



Buckinghamshire Council

Transport, Environment & Climate Change Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE TRANSPORT, ENVIRONMENT & CLIMATE CHANGE SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2021 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 10.00 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 12.20 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

B Chapple OBE, K Ashman, P Brazier, R Carington, C Cornell, E Gemmell, S Guy, D King, A Poland-Goodyer, L Sullivan, M Walsh, W Whyte and A Wood

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

S Broadbent, P Strachan, C Ward, S Bambrick, R Smith, S Turnbull, E Barlow, A Clarke, J Hancox, D Sutherland and S Winkels

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies were received from Councillors E Culverhouse and M Caffrey.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor W Whyte declared a personal interest as a Trustee of Bernwode Community Bus.

Councillor M Walsh declared a personal interest as the Chairman of Princes Risborough Centre Ltd.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 24 June 2021 were confirmed as an accurate record.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Two public questions were considered at the meeting as attached to the agenda and verbal responses were provided by the Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change and the Cabinet Member for Transport. The questions and responses are appended to the minutes.

5 CLIMATE CHANGE & ENVIRONMENT UPDATE

The Chairman welcomed Councillor P Strachan, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change, to the meeting and invited him to present an update to the Committee. Targeted engagement had taken place on the draft Climate Change & Air Quality Strategy. Comments

received had supported incorporating nature based solutions to help carbon absorption and how buildings and electric vehicles could be used in the Strategy. Engagement had now concluded and the Strategy would be adopted as soon as practical. The Cabinet Member also outlined elements of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report which highlighted urgent need for global reduction in carbon dioxide emissions. Livestreamed activities were being developed to coincide with the COP 26 Conference in Glasgow during November. Tree planting in Buckinghamshire was being supported and the council had recently received a grant of £200,000 from the Local Authority Treescapes Fund to support planting in non-forest areas. A programme was also being developed to support the Queens Green Canopy project.

In response to questions the following points were noted:-

- 20 council buildings already had solar panels installed. The energy created was being consumed in the building with any excess being exported to the grid. Work was ongoing to identify other buildings in the council's portfolio that would be suitable for similar installations.
- The council's fleet of vehicles had a service life of seven years and these would be replaced by more energy efficient vehicles at this juncture. A project would be undertaken next year to investigate this further.
- Community Boards and Parishes would receive guidance regarding tree planting on verges from October. The council had worked with the Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership on wilding verges and advice based on this experience would be included in the guidance. In conjunction with Transport for Buckinghamshire, pilot sites had been set up with different cutting regimes to encourage wildlife.
- The Government's England Tree Strategy committed to making sure that the guidance on Tree Protection Orders (TPO) and protection for mature trees was updated as part of future planning reforms, beyond the current 'Amenity Value' requirement, in order to reflect all the important benefits trees provide.
- Air Quality Management infrastructure was often placed along key transport routes. Part of the Strategy would look to enhance the monitoring across Buckinghamshire. A Member highlighted the benefits of monitoring air quality around schools and it was agreed that this would be investigated further with the air quality team.

Action: Mr E Barlow

- The Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change and the Cabinet Member for Transport were developing clear guidance for residents on switching to electric vehicles. The guidance would be available on the council's website once finalised.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for his update.

6 HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT

The Chairman welcomed Councillor S Broadbent, Cabinet Member for Transport, to the meeting and invited him to present the Home to School Transport item to the Committee. There were three types of school bus transports: council contracted buses, public buses and private coaches. At the start of September 2021, 14 new commercial school routes had been set up which were met positively by parents. A number of key changes were highlighted, one of which was that the Spare Seats scheme was now reviewed every term rather than annually. The SEND transport arrangements were also outlined. One of the key changes was the introduction of Personal Transport Budgets which had received a strong take up of 260 parents.

The Committee received an overview on the Client Transport Improvement Programme which had been established in February 2020. Five work streams were focused on:

- Improving the customer experience;
- Ensuring the service managed its resources within budget;
- Ensuring the service's operating model is sustainable, effective and efficient with robust contract management;
- Reducing demand for transport provided by the council.

The budget for this service had been moved from Education to Transport Services which allowed improved budget accountability and the establishment of a robust monitoring framework. Some routes had been adjusted following their recent implementation and any resolutions that were required would be carried out as quickly as possible.

In response to questions, the following points were noted:-

- All bus passes were dispatched on time and parents had been contacted early on to communicate any change of schedule.
- Around 1,500 process queries had been received in August 2021 via the call centre and most of these were resolved quickly. The number of formal complaints had reduced over the past two years (2019: 64, 2020: 8, 2021: 2). Further work was required to categorise customer contact and monitor customer experience to improve the service.
- The budget for Home to School Transport was £23m and was demand led. The national trend was for a significant increase in this expenditure and this trend was reflected in Buckinghamshire. The work on tenders would assist in controlling these costs. The budget for the 260 Personal Transport Budgets would be provided to Members separately.

