



SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE  
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE ENVIRONMENT

REVIEW AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF  
LOCAL COMMITTEES

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## SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE ENVIRONMENT

### REVIEW AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL COMMITTEES

- 1 Over the last three months the Select Committee on the Buckinghamshire Environment has undertaken a programme of work reviewing the County Council's Local Committees and investigating options for the future. It is hoped this work will help inform the Council's submission to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport & the Regions with regard to a future structure and constitution for the County Council.

#### The Current Arrangements

- 2 The County Council established four Local Committees in May 2000, one for each of the District Council areas of Aylesbury Vale, Chiltern, South Bucks and Wycombe. The Committees are committees of the Council. Currently on a pilot basis, however, their agendas have been mainly restricted to environmental services issues and, in particular highway matters.
- 3 Under their current constitution, the Committees advise the Director of Environmental Services on matters such as priorities for spending on structural maintenance, passenger transport initiatives, road safety and traffic management measures.
- 4 The committees meet four times each year (currently May, July, October and January). During the first year each committee has considered and agreed how an ear-marked sum of £100,000 within the Highways Structural Maintenance budget should be spent and have put forward proposals for a share of a central pot of £100,000 maintenance funding. The Committees are not legally able to make financial decisions, however the Director has agreed to be bound by their proposals. The Committees have advised on the Road Safety Plan, the 'easybus' rural Bus Project, and the Forbearance Fund.
- 5 The majority of the agenda items have been dealt with in conventional committee manner, but workshops have been used, for example, to gather views on the draft Road Safety Plan. The workshops were welcomed by committee members and provided an opportunity for them to get to know one another and work together on a more informal basis. It is proposed to use workshops for suitable items in the future.
- 6 The committees play a significant role in fostering liaison between the three tiers of local government principally in areas of transport and planning.
- 7 Membership of the Local Committees varies between the local committees:

#### **Aylesbury Vale**

County Council	10
District Council	2
Parish/Town Council	8*

#### **South Bucks**

County Council	8
District Council	2
Parish/Town Council	6

#### **Chiltern**

County Council	8
District Council	2
Parish/Town Council	6

#### **Wycombe**

County Council	9
District Council	2
Parish/Town Council	7*

\*One member of the Aylesbury & Wycombe Local Committees represent the Charter Trustees of Aylesbury & Wycombe respectively.

- 8 The County Council appoints the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of each committee. In addition to the members of the Local Committee any local County, Parish or District Council member who is not a member of the Local Committee may speak on any item affecting his/her division at the invitation of the Chairman, but not vote. The representatives of all other parish and town councils in the area, and other nominated organisations are invited to attend and participate in the discussion but are not be eligible to vote.
- 9 There is a list of other organisations that are invited to attend Local Committees contained in the constitution. Each Local Committee has its own constitution, which takes into account local arrangements regarding representatives. A copy of the constitution for the Aylesbury Vale Local Committee is attached (Appendix A) as an example.

### **Conduct of the Review**

- 10 Views on the way Local Committees have operated so far (and how they might be improved) have been sought from a variety of sources. The Committee has interviewed a number of people and sought written comments, these are detailed below.
  - Mr. Chapple, Deputy Leader (former Chairman of Environmental Services and Aylesbury Vale Local Committee) (Minutes – 9 January, 2001)
  - Ms. Smith, Performance and Initiatives Manager (Report and Minutes 9 January,2001)
  - Mr Royston, Cabinet Member for Planning and Transportation (Minutes 8 February, 2001)
  - Mrs Relfe, Acting Strategic Director of Environmental Services and General Manager, Planning and Transportation (Minutes 8 February, 2001)
  - Mr Currell, Head of Transportation (Minutes 8 February 2001)
  - Chairman of Aylesbury Vale Association of Local Councils (Notes of Meeting 26 February)
  - Chairmen of Local Committees (Feedback from Chairmen and Minutes 2 March, 2001)
  - Members of the Select Committee (Minutes 9 January 2001, 8 February 2001 and 2 March, 2001)
  - Buckinghamshire County Council General Managers (2 March 2001)
  - Local Area Co-ordinators (2 March 2001)
11. Feedback from the interviews/written comments received is summarised in Appendix B attached but some of the emerging themes are highlighted below:
  - Piloting the Local Committees in their current form had been helpful in facilitating a smooth transition to the modernised Council and much had been learned from the experience.
  - The Local Committees are good but need to be developed further in order to keep participants on board and interested.
  - Chairmen of Local Committees should be more closely involved with the agenda setting. District and Parish colleagues should be invited to submit items for the agenda.
  - The system of voting in local committees causes confusion in some areas.

