Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee agenda

Date: Thursday 17 February 2022

Time: 10.00 am

Venue: The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, HP19 8FF - Aylesbury

Membership:

D Carroll (Chairman), T Hunter-Watts, M Smith, A Baughan, Q Chaudhry, T Hogg, S Rouse, M Bracken, N Brown, S Chapple, I Darby, M Hussain, C Etholen, C Poll and D Town

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Agenda Item		Time	Page No
1	**Apologies for Absence/Changes in Membership**		
2	**Declarations of Interest**		
3	**Minutes** To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 9th		5 - 14

December 2021 as a correct record.

4	**Public Questions** Public questions is an opportunity for people who live, work or study in Buckinghamshire to put a question to a Select Committee. The Committee will hear from members of the public who have submitted questions in advance relating to items on the agenda. The Cabinet Member, relevant key partners and responsible officers will be invited to respond. Further information on how to register can be found here: https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/your-council/get-involved-with-council-decisions/select-committees/ **Mr Chadwick has submitted the following question:** ***Addressing the decline in town centres through town centre regeneration projects is clearly a good thing. It also provides great opportunities to adapt them and remodel them to create thriving communities, but in a way which also builds in sustainable and low carbon patterns of living – such as active travel, locating services and facilities close to residences to minimise the need for travel, incorporating high energy efficiency standards in any related development, etc. Could the Cabinet Member please provide information and assurances about how town regeneration schemes are and will be developed and refined with these goals in mind?***	**10:10**	
5	**Digital Infrastructure Update** The Committee will receive an overview of the current activity related to Broadband connectivity and details of the Government's new programme to deliver gigabit capable broadband speeds. **Contributors:** Cllr Martin Tett, Leader of the Council Lisa Michelson, Service Director – Economic Growth and Regeneration	**10:15**	**15 - 22**
6	**Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy** The Committee will receive an update on the development of the Council's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy. Members will be invited to comment on the priorities that have been identified.		**23 - 40**

Contributors:
Cllr Nick Naylor, Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Regulatory Services
Cllr Mark Winn, Deputy Cabinet Member for Homelessness
Nigel Dicker, Service Director – Housing and Regulatory Services
Michael Veryard, Head of Housing

7	**Town Centre Regeneration** The Committee have heard at previous meetings about activities that the Council has undertaken to support high streets during the pandemic. This report builds further on the Council's aspirations for the future and the development of a Regeneration Framework for Buckinghamshire. There will be an opportunity for members to ask questions and offer feedback on the direction of travel and specific regeneration projects that have been included in the Council's capital programme.	**11:30**	**41 - 48**

Contributors:
Cllr Gareth Williams, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration
Cllr Jocelyn Towns, Deputy Cabinet Member for Town Centre Regeneration
Lisa Michelson, Service Director – Economic Growth and Regeneration
Shabnam Ali, Head of Local Economic Growth
Richard Wood, High Street Task Force

8	**Member Engagement in Planning report** The Committee will receive the final report of the Member Engagement in Planning report from the review group, ahead of it being presented to Cabinet on 1st March.	**12:15**	**49 - 60**

Contributors:
Cllr Chris Poll, Chairman of the Review Group

9	**Work Programme** For members to note the Committee Work Programme.	**12:30**	**61 - 62**

10 Date of next meeting
7th April 2022 at 10am

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Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee held on Thursday 9 December 2021 in The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 10.00 am and concluding at 12.30 pm.

Members present

D Carroll, T Hunter-Watts, M Smith, S Rouse, M Bracken, I Darby, M Hussain, C Poll and D Town

Others in attendance

G Hall, A Wheelhouse, G Williams, S Bambrick and D Eggleton

Apologies

A Baughan, Q Chaudhry, T Hogg, S Chapple and C Etholen

Agenda Item

1 Apologies for Absence/Changes in Membership

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Baughan, Chapple, Chaudhry, Etholen and Hogg.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were none.

3 Minutes

RESOLVED

The minutes of the meeting held on 14th October 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

A member raised concerns that additional information that had been requested during that meeting had subsequently been circulated to members, but that information was not captured in the public record of the minutes. It was agreed that the process would be reviewed to ensure that information provided after the select committee meeting could be captured in the minutes to ensure transparency for the public. **ACTION: Scrutiny Manager**

In addition, the member expressed the view that a response he had received in connection with his question on housing was insufficient and he would therefore follow this up with the Cabinet Member for Housing who would be attending the next meeting in February 2022.

4 Public Questions

There were none.

5 Buckinghamshire Local Plan

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Gareth Williams, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration, Steve Bambrick, Service Director, Planning and Environment and Darran Eggleton, Head of Planning Policy and Compliance to the meeting. The Cabinet Member presented members with an overview of work that had recently begun on the development of a new Buckinghamshire Local Plan and the following main points were noted:

- The Buckinghamshire Local Plan is a vital document which will determine how development can take place across the county, including housing and employment sites, during the period of 2022-2040. It was important that it was prepared well because it would have a lasting impact and would sit alongside the county's Growth Plan to set the vision for Buckinghamshire.
- £750,000 had been set aside to support the development of the plan.
- The Planning White Paper proposed significant changes to the local plan process, not least being a reduction in the timeline for producing one to just 30 months. However, with the legislation being delayed until 2022, following the appointment of a new Secretary of State, the team had no choice but to begin the process. They acknowledged that they would have to be agile enough to move at pace once any changes to the process were confirmed. Previous local plans had taken 5-7 years to get approval.
- The Council wanted to include local residents and listen to their concerns in relation to planning. Over 700 people had responded to the Statement of Community Involvement consultation and as a result of this, the Council had committed to consult on the draft local plan, which could take up to a year. This might have to be revised in light of legislative changes.
- An initial call for brownfield sites had not produced a significant number of viable options so far. These sites would likely yield 5,500 homes which represents only 10% of the overall target of 55,000 houses in total (based on 2014 government figures).
- Members and residents were invited to submit any other brownfield sites for consideration for inclusion in the new local plan. To give members an indication, Steve Bambrick advised that brownfield sites might usually account for around 20% of required housing numbers.
- The Council also had a duty to co-operate with neighbouring local authorities when preparing their local plan and this could impact housing numbers.
- There could also be an impact on Buckinghamshire's housing numbers as a result of the Cambridge/Oxford Arc spatial framework.
- Until the new Local Plan is in place, the planning frameworks set out in the existing local plans e.g Wycombe Local Plan, Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan, will

remain the benchmark against which planning applications are judged.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for his introduction and invited questions from members. In response to questions and during the subsequent discussions, the following main points were noted:

- Steve Bambrick explained that the Planning Policy team had 26 members of staff. During the first year of the Council their focus had been on finalising the Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan and now their attention was turning to the Buckinghamshire Local Plan. There were 7 vacancies in the team currently, but recruitment had been relatively successful as the Council was an attractive place for ambitious planners to work a one of the largest planning authorities in the country. Even with those vacancies, the team were managing the workload effectively.
- It was noted that transport connections between where we live and where we work should be key considerations in the new local plan. The Cabinet Member agreed and suggested that the Local Plan was a means to leverage funding for the associated infrastructure.
- Whilst it was important to listen and consult with residents, the Council needed to get a local plan in place in a timely fashion, so there was a balance to be struck.
- Brownfield sites included in a local plan have to be 'deliverable' – for example if a landowner had no intention of allowing development on the site then this couldn't be included. Whilst the Council wanted to prioritise brownfield over greenfield sites, it is was unrealistic to think that the housing numbers could be delivered via brownfield sites alone.
- In response to a question regarding whether the government housing targets could change, the Cabinet Member suggested some examples of how it might – the government could move some of the housing numbers to other areas as part of its levelling up agenda or government could choose to use more up to date figures from the Office for National Statistics, which would lead to a reduction in Buckinghamshire's housing requirements. Conversely the Council could choose to build more than the government target in order to promote more affordable homes. However, the Cabinet Member was not working on the assumption that the housing target would reduce.
- The Cabinet Member confirmed that if a reduced timescale of 30 months was introduced as part of new planning legislation in 2022 the commitment to consult on a draft local plan would have to be withdrawn.
- A member commented that he had been impressed with the initial communications he had seen in connection with the Buckinghamshire Local Plan and asked what the reaction had been from the public to date. The Cabinet Member reported that the Local Plan consultation opened on 29th November and had received 1140 responses in the first 10 days and would remain open until 11th February so there was still plenty of time for people to share their thoughts.
- Whilst noting that a budget of £750,000 had been set aside for developing the local plan, a member queried if there was a risk of this being overspent. The Cabinet Member indicated that the service would work within that

budget but variables that he had highlighted, such as a change to a 30-month timescale or additional housing or employment demand in the county as a result of the Cambridge/Oxford Arc proposals, could result in a need to employ consultants and therefore risk an overspend.

- Steve Bambrick assured members that previous experience in developing local plans had informed this budget. It would be monitored closely so that if further funding was needed this could be requested through the annual medium term financial planning process.
- A member commented about the need for infrastructure considerations to be a priority in the new local plan. It was important to preserve green space and consider traffic implications of new homes. The Cabinet Member agreed that infrastructure was crucial but there was not always sufficient funding to deliver it. This was often why development would be added on to existing settlements.
- In response to a question regarding converting retail space into higher density housing, the Cabinet Member gave examples of how this has been delivered well, with sufficient parking and green space in Cambridge. He advised that a scheme had been recently approved locally which would deliver several hundred flats and would also help to revitalise the town centre.
- A member reported that she had found the consultation document slightly confusing as the numbering system reversed between the earlier and later questions which might have caught some people out. The Cabinet Member promised to share this feedback with the communications team.
- In response to a question regarding provision for truly affordable housing, the Cabinet Member explained that Cllr Nick Naylor, Cabinet Member for Housing and Regulatory Services was leading a working group on affordable housing which would feed into the development of the local plan. This was an important consideration for the council as the average salary in the county was £29,000 in comparison with an average house price of £470,000. The Council was reviewing its own estate with a view to releasing some land for development, but it was important to balance the need to develop affordable housing options versus the need to maximise capital receipts to deliver value for money for taxpayers.
- The lack of affordable housing was also an issue nationally which might require a national solution. The Committee might want to consider discussing affordability in more detail at a future meeting.
- A member asked if the Council could share the methodology by which the housing needs figures had been calculated, noting that the 2018 ONS figures were lower than 2014 and asked whether it was possible for the housing needs figures to be reduced by virtue of paragraph 11b, footnote 7 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) due to the areas of green belt and outstanding natural beauty in Buckinghamshire. The Cabinet Member offered a member briefing session on how the statistics are compiled and therefore how the housing need figures were reached as this would be helpful in setting a context. **ACTION: Gareth Williams**
- With regards to the suggestion of assuming a lower housing needs figure,

Steve Bambrick explained that there was a formal process to request that the standard methodology be lowered and to do this, Buckinghamshire would have to demonstrate that there were insufficient appropriate sites to meet the housing needs. With the smaller legacy councils, such as Chiltern and South Bucks, where there was a high proportion of green belt, this was easier to demonstrate. However now as a larger unitary authority, all potential sites from across the county area would have to be assessed, which might make it more difficult to challenge the housing numbers. The initial identification and assessment of sites was building an evidence base and if as a result of this, it could be shown that housing needs could not be fulfilled, then the option of lowering the standard methodology could be considered.

- In response to a question about how windfall homes would be taken into account in the housing numbers, the Cabinet Member explained that historically the numbers of windfall homes had exceeded the figures included in the local plan and the Cabinet Member had asked officers if this historical average could therefore be used. It was important to strike a realistic balance otherwise the Planning Inspector could reject the plan.
- A member asked how they could access information on S106 and infrastructure plans for their own local areas. The Cabinet Member advised that he would be happy for information to be shared with local members and suggested that it might be possible to produce a local member report detailing S106 and CIL spending**.** **ACTION: Gareth Williams**
- The Cabinet Member also commented that he was keen to improve member engagement with planning more generally and in the new year, Member Surgeries were being introduced, whereby members could book time with planning officers to discuss any specific cases in their areas.
- In response to a member question about the powers of the Planning Inspector, it was noted that the local plan has to be judged to be deliverable. Inspectors can be challenged but only if they have made an error in law.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member, Steve Bambrick and Darran Eggleton for their presentation and for answering members' questions.

6 Planning Enforcement

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Gary Hall, Deputy Cabinet Member for Planning Enforcement to the meeting, who joined Cllr Gareth Williams and the Officer team. Cllr Gary Hall introduced the report, reminding members that planning enforcement was a priority but if a breach was reported, the team would work with individuals to bring their development back into line with planning rules, before looking to take more formal action. Cllr Hall paid tribute to the staff and reminded members that whilst planning could be an emotive subject, officers should be treated with courtesy and respect.

Darran Eggleton, Head of Planning Policy and Compliance, highlighted the following main points from the report:

- Buckinghamshire Council took a firm but fair approach to planning enforcement and formal action would be taken as needed.

- The Planning Enforcement management team had been restructured with two Area Team Leaders reporting into the Enforcement Manager. The two teams were aligned with North and Central Planning areas and East/South and West planning areas.
- The teams were working through a backlog of cases, using a proactive risk-based approach which enabled decisions to be taken as early as possible in the process. This was leading to an increase in performance, with an increased number of notices issued and a high success rate at appeal stage which demonstrated that staff were making sound judgements.