Action: Ms Sara Turnbull

- There was merit in the suggestion of a cycling to school scheme similar to the 'Crocodiles' organized walking bus initiative. Officers agreed to investigate this idea with a view to including it in the next Home to School Travel update.
- New bus routes were being monitored to ensure they maintain their timetable. Adjustments had been carried out following traffic returning to roads in September (e.g. a route being split). The service also liaised with schools to monitor routes and did have inspectors on routes. Additionally there was a team to monitor compliance and contract manage. Where poor performance was identified by the provider and actions not taken to correct issues then the Council may withdraw the contract and re-award to another supplier.
- Each procured contract related to a specific route that varied in how many children used it. The tendering process had been robust and had also been reported to the Audit & Governance Committee. The tender had been in a competitive market so the service was confident that best value had been obtained.
- Members acknowledged the work carried out by the service during the busy August period and thanked the officers for supporting residents and Members.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for the update to Committee.

7 BUS SERVICE IMPROVEMENT PLAN

The Chairman invited Councillor Broadbent, Cabinet Member for Transport, to introduce his report to the Committee. The Cabinet Member highlighted a number of points:-

- The Plan was required as part of the Government's Bus Back Better Programme to improve bus provision nationally. A Member Task & Finish Group had also assisted in the formulation of the Plan.
- Engagement had taken place through a public survey which had recently closed. Community Boards and Town and Parish Councils had also been encouraged to respond to the survey.

- The draft objectives and priorities of the Plan were:
 - Encourage growth
 - Increase ease and attractiveness of bus use
 - Increase reliability
 - Protector transport users
 - Protect the environment
- The Plan needed to be submitted to Government by the end of October 2021. The signed Enhanced Partnership would need to be in place with bus operators by April 2022.

In response to questions, the following points were noted:-

- A key theme from a meeting with operators was reliability and frequency which was challenging in rural areas. The Plan at this stage would focus on higher service usage in populated areas.
- The ambition included an operator requirement of Euro 6 engines in the core bus network and Euro 5 engines in the infrequent rural areas. The Government may also add requirements to the fleet of operators (e.g. accessibility criteria).
- The rural bus service was a national challenge particularly with its frequency and routes. The Plan tried to develop better bus interchanges with tickets working between different operators in neighbouring local authorities.
- Employers in High Wycombe had trialled work place bus routes for employees. It was hoped these successes would raise the profile of buses and showcase them as viable alternatives particularly if supported by the Local Enterprise Partnerships.
- Pressure on the recruitment of drivers was felt across all operators and providers.
- Members were keen to see trials of demand led transport in the future.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for the report on the Plan.

8 PROCUREMENT OF THE BUCKINGHAMSHIRE HIGHWAYS CONTRACT

The Chairman invited Councillor Broadbent, Cabinet Member for Transport, to introduce his report and presentation to the Committee. The Cabinet Member highlighted a number of points:-

- This procurement exercise was one of the largest Buckinghamshire Council would carry out and the service was of significant importance to residents.
- Market engagement had already taken place to set out the overall requirements of the service, one of which was bringing multiple functions back to the Council.
- Responses to the Initial Selection Questionnaire for the Term Maintenance Contract were now being assessed.
- The current model was not appropriate to achieve the outcomes or key strategic objectives of the Council. The Cabinet Member outlined a number of the model's limitations one of which was the small 'in house' client team.
- The preferred new model had been developed following discussions between a panel of Members, officers and industry experts. This model had been approved by Cabinet in March 2021.
- All parties involved in the new model would sign up to be part of an alliance whereby all parties would agree to share information and best practice.
- The in-house team would set policy, strategy and communication in line with the council's requirements. This team would manage the asset and network as well as manage the contracts. Moreover, this team would facilitate improved and closer working relationship with Members, Parishes and local communities.
- Performance indicators would be in place and the council would maintain the right not

to extend any contract should it see fit.

- Member input would continue in future and the Select Committee would be updated as the procurement process develops.

In response to questions, the following points were noted:-

- The model would allow for a stronger Member and local voice however issues on the Highways did need to be categorized to maintain the asset. The detail of this would be developed later in the procurement process.
- The procurement at this stage did not extend to the role of Town and Parish Councils in the Highways service. Possibilities to devolve would be considered as appropriate based on the new structure's flexibility and the capacity of Parish and Town Councils.
- The market engagement exercise had a scoring method based on a range of subjects including the council's climate change ambitions. An example of this would be better use of materials to reduce the network's carbon impact. In addition, the service wanted newer, more efficient machinery being used on the network.
- The council's legal team had been involved in the procurement process.
- In response to a Member question on the impact of potholes on cyclists, it was noted that Buckinghamshire Council was able to set its own pothole specification threshold as appropriate. The current guidance was in keeping with most local authorities.
- There would be an opportunity for input from residents and road users once the delivery of the new contract had commenced.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for outlining the current position on the procurement of the Highways contract and welcomed this returning to the Select Committee later in the procurement process.

