

Aspire and Prosper Scrutiny Committee – Annual Report 2014

“To aspire & prosper in Tamworth” is the first strategic priority of this council and a priority that not only members present here tonight will hold very dear to them but so will all of Tamworth’s residents. We want Tamworth to be a place where everyone maximises their potential and is supported to do so not just by this council and its partners but by other residents, businesses, community groups and so on.

To do this, members of the Aspire & Prosper scrutiny committee have over the past year tried their very best to ask questions and monitor the performance of this council and other significant contributors to the aspire & prosper agenda. Have we been successful? That is not for me to judge but is a responsibility that the people of Tamworth will no doubt hold us to account to in a few short months.

So what work have members of this committee undertaken since last May?

Members have worked hard on two major pieces of work and also taken on several other less time consuming items of scrutiny work in an attempt to make Tamworth even better.

Since 2012 at least this committee has been actively scrutinising the issue of the golf course. Now this is a very highly charged political issue and members on opposing sides of the chamber have very different views. But what is clear is that members have been looking at the decision making process in a very public way for at least two years. Indeed at the first meeting of the committee for this council year held in June our main focus was the golf course and we were fortunate to welcome both the Portfolio for Economy and Education, Cllr Steve Claymore and the Director for Communities, Planning & Partnerships Rob Mitchell who took a series of rigorous questions. This process was repeated again in October 2013 and for a third time in February 2014. At the latter two of these public meetings the Leader of the Council attended to ensure total accountability and transparency ensued. I must thank all committee members for the very high quality, probing and relevant questions that were asked at all of these meetings. Those members of the public who were present would have seen true accountability and scrutiny in action.

Some of the less challenging, but no less important, items of scrutiny work we have looked at have ranged from the work of David Hunter, the newly appointed Regeneration Projects Co-ordinator to the proposals recently put forward by Staffordshire County Council with regard to their review of youth services. Back in December David joined our meeting to outline his role and how it will help support the prosperity of Tamworth residents and business in achieving our very important strategic priority. Again, members were free to question David with regard to his work and this did this with their usual unfaltering zeal for trying to ensure Tamworth is getting value for money.

It was also at the December meeting that the work of the Education & Skills Board was outlined and updated by Rob Mitchell. Members again questioned Rob about how effective the board is at ensuring the aspirations of young people in Tamworth are always at the forefront of our academic institutions.

When County Councillor Robbie Marshall joined us just a few weeks ago we were treated to an outstanding, and at the same time controversial, presentation outlining the county council

consultation with regard to Youth Services. After a very lengthy meeting which included yet another very rigorous Q & A session I think it is fair to say that Cllr Marshall left knowing just how strongly members felt about the suggestions being put forward.

Aside from the golf course, the other huge piece of ongoing work the scrutiny committee has undertaken is looking at education in Tamworth. The initial problem was where to start. Members suggested looking at Sixth Form provision, Key Stage Two performance, vocational provision and others. In the end, spurred on by a recommendation by Cllr Couchman at the State of Borough Debate, it was decided to start by looking at our secondary schools and how we as elected members and a borough council can support our secondary schools to become better. I think it is fair to say that some of our schools key performance indicators, such as GCSE performance suggest that they are very good but this same GCSE performance is not being replicated in all of our schools. So members of this committee have come together to challenge our secondary schools in a positive and supportive way to be top of their class. We want every child in Tamworth to have a top quality education and attend a school that engages them, their parents and the local community. At the same time we want to see our schools made locally accountable for their actions and performance. This is a mighty challenge we have set ourselves and one I can see being an ongoing project that will last for many years to come. A great deal of work has already been done behind the scenes with mixed success. I am pleased to report that Cllr Couchman and I will be meeting privately with our secondary head teachers this coming Friday to outline further the supportive process we would like them to engage with. It is hoped they will join with members at the next meeting of the Aspire & Prosper committee planned for April 9th.

I have mentioned her name on a couple of occasions already but even though Cllr Couchman is not a member of the Aspire & Prosper committee her support for the committee and its work in connection with education is unfaltering. I cannot thank her enough for the support she has shown me in some of the difficult and very much self-doubting moments I have experienced whilst trying to steer this process.

Whilst both education and the golf course are continuing items of labour which, I hope, will continue under the stewardship of the aspire& prosper committee for a long time to come. We have one final piece of work to look at this coming year. April 15th will be when Cllr Thurgood brings her transport scrutiny work to the committee. The work on this has again seen cross party support and working taking place. I await this final scrutiny work for this council year with much interest.

I hope I have said enough to outline the work we have done. It goes without saying that one of the major strengths of this scrutiny committee is the great working ethos and collaboration shown by all members to ensure that Tamworth truly does become an aspirational and prosperous place to live, work and grow up.

Fellow members of the committee I thank you all. It has been an honour to work with you every one of you.

R Kingstone
March 2014