

7a. REPORT OF THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL

Strategic Plan and May Debate

As announced in February, a review of the Strategic Plan is currently taking place. A Members' workshop was held on 19th March to review the Council's priorities and another workshop is planned for 16th April after County Council.

For the past three years, the Member debate held as part of our Annual General Meeting in May has provided a useful opportunity for Members to consider the big issues facing Buckinghamshire.

As in previous years we have invited a national speaker to prompt the debate and I am pleased to announce that Mike Burton, Editorial Director of the Municipal Journal, will be joining us on 21st May. The focus for this year's AGM Debate will be on the big issues facing Buckinghamshire but with a particular emphasis on the implications arising from the General Election results.

Tri-County Partnership

The County Council continues to work with colleagues in Oxfordshire and Northamptonshire in exploring the opportunities and potential benefits of a co-ordinated approach to the strategic planning and delivery of infrastructure in support of planned levels of growth. The discussions, which are taking place in partnership with the three county-based Local Enterprise Partnerships, are looking at how to develop an integrated approach to the planning and delivery of strategic investment in transport infrastructure, digital infrastructure, economic development and skills development.

At the same time we are exploring the opportunity to develop a delivery model at the sub-national level that could form the basis for securing genuine devolution of powers, funding and accountability from Whitehall. Simplification of the existing plethora of funding mechanisms and incentives could help realise efficiencies that enables the proportion available for investment in services to be increased. If accompanied by greater certainty on the funding available over the medium term there is the very real opportunity to achieve significant benefits in planning and delivering strategic infrastructure.

The expectation remains that post-election the trend towards greater devolution of powers will continue: the current discussions provide the opportunity to develop a proposition for consideration by the incoming government.

Improving Children's Social Care Services

The Improvement Programme for Children's Social Care services is now well underway and the pace of change remains high. Over the next few months I expect to start to see the impact of the changes reflected in improved outcomes for children and young people.

I am a member of both the overarching Improvement Board and the Leadership, Governance and Partnership group. I have also attended meetings with both Police and Health partners to discuss improving joint partnership working. I have recently attended, along with the Cabinet Member, a workshop with staff from across Children's Services which enabled them to outline the changes they would like to see. There are significant actions needed to make the required changes and the Improvement Programme in Children's Services is my personal top priority in terms of where I focus my time and effort.

The Department for Education appointed advisers, Red Quadrant, submitted their first report to the Secretary of State at the end of February. This was and remains the property of the Department for Education. Whilst the final version of their report has not yet been officially published, I know that many people will have seen the draft report. I am very pleased that the advisers have recommended that further government intervention is not needed in Buckinghamshire. I accept all of the recommendations in the report and we are in the process of ensuring that these are embedded into the Improvement Plan.

There is clearly still a long way to go but I am confident that following the additional funding we have set aside for the Improvement Programme, together with the commitment of all staff and senior management across the Council, we will make the necessary improvements to services for our children and young people.

Broadband Update

Connected Counties rollout:

The Connected Counties programme seeks to ensure countywide fibre connectivity is extended to 90%+ of premises (business and residential). Areas that have been enabled to date are detailed here – www.connectedcounties/news. The website includes the ability to validate individual phone numbers and addresses and use a variety of maps for visual reference (www.connectedcounties.org/check-availability).

With the Connected Counties rollout past the halfway stage, a great deal has been achieved and there is more to come. Over 100 fibre cabinets have been installed in Buckinghamshire, serving over 23,000 homes and businesses. Recent activity has seen new exchange areas go 'live', including Haddenham and Long Crendon. A significant amount of additional fibre connected premises are expected before the end of Q4, which will benefit more homes and business in the county. Fibre to the premises work is also ongoing, which in some areas will enable access to ultrafast speeds of 330 Mbps.

Supporting communications and demand stimulation activity continues apace. The most recent take-up report shows continued increase in take-up across the project, approaching 19%. It has been acknowledged that the project is performing well in comparison to other areas and more case studies have been generated, which will be used for advocacy.

A variation to the contract is being negotiated which will deliver some further fibre broadband coverage to new areas in Buckinghamshire (6 new locations). This is being achieved by remodelling unallocated funding. It is hoped that an announcement will be made soon regarding the areas set to benefit.

Other activity:

The BT tender for the Superfast Extension Programme was received w/c 16th March. It is proposed that a change control exercise would be issued to enable BT to develop a solution for Buckinghamshire using allocated District Council, Local Enterprise Partnership and Central Government funding. It is anticipated that a contract will be signed by Herts CC and BT by the end of April, with a change control process initiated by Buckinghamshire thereafter. A number of neighbouring areas have now signed contracts with BT for additional fibre broadband coverage.

Work is taking place to support a variety of broadband activities, seeking to fill in the broadband 'gaps'. This includes: Village Networks as a local wireless provider - developing a superfast products; a community 'pilot; the LEP's 5G trials; and new

commercial/residential site consideration. There is a need to ensure this activity is coordinated effectively, so that this work is complementary. In parallel there is considerable activity in the marketplace, with the announcement of new investment, technology deployment, trials, mobile coverage commitments and acquisitions. Broadband also featured prominently in the most recent Budget.

Ofcom, as the industry regulator, has been busy as of late, focusing its efforts on reviewing its data on fixed and mobile broadband coverage in the UK, as well as benchmarking this against EU competitors. The headlines confirm that coverage and speed indicators have shown significant jumps, which places the UK in an advantageous position against the EU5. In addition, Ofcom is about to undertake a full review of digital infrastructure in the UK, focusing on competition and investment, future innovation and the availability of broadband, phone and mobile services.

