



Buckinghamshire Council

Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE GROWTH, INFRASTRUCTURE & HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 14 OCTOBER 2021 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 10.00 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 12.00 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

D Carroll, T Hunter-Watts, M Smith, A Baughan, Q Chaudhry, S Rouse, M Bracken, N Brown, S Chapple, C Poll and P Brazier

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

G Williams, L Michelson, I Thompson, C Ward and Mrs E Wheaton

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies were received from Cllrs I Darby, C Etholen, T Hogg, M Tett and D Town. Cllr P Brazier attended as a substitute for Cllr D Town.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

3 MINUTES

Two Members requested that their questions regarding Bucks Home Choice and the Council's Homelessness Strategy be reflected in the minutes. These would be added by the Scrutiny Officer.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were none.

5 BUCKINGHAMSHIRE STRATEGIC VISION

Cllr G Williams, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration, gave a presentation on the draft Strategic Vision document that was contained in the agenda report pack. The establishment of the Buckinghamshire Growth Board had given an opportunity for the strategic leadership of the county to produce the Vision. The purpose was to express a shared ambition and focus on improving the economic, environmental and social health of Buckinghamshire. This single voice would establish priorities for long-term change, set the strategic direction to realise the 2050 goal and bring together the unique selling points in

Buckinghamshire. The final document intended to be broad and far-reaching with details being linked to existing and future policies and strategies of the Council.

There were a number of challenges that the Vision would face which included:-

- Lack of affordable and accessible housing;
- Poor digital connectivity which impacted business development;
- Poor air quality in parts of the county;
- Shortage of skills and labour in key growth sectors;
- Limited infrastructure compared to housing growth.

The Vision aimed to support successful businesses and careers in Buckinghamshire through enhancing physical and digital connectivity and capitalize on economic super sectors (e.g. Silverstone, Westcott, and Pinewood). Alongside this, creating flexible spaces would enable flourishing industries and small-medium enterprises (SMEs) to develop. Current technology clusters and the four Enterprise Zones in Buckinghamshire would be enhanced. The Vision also aimed to harness a thriving culture, heritage and natural environment as the Council aimed to achieve net zero by 2050 and improve the use of sustainable resources. The Cabinet Member highlighted a number of Buckinghamshire's cultural assets which included the Roald Dahl Museum, green spaces and 1,500km of rivers and chalk streams. Finally, the Vision intended to make Buckinghamshire a vibrant location that was connected in rural and urban communities.

Members were asked for their comments and feedback as follows:-

Buckinghamshire Strategic Vision feedback

- A number of Members felt that there was a generic tone in the Vision and that the document would benefit from the inclusion of timescales, a more ambitious concept map and key indicators for delivery. Although there was merit in including timescales, the Cabinet Member felt that the relevance of specific key indicators may shift over the next 10-20 years.
- Indicate more than two skills hubs on the 2050 concept map in order to show that Buckinghamshire's skills shortage was being addressed.
- The Vision could provide more impact by being more concise and avoiding repetitive language (e.g. 'sustainable') and corporate language. It was not clear that the Vision intended to attract investment into the county, particularly from SMEs, so the corporate nature may not appeal to SMEs.
- Connectivity within Buckinghamshire would challenge the strategic ambition of creating successful businesses and careers. It was suggested that the Vision sought to improve connectivity between the East and West of the county and should recognize that the current transport infrastructure did not meet current needs.
- The Vision needed to address the pressures on the local labour market and affordable housing. The Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Regulatory Services was already working to address this issue and it would feature as part of the Buckinghamshire Local Plan.
- It should be made clearer that the Vision was designed to be an overarching document to cover all the strategic ambitions. The detail of its delivery would be through strategies and policies, and also work from other bodies such as Health & Wellbeing Boards and Local Economic Partnerships. The Select Committee would have a role in monitoring this progress.
- It was suggested that more detail on the productivity data would be beneficial in order to identify whether goods and services met the needs of residents.

- It would be beneficial for the document to facilitate the Council's policy of being net zero by 2050 and reference the electric vehicle infrastructure that would be required.
- The roadmap milestones could be expanded upon to include more granular detail (e.g. skills) but further detail would be part of the Buckinghamshire Local Plan.
- Reference to Cross Rail should be included along with other train lines referenced in the document.
- Job facilitation to match skills with vacancies was important and could be referred to in the Vision.

