affects public services, so we're pleased with this latest successful prosecution.



Fostering... “We’ve loved every minute”

The council’s latest fostering campaign encourages people to put their spare room to good use in “People helping People”.

Long-time foster carers from Burton have fostered more than 80 children over 28 years. The couple say that they had loved every minute of it and urged other families to consider fostering.

There are 1,137 Looked After Children in the county council’s care.



£2 million smart road trial

News was announced that £1.9 million of Government cash will be used to create a ‘smart’ road network at Keele University.

The Living Lab project will help find new ways to help keep people on the move in a more sustainable way. Helen Fisher praised the project and said it was exciting not just for Staffordshire but for transport innovation and community improvement nationwide.



Cutting-edge technology will help improve traffic flow across the campus, in the project funded by the Department for Transport.

The scheme will explore how the Smart Highways concept, usually used on primary routes, can be applied to a local road network.

Job boosting scheme set to create over 1,800 jobs

News that The Chatterley Valley development scheme in North Staffordshire was granted planning permission was widely welcomed. The scheme next to the A500 in Newcastle Borough will see units built for industrial and distribution uses and could create almost 2,000 jobs.



Mark Winnington said: "This is a significant development as it lies within an Enterprise Zone making it highly attractive to business and we look forward to seeing construction work get under way as soon as possible."

County cashes in on attractions

Did you know that tourism is now worth £1.8bn a year to the county, with 24.6 million day trips and 1.6 million overnight stays?

I am sure you will encourage friends and families to support the local economy by staying in Staffordshire in the school holidays.

From Alton Towers and Drayton Manor to Wedgwood and the NMA there is something for everyone in Staffordshire.



£1m for community groups

The announcement was welcomed that community groups can access a £1m fund to use in support of initiatives for health and wellbeing, children and families.

Staffordshire County Council is set to launch the 'one-off, time-limited' Community Investment Fund (CIF) as part of revised budget proposals.

CIF will 'empower local communities to make a real difference' in their local areas over the next three years, encouraging people to help themselves and when able support their local community.



We're also supporting the voluntary sector to help empower local communities with some additional funding during the transition period from council to community services. This one-off funding will be for three years from August 2019, and will focus on health and wellbeing, and children and families.

"Those who can make the biggest difference to creating stronger, healthier, independent and more rewarding communities are the people who do a little more for themselves, their families and their friends and this is reflected in these new proposals."

Support for schools hit by tragedy

The recent fire tragedy in Sycamore Lane, Stafford, has affected many people.

While Leader Philip Atkins responded on behalf of the county council to the news of the deaths of four young people, both schools involved with the children were also supported by the authority's media team as they found themselves in the national spotlight.



Investigations into the circumstances of this tragic accident are ongoing.

Employment at Record Highs

The latest unemployment claimant figures for January show our Conservative number one priority of having a productive Staffordshire economy continues to work.

Staffordshire's unemployment claimant count rate is 1.4% and remains the lowest out of the 14 strategic authorities in the West Midlands and well below the national rate of 2.4%.

There are a total of 7,535 claimants in Staffordshire. In Stoke-on-Trent the claimant rate has increased to 3.3%, with 5,240 claimants.

Highways Investment for Next Year

Good news for Staffordshire roads AS The Department for Transport has allocated Staffordshire an additional one-off £8.899m for Highway Maintenance.

The cost to arrest the steady managed decline of Staffordshire's network is in the region of an ongoing extra £15m per annum and this one-off additional funding is ring-fenced to activities that directly replace or enhance the life of existing highway assets.

It will be distributed between a number of maintenance operations that have significant outstanding work programmes such as life-adding structural repairs (resurfacing and hot-spot patching) prioritised through the council's Highway Infrastructure Asset Management Plan (HIAMP), pothole repairs and pre-patching - to reduce the current work stack and to support the preventative maintenance programme and gully emptying - to accelerate the transition to the new asset-led routine cleansing regime.

In addition, funding will be devolved to each County Councillor's division for locally identified priorities that are not currently being delivered through the HIAMP. This funding will be £20k per division and each Member will have the opportunity to discuss their local priorities for this funding with their Community Liaison Infrastructure Manager in the New Year; with the aim to identify work activities by April 2019. They could pool divisional allocations and the inclusion of a Member's existing £7k Divisional Highways Programme influence over highway programmes.

The funding is to be spent during 2019/20 and identified works will be planned and co-ordinated to achieve the greatest value for money.

I am sure you will agree this is “Good News!”