- The remit of local committees could be widened to discuss other than environmental issues. However, it was important to resolve any existing problems first.
  - Local Committees could be an important tool in consulting and disseminating information to local communities on a wide range of issues including cross cutting issues such as community safety.
  - The County Council should take into account the way in which District Councils were developing their modernised structures – further consideration should be given to working closely with the Districts to develop local forums, which could be used by all tiers of local government and other partners.
  - Public participation in meetings e.g. ‘question time’ should be encouraged and could open each meeting (advance notification of questions could be required to ensure that the right staff were available if necessary).
  - Consideration could be given to providing budgets to the local committees (or local committee members) for (local) community type projects.
  - The current configuration of local committees, based on district council boundaries may not be the most appropriate for Buckinghamshire and should be reviewed. The Aylesbury Local Committee, for example, was too large. Wycombe Local Committee might also benefit from being subdivided into two, covering urban and rural areas respectively.
12. Views have also been sought via a questionnaire, which has been sent to all County Councillors, District Council members, and participants in Local Committees and other partners and stakeholders. In total questionnaires were sent to approximately 500 organisations/individuals.
- 13 At the time of writing responses to the questionnaire have been received from 122 organisations and individuals. A detailed report of the results of the survey is attached as Appendix C. However some headline results of the survey are outlined below, a further update report of results will be tabled.
- 81% of respondents felt that 4 meetings a year was about right.
  - 88% feel that the tone of the meeting (degree of formality) is about right
  - 46% of all respondents expressed a preference for early evening meetings starting at 5.00 or 6.00 pm, 28% prefer afternoon meetings. 71% of those responding from the South Bucks Committee area have expressed a preference for afternoon meetings. Some respondents made the point that people who work full time often find it difficult to attend unless meetings are in the evening.
  - Overall 46% of respondents felt that the length of meetings was about right, compared with 42% who think they are too long. An analysis by district shows that all districts except Wycombe feel that their meetings are too long.
  - Roughly equal proportions of respondents; felt that agendas were either too long (47%) or about right (50%).
  - 76% of respondents feel that the committees consider issues that are important to their organisations.
  - Very few organisations felt that no action was taken on issues agreed at the local committees only -3% across the county.

Respondents were also asked to comment on the hopes and fears that had been expressed at the first meetings

- Of the 100 people who answered this question 62% agreed that the Local Committees provide a real voice for local people

- Of the 87 people who answered this question 44% agreed that it had been difficult to reach agreement
- Of the 83 people who answered this question 72% agreed that spending followed local priorities
- Of the 94 people who answered this question 74% agreed that the County Council had listened
- Of the of the 83 people who answered this question 78% agreed that insufficient money is allocated, including 30% who strongly agreed
- Of the 91 people who answered this question 67% agreed that there is a better understanding between the three tiers of local government
- Of the 99 people who answered this question 49% agreed that the Local Committees are just a talking shop
- Of the 100 people who answered this question 60% agreed that larger councils dominate the meetings

The Survey also asked respondents to comment on the way that Local Committees might be used in the future. 109 respondents answered this question of these:

- 53% % felt that local committees should advise the County Council on the decisions it makes.
- 54% feel that they should help the Council's select committees examine areas of the Council's work.
- 34% feel they should be expanded to include other service areas.
- 83% feel local committees should be used to consult local communities about issues affecting their area and the county as a whole.

