

Questions on notice

Full Council meeting 6 December 2023

Question to Councillor Mark Winn, Cabinet Member for Homelessness and Regulatory Services from Councillor Robin Stuchbury in relation to the Council's Housing Strategy 2024 - 2029

Full Council agreed a Notice of Motion on 9 December 2020 on "Buckinghamshire Council becoming a Social Housing Provider" the second part of which stated "Council calls on Cabinet to instruct Officers to commission a report detailing both current and future possible affordable housing delivery models, including local authority owned social housing, which will maximise the provision of the best range of good quality affordable housing appropriate to the needs of our residents."

Can the Cabinet Member please inform Members whether he believes the current draft Housing Strategy 2024-29 which is subject to public consultation will lead to the provision of the level of social housing at affordable rents to be able to accommodate shortages for social and key worker housing in the county, and whether more consideration can be given in the Strategy, as per the agreed 2020 Council Notice of Motion, to the Council becoming a social housing provider and utilising Council owned properties for this purpose?

Response

The Housing Strategy sets out the housing affordability issues facing Buckinghamshire and clarifies the priorities and actions for the Council as we all seek to address these challenges. There is a need to explore all options and avenues that may support delivery of the vision set out in the strategy which is 'A strong housing offer that provides affordable, accessible, sustainable, and suitable choices for all life stages'.

We have already received feedback from the consultation currently underway which references direct delivery and are aware of an existing motion on this from 2020. In response to this, we will add explicit reference in the strategy to include an action to explore options whereby the Council becomes a Registered Provider of social housing (Local Housing Company). This piece of work will set out the process, financial implications, risks, and potential benefits of this model.

In terms of accommodating Key Workers, the housing strategy contains the following priority:

Priority one – Responding to the needs of our Diverse Population

Under this priority, Buckinghamshire Council will undertake the following:

- Identify, specify, and deliver housing options for groups with particular needs. This will include options development for specialised housing solutions for Care Leavers, **Key Workers**, Persons leaving the Armed Forces, Older People, Persons with a physical and/or learning disability or mental health needs.

We are monitoring good practice used by other local authorities in devising affordable housing options for key workers on low to medium annual incomes.

Question to Councillor Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services from Councillor Robin Stuchbury in relation to the provision of Children's Centres in Buckinghamshire

As part of Early Help Review proposals in 2017 the former County Council took a decision to close Children's Centres in the county and to deliver services through a new model from April 2018. The new model included for venues to offer early help services through a geographical approach to the location of local community hubs to deliver services. More recently, the Buckinghamshire Council's Children's Services Transformation Strategy 2023 has stated the importance of community hubs in improving outcomes for SEND children in Buckinghamshire. The Strategy does not make mention of Children's Centres that can be of high value in delivering early diagnosis and interventions for children with learning disabilities/SEND.

Could the Cabinet Member please advise Members what monitoring has been done of these 'new' arrangements to assess the impact that closing Children's Centres has had on improving outcomes for children and young people with special education needs in the county?

Response

Thank you, Councillor Stuchbury, for your detailed question regarding the provision of children's centres in Buckinghamshire and their impact on improving outcomes for children with special educational needs.

To clarify, the decision that the former County Council took in March 2019 was to agree, following a consultation process, changes to the Council's early help services. This did include a decision around the future use of children's centre buildings as we knew services were not reaching those families who needed help the most. Only 5% of families accessing children's centres had an identified need for support in 2017/18.

Since the new service went live in September 2019, we know that at the point of referral into early help services, the most appropriate support based on the individual needs of the child/family is identified. This support is provided by a range of Council practitioners and partners delivering services and support across the spectrum of needs for children and their families, providing help at the earliest stage through to those with more complex needs, referring to statutory support where required, including support for children with special educational needs. Our family centres also continue to signpost families to the SEND Local Offer and the SEND Service as relevant to get help on how to access support and, if necessary, how to request an assessment. The access to support is therefore broader and more easily available to parents as it does not rely on visiting a centre. For this reason, I am confident that the support we provide to children and families is more aligned to their needs as a result of

the changes introduced. On the point of Children's Services Transformation Programme, the initial proposed changes to the service will be implemented in April 2024 and involve the reorganisation of relevant staff into Locality Family Support Teams and into a Family Hub model. The Family Hub structure will utilise our existing family centres, to bolster the success of the Early Help Partnership. This will ensure that families that do not require statutory or higher tier intervention are supported effectively within communities and that preventative activity is tailored and targeted, through local partnerships, to ensure it reaches families at the earliest point.