HS2 Update

House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee Report

Following on from the evidence I gave to their inquiry in November 2014, this Committee published their report on 25 March. The conclusion is that the Government has not made a convincing case for HS2. It must do so before Parliament passes the Bill to enable the construction of the first stage of the railway to begin. The Committee concluded that, "the Government has not carried out a proper assessment of whether alternative ways of increasing capacity are more cost-effective than HS2" and on rebalancing, "London is likely to be the main beneficiary from HS2. Investment in improving rail links in the north of England might deliver much greater economic benefit at a fraction of the cost".

These comments reflect what Buckinghamshire County Council has been saying for the last 5 years.

Select Committee Site Visits to Buckinghamshire

The Select Committee visited the Denham area of South Bucks in the Colne Valley on 15th January, as well as London Borough of Hillingdon. We lobbied for, and have now received, three dates from the Committee Clerk for the visits to the rest of Buckinghamshire. Starting in Amersham and Chesham (MP Cheryl Gillan's constituency) on 20th May, moving on to Aylesbury (MP David Lidington's constituency) on 21st May and finishing in north Bucks/Buckingham (MP John Bercow's constituency) on 22nd May. As the County Council Annual General Meetings takes place on 21 May we did request a change to this date but were informed that this is fixed.

The HS2 team has worked up a draft itinerary in consultation with community groups and other stakeholders and is further refining this with the Clerk and HS2 Ltd ahead of the visits as well as involving the Buckinghamshire Compensation and Mitigation Panel Members in the organisation of the visit.

Select Committee proceedings

In the most recent Parliamentary briefing sheet for MPs, it was stated that as of the 19th February, the Committee had heard 230 petitions with a further 82 petitions having been withdrawn or not being appeared on. It is anticipated that by the time Parliament prorogues for the 2015 general election the number of petitioners heard will be around 400.

Local residents, landowners and amenity groups from the Colne Valley presented their petitions to the Select Committee in the second and third weeks of March. Although petitioners were well received by the Committee members, to date this has not resulted

in any revised proposals or assurances from HS2 Ltd. The County Council's appearance at the Select Committee to present on our petition issues for that area will be after the General Election. For more information please see the briefing sheet: www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN00316/railways-hs2-phase-1

The Select Committee has released a first Special HS2 Select Committee Report. The Select Committee set out advice for petitioners: being concise, not taking longer than 30 minutes to present. They discussed the 'Need to Sell' property compensation scheme and wanting to see this working correctly before the end of the Select Committee hearings, if this is not the case they will readdress. The Select Committee reserved judgement on Colne Valley issues, as they are only part way through hearings, and the issues are connected to the petitioners from The Chilterns. With regard to noise, they do not want to hear from individual petitioners on World Health Organisation guidelines; they would rather comparisons from HS2 or actual measurements came forward. They recommended that in The Chilterns area, petitioners group together, stating "arguments made once or twice are more powerful than those made several hundred times over". The three days' of Buckinghamshire visits are stated as 'provisionally planned'. The report can be read in full here: www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmhs2/338/338.pdf

Further Additional Provisions to the Bill and an Updated Environmental Statement

We have to date received two letters from HS2 Ltd setting out a total of 29 further changes to the Bill, mostly relating to additional land required, realignment of access, alterations to rights of way and drainage infrastructure. We may receive further Additional Provisions which in time will be detailed by HS2 in an updated Book of Reference. The impacts of the additional proposals will be set out in an updated Environmental Statement expected in the summer. There will be a further opportunity to petition on those changes.

Heathrow Spur and Questions to the Secretary of State

In answer to a question put forward by Dominic Grieve MP, the Secretary of State for Transport Patrick McLoughlin has confirmed that the Heathrow Spur will not be built as part of either Phase 1 or Phase 2 of HS2. The reasoning given for this was that within the Airports Commission interim report of November 2014, it was found that a HS2 spur would be unlikely to be necessary to support any expansion of Heathrow Airport. This question and answer can be found on the parliament website at: www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-03-02/225879.

It should be noted that there are a number of questions to the Secretary of State asked by Cheryl Gillan MP. These include a question on the effect of tunnelling on the chalk aquifers of The Chilterns to which parts of the Environmental Statement are pointed. These can also be found here: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-question/Commons/2015-03-09/226723>

HS2 Bernwood Green Infrastructure Hub

On 9 March I chaired a third stakeholder meeting in Hogshaw to engage residents and partners in developing our own mitigation ideas for the area. This is centred around the idea of creating a non-commercial, low impact, naturalistic type hub, which would be welcome in the area. The idea is to create a network of natural and semi-natural features, green spaces, rivers and lakes, interspersed and connected to villages in the area to counter balance the hard infrastructure that is coming with HS2. The proposal under the Bernwood brand was generally well received with discussion on the scope of

the area. A working group, with local representatives, will be established to take this work forward.

Buckinghamshire Compensation and Mitigation Panel (BCMP)

The BCMP is now meeting every two months, and is likely to increase in frequency as we approach the Councils' representations before Select Committee. All local members whose areas are affected by HS2 are invited to attend along with community representatives and representatives from the District Council, National Trust, Chilterns Conservation Board, Bucks, Berks and Oxon Wildlife Trust, and HS2AA.

Community support meetings

There will be further 'drop-in' sessions arranged to give 1:1 support to petitioners. Also, officers will be canvassing for interest in further community meetings to explain what assurances are being requested as well as supporting petitioners to co-ordinate and organise the sequence of their presentations as well as ensure they meet the Select Committee's requests for short and concise presentations with minimal repetition.

**MARTIN TETT
LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**