#### *Practice Elsewhere*

- 14 The Select Committee has also researched experiences of other County Councils currently operating Local Committees both in advance of and as a result of modernisation. A number of County Councils have been contacted and a summary of their experiences is attached (Appendix D). These have been supplemented by discussions with officers and members at some of the County Councils (e.g. Durham, Hampshire, Herefordshire, Nottinghamshire, North Yorks and Warwickshire).
- 15 In summary, counties have a long experience of local committees because of the large geographical area covered and the need to develop good working relationships with the various tiers of government. In many County areas, committees involve not just the three tiers of local government but also other partners e.g. the Police, Health and Voluntary sectors. Local Committees have also provided a mechanism for public involvement over and above that which can be achieved via the normal council meetings.
- 16 Local Committees also vary according to different needs and some counties have different models within their boundaries. This confirms that there is no single model that suits all. Here, and in Norfolk, local committees follow district council boundaries – whereas in other counties e.g. Northamptonshire and Herefordshire they have defined different criteria. What seems to be important is that local committees increase the level of public participation in the work of the Council and that they have a demonstrable impact on the decision making work of the Council i.e. are not 'talking shops'.
- 17 In formulating options for the future the Committee has had regard to the examples of good practise it has identified in different authorities.

## Case for Change/Options for the Future

- 19 Apart from reviewing experience so far the Committee has identified four main reasons for developing the model further.

(i) *The Local Government Act 2000*

The Local Government Act 2000 recognises the importance of Local Committees. It sees them as bringing local government closer to the communities it serves and by giving communities a say in how local authorities work. Local Committees can also help the County Council discharge its functions and advise the Cabinet. Local Committees can play a part in a Council's Community Leadership and representational role.

The Local Government Act 2000 does not prescribe how Local Committees might be constituted but allows great flexibility to local authorities to establish a model of Local Committees that suit its needs locally. Under the Local Government Act 2000, Local Committees can be advisory, consultative or decision making with their own delegated functions and budgets. Hence Local Committees will differ between authorities and sometimes may vary within an authority e.g. East Sussex. Local Committees are treated as normal committees of the Council, however they need not be politically balanced. Local Committees may have decision-making powers carrying out executive functions, in which case their authority must be defined through published schemes of delegation. Local Committees may also have decision-making powers over selected non-executive functions. This could include the functions relating to the new power of promoting the social, economic and environmental well being of the local areas by preparing a local community strategy to contribute to the overall community strategy, the preparation of which is a duty under the Act.

Membership of the Committees can include councillors (county, district and parish), representatives of private and public sector and voluntary organisations and members of the public. There are however, some issues around non-authority membership of Local Committees.

Current legal advice is that a Local Committee remains a Section 102 Committee, governed by s.15 of the 1989 Local Government Act. Such committees are not subject to the rules of proportionality where all the voting members of the Committee are members of the parent authority for wards (electoral divisions) within the relevant area covered by the local committee. Similar rules apply for joint local committees between County and District Councils. This does not preclude the appointment to the Committee of non-members of the authority but they would be non-voting members unless one of the exceptions such as an Advisory Committee applies, this position is not affected by the Local Government Act 2000. Therefore if the co-optees are non-voting the Committee can have spending powers. If they are voting, the committee has to be purely advisory, and it will be for the officers to exercise their delegated powers after taking into account the views expressed by the advisory committee. Only the Cabinet is able to delegate executive functions to a local committee. Therefore the Council sets up the local committees and is responsible for appointing members to it, and for delegating council (non-executive) functions, but any executive functions would have to be delegated to Local Committees by the executive.

Therefore the Local Government Act 2000 does not fundamentally change the constitution of Local Committees but it does open up a range of possibilities to redefine their role and purpose.

*(ii) The Council Plan*

The Council's Strategic Aims and supporting policies also highlight the importance of the community focus in Buckinghamshire. Local Committees can be an important tool in helping the Council develop its community leadership role and deliver these strategic aims. The Council's recent consultation regarding its modernised structures has also shown that most respondents wanted to see an increase in accountability at a local level.