Themes from discussion regarding the vision

- The Council was exploring opportunities with the Department of Work and Pensions to address Buckinghamshire's skills shortage to target funding towards shortages in the public and private sector.
- Buckinghamshire was in the second procurement wave of Project Gigabit. The indicative timetable was that procurement would take place in Spring 2022. Members were encouraged to highlight gaps in broadband and fibre coverage in their wards to officers so that they could be addressed as part of Project Gigabit.
- Sustainable travel needed to be delivered in the rural areas of Buckinghamshire as well as urban.
- Infrastructure connectivity between the technology clusters and employment sites would feature in the Buckinghamshire Local Plan. The Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan (VALP) had secured £172m Housing Infrastructure Funding (HIF) which was contributing towards the South East Link Road and other key infrastructure projects around Aylesbury.
- The resolution of roads and long-term transport was linked to planning and new developments and the emerging Transport Strategy would work towards this. The Council was also tied into two connectivity studies through England's Economic Heartlands which would look at the internal roads in the county.
- The adopted VALP required developments of more than 11 homes to provide electric vehicle charge points at each home or car park and HIF funding had been secured to safeguard demands on the power grid.
- Buckinghamshire was the third lowest growth area in England between 2014 – 2018 which was attributed to skills shortages and high vacancy rates.
- The Council had submitted bids for Levelling Up Funds across each of the five Parliamentary constituencies across Buckinghamshire. Levelling up was required within the county to address issues such as social mobility and food accessibility. Additionally, the Buckinghamshire County Deal, 'Succeeding as a Place, Succeeding as a County', would address local levelling up need and assist the national program.
- The Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources, Property and Assets and the Deputy Cabinet Member for Resources were addressing concerns regarding customer service.

The Chairman thanked the Committee for their questions and input and welcomed the Vision returning to Members in future.

6 SUPPORTING BUCKINGHAMSHIRE'S HIGH STREETS

Cllr G Williams, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration, gave a presentation on work carried out and future plans to support Buckinghamshire's high streets following the pandemic. Nearly £1m Government funding had been secured as part of the 'Reopening High Streets Safely Fund' and 'Welcome Back Fund'. The Community Boards had also engaged with Parishes and local organisations during the reopening of high streets. The Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) had offered £18m of financial assistance to businesses through a quick, simple, non-

bureaucratic process. Buckinghamshire had been the second quickest authority in the country to distribute these funds and feedback had been positive.

Buckinghamshire still had money to allocate as part of the Welcome Back Fund. All spend and delivery required completion by 31 March 2022. There were currently 44 events under consideration for funding with most originating from Community Boards. As the funding was European, there were strict criteria and procurement rules to follow. There were six themes to the fund:-

1. Support and develop an action plan for how the local authority will safely reopen local economies;
2. Communications and public information;
3. Business-facing awareness;
4. Temporary public realm changes;
5. Promote a safe public environment for the local area economy;
6. Support local authorities to develop plans for responding to medium term impact of Covid-19 including trialling new ideas relating to the high street.

Forthcoming activities were also highlighted which included:-

- Place promotion
- Online retail innovation pilot
- Business survey
- Seasonal events and activities
- Christmas campaign
- Beautification of the high street

In response to questions the following points were raised:-

- Members commended the speed of the ARG distribution and the community activities that were being organised as part of the return to high streets.
- It was preferable for the funding to be spent towards activities that offered a longer term impact, for instance through purchasing light machines, which would assist with the council's regeneration agenda.
- The Council had streamlined the pavement license process so that businesses could operate in an alfresco or café style. Due to the scheme's popularity with businesses and residents, it had been extended until September 2022. The number of these licenses granted would be investigated and fed back to the Committee.

ACTION: L Michelson

- The funding had been used to purchase footfall monitoring equipment which would provide key baseline data on the high streets. It would be investigated whether the maximum value had been purchased and where the equipment would be set up.

ACTION: L Michelson

- A Member requested that the comparative data for the national distribution of the ARG be shared with the Committee.

ACTION: L Michelson

- As the high streets fund was prescribed, each Community Board had working groups and funding towards long-term economic recovery projects.
- The 'Being Considerate' campaign aimed to address mental health concerns following reopening high streets. The Committee would be advised of this cost separately.

ACTION: L Michelson

- Plans for business rates would be reported in future as part of the budget process.

- The reopening project was being carried out by officers in the Economic, Growth and Recovery team. Elements of the project, such as communications, had adapted based on feedback and lessons learnt.
- The markets and market traders were important during the lockdowns as they offered shopping in an outside space. Short term street closure events to promote footfall in town and village centres may be considered in future.
- The Government had supported local schemes of free parking. Now this funding had ceased, the council's budgetary constraints meant that free parking would be difficult to offer in future. The high streets fund could not be used to subsidise parking due to prescriptive criteria exempting council expenditure.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and the officers for the speed of distributing the funds and work carried out to reopen high streets.

7 WORK PROGRAMME

RESOLVED –

That the work programme be agreed.

8 SCOPING DOCUMENT FOR RAPID REVIEW - MEMBER ENGAGEMENT IN PLANNING

The Committee received a scoping document to carry out a rapid review on Member engagement in the planning process. The Chairman of the review would be Cllr C Poll and the review intended to focus on improving the process between planning, Members and residents. An update from the review would come back to the Committee in December.

The Chairman asked for Members to volunteer to attend a number of meetings for the rapid review. Volunteers were as follows:-

Cllr C Poll (Chairman)
 Cllr A Baughan
 Cllr M Bracken
 Cllr P Brazier (attended this meeting as a substitute)
 Cllr N Brown

Any other volunteers outside the meeting were invited to contact the Chairman separately.

RESOLVED –

That the rapid review scope document be agreed.

9 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting would be on Thursday 9 December at 10am.