In response to members' questions and during the subsequent discussions the following main points were noted:

- It was noted that 805 cases had been closed and only 24 formal actions taken. Darran Eggleton explained that cases were not closed unless permission has been sought and obtained or if it was judged not to be expedient to pursue the issue. The closure rate was monitored and usually ran at 20%, due to issues being resolved or being found not be in breach of planning rules.
- In response to a question regarding the caseload per officer, average length of time to resolve a case and how Buckinghamshire Council compared to others, it was agreed that more detailed KPIs would be shared with the committee. It was noted that Government collated national statistics in terms of the number of enforcement notices issued and BC were ranked 11th last year or 5th outside of Greater London. **ACTION: Darran Eggleton**
- A member briefing session on enforcement was planned for the new year as well as some training aimed at town and parish councils.
- Anyone could report a planning breach via the planning portal. The team had 1556 open cases currently.
- A member complimented the team on dealing with a planning breach she reported and resolving the issue within 3 weeks.
- A member questioned why only 24 formal notices had been issued when reporting of issues was much higher. It was noted that last year the Council issued 59 notices in comparison with 100 for the highest issuing local authority.
- The enforcement team was made up of 17 full time equivalents although there were currently 3 vacancies, which were being covered by agency staff. A further 5 officers had been requested in the current budget round.
- A member commented that he was appalled to hear about unacceptable behaviour from members towards officers. He expressed the view that members should never raise their voices with officers and suggested that improved understanding of the process might encourage members to moderate this behaviour.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Gary Hall and Darran Eggleton for their report and was pleased to see that improvements were being made in this area.

7 S106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL)

The Committee received and noted the report on S106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL). In response to members' questions and during subsequent discussions the following main points were noted:

- It was noted that the planning white paper had suggested that a national infrastructure levy could be introduced instead of CIL so changes could be on the horizon.
- Buckinghamshire Council had not reimbursed any developer contributions through the clawback mechanism.
- A member asked how CIL operated in the High Wycombe town area which was unparished and asked if any CIL monies had been clawed back by developers in the Wycombe District Council over the past ten-year period. It was agreed that this information would be provided after the meeting. **ACTION: Steve Bambrick**
- A member asked how S106/CIL was managed in connection with larger developments, particularly when developers take applications to appeal. Steve Bambrick advised that major applications tended to be managed via Planning Performance Agreements (PPAs). If an application is very speculative and goes to appeal the Council has a duty to defend its position and would advise the planning inspector of any conditions and S106 provisions that would be needed if planning permission was granted. The planning team try to work collaboratively with applicants either through pre-application advice or PPAs in the case of major developments.
- A member advised that a S106 funded initiative was going ahead in his ward despite concerns being raised by all local members there. He wanted advice on what local members can do to influence the S106 spend. It was noted that any S106 agreement is designed to deliver an outcome required as a result of a planning decisions. Decision makers set out the requirements for the S106 so it was important to engage with the process ahead of that decision being taken at area planning committee.
- In response to a question regarding the mechanisms around CIL it was explained that when planning permission is approved, applicants are provided with a CIL liability form. There are some exemptions such as self-build, social housing etc. The applicant must then provide a commencement notice and within 60 days they must pay the CIL. Each year the Council published an Infrastructure Funding Statement on 31st December. This provided an overview of CIL that had been collected in each local area and across the county as a whole.
- After five years, town and parish councils must provide notice to Buckinghamshire Council detailing how the CIL monies have been spent. If it has not been spent, then Buckinghamshire Council would take back the money but it still had to be spent in that local area. It was unclear if the onus was on the town and parish council to return the money or on Buckinghamshire Council to request it after the five-year period. It was agreed that this would be clarified following the meeting.

  ACTION: Darran Eggleton
- A member asked why only some CIL information was available online and it was noted that a fee was charged to access some S106 copies. These

discrepancies were due to differences in legacy council systems which were yet to be aligned. A new specific database for CIL and S106 would be introduced which would make processes more efficient and transparent. The Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration agreed that this information should be accessible and transparent.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member, Steve Bambrick and Darran Eggleton for attending the meeting.

8 Member Engagement in Planning - Update

The Chairman invited Cllr Chris Poll, who was chairing the rapid review on Member Engagement in Planning to update the Committee on the progress with this piece of work. The following main points were noted:

- The review group held an initial meeting in early November with the Cabinet Member, Gareth Williams, Christine Urry, Head of Planning & Development and some of her team.
- This was a very useful meeting. Members shared some of their experiences with accessing help and updates from planning officers and the staff provided an insight into some of the challenges they have been facing, such as building one team in the new Unitary council against the backdrop of a significant increase in planning applications and having to work remotely due to the pandemic.
- Following on from the meeting, the review group decided to set up two surveys – one for elected members and one for planning staff. These were accessible online and all data received was confidential and anonymised. The surveys closed on 26th November and a summary of the results will be shared with the review group shortly.
- Some initial headlines - 59 members responded, which is a response rate of 40%, with a good mix of new members and members who had previously served on one of the legacy councils.
- Overall, 46% reported having a positive or very positive experience of engaging with the planning service and 25% reported having a negative or very negative experience so far.
- In response to a question regarding the Cabinet Member's proposal to introduce pre-bookable Planning Surgeries for members, the feedback was supportive with 80% of respondents being positive or very positive about the initiative.

Next Steps

- The review group will be meeting via MS teams with a Planning Development Manager from Durham, to discuss their experience of member engagement in planning. As another large unitary authority with a similar planning committee model to Buckinghamshire, Durham will be a useful comparator.
- In January, the review group will meet to consider the evidence that has been gathered and a report with recommendations will be drafted.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Poll for this update.

9 Work Programme

The Select Committee noted the Work Programme.

10 Date of next meeting

17th February 2022 at 10am

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Report to Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committee

Date:	17th February 2022
Title:	Digital Infrastructure Update
Cabinet Member(s):	Cllr Martin Tett
Contact officer:	**Lisa Michelson/ Claire Phillips**
Ward(s) affected:	All
Recommendations:	**That the Committee note this update on current broadband connectivity activity and details of the government's new programme to deliver gigabit capable broadband speeds.**
Reason for decision:	**To ensure the committee is kept up to date with activity to maximise connectivity across Buckinghamshire**

1. Executive summary

1.1 There are 5 programmes of work to enable the ongoing enhancement of digital infrastructure in Buckinghamshire. This paper will provide an update on existing contracts as well as looking towards the new programmes that will support the governments ambition to deliver nationwide coverage of gigabit-capable broadband as soon as possible.

a) Bucks Rural Broadband Project (Live programme)

b) Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme (Live programme)

c) Project Gigabit (New programme)

d) Project GigaHub (New programme)

e) Connected Counties Broadband Programme (Closing programme)

1.2 Buckinghamshire has consistently lagged behind the national averages for broadband connectivity for Superfast, Ultrafast and Gigabit capabilities (Appendix 1). Although

good progress has been made in some areas of Buckinghamshire via the voucher scheme, supplier engagement, and rural contracts, there is now a real opportunity to build our Gigabit capability to match our ambitions and vision for a connected county.

