



Buckinghamshire Council

Communities & Localism Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE INFORMAL WORKING GROUP MEETING OF THE COMMUNITIES & LOCALISM SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 16 DECEMBER 2021 VIA MS TEAMS, COMMENCING AT 9.30 A.M. AND CONCLUDING AT 12.10 P.M.

MEMBERS PRESENT

M Harker (Chairman), A Waite (Vice-Chairman), J Baum, P Drayton, M Hussain JP, M Knight, F Mahon, L Smith, M Stannard

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

S Bowles, A Hussain

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE / CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised that due to the situation at the time of this meeting and with covid-19 transmission on the increase, the meeting had been changed from a formal public meeting to a working group to allow the meeting to be held virtually. The Chairman reported that there had been a change in membership and Councillor Matt Knight was welcomed to the Committee. Councillor Knight had replaced Councillor Imran Hussain.

Apologies were received from Councillors G Smith, P Bass and G Hollis.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 October 2021 were agreed as an accurate record and would be formally agreed at the next committee meeting on 22 February 2022.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions had been received for this meeting.

5 CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE

The Chairman reported that a public consultation exercise was undertaken on the draft Statement of Licensing Policy under the Gambling Act 2005, this closed on 10 December and it was hoped that interested members were able to respond. The results would be considered by the Licensing Committee in February ahead of the policy going to Full Council for agreement.

Following Community Boards being highlighted as a priority area of work by this committee, a working group had been established to hold some 'deep dive' sessions in to community boards. The first of the deep dive sessions was held on 13 December where members discussed the concept of the boards and what 'good' looked like. The next session would take place on 20 January at 10 a.m. and members were advised that recommendations would be produced on the back of these sessions for the Cabinet Member to consider. To assist with this work, the Chairman advised that she had attended further community board meetings and sub-groups and had met with the Cabinet Member and Service Director to advise of early findings across boards.

The Chairman also reported that the domestic abuse strategy, that the committee recently received a private briefing on was approved by Cabinet at its meeting on 7 December. Under the work programme agenda item it was highlighted to members that domestic abuse had been brought forward to the next meeting.

6 COMMUNITY SUPPORT 'HELPING HAND'

The Committee received a presentation from Councillor S Bowles, Cabinet Member for Communities and Gill Harding, Head of Community Support. The presentation covered the changing landscape for those residents struggling financially which included the impact of the pandemic on individuals, the planned increase to National Insurance contributions by April 2022 and the energy cap which was expected to rise again in April 2022; the Helping Hand service and the positive impact this had on residents who accessed it; the Household Support fund and how it would be used; partnership working through the Buckinghamshire Financial Insecurity Partnership; and the Council's role in improving food infrastructure in Buckinghamshire.

During the presentation, the following key points were highlighted:

- Councillor Bowles thanked the team for their ongoing work across a number of projects and for having continued to deliver an excellent service to residents under pressured circumstances.
- A collaborative approach across all stakeholders was taken to support residents throughout challenging financial times. Challenges included increasing fuel costs, changes to universal credit, an uptake in residents accessing Healthy Start vouchers and an independent study having found people living in the Wycombe area being some of the most affected by food insecurity in the UK. Data intelligence sharing across services including housing associations, public sector and the business sector was essential to provide help to those in need.
- The team had liaised with the author of the study, which had been undertaken by Sheffield University to gain a better understanding of how to support the residents facing difficulty in the Wycombe area.
- There had been a changing landscape for those who were in need of support driven by increased living costs and consequences of the pandemic. It was highlighted that support was not just available for those in receipt of benefits and help could be provided for those in need over a short term period.
- Food banks experienced increasing demand particularly from residents who had never used the service before. The number of children who received free school meals increased with the highest numbers in Wycombe, Chesham and Aylesbury areas.

