

7A : SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE ENVIRONMENT

1 REVIEW AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL COMMITTEES

- 1 The Select Committee on the Buckinghamshire Environment has carried out a review of the County Council's current arrangements for Local Committees and investigated options for the future. The Review Report has been circulated to members as background information.
- 2 The Select Committee, as part of its review, looked at the current arrangements, practice elsewhere and options for the future, particularly in the context of the opportunities provided by the Local Government Act 2000. As part of the review, views on the way in which Local Committees have operated so far (and how they might be improved) were sought from a variety of sources. The Committee interviewed a number of people and sought written comments. Views were also sought via a questionnaire, which was sent to all County Councillors and other partners and stakeholders. 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 undertaken to investigate the implications of any of the options suggested. The Select Committee has identified the options which it feels are appropriate for Buckinghamshire. The Council will need to consider which of these it feels have merit and require further investigation.
- 3 The Select Committee also looked at experiences in other County Councils currently operating Local Committees. 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 local government. In many counties, Local 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.

- 4 Local Committees also vary according to differing 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. In formulating options for the future, the Committee has had regard to the examples of good practice it has identified in different authorities.
- 5 The Select Committee identified four main reasons for change:
 - The Local Government Act 2000 and its recognition of the importance of Local Committees in bringing local government closer to the communities it serves and in giving communities a say in how local authorities work.
 - The Council Plan, which highlights the importance of the community focus in Buckinghamshire. Local Committees can be important tools in helping the Council develop its community leadership role and deliver its 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.
 - Practice in other parts of the country. Increasingly, County Councils are using Local Committees to discuss all areas and services within the Council's remit as well as to advise and inform the executive and local members about local matters.
- 6 The Select Committee also feels that the Council, with the District Councils, should explore the possibility of working together on Local Committees towards joined up agendas and the greater participation of the District Councils. This might include discussions between the Leaders of the Councils to facilitate future arrangements. The Select Committee would be interested in pursuing this. It is important that this work is done in the near future to aid planning for the new structures in all authorities as the Districts are already considering their own

options for Local Committees.

- 7 The review of the current arrangements and consultation has shown that the experience of the Local Committees over the past year has been positive. There are encouraging signs that the Committees are accepted and are continuing to improve, however, there are concerns at the levels of attendance. Whilst marginal changes to the existing model in the short term are one option, there is a need and an appetite for the Committees to be further developed to fully harness the value gained from the input of local communities.
- 8 The Select Committee believes that the County Council will be missing important opportunities to make greater use of the local forums it has established if it does not consider and further investigate some of the options identified during the course of its investigation. There is also an expectation from the Government (and locally) that local views will be taken into account in developing policy and delivering services. In developing a new model, it is very important not to lose the benefits of that which has already been created and any new model must take this into account. Changes should not be made quickly without further investigation and then should be made in a managed way.
- 9 **The Select Committee suggests the following short-term improvements to the current Local Committee model which can be made quite quickly:**
 - **Ensure agendas and, where possible, all papers are circulated two weeks before the meeting, or in any event that all papers 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 to focus on one or two major issues, fitting in general issues and engaging the Committee Chairmen in the planning process.**
 - **Time manage meetings.**

- **Investigate appropriate venues in each local area.**
- **Ensure the proceedings can be heard and to consider the 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 and County Council issues.**

- 10 **The Select Committee also suggests that the Council consider investigating further some or all of the following options for change in the medium to long term:**

Seek ways to increase public participation at meetings

Other authorities are increasingly using public participation in Local Committees. In some cases this can be by way of representatives on the Committee but more commonly, time at meetings is allocated for a public question time. Those authorities that have used this (eg Warwickshire) have found the forum very useful and issues raised are used to form the basis of the Committee's agendas. Should this option be investigated further?

Widening of scope and remit

A widened remit and scope for Local Committees is a key feature of practice elsewhere and has been supported during the consultation and review process. Further thought should also be given to the basis for widening the Committee's remit. This could be to aid decision making at the local level by devolving budgets, to consult Local Communities on issues affecting their area, to develop local input to the Community Plan or a combination of these. 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 service areas of widening the remit and this work will need to be completed as part of exploring this option further.

Delegation of some budgets for local issues

Across the country, authorities are developing different ways of devolving funds and budgets to Local Committees to spend on local issues. In some areas funds are devolved to the Committee to spend on local issues, in others a sum of money is delegated to individual members to spend on local projects. Members can spend this money individually or collectively with other members of the Committee. Is this an option that the Council wishes to support in principle?

Voting rights and mechanisms

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 either all those attending may vote or where only County Councillors may vote. If the Council finds this option attractive, further consultation will need to be undertaken, particularly with members of the existing Local Committees, about whether and how this might best be achieved.

Geographical Boundaries

The County Council's current Local Committee arrangements are set up to follow District Council boundaries. The Council might wish to consider whether these are the most appropriate boundaries for Buckinghamshire Local Committees. Whilst some other counties follow District boundaries, this is not the only option. Some authorities use other criteria, e.g. natural communities and population centres. This might be particularly relevant in Aylesbury Vale which could be divided into two Local Committees or be based on the main towns. This is particularly timely in 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 has also been suggested, similar to that area used in the Local Transport Plan. Again, if the Council wished to investigate this option, further consultation and work would be required in developing the most appropriate geographical boundaries.

- 11 **The Council is also invited to give an indication of the timescale for this investigation to happen, perhaps over the next six months. The Council will also need to consider who might carry this work forward. If it is decided to commission the Select Committee to continue its work on Local Committees, it would be happy to assist the Council in this way.**
- 12 The Cabinet was invited to comment on the Select Committee's report. The Cabinet welcomed the report and noted the success of the Local Committees so far. The Cabinet's comments to the Council are that the short term proposals identified should be agreed and adopted with immediate effect. With regard to the medium and long term proposals, the Cabinet agrees with the Select Committee that they require further work. This would include taking into account the role that might be played in the Local Committees by the recently appointed Local Area Co-ordinators. The Cabinet therefore suggests that these options be considered further by the new Council.

**R C PUSHMAN
CHAIRMAN**

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Select Committee Report on the Future and Development of Local Committees
(Cabinet 2 April 2001)