Question 1 to Councillor Steven Broadbent, Cabinet Member for Transport from Councillor Adam Poland-Goodyer in relation to cycle infrastructure in Buckinghamshire

Following reports in the local press and an item at Cabinet, it was stated that Council will be reallocating funds to future years for some projects, in particular £1.237 million from cycle infrastructure. Could the Cabinet Member please identify which projects are at risk/will be delayed, confirm what the current status of the Wendover to Great Missenden Greenway is and whether this will be affected and, if not, do we have an opening date for this project?

Response

Appendix 1 of the Q2 Capital Budget Adjustments & Reprofiling report presented to Cabinet on 14th November 2023, available [here](#), mentions that £1.237m of funding for Cycle Infrastructure will be reprofiled. This relates to a cycle infrastructure project in Aylesbury that is being funded through the Aylesbury Garden Town Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) project. The project is currently in early development stages, and subject to further investigation and local engagement is expected to be delivered within the next 1-2 years. The project is not at risk and funds are not being reallocated to alternative projects.

The Misbourne Greenway, which will connect Wendover Dean and Great Missenden, is currently under construction. This project is being managed, funded and delivered by Sustrans, the national walking and cycling charity. This project therefore does not feature in, and is not affected by, the Council's budget. The Council anticipates that the Misbourne Greenway will be opened in Spring 2024, subject to confirmation from Sustrans.

Question 2 to Councillor Steven Broadbent, Cabinet Member for Transport from Councillor Peter Cooper in relation to phase 1 of the SEALR project

Please could Cllr Broadbent (Cabinet Member for Transport) give members an update on the progress of Phase 1 of the SEALR. The press reports that funding has been removed from the

current budget are alarming. The SEALR phases one and two are intended to take pressure from other roads in Town, particularly the town centre & gyratory. The residents of Mandeville & Elm Farm, Stoke Grange and Hawkslade have already experienced months of uncertainty due to the elongated planning process and stop/start preparatory works. What reassurances can you give the Town as a whole and those residents adjacent to the proposed site, that the project will be completed in its entirety and what the revised timeline for opening each stage will be?

Response

Firstly, I would like to take the opportunity to correct recent press reports which stated that the Council has removed funding for the South East Aylesbury Link Road. This is simply incorrect and was a misinterpretation of the published information, which looked to reprofile expenditure to align with the current timescales for delivery as part of normal financial processes.

The Council remains committed to the delivery of the South East Aylesbury Link Road and we continue to be involved in discussions with central government regarding the financing of the project. Securing these funds has taken far longer than anticipated, however a substantial portion of the funding, through the Housing Infrastructure Fund, has now been agreed with Homes England.

The recent key decision taken by the Leader of the Council on the 30th October 2023, provided authority to start construction works on the Wendover Road and Lower Road roundabouts. Works are due to start on 11th December 2023 on Wendover Road following on from the preparatory works that have already taken place. There are further decisions on the forward plan to be taken in the early part of 2024, relating to the next stages of the SEALR project which will set out the revised programme and completion dates. I recognise the importance of SEALR for residents of Aylesbury and the travelling public using the roads of Buckinghamshire, and the project remains a key priority for the Council.

Question 3 to Councillor Steven Broadbent, Cabinet Member for Transport from Councillor Julia Wassell in relation to footpaths between High Wycombe Rail Station and Gomm Valley

£35k was set aside for an innovative bid to link footpaths together between the Railway Station and Gomm Valley to encourage walking. This project is now reported to the High Wycombe Town Committee as 'complete' which is erroneous. This is not complete as the signage and information boards have not been funded to promote this walking route and £8k is still required to complete the scheme when a small underspend is accounted for. The new signage includes removal of a large 'Bucks County Council Easton Street Area Office' sign. How will you support the proper completion of this scheme into which Officers and Members have invested considerable time?

Response

A paper on the local Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) funding allocation was presented to High Wycombe Town Committee on 22nd November 2023. This paper advised that of the £35k CIL budget allocated to this project, £33,789 of this has been spent on improvements to footpaths in the east Wycombe area. I appreciate your aspiration to provide signage and information boards. Unfortunately, the remaining local CIL allocation, totalling £1,211, is insufficient to deliver these features unless additional funding is secured. This could be achieved through external contributory funding or a further allocation of local CIL funding if the Town Committee were minded to recommend this. I regret that in view of the financial constraints facing the Council there is no additional Council funding available. However, the removal of outdated signage is something that could be raised with the Local Area Technician for action.