- Whilst uptake of the Healthy Start voucher scheme had been seen this was still heavily underutilised and work was ongoing with the Public Health Team to publicise the scheme more widely.
- Residents were able to access support through helping hands the Council's communities team. A signposting leaflet had been produced to improve the visibility of the support on offer and an online directory had been produced. The Buckinghamshire Financial Insecurity Partnership also raised awareness and signposted residents to available support. There had been a back on track event run by Red Kite Housing association which the team had supported to encourage employment opportunities and debt support for residents.
- The Helping Hand service had been built as a brand for residents to reach out to who may otherwise be off put by the stigma of contacting the council for assistance. The service was aimed to help people get back on track and those in need of short term support.
- A range of residents were entitled to access the Household Support Fund, a fund provided by central Government and members were encouraged to share details of this with residents where a need was identified. The fund was flexible and designed to ensure residents had food, warmth and support with household essentials/bills where needed. The Household Support Fund was available to support a range of needs and funding was distributed via third party organisations, including welfare teams, health visitors, adult social care teams, housing services, Heart of Bucks and directly from helping hands.
- The pandemic had a personal economic impact on many residents. The Buckinghamshire Financial Insecurity Partnership had launched its 'Back on Track' scheme to help residents access support to overcome initial financial challenges and find ways to stabilise their finances in the medium and long term. The scheme ensured collaborative working with organisations across the voluntary and community sector to collect data and build a robust sustainable solution. This partnership included Buckinghamshire Council, Citizens Advice, Housing Associations, DWP and other key groups. The data insight collected would feed in to a long term solution for a support model to residents. The 'helping to get you back on track' leaflet and social media campaign had proved successful in raising awareness of support for residents.
- The Buckinghamshire Food Partnership continued to look at addressing the key issue of residents struggling to access food. Financial support had been received from Government but future funding post-April 2022 was not yet known. A food access strategy was being developed with VCS partners to collaboratively agree an approach to addressing food poverty in Bucks. There had been work with Public Health England to roll out sustainable food support programmes encouraging residents to cook home grown food.

During discussion, questions and comments raised by the Committee included:

- The Committee commended the Communities team and partners for their work and highlighted the importance of working collaboratively to support the different levels of need in the community.
- A member was interested in whether there were plans to extend the 'Helping Hand' scheme beyond March 2022. The Committee was advised that there needed to be evidence of the level of demand for the service, including details on numbers of people who were back in work. This data collection would be supported through collaboration with the DWP and LEP.

- Members expressed concern around potential lack of Government funding moving forward. The Committee was advised that this was a risk, although the Government tended to leave announcements on future funding late, often very close to the end of the existing funding stream. A Member asked whether feedback about the scheme was provided to the Government and was advised that figures on how the funds had been distributed were passed back to the Government.
- Members were keen to know whether there was support available for those self-isolating. It was noted that residents had access to the household support fund, which could be accessed through the 'Helping Hand' scheme. Buckinghamshire Business First supported employment aspects and had launched a grant scheme to assist smaller firms in the rollout of work from home infrastructure to assist in keeping people in employment.
- A question was asked about approaching parish councils with a view to asking those with allotment plots, whether they could give excess food to someone who would value it. The Committee was advised that the team worked closely with public health on a 'grow to give' scheme where communities donated produce grown and further opportunities would be explored.
- It was noted that further work was required to ensure foodbanks connected and communicated to each other to ensure that if one food bank had a surplus, it was passed onto another food bank. The Council was working with food banks to see how it could best support residents, for example by providing vouchers instead of food parcels. Food support groups had been formed in some locations including High Wycombe. The scheme also looked at available pieces of land to grow produce, and also to encourage people to build skills necessary to cook meals with own-grown produce.
- Through working with Community Boards a community fridge infrastructure was being developed for people to access and the team was looking at providing a mapping tool to locate these across the county. The Council had encouraged staff to donate to food banks by providing drop-off locations within Council buildings, however, this had been more difficult due to the pandemic.
- A member asked whether elected members could get access to hard copy leaflets to distribute to residents, especially those who had to cancel their broadband connection due to financial constraints. The Committee was advised that the team would look to make these available to members, and that where possible residents should be discouraged from cancelling broadband due to the important connectivity it provided to them.
- The Chairman was interested in how the Council was supporting refugees from Afghanistan. Currently, there were three families in the Council's care, and the voluntary sector had been particularly proactive in offering support. Funding had been received from Heart of Bucks as well as central government. The Council was reliant on both social and private landlords to provide housing and the aim was to settle families and get working age people in to employment as soon as possible. Discussions with other local authorities were ongoing however families and in particular pregnant women were being supported. Schools were supporting and integrating child refugees who second language was English. The Chairman noted that long-term support would be required to support refugee families.

7 DEVOLUTION

The Committee received a presentation on devolution from Councillor S Bowles, Cabinet Member for Communities and Katie McDonald, Head of Localities. The presentation covered the importance of devolution to the Council's localism agenda; the objectives of the programme;

legacy arrangements; the effect of covid on delivery; the devolution process, stages and pilot schemes; and future plans.