2. Content of report

A. Buckinghamshire Rural Business Broadband Programme

2.1 This Defra funded programme aims to connect the most rural businesses from below superfast connectivity (<30mbps) to gigabit capable (≥1,000) broadband. The council has a £1.8M contract with Openreach which must be completed by the end of 2022 as we must reclaim our expenditure from Defra as it uses European funding.

2.2 This contract focuses on provide broadband infrastructure to 'white areas' (areas where there are no commercial delivery plans from suppliers) that are rural businesses. As part of our contract, we have been able to connect other properties from the same structure which has enabled a wider benefit to residents.

2.3 Delivery of the contract has been subject to delays as a result of covid. Openreach connected the first structure in June 2021. Delivery will be concluded by the end of 3rd quarter 2022 (Connectivity to circa 620 premises across the county).

2.4 During Q3 we required Open Reach to produce a remedial recovery plan due to constant delivery issues and slippage against original plan. We are currently undertaking due diligence to ensure that Openreach's build plans are compliant with DEFRA eligibility rules. Delivery targeted for completion June 2022.

B. Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme

2.5 Central Government provides up to £1,500 for rural residents and up to £3,500 for rural businesses to gain gigabit-capable broadband. Residents/Businesses apply directly to BDUK for these vouchers. In recognition of the challenges and costs in delivering connectivity to rural areas using Getting Building Funding from the LEP Buckinghamshire Council has offered top-up vouchers which add up to £2,000 for rural residents and £3,500 for rural businesses, bringing total voucher value for rural residents in Buckinghamshire to £3,500 and £7,000 for rural businesses.

2.6 Since the inception of the Gigabit Voucher Scheme, and excluding the Buckinghamshire top-up, over £3,300,000 has been committed to improving broadband connectivity to communities across Buckinghamshire, with over 1,767 vouchers being requested.

2.7 Total top up funding to date from Buckinghamshire Council (Issued + Paid + Requested) minus over commitment is over £910,000. Circa 500 premises connected

so far out of targeted 2,000 (note that connection can take up to 14 months post voucher issue).

2.8 Using their grant, beneficiaries can contract with suppliers as part of a group scheme (a project) for gigabit capable products. Projects must include at least two beneficiaries and once approved suppliers have 12 months to deliver all promised connections.

2.9 This has been a hugely successful initiative in Buckinghamshire with the local top up making the difference to a viable connection in a local area and offering good value for money for investment.

2.10 As part of the recently launched Project Gigabit scheme by the Government, there is a continued Broadband Voucher Scheme available - Over the next 3 years, up to £210m (UK wide) will be allocated to deliver a voucher scheme.

2.11 The Bucks Gigabit Voucher 'Top Up' scheme has been made live again due to underspend against the grant, which means that some businesses and residential premises may be eligible for Gigabit Vouchers and 'Top Up' support from Buckinghamshire Council. Eligible applications will be dealt with on a first come first served basis.

C. Project Gigabit

2.12 The Government wants to deliver nationwide coverage of gigabit-capable broadband as soon as possible. It is encouraging commercial investment and stimulating suppliers to go further into harder to reach areas, by using subsidies to stretch that commercial activity further.

2.13 Project Gigabit programme targets properties that would otherwise have been left behind in broadband companies' rollout plans and prioritises those that currently have the slowest connections. Buckinghamshire has been designated in a region that also includes Hertfordshire and East of Berkshire, known as 'Lot 26'.

2.14 Our role will be to work directly with the Government's delivery agency Building Digital UK (BDUK) and suppliers over the coming months and years, to get the maximum investment for Buckinghamshire residents and businesses. Local Authorities are critical partners in delivering the Government initiative entitled 'Project Gigabit' and the wider build against national gigabit targets, with key emphasis on areas with sub-Superfast connectivity.

2.15 We will influence, shape and provide the appropriate challenge to BDUK and suppliers in relation to their planned intervention areas, build plans, and supplier issues on the ground. We will be able to influence the build in our area through participation at a number of stages to ensure the right actions and decisions are taken.

2.16 The timetable for implementation of 'Lot 26':

- August 2021: Open Market Review (OMR) for 1 month plus a few months period of validation, evaluation, and assurance. Followed by the Public Review (PR) for 1 month again followed by a few months period of validation, evaluation, and assurance - currently the OMR is near completion and Public Review due to commence in February 2022
- Summer 2022: Procurement starts
- Spring 2023: Contract commencement date

2.17 BDUK will work closely with the Council to extend gigabit coverage through a centralised procurement approach. An anticipated 142,000 premises will be connected through this contract for Lot 26 (Bucks, Herts and Berks). There is an indicative contract value £140-237m, however the value of the contract and number of premises to be connected is likely to change over the course of the public review and procurement process and the breakdown for Bucks is not known at this stage.

2.18 Once the results of the Open Market Review are published, we will have up to date data of where the builds are and will be, and where our 'white' areas will be, by UPRN (unique property reference number). We will then potentially be better equipped to answer direct resident/business queries about plans to improve connectivity in their area. We can also publish the maps BDUK produce.

D. Project GigaHub

2.19 Over the next 3 years, up to £110m of government funding UK wide will be invested into connecting rural buildings with no existing or planned superfast broadband such as schools, GP surgeries, libraries, and other public buildings to bring new fibre right into the heart of communities for the first time. These buildings will then act as 'hubs', from which industry can connect surrounding homes and businesses. There is an opportunity for us to work with local partners to identify priority locations and suitable buildings for these hubs in Buckinghamshire.

2.20 In order to qualify for Gigahubs funding DCMS are ideally looking for projects with a minimum of 100 eligible sites**.** The site needs to be classified as a public sector building (i.e., owned by central government, Buckinghamshire Council, or any other public sector body) and be performing a public function. We will be looking at the potential to work as connected counties with Herts and Oxfordshire for critical mass.

2.21 If we participate in this programme the council will be required to provide resource to programme manage and develop a business case. We will have to identify the premises and contact potential public sector partners who could aid with the collation of premises and have knowledge of local gigabit broadband demand.

E. Connected Counties Broadband Programme

Contract 1

- This contract started in June 2013, with a three-year network build, and a ten-year contract term. By March 2016, the contract delivered 45,780 improved broadband connections across Buckinghamshire, of which 40,508 can access superfast speeds (above 24mbps). This contract was split 64% for Buckinghamshire and 36% for Hertfordshire as Buckinghamshire at the time were behind on their superfast delivery.
- The Contract is now in its "In Life" phase until March 2023, during which period take-up is monitored with formal review points scheduled every two years.
- Within the contract, Buckinghamshire Council and Bucks LEP (as well as the Hertfordshire and BDUK partners) receive a monetary bonus known as gainshare for any take-up above 20%. In May 2021, take-up was at 81.1%.