Question to Councillor John Chilver, Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources and Councillor Peter Strachan, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration from Councillor Adam Poland-Goodyer in relation to S106 funds in Aylesbury

For the past 15 years Coldharbour Parish Council has been in negotiations with (originally AVDC), Taylor Wimpey, Ernest Cook Trust and what was Buckinghamshire County Council, now Buckinghamshire Council, about the legal status and ownership of the riverine corridor that travels through the Coldharbour Parish.

What should be a simple land transfer (that could have been resolved years ago) is still ongoing with lawyers and stake holders from all sides blaming each other for delays. This has incurred costs for all Buckinghamshire residents which includes ongoing legal fees for a process that should have been completed years ago.

This land was promised with the agreement of S106 money from the developer, which we have been repeatedly assured has been ringfenced.

Would and could the Cabinet Member please, with urgency, convene an in-person meeting with all relevant parties to resolve the legal blockages to what should be a simple land transfer and reassure Coldharbour Parish Council that the S106 money, that was promised to be ringfenced, is indeed still available for the maintenance of this integral flood protection measure.

Response

I agree that it is unfortunate that the Transfer of land relating to Phases 4 to 7 Fairford Leys to Coldharbour Parish Council have not yet been completed. There are a number of legal points that remain to be completed, including finalising the wording of the Transfer, and gaining the

approval of the Ernest Cook Trust, so that the Transfer can then be engrossed and sealed by the parties in readiness for completion. Following completion, the Transfer to Coldharbour Parish Council can be completed.

Unfortunately, the legal officer who was dealing with this has left the Council. However, the case has been passed to a new legal officer who will be progressing this. While I am unable to give a date for completion, please be assured that our Legal Department is treating this matter as a priority and will do everything to get the Transfer agreed and put in the name of Coldharbour Parish Council.

We would be open to a meeting to share an understanding of any outstanding issues and the way ahead. Given the need for our legal team to review the case file any meeting will need to be scheduled between the relevant legal teams in January. I am asking that a note be circulated after that meeting setting out agreed actions to complete the transfer.

Background

As the question alludes to, there is a good deal of background to this. Planning permission granted in 1993 subject to a s106 agreement for the development of Coldharbour Farm in Aylesbury (now Fairford Leys). The Riverine Corridor runs right across the development and covers an area of nearly 12 hectares. The former AVDC agreed in 2001 that it would adopt the Riverine Land, five years after completion of landscaping of the entire Riverine Corridor. This period elapsed in 2011 so that adoption could progress.

There then followed a considerable period working with the Developer (Taylor Wimpey) to bring the land (or specific Phases) up to the Council's adoptable standard. There is no commuted sum payable, the Council put aside £850,000 reserves to fund the future maintenance of the land.

In 2016, Coldharbour Parish Council submitted a proposal that they take future ownership of this land subject to these funds being made available to support future maintenance. This was approved by a Cabinet Member Decision in September 2017.

Phases 1 to 3 transferred to AVDC and then on to and then to Coldharbour Parish Council between May 2019 and October 2021 and November 2022. To date, £360k has been paid to the Parish Council from the Reserve for the future maintenance of the land with £490k still held and ringfenced for this purpose.

Coldharbour Parish Council want to take the remaining land as soon as possible and without requiring the Developer to undertake any further works in an effort to progress things quicker. In order to expedite this our Legal team were instructed to complete the transfer of the remaining four phases which ideally will pass directly from Taylor Wimpey to Coldharbour Parish Council without the need to pass to Buckinghamshire Council.

Additional Notes

- The development of Coldharbour Farm, in Aylesbury brought about Fairford Leys under planning permission 93/01593/APP and subject to a S106 Agreement dated 20/12/93.
- AVDC agreed under a later Deed (dated 5 January 2001) that it would adopt the Riverine Land, but not before five years had elapsed from completion of landscaping of the entire Riverine Corridor. This period elapsed in 2011 enabling adoption to progress thereafter.
- Due to the size of the area, the area was initially split into seven sections to allow the Developer to carry out the maintenance works required.
- Phase 1 transferred to AVDC in November 2017 and then to Coldharbour Parish Council in May 2019. Phases 2 & 3 transferred to AVDC in November 2019 and on to Coldharbour Parish Council in October 2021 and November 2022 respectively.

