



Buckinghamshire Council

Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee

Minutes

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE GROWTH, INFRASTRUCTURE & HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE
HELD ON WEDNESDAY 13 APRIL 2022 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE
ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 10.01 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 11.46 AM**

MEMBERS PRESENT

D Carroll, M Smith, T Hogg, M Bracken, N Brown, S Chapple, I Darby, C Poll and P Brazier

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

D Eggleton, L Michelson, K Sutherland, M Tett, G Williams and Cheston

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies were received from Cllrs Baughan, Chaudhry, Etholen, Hussain, Rouse and Town. Members noted that Cllr Peter Brazier would be substituting for Cllr Town for this meeting.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 17th February 2022 were confirmed as a correct record.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

The Select Committee had received two public questions.

Question from Mr Chadwick

Could the Cabinet Member or Officers please confirm that all relevant policies within the new Buckinghamshire Local Plan will contribute towards the urgent goals of reducing carbon emissions, and adapting to the impacts of climate change. Would you agree that these considerations cut across many areas of policy, including, in particular, housing, transport, and environment, but others, too - and thus that a coordinated and coherent approach across the piece is required? What structures and expertise are in place within the planning policy team to achieve this?

In particular, given the significant number of new homes to be built, will you be looking to put in place policies to require Passivhaus (zero carbon) standards of energy efficiency by early in the

Plan period, and if not, why not?

Cllr Gareth Williams, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration provided a response, making the following main points:

- The Council has a statutory and local obligation to mitigate and to adapt to climate change and reduce carbon. The Council has a climate change policy aiming to achieve a net zero carbon position in Buckinghamshire by 2050. Climate change will be an integral part of the Local Plan and will be embedded into the policies therein.
- It was acknowledged that this is cross-cutting and a Cabinet Member has been appointed to oversee the climate change agenda across the Council. The Planning Policy team will work closely with the environment and climate change team to produce robust and effective Local Plan policies.
- There is a climate change lead officer within the Planning Policy team who will liaise with the Council's environmental specialists on urban design, ecology, the natural environment, arboriculture and other relevant disciplines.
- The Local Plan for Buckinghamshire is in the early stages of production. The plan provides us with the opportunity to develop a range of new policies that, collectively, will reduce carbon dioxide emissions and encourage renewable and low carbon energy in Buckinghamshire.
- At the national level, the government introduced "The Future Homes Standard" in 2019 which will replace the current Building Regulations. It proposes that from 2025 new homes built to the Future Homes Standard will have carbon dioxide emissions at least 75% lower than those built to the current Building Regulation standards.

Question from Mr Thawley

Given that skills relating to the net-zero transition in construction will play an ever-increasing role in the economy, how is the council supporting local businesses to acquire these skills, either by ensuring that the relevant training is provided and accessible, or by supporting the growing market? To this end, given that we have to date been unable to require developments to do more than meet the minimum requirements set by government through planning, will the council commit to ensuring the developments it instigates itself (through Consilio Property, for instance or on council-owned land in Stoke Mandeville), will be required to be built to zero-carbon standards rather than vaguely promising to be 'energy efficient'?

Cllr Gareth Williams, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration provided a response, making the following main points:

- With circa 5000 people on the waiting list for social housing, the Council has to be mindful of the provision of affordable homes alongside the zero-carbon commitment that the Council has made.
- This means inevitably that there will be a tension between affordability of a development and climate change goals.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for his responses to the public questions.

5 CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE

The Chairman thanked officers in housing who had delivered Member Briefings on the Homelessness Strategy where members of the Committee had been able to provide their feedback.

The Chairman also reported that Cllr Chris Poll had presented the Member Engagement in Planning review report to Cabinet on 1st March and all six recommendations had been accepted.