Contract 2

- This contract was signed in April 2015 without Buckinghamshire, who joined in August 2016. The original aim was to complete the contract in December 2019, but due to it being placed under a Default Notice in November 2017 over slow progress, the delivery was extended to be completed by December 2020. Due to various reasons, including the Coronavirus pandemic, Openreach concluded at the end of March 2021. This contract is split the opposite of Contract 1, so 64% in Hertfordshire, and 36% in Buckinghamshire.
- Within the contract, Buckinghamshire Council and Bucks LEP (as well as the Hertfordshire and BDUK partners) receive gainshare for any take-up above 27%. In May 2021, take up was at 66.9% and is following a similar trajectory as Contract 1.

Gainshare Data

These estimations were provided by BDUK in January 2020 and are for the life span of the whole contract:

Contract 1	Gainshare Total amount	Total amount (minus BDUK portion (47.12%))	Funding proportion
Total gainshare	£6,758,747	£3,574,025	
Hertfordshire	£2,433,148	£1,286,649	36.00%
Buckinghamshire	£4,325,598	£2,287,376*	64.00%

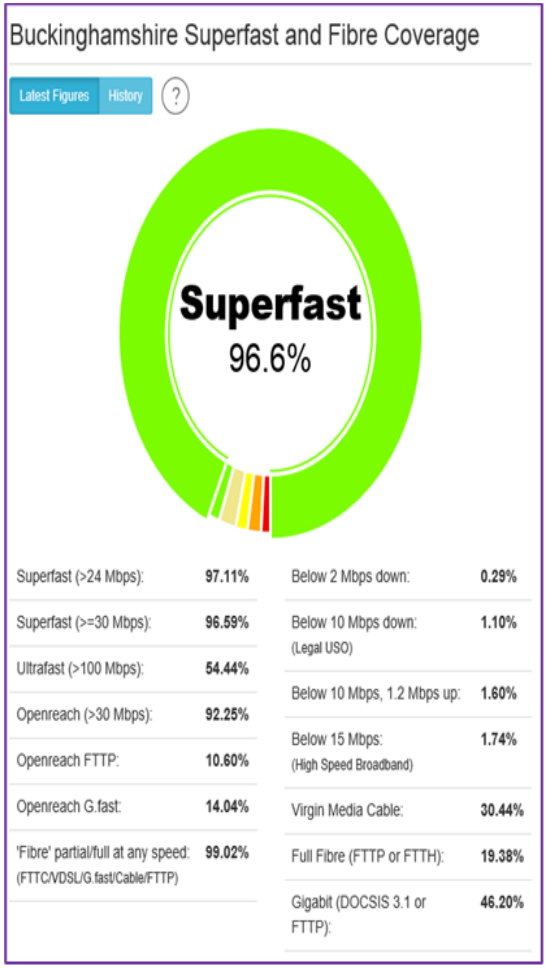
*The Buckinghamshire portion is split 54.05% BC and 45.95% LEP reflecting the original investment in the contract

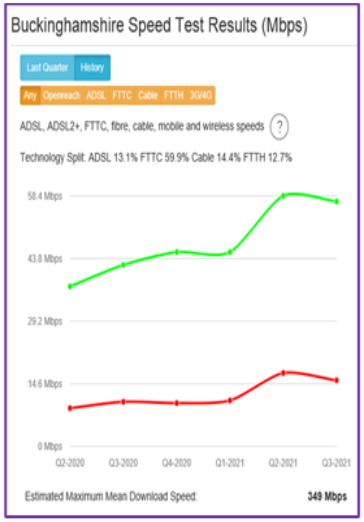
Contract 2	Gainshare Total amount	Total amount (minus BDUK portion (est.50.3%)	Funding proportion
Total gainshare	£7,472,966	£3,714,064	

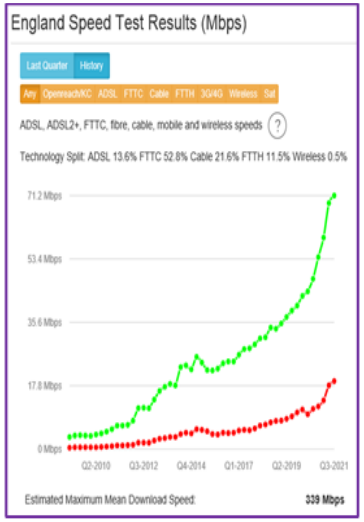
Hertfordshire	£5,006,887	£2,488,422	67.00%
Buckinghamshire	£2,466,078	£1,225,641*	33.00%

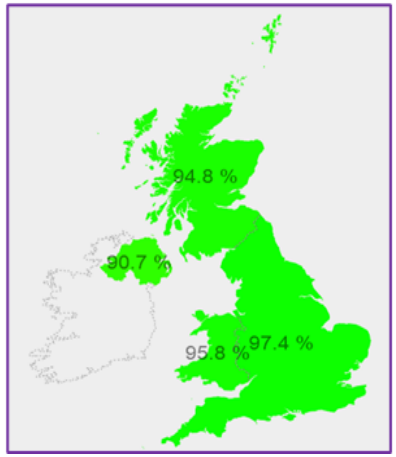
*Contract 2 is split 63.01% Bucks and 36.99% LEP and there is an estimated gainshare of circa £770k for Bucks and £450k for LEP over 7 years post deployment. Deployment ending in 2021

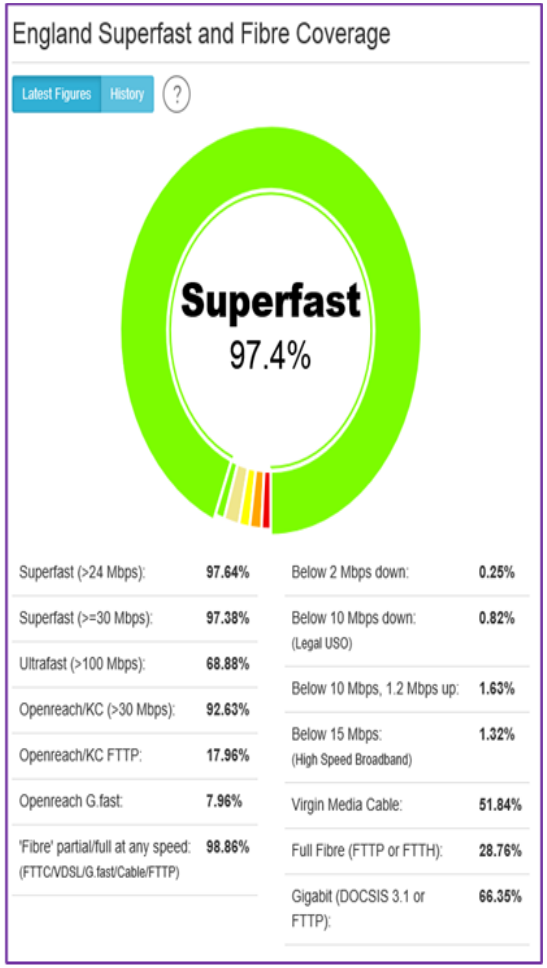
APPENDIX 1: BROADBAND COVERAGE STATISTICS (Source: Think broadband Statistics, Jan 2022)











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Growth Housing & Infrastructure Select Committee

Feb 17th 2022

Update on progress with development of the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy

Development of Buckinghamshire Council's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2022-2025

Homelessness Act 2002 requires Council to have a strategy

Aims to meet requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 to

1. Prevent more people from becoming homeless in the first place by identifying people at risk and intervening earlier;
2. Intervene rapidly if a homelessness crisis occurs, so it is brief and non-recurrent;
3. Help more people to recover from and exit homelessness by getting them back on their feet.