Question to Councillor Peter Strachan, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration from Councillor Julia Wassell in relation to CIL funding for Portland House, Arnison Avenue, High Wycombe

The process for this takes place at the High Wycombe Town Committee. CIL money was bid for and £150k awarded for East Wycombe Shopping Centres. This was agreed and the priority agreed was Portland House, Arnison Avenue. £25k was spent on consultation and artist impressions of potential improvements. This left £125k remaining for works. In November 2022 at the High Wycombe Town Committee Meeting an officer announced that the figure for this project was now £0. I managed to reinstate £50k for the project. At the subsequent meeting the officer apologised and advised that the figure for the project remained £125k and they had previously been supplied erroneous figures. Therefore, decisions made subsequently were based on incorrect information. I believed this error had been rectified, however at the most recent meeting the error is being carried forward again and monies are urgently needed for this project.

What support can you give to the community of Bowerdean to ensure that the original figure of £125k is carried forward? These are much needed improvements at Portland House, Arnison Avenue which is an eyesore that residents must put up with daily due to lack of infrastructure improvements.

Response

It is for the High Wycombe Town Committee to consider what recommendations it wishes to make concerning funding. However, I can confirm that there is a current budget commitment for district centre public realm improvements of £125,000. The Town Committee minutes from January 2023 indicate that members of the Committee confirmed that 'the sum of £50,000 funding towards a feasibility study for improvements to Arnison Avenue shopping parade be met from the budgeted £125,000 that is allocated'.

Question to Councillor Martin Tett, Leader from Councillor Julia Wassell in relation to Opportunity Bucks

When this scheme was originally planned it was said that funding to deprived wards could be £150k each over three years. It appears that some Opportunity Bucks schemes are old schemes 'rebadged', rather than new investment. Can we have a full explanation about how Opportunity Bucks is funded overall and per ward?

Response

The Opportunity Bucks programme formally launched on 7th December 2022, and the Council have committed to providing funding of £1.5m per year for each year of the programme. This funding has not been allocated per ward or across particular themes, it is coordinated across the programme for use on initiatives that will make the biggest impact and deliver the outcomes we are seeking to achieve. We are also identifying and maximising the use of additional funding streams to support the programme, including £2.2m of Health Inequalities funding and £2.1m of funding to support the Multiply initiatives.

Opportunity Bucks is a partnership approach across Buckinghamshire, with statutory partners and the voluntary and community sector working together. The ethos of the programme is to consider how we are using our collective resource to improve outcomes for residents who need it the most, and as such many of the initiatives being delivered through the programme are enabled through coordinated collective effort, rather than through additional investment.

For the initiatives that are drawing down from the programme budget, we are tracking the delivery and impact of these to ensure we are obtaining best value from the funding. For example, the Making Every Adult Matter team are funded through the programme budget for year 1, and are on track to achieve savings far in excess of the cost of the team for this year, through preventing and reducing rough sleeping in Wycombe.

Further information on the programme can be found in the report taken to Cabinet in November

<https://buckinghamshire.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s67300/Report%20for%20Opportunity%20Bucks%20Progress%20Update.pdf> or through the Opportunity Bucks webpages: <https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/community-and-safety/opportunity-bucks/>

Question to Councillor Angela Macpherson, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing from Councillor Julia Wassell in relation to Social Worker registrations

Social Workers are required to re-register with Social Work England prior to December 1st each year. As of 16th November 2023, only 47.5% nationally had completed all three actions required and Social Work England expressed concern about this on 23rd November 2023. Do

you think Buckinghamshire Social Workers are receiving sufficient support to complete the Continuous Professional Development requirement through protected time and line management support or other measures?

Response

Adult social care creates and promotes Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities for both staff and managers, to make the registration process as easy and simple as possible for our workforce. Although staff do not have protected time, CPD is woven into everyday practice, including through a number of specific initiatives including:

- Monthly reflective practice sessions for managers and staff
- Thematic focus on particular areas of practice each month throughout the year, with practice webinars attended by all social work staff
- Promotion of CPD training sessions for staff and managers, including those provided by Social Work England
- A CPD toolkit for Buckinghamshire managers and staff, which encourages best practice with links to internal and external resources

The registration period is actively promoted with staff and checks are done post-registration to ensure staff are working within national professional requirements.