9 WORK PROGRAMME

The Senior Scrutiny Officer introduced the Select Committee's work programme for the forthcoming year which covered a range of topics within the Committee's remit. The Chairman reminded Members that there was a need to be mindful of officer resource and suggested a more in-depth piece of work might be undertaken later in the year, possible around flooding and water contamination in Buckinghamshire. It was noted that the work programme could be adapted as the year progressed and that Members could write to the Chairman with further suggestions.

10 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Tuesday 16 November at 2pm.

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Public Questions – TECC 16 September 2021

Question One

Buckinghamshire Council currently operates a fleet of 185 vehicles, of which it owns 101, and the latest Fleet Management report states that 'due regard will be taken of commitments in the Council's climate change strategy in the management of fleet vehicles'.

When the climate change strategy was written, the council operated 'two electric vans and some electric pool cars', so there is clearly vast room for improvement. Unfortunately, the strategy sets no firm targets, merely committing to a review of the fleet and to explore and implement emissions reductions where practical. Given the urgent need to decarbonise and the fact that electric vehicles are already more cost effective in terms of cost of ownership, can the relevant cabinet members give further details on the timetable for the review and concrete commitments to fleet electrification?

Answer

Thank you for your question and I agree there is indeed an urgent need to reduce emissions, not just in Buckinghamshire but worldwide. We must remember as the UK looks towards hosting the COP 26 climate conference in November, that we cannot address climate change in isolation and need to see action from all countries to avoid its worst effects.

I do however wish to challenge what appears to be asserted in the question, that electric vehicles are always more cost effective to run. It is true that in an increasing number of circumstances, they will be. However, this is not a universal fact and it will depend on a range of factors, in particular the upfront cost difference between electric and conventional models and the annual mileage of the vehicle.

For a small electric car with typical domestic use it may be cheaper overall now; however, for larger vehicles such as vans or lorries, which the Council's fleet includes, the higher upfront cost could push the payback beyond their normal lifetime. Clearly such factors need assessing carefully.

Our Fleet Team encourage customers needing new or replacement vehicles to consider alternative fuel options. They will always source quotes for an electric vehicle where one is available and provide technical advice to support customers in making a decision. Along with all other service areas, the Council's internal fleet services will be reviewed to identify the best operating model. Further updates on fleet arrangements will be reported to Members as part of the regular Climate Change updates on the delivery of the Strategy.

Lastly, I would add that the vehicles we are currently using were produced via energy intensive processes and have significant embedded carbon – as do the electric vehicles which could replace them. It is therefore important that we approach this carefully and do not prematurely dispose of vehicles, which have many years of life in them, as this could contribute more to global carbon emissions than it saves.

Question Two

“In February, Buckinghamshire Council agreed its Climate Change Strategy, containing 60 Actions with varying degrees of detail. The Executive Summary cited as a key communication activity “to report regularly on our progress”, with specific Actions within the Strategy to “Monitor and report quarterly on emissions savings across Council operations” [Action 6], and “Report annually on progress made against actions and reducing emissions [Action 9].

Over 6 months have now passed since the Strategy was agreed, a period in which events in Europe and around the world have starkly illustrated the consequences of climate change and the growing urgency of addressing it. Given the self-identified importance of reporting on progress, would the Cabinet Members please provide a brief interim update to the Committee and the wider public on progress on Actions, perhaps on a red / amber / green “on track” rating, with accompanying commentary where relevant.”

Answer

Thank you for the question and I agree with you that we have indeed seen extremes of weather over recent months, including in the UK as well as around the globe. It is a stark reminder that the climate is already changing, and we must expect to see such extremes more regularly.

In terms of the specific question, I must first highlight that the Strategy was not formally adopted at the Cabinet meeting in February this year. At that meeting, Cabinet reviewed the Strategy and requested further engagement activity be undertaken.

As such, the Strategy is not yet in place and you will appreciate that not all the actions can be implemented at the same time. Since the engagement work was completed the team have been focusing on delivery of carbon reducing actions rather than the reporting ones, and so I am not able to provide the requested update today.

However, as per the update I will give to this Committee shortly, we are working to bring the Strategy forward for adoption. When it comes forward for adoption, my intention is that we will provide an update on the work which is being undertaken to implement the Strategy as well as an update on our carbon emissions.

As we then continue the delivery of the Strategy, I can assure you and this committee that we will be reporting back regularly on our progress and the actions being undertaken.