Our upcoming strategy will reflect the requirements above and the recognised need to continue to intervene at the earliest possible stage to prevent homelessness.

Actions to Date

- HQN (Housing Quality Network) appointed to support strategy development
- Review of the three former district strategies;
- Workshops with internal and external stakeholders;
- Collection of data and information;
- Identification of causes of homelessness and rough sleeping;
- Drafting of strategy prior to consultation activity

Strategy Context

The Homelessness Strategy will underpin the Council's key priorities:

1. **Strengthening our communities**
2. Improving our environment
3. **Protecting the vulnerable**
4. Increasing prosperity

The key priorities are for our residents, employees, businesses, service users and councillors.

Strategy Context

Strengthening our communities

Provide the homes our growing communities need, including affordable housing, at the right stage in people's lives

Protecting the Vulnerable

Work to reduce homelessness and address its root causes.

The Homelessness Strategy also supports the priorities of increasing prosperity and improving the environment.

Challenges In Buckinghamshire

The evidence base we have collected highlights some of the key challenges.

1. The number of people, particularly young people, being asked to leave by family and friends. Many of these have never held a tenancy in their own right.
2. The number of households with debt and financial challenges affecting their ability to pay their current rent.
3. The number of households threatened with homelessness when their private sector tenancy is ended.

Challenges In Buckinghamshire

4. The number of people threatened with homelessness as a result of a relationship breakdown, many involving domestic abuse.
5. Encouraging those threatened with homelessness to make early contact with the service in order to resolve the situation and prevent homelessness.
6. Increasing the proportion of households where homelessness can be prevented either by retaining the existing tenancy or making a planned move.

Challenges In Buckinghamshire

7. Reducing rough sleeping to zero.
8. Continuing to manage temporary accommodation (TA) tightly; minimise the use of B&B accommodation; and ensure move-on from temporary accommodation as early as possible to affordable, sustainable, settled accommodation.
9. Ensuring appropriate support is available for vulnerable households, with a particular focus on mental health needs.

Challenges In Buckinghamshire

- In 2020/21 circa 2,000 households approached us for advice and support.
- Statutory duty to assist (prevention or relief) in 90%+ cases.
- Homelessness successfully prevented in over 50% of cases.
- Around 30% of cases moved to alternative accommodation - private sector let or social housing (including supported).

Challenges In Buckinghamshire

- Most of those where a housing duty applied were single people without children.

  The Council must prevent and relieve homelessness for this group, there is no test of vulnerability or other threshold criteria at this stage.
- Next largest group were single parents.
- Most heads of households age 25–44.
- Approx. 1/3rd in work, 1/3rd unemployed
- One in ten unable to work due to a disability

Challenges In Buckinghamshire

Main causes of homelessness:

1. Friends/family no longer willing to accommodate
2. Ending of private sector tenancy
3. Non-violent relationship breakdown
4. Domestic abuse
5. End of social rented tenancy

Other reasons:

6. Leaving an institution (prison, hospital etc.)
7. Harassment
8. Eviction from supported housing

In many cases underlying reasons for homelessness - debt, ill-health, or another vulnerability.

Challenges In Buckinghamshire

Many households threatened with homelessness have a support need:

- Mental health
- Physical health and disability
- Domestic abuse
- Offending history
- Repeat homelessness
- Drug/Alcohol dependency
- History of rough sleeping
- Learning disability
- 18-25’s requiring support to manage independently

Draft Vision and Priorities

Draft vision:

“That everyone has a secure and affordable place to live; advice and support is available for those threatened with homelessness; effective early intervention means that no-one becomes homeless or has to sleep rough.”

Draft Vision and Priorities

Priorities:

1. To provide advice, information and support to enable those at risk of becoming homeless to take steps to remain in their accommodation where feasible and appropriate, or to undertake a planned move if required
2. To provide appropriate and consistent services and to recognise the individual needs of different localities.
3. To identify those at risk of homelessness early and to intervene to prevent homelessness.
4. To support homeless households to find appropriate alternative accommodation quickly.
5. To prevent anyone having to sleep rough.
6. To maximise the supply of affordable rented accommodation.

Draft Vision and Priorities

In addition to these draft priorities, there are two cross-cutting themes to which we will continue to address with associated plans and ideas.

These are:

- Making best use of resources
- Partnership working

Next Steps

- Develop and Action Plan to deliver the Vison & Priorities
- Consult with internal and external stakeholders in the coming weeks
- Adoption by Buckinghamshire Council
- Implementation of action plan – monitoring of delivery and review – further scrutiny?

Questions

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Report to Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committee

Date:	17th February 2022
Title:	Town Centre Regeneration
Cabinet Member(s):	Cllr Gareth Williams & Cllr Jocelyn Towns
Contact officer:	**Lisa Michelson/ Shabnam Ali**
Ward(s) affected:	All
Recommendations:	**That the Committee note content of this report.**

1. Executive summary

1.1 Town Centre Regeneration will remain an important focus for the Council as it supports places to emerge successfully from the COVID pandemic.

a) Regeneration success is achieved through clear vision and narratives that are locally developed and driven. It is essential that Buckinghamshire makes progress on this if our towns and villages are to achieve their ambition.

b) The Council is delivering an ambitious capital programme to invest in our town centres in the regeneration portfolio. These projects include delivering significant grant funding as well as projects which utilise council assets. Next year's capital investment budget sees £21.5m funding programmed for regenerating our places.

c) Recent work has recently been focussed on pandemic support for businesses and high streets which has been reactive. As we come out of the pandemic, it is important to reframe the next phase of regeneration into a proactive approach focussed on the medium and longer term.

d) Two years into the pandemic, we are able to see that some trends for town centres have been expedited (e.g. retail struggling) and other changes to behaviour related to increased home working and public safety (such as more activity taking place outdoors, weather permitting), which need to be factored into our thinking about the next evolution for the high street.

e) The Council is supporting communities to develop their ambitions for their place and put local strategies into place to stimulate and coordinate regeneration investment. The Council is developing a Regeneration Framework for Buckinghamshire in order to pull a coherent approach to regeneration together across the whole of the county.