During the presentation, the following key points were highlighted:

- Devolution entailed shifting power to communities and helped them get involved in local decision making and intended to deliver local services in line with local needs. The devolution programme aimed to
 - Improve outcomes and service quality for residents through enabling opportunities for services to be more tailored to meet the diverse needs of communities
 - Empower Town and Parish Councils through enabling further opportunities for local prioritisation and choice
 - Enable joint working with local communities to improve local services and facilities through increasing local control over services and assets
- The Council wanted to work with partners to develop the right devolution deals for local areas, enabling creative local solutions based on best practice, and providing technical advice and support.
- Examples were shared of legacy devolution arrangements highlighting what had worked well and what the lessons learnt were in areas such as green spaces, highways, youth centres and community libraries.
- It was important to the whole process that there was a cross-council collaborative approach to devolution. A number of things could be devolved, ranging from assets of community value through to local events.
- A Member Devolution Board was in place to help ensure the programme was driven forward and achieved maximum benefits for local communities and value for money. The Board met monthly and considered all expressions of interest received, reviewed implications and agreed recommendations for transfer and/or development of the business plans. The Board was made up of the Cabinet Member and Deputy Cabinet Member for Communities, the Cabinet Member for Resources, the Cabinet Member for Transport and two relevant Community Board Chairs for single item agendas to help ensure strong communication links on board area developments. Officers in attendance included the Deputy Chief Executive and Service Directors for Legal, Localities and Strategic Partnerships and Property as well as relevant Heads of Finance.
- There was a strict process in place which started at pre-application stage, where officers provided pre-application advice and assessed viability, through to expression of interest, business case, handover and transfer then aftercare and evaluation. The length of time required on any transfer was highlighted, with a number of checks and balances required along with risk assessments, legal issues, and possible break clauses.
- 14 possible pilots, in which 45 projects were in motion, were identified after parishes were invited to submit expressions of interest. The detail needed for each pilot had meant that these could not progress at a particularly rapid pace. An overview of pilots and areas was given to the Committee and would be circulated after the meeting.
- The team regularly liaised with other local unitary authorities who had successful devolution programmes, this included, Durham, Cornwall and Milton Keynes to ensure delivery in Buckinghamshire was of high quality.
- Highways services were a large part of the devolution programme and their expertise was relied upon for a number of asset transfers.
- Resources within the team had been an issue at times, however the Committee was advised that a specialist officer was now in post and significant progress was being made.

During discussion, questions and comments raised by the Committee included:

- The importance of transparency in decision making was highlighted and it was asked how the public could be reassured a robust procedure was being followed. The Committee was advised that a rigorous process was undertaken when assessing expressions of interest including assessing how proposals meet the needs of the local community, ensuring the business plan worked and the overall ethos of the asset was a good fit. It was reiterated the process did not just look at financial benefit but also community benefit. As it was early in the pilot stage, lessons were being learnt as projects were completed.
- Members were advised that the presentation slides from this meeting could be shared with Town and Parish Councils, if any member wished to.
- In relation to how Town and Parish Councils could feed in to the Members' Devolution Board it was explained that they did not have specific representation on the board, however issues could be raised through their relevant Community Board Chair who could take part in decision making on assets within their localities. The Cabinet Member advised he would consider other ways Town and Parish Council input could be captured by the board.
- With Wycombe being unparished a concern was raised that there was not a Town Council to build in to the devolution process, however the High Wycombe Town Committees views were sought on decisions.
- A member queried how Town and Parish Councils would meet maintenance costs should they escalate once an asset had been transferred. It was noted that assets were only passed on in reasonable condition, with any major issues resolved before the asset is devolved. Conditions for maintenance were set out in contracts and members were assured that the Council would not devolve any asset that was in any way defective. Financial planning takes place before the devolution happens to ensure maintenance is secured, and the scoring is based on the community benefit rather than solely on financial resources.

8 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received an up to date version of the work programme to cover the remainder of this municipal year. Members were advised that items had been scheduled for the most appropriate meetings where member input would be most valuable. The Committee was advised that domestic abuse and visitor economy were scheduled for the next meeting and topic suggestions were welcomed for the April meeting. Members suggested that a joint presentation from the devolution team with highway services would be welcome as would details on food security work happening. The Committee were open to food bank representatives attending that session to understand the challenges faced and the current infrastructure around delivering a service to vulnerable residents.

Resolved:

That the work programme be noted.

9 DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

22 February 2022 at 10 a.m.