6 BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LOCAL PLAN UPDATE

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Gareth Williams, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration, Darran Eggleton, Head of Service, Planning, Policy and Compliance and John Cheston, Planning Policy Manager to the meeting. The Cabinet Member highlighted the following main points:

- There continued to be uncertainty in connection with anticipated changes to the planning framework following the appointment of Michael Gove as the new Secretary of State in Autumn 2021. It was now being suggested that any changes to planning might be included in the Levelling Up and Regeneration bill.
- Eleven local authorities had chosen to suspend the development of their Local Plans as a result of this uncertainty, but Buckinghamshire was continuing to work on the development of the Local Plan and officers were concentrating on elements of work that they hope would not need to be revised.
- The principal workstream to date focussed on identifying brownfield sites. On 6th December 2021 a second call for brownfield sites had been launched and a further 47 sites had been proposed to date. A lot of brownfield sites had already been developed and whilst it would be preferable to concentrate future development on brownfield, it was recognised that this would not provide all the necessary space required to meet the government housing numbers.
- An Attitudes Survey had been undertaken to enable members of the public to provide feedback on their key priorities for the Local Plan at an early stage. There had been 3439 responses to the survey, which was a positive sign of engagement.
- The two main elements of the Local Plan – the key policies and the nominated sites, would be subject to consultation with the public and other stakeholders, such as Town and Parish Councils.
- It was noted that until the new Local Plan was finalised the current Wycombe Local Plan and Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan would remain in place.

The Chairman invited members' questions and in response to questions and during subsequent discussions, the following main points were noted:

- In connection with a question about the survey response, the Cabinet Member advised that he had seen the provisional results of the survey. Early responses had come from an older demographic so there was a communications push on social media to try and engage with younger residents too. The geographical spread of response would also be analysed. The Cabinet Member was happy to share the survey response with the Select Committee shortly.

ACTION: Cllr Gareth Williams

- A Member expressed concern that areas in the south of the county were currently vulnerable to speculative planning applications. The Cabinet Member advised that the five-year land supply numbers would shortly be released which would provide some protection, alongside the protection already afforded by the Green Belt and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
- It was noted that the timescale for completion of the Local Plan in light of potential Government changes was very challenging. The Cabinet Member would share an updated timeframe for Local Plan delivery at his next update to the Committee.
- The Cabinet Member was also asked how Members could get more involved with the Local Plan. In response, the Cabinet Member reported that there was a Member Local Plan Working Group which included the Chairs of all the Council's Planning Committees and others who were feeding views into the Local Plan. The Working Group had consulted with previous Cabinet Members of the legacy District Councils about their

experiences of producing a Local Plan and had also held sessions considering Density, Design Codes and Environmental and Climate Change. All 147 members would have the opportunity to comment at the consultation stages and the Cabinet Member was open to discussions with any Members who had particular expertise.

- National guidelines for environmental standards in new home building would be followed although there was flexibility to determine if higher standards should be applied in Buckinghamshire. The environmental impact would have to be balanced against the affordability of the housing and Council would agree the policies around this.
- It was highlighted that the Statement of Community Involvement was difficult to locate on the Council's website. Officers agreed to look into this.
- There was a discussion around the number of Town and Parish Councils that have agreed a Neighbourhood Plan and what influence these might have over the Local Plan for Buckinghamshire. It was reported 40% of Town and Parish Councils in the county had a designated neighbourhood area and there were currently 30 Neighbourhood Plans in place and 38 more were in development, including 4 which were reviews of existing plans. With regard to planning decisions, whilst Neighbourhood Plans would be taken into consideration, the Buckinghamshire Local Plan would take priority.
- Members asked what more could be done to promote Neighbourhood Plans to Town and Parish Councils as the take up seemed very low. The Cabinet Member explained that regular planning forums were held with Town and Parish Councils and Neighbourhood Plans were also promoted via Buckinghamshire Association of Local Council (BALC) forums as well. Some Parishes were perhaps nervous about the relevance of Neighbourhood Plans and they did involve a lot of work. A Member commented that 6 of his 7 Parishes had Neighbourhood Plans and he believed that this had prevented some unwanted developments.
- The Cabinet Member reported that 1200 people had responded to the consultation which Chesham Town Council ran when preparing their Neighbourhood Plan. This level of engagement was good to see and also helped to inform Buckinghamshire Council about what people want to see locally and could help to add local texture to the Local Plan.
- A Member commented that Neighbourhood Plans helped to preserve areas of character and could consider smaller elements such as grass verges and shop fronts which can really contribute to the local community.
- Darran Eggleton commented that there was a team to support the development of Neighbourhood Plans and he would encourage Town and Parish Councils to be proactive and work towards this, as a Neighbourhood Plan would help when planning decisions are being taken.
- A Member asked about sustainability issues and commented that there were lots of innovative ways that concrete and more natural materials could be used in developments. The Cabinet Member advised that the Local Plan would not be too prescriptive about what materials should be used as there were pros and cons for different construction styles and there could be recurrent costs with certain materials that would also need to be taken into account.
- In response to concerns raised about planning applications around Iwer and Wexham in the South of the County, the Cabinet Member advised that there had been lots of discussions with Colne Valley Park, local members and the MP and permission for development in the Green Belt was only granted in exceptional circumstances.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration and his officer team for attending the meeting.