*(iii) Best Practice across the Country*

Increasingly County Councils are using Local Committees to discuss all areas and services within the County Council's remit to advise and inform the executive and local members about local matters. Of the 15 authorities researched 14 used their local committees to discuss all services, with only Cambridgeshire restricting the remit of their committees to environment and transportation issues. It must be stressed however that even when other issues are included on the agendas, environmental, roads and transportation issues remain important and central issues for local committees.

Local Committees are being established in different ways across authorities. In some they are consultative advisory bodies, in others (8 of the 15 researched) they have decision-making powers. In Nottinghamshire whilst the County set up the local forums they are now being run as grant aided bodies separate from the County Council. Where local committees have delegated powers, membership of the committee is normally either restricted to County Council members only or, where membership of the committee includes others, voting is restricted to county council members. This is no doubt, at least in part to accommodate the legal restrictions outlined in paragraph 19 (i) above. Of the local committees that have delegated authority some also have specific amounts delegated to spend on local issues. In Warwickshire for example, the Stratford-upon-Avon Committee is allocated £72,000 per annum for 'good causes'. The money can be awarded to any worthwhile scheme not in receipt of statutory funding (highway schemes are excluded as they are included in the budget). The money can be used for community purposes e.g. safety handrails in shopping centres. In Durham a sum of money (currently £6000) is delegated to individual members to be spent on local projects. Members can spend this money individually or collectively with other members of the Committee.

*(iv) The Review of the Current Model*

The review and consultations have shown that whilst the experience of the local committees over the past year has been good, there is a need and an appetite for them to be developed to fully harness the value to be gained from the input from local communities. There are significant opportunities to make greater use of local committees and there is an expectation from government (and locally) that local views will be taken into account in developing policy and delivering services.

During the consultation process a number of interviewees have supported widening the remit of local committees in Buckinghamshire. Responses to the questionnaire also showed some support for this (34%), whilst 83% supported using the local committees



to consult local communities about issues affecting their area and the County as a whole. The local committees could also be used as a way of consulting communities and developing local input to the Community Plan. The major concerns that have been voiced about whether the committees should be expanded are about whether it could be achieved in practice without making meetings too long or increasing the number of meetings and membership i.e. ensuring the right participants. However for the reasons set out above the Committee thinks the time is right for the Council to consider widening the remit to include other service areas. This could be done in a variety of ways e.g., incrementally or by holding themed meetings. Initial views of officers on the possible effects on service areas are that consideration would need to be given to ensure that the good work which has already been done in establishing existing partnership arrangements and consultation mechanisms in other areas, was not undone. If this option is to be explored more work will need to be done on the implications for other services; particularly how local committees might interact with other established forums and partnership arrangements.

### **Key Factors for A New Model**

- 20 In developing a new model it is very important not to lose the benefit of what has already been created and any new model must take that into account. Five key factors for a new model have been identified
- a Public participation in local committees is being increasingly used by other authorities. In some cases this can be by way of representatives on the Committee but more commonly time at meeting is allocated for public question time. Those authorities that have used this (e.g. Warwickshire) have found the forums very useful and issues raised are used to form the basis of the committee's agenda. Should this option be investigated further?
  - b A widened remit and scope for local committees is a key feature of practise elsewhere and has been supported during the consultation and review process Further thought should also be given to the basis for widening the remit is it to aid decision making at the local level by devolving budgets, to consult local communities on issues affecting their areas and developing local input to the Community Plan or a combination of these. As outlined above the Select Committee feels the time is right for the Local Committees to be developed in this way and suggests that this option be explored further. The Select Committee has not as yet conducted detailed investigations into the implications for other service areas of widening the remits and this work will need to be done as part of exploring this option further.
  - c Across the Country authorities are developing different ways of devolving funds and budgets to local committees to spend on local issues. In some areas the funds are devolved to the Committee to spend on local issues. In others a sum of money is delegated to individual members to be spent on local projects. Members can spend this money individually or collectively with other members of the Committee. Is this an option that should be explored further?
  - d If it so wishes the Council could reconsider the constitution of its local committees, particularly with regard to voting rights. In some areas of the County the issue of voting has caused no difficulties however it has been suggested that the current system of voting in at least one local committee causes confusion. Options might include using the committees as advisory/consultative groups where all those attending might vote or allowing only county councillors to vote. If

the Council chooses this option further consultation will need to be undertaken particularly with members of the existing local committees about whether and how this best might be achieved.