2. Delivering Regeneration in Buckinghamshire

2.1 Buckinghamshire as a county is not dominated by a single town/city, but instead made up from a thriving network of medium sized towns, market towns and large villages. Regeneration in these important towns and rural communities is essential to ensure their long-term survival and prosperity as well as to achieve the economic ambitions for Buckinghamshire.

2.2 Regeneration in Buckinghamshire is community led and delivered through partnership. Working with key public and private sector partners, the council provides local leadership and clarity for practical, long term vision which is essential to achieve consensus for strategic and local regeneration.

2.3 Working across Buckinghamshire partners, the Council plays a key role in spotting opportunities for investment and building momentum for that investment through a compelling narrative for communities. This is true for the two largest towns in Buckinghamshire, but also for other towns and large villages across the county.

2.4 Regeneration success is the realisation of locally determined strategies and vision from our places which achieve a thriving and prosperous Buckinghamshire.

2.5 Alongside essential strategy and vision development, the Council is delivering an ambitious capital programme of regeneration projects. These are funded through a variety of sources including grant funding, S106, or other capital funding. The list of the upcoming year's regeneration capital projects can be found in Appendix 1.

3. Town Centre Pandemic Support

3.1 Regeneration activities for the past two years have been focussed on the rapid and urgent support to our high streets and town centres during the COVID pandemic. While reactive in nature, a number of important initiatives have been designed and delivered.

3.2 **Reopening High Streets Safely and the Welcome Back Fund** – These two initiatives (where the Welcome Back Fund is a scheme which continues on from the Reopening High Streets Safely Fund) have provided support for our high streets and commercial areas during periods of the pandemic where lockdown and social distancing restrictions were in place. The combined funding of nearly £1m has:

a) provided temporary street furniture and public realm improvements to enable businesses and restaurants to trade outdoors,

b) funded additional safety, sanitation, and hygiene measures,

c) delivered important communications campaigns to promote safe behaviour and encourage local shopping in affected businesses

d) created vibrancy through signage, bunting and events to encourage people to return to the high street

3.3 The Council has also supported Buckinghamshire's businesses through the efficient delivery of a number of successful business grants schemes. In particular, the Additional Restrictions Grant scheme was designed to support businesses and self-employed individuals who were not able to access other schemes or support. Over £22m in support was paid directly to thousands of businesses across the county starting at the end of 2020 and through to May 2021. New support measures were announced in December 2022 and the Additional Restrictions Grant Booster scheme was launched in January. This small scheme, which closes on the 23rd of February, provides businesses in targeted sectors with one-time relief grants of £1500.

4. The Changing High Street

4.1 Over recent years, town centres and high streets have been changing due to long term structural changes to the retail sector and online shopping, even before the pandemic's impact and the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions were put into place. Defining the post-COVID role, function and offer of town centres will form a key focus of town centre regeneration activities going forward.

4.2 The pandemic was a shock to many high streets when businesses were required to close and footfall collapsed. However, more recently, the High Street Task Force (HSTF - 2020/21 Review of High Street Footfall in England) has established that the vaccine roll out has supported considerable high street footfall recovery. This has though varied from place to place, with smaller centres recovering quicker than cities and regional centres. Early indications are that 'holiday' towns have recovered best, followed by 'speciality' towns. Comparison Retail Towns – reliant on traditional shopping centres – have fared less well.

4.3 At a national scale, several major brands and familiar stores have disappeared from our town centres, and many stores have diversified into online retail platforms. Such changes can bring opportunities for empty retail and commercial space repurposing such as for much-needed homes, new food and beverage space, public services, or to facilitate cultural activities.

4.4 Broadening the offer of high streets aligns with emerging trends showing more people coming to town centres for a range of different reasons. The public realm and green infrastructure can help drive more footfall to high streets and support events and

activities. Places with unique attractions and a range of services have fared better since the pandemic than those focusing on high street retail – reinforcing the importance of sense of place, heritage, greenspace and the 'experiential offer'. Markets, festivals and events are often key parts of this offer. High streets are increasingly looking to become multi-functional – combining shopping, employment, and culture.

5. Defining and Delivering Regeneration for our communities

5.1 It is important that Buckinghamshire Council and key partners have a clear strategy and vision which drives our collective approach to regeneration.

5.2 Development is underway to produce and agree a new Buckinghamshire Regeneration Framework as the foundation strategy for investment and future place-shaping. Key priorities that drive the regeneration approach in Buckinghamshire include initiatives and strategies which:

a) Support in the development of an ambitious regeneration programme for Buckinghamshire.

b) Define the Buckinghamshire specific principles to underpin place-based regeneration of our town centres.

c) Ensure all Buckinghamshire communities share equally in the county's, and the UK's success including delivering against key Levelling-Up missions such as Pride of Place, employment and productivity, and Healthy Life Expectancy.

d) Articulate the unique network of towns within Buckinghamshire, drawing out how they individually and collectively contribute to the growth ambitions of the County.

e) Set priorities for town-centre-based regeneration at a high level, helping us to prioritise future economic investment and creating a basis for individual towns to progress local strategies, masterplans and delivery plans.

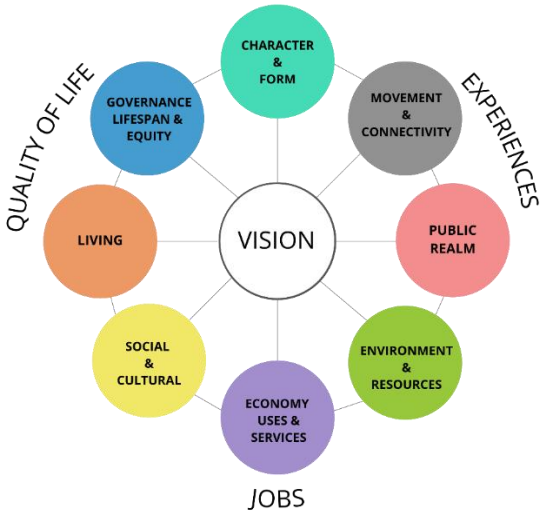
f) Define the governance arrangements required to drive forward regeneration, based on existing good practice from across the County, in particular those established for Aylesbury Garden Town.

g) Engage stakeholders to contribute to and play an active role in Buckinghamshire's regeneration programme

5.3 The regeneration approach will not be looking to 'standardise' our places. Our places, be they villages, towns, cities or regions, are diverse and unique. They are shaped by their location, connections, natural surroundings, history, culture, economies, and the people who live, visit, and work in them.

5.4 The regeneration approach draws on and reflects key characteristics identified in the National Design Guide, the Egan Review of skills for sustainable communities, the BRE Excellence Framework for sustainable communities and the work of the High Street Task Force and Institute of Place Management, to ensure a town centre focus.