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Martin Tett, Leader of the Council and Lisa Michelson, Service Director, Economic Growth and Regeneration to the meeting.

The Chairman invited the Leader to highlight the key points from the report on Levelling Up and the following main points were noted:

- The Government had stood on a 'Levelling Up' platform at the 2019 general election but the policy was not clearly defined in terms of delivery and the Covid 19 pandemic has delayed its development.
- In September 2021, Michael Gove replaced Robert Jenrick as the Secretary of State for the renamed Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and in February 2022, the Levelling Up White Paper was published, setting out a broad range of ways in which the levelling up agenda would be taken forward.
- The White Paper sets out four key outcomes – Boost productivity, pay, jobs and living standards; Spread opportunities and improve public services; restore a sense of community, local pride and belonging and Empower local leaders and communities.
- The policy is underpinned by five mutually reinforcing pillars, namely: reshaping Central Government decision making; Empower local decision making; The role of data, monitoring and evaluation; Transparency and Accountability and 12 medium term missions.
- Reshaping Government decision making was important to note, as previously Government has evaluated projects in terms of capital return which was biased towards projects based in the South and South East of the country.
- The 12 missions are very broad in scope and are to be delivered by 2030. The 12 missions encompass the following: Employment; Research and Development; Transport; Broadband; Education; Health inequalities; Skills training; Crime; Home ownership; Wellbeing; Pride in place and Devolution.
- Devolution is about devolving more decision making to local government but it has been difficult to pin down exactly what this means. The White Paper outlines a Devolution Framework with three tiers. Buckinghamshire currently lies in Tier 2, with Tier 3 only open to areas with directly elected Mayors. The Leader commented that he believed that Buckinghamshire could be categorised as Tier 2 plus.
- Buckinghamshire Council had not been awarded a county deal as part of the first tranche but the Leader would continue to lobby for inclusion in future rounds. However, it was noted from the first tranche of devolution deals that no additional funding new funding was attached. Buckinghamshire was in a strong position with a well-developed Growth deal proposal and in the meantime, Cabinet was considering how the Council could address levelling up issues locally.

The Chairman invited Members' questions. In response to questions and during the subsequent discussions, the following main points were noted:

- A Member questioned what the Council could do to address inequalities when Government did not see Buckinghamshire as a priority at this time. The Leader commented that the global financial situation, which was now exacerbated by the war in Ukraine was contributing to a cost of living crisis. The Council's Helping Hands scheme had received £2.4m of government funding to help to support the most vulnerable and the Council was also currently administering the £150 Council Tax rebate. Additional support measures were currently being considered.
- The White Paper was trying to address long term structural issues. Although a county deal might not deliver substantial new funding it could provide more freedoms and flexibilities for the Council which would be advantageous.
- The Council was also using one off Capital investment in town centre regeneration for example to support job creation and pride in place and the Council could also consider

- partnership working with the private sector to deliver more transformative projects.
- A Member commented that he would like to see more innovation with regards to the Council raising its own finance and more opportunities for the Council to invest its reserves more effectively. The Leader commented that the Council was financially strong due to strong governance and a prudent approach but agreed that there were limits in terms of how money could be raised.

The Chairman thanked the Leader and Lisa Michelson for attending the meeting and answering members' questions.

8 WORK PROGRAMME

The Chairman invited members to suggest any possible topics for consideration for the Select Committee's future work programme.

9 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

14th July 2022 at 10am – to be confirmed.