- e The County Council current Local Committee arrangements are set up to follow District Council boundaries. The Council might wish to consider whether these are the appropriate boundaries for Buckinghamshire. Whilst some other counties, in setting up their local committees, follow district boundaries, this is not the only option. Some authorities use other criteria for example natural communities and population centres. Durham, for example, may have more than one local committee within a district council area based on centres of population. This might be particularly relevant in Aylesbury Vale where it could be divided into two or based on the main towns. This is particularly timely in the light of the recent reorganisation in the Aylesbury area. A similar split could be considered for the Wycombe committee. A further Local Committee covering the Chiltern AONB area has also been suggested similar to that area used in the Local Transport Plan. Again if the Council wished to explore this option, further consultation and work would be required in developing the most appropriate geographical boundaries.
- f The Council should explore with District Councils, the possibility of working together on Local Committees with joined up agendas and greater participation of District Councils. This might include discussions between the Leaders of the Councils to facilitate future arrangements, and the select committee would be interested in pursuing this. It is important that this report be done in the near future to aid planning for the new structures in all authorities.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

- 21 In general the Select Committee feels that the experience of local committees over the past year has been a positive one. There are encouraging signs that the committees are accepted and are continuing to improve. However, there are concerns at the levels of attendance. Making only marginal changes in the short term is an option. However, the Select Committee believes, that the County Council will be missing important opportunities to make the best use of the local forums that it has established if it does not consider and further investigate some of the options identified during the course of its investigation.
- 22 Such changes should not be made quickly without further detailed investigation and should best be made in a managed way.
- 23 There are, however, a number of **short-term** improvements that can be made quite quickly to the current model. These can in large part be taken forward quickly and easily by officers in consultation with Local Committee chairmen. The Select Committee therefore suggests the following short term changes to local committees:
  - Ensure agenda and, where possible all papers, are circulated two weeks before the meeting, or in any event all papers to be circulated at least 7 days before the meeting.
  - Plan the timetable of meetings a year in advance to enable as many people as possible to attend.

- Plan the agenda for each meeting focusing on one or two major issues at each meeting – fitting in general issues and engage the Committee chairmen in the planning process.
- Time manage meetings
- Investigate appropriate venues in each local area.
- Ensure the proceedings can be heard - consider purchase of appropriate equipment to facilitate this.
- Review publicity of local committee meetings to increase public (including parish council) awareness in local areas.
- Actively encourage joint reports to local committees from District/County/Parish Councils and consult further, particularly with district councils about possible future developments for local committees to include District Council and County Council issues (paragraph 20 f above).

### **Medium to long term changes**

- 24 The Council are recommended to consider investigating further some or all of the options identified in paragraphs (20 a - e) above, namely:
- Seek ways to increase public participation at meetings
  - Widening of scope and remit
  - Delegation of some budgets for local issues
  - Voting rights and mechanisms
  - Geographical Boundaries
- 25 The Select Committee in particular favours further investigation into widening the scope and remit and to the delegation of some budgets to local committees. The Select Committee also feels that further investigation should be made as to the appropriateness of the number of local committee and their respective boundaries.
- 26 In the time available to the Select Committee it has not been able to carry out the thorough research and consultation required into the options available and more work would need to be done to investigate the implications of any of the options suggested. The Select Committee has identified the options it feels are appropriate for Buckinghamshire. The Council will need to consider which of those it feels have merit and require further investigation. The resulting changes that will need to be made to the County's existing schemes will need to be achieved in a managed way following further investigation and consultation. The Council is invited to give an indication of the timescale for it to happen. The Council will also need to consider who might carry this work forward. If it decided to commission the Select Committee it would be happy to continue its work on local committees and assist the Council in this way.

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