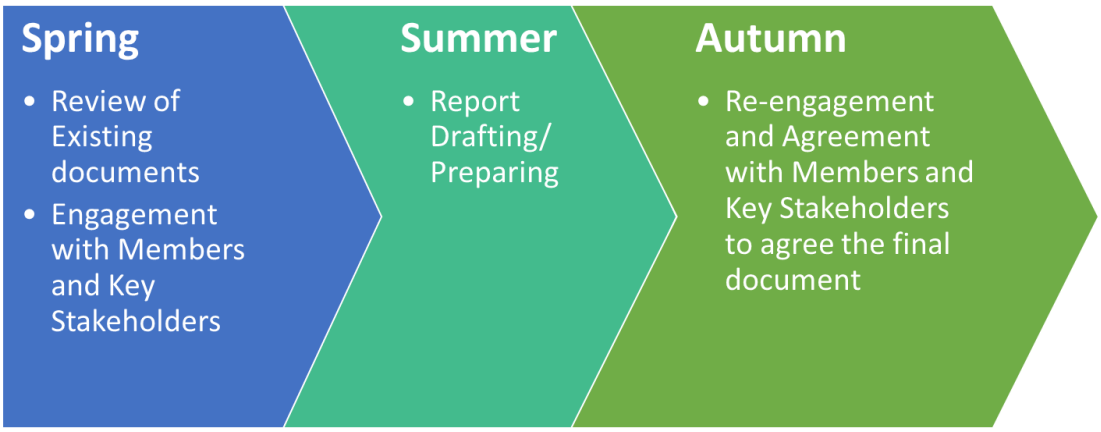
5.5 Against each theme, strategic principles speak to 'what makes a good town centre' – enabling the Council to define the high-level principles we wish all our towns to be based on going forward. To understand how these principles can apply to and are relevant for the towns across Buckinghamshire, an associated series of questions are being explored through evidence clinics with key officers (the theme headings are shown in the diagram below).



5.6 It is important that our strategy documents recognise the roles:

- Economy and service delivery play for our high streets and town centres and their relative performance
- Connectivity plays with a need to address how people move about safely, seamless integration between modes of travel and the need for enhanced accessibility
- Heritage, green infrastructure and character play to shape our places' draw as destinations
- Local leadership, management, marketing, networks of key local stakeholder and partnerships play in building momentum and driving regeneration forward.

5.7 Timeline for development of the Buckinghamshire Framework in 2022



6. Conclusion

6.1 Town Centre vitality and regeneration will remain a top priority for the Council. Further work to develop and deliver the Regeneration Programme will take place, working closely with communities. We are entering a new phase of regeneration work as we come out of the pandemic.

6.2 Regeneration is delivered across any number of local stakeholders. Having a clear vision and ambition for our towns and villages enables local places is essential. It enables communities to build both momentum for action and the basis for investment. The Council will support places in setting out clear strategies and deliverable ambitions, while considering the public sector assets in a place and what those could achieve.

6.3 Alongside further strategy and engagement activities, the Council is also delivering an ambitious programme of regeneration capital projects.

Appendix 1 – Proposed Capital Programme for Regeneration for the next 4 Years

Service Area	Project Group / Project	2022/23 £000's	2023/24 £000's	2024/25 £000's	2025/26 £000's	MTFP Total £000's
Economic Growth & Regeneration	Amersham Regeneration (St John's Build)	1,200	0	0	0	1,200
	Aylesbury Town Centre	800	2,000	200	0	3,000
	CIL Funded Regeneration	260	0	0	0	260
	Employment & Regeneration Led Opportunity	1,596	500	0	0	2,096
	Future High Street Funds	12,725	88	0	0	12,813
	High Wycombe Town Centre	200	1,455	1,456	0	3,111
	Retasking of Winslow Centre	530	1,000	2,000	5,700	9,230
	S106 Funded Projects	185	0	0	0	185
	Waterside North Development (OCO)	4,050	2,000	0	0	6,050
	Regeneration Total	**21,546**	**7,043**	**3,656**	**5,700**	**37,945**
Economic Growth & Regeneration Total		**21,546**	**7,043**	**3,656**	**5,700**	**37,945**

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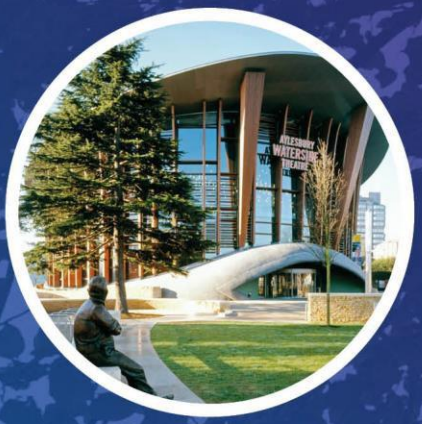

Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee – Member Engagement in Planning Rapid Review

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Introduction

I am Chris Poll, Buckinghamshire Councillor for Ivinghoe and Vice-Chairman of the Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committee. In October 2021, the Select Committee invited me to lead a rapid review group to investigate Member Engagement in Planning and I was joined in this by four other colleagues, Cllrs Andrea Baughan, Michael Bracken, Peter Brazier and Nic Brown. Whilst this review is very internally focussed, looking primarily at the working relationships and practices between planning officers and elected members, I very much hope that by promoting a culture of collaboration and trust between officer and members within the Council, our residents and other partners, such as town and parish councils, will also feel the benefit of the recommendations we are making.

I would like to extend my thanks to my colleagues on the review group, the planning staff who we spoke to and all members and officers who completed our online survey, as well as to the Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration, Gareth Williams for his contribution. I would also like to thank Stephen Reed, Development Manager at Durham County Council, for taking the time to speak to members and giving us some insight into how the planning process works in another large unitary authority.

Cllr Chris Poll, February 2022

Chris Poll
Ivinghoe

Andrea Baughan
Ryemead &
Micklefield

Michael Bracken
Gerrards Cross

Peter Brazier
Ivinghoe

Nic Brown
Bernwood

Aim of the Inquiry

As part of a service improvement programme, the Planning and Environment service had identified a need to ensure that members are well-supported to deal with enquiries from residents in connection with planning matters. For members who sit on one of the 5 Area Planning Committees (APCs) or on the Strategic Sites Committee (SSC), statutory training must be undertaken before the committees can make any decisions. In addition, Induction training was also provided for all members following the May 2021 elections, to raise their awareness of planning issues.

Buckinghamshire Council has 147 elected members and the Planning service are dealing with circa 13,000 planning applications and 1,650 enforcement enquiries per annum. This generates a significant amount of queries/liaison between planning officers and members, therefore it is important that member engagement is meaningful and can resolve issues at an early stage. With this in mind, the Planning and Environment service were keen to work with the members of the rapid review group to identify what changes could be made that might improve engagement between members and planning officers.

Methodology

In order to gather evidence, the review group held a number of meetings and conducted an online survey of both planning staff and elected members.

4th November 2021 – Initial meeting with Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration, Head of Planning and Development and other senior planning staff

17th-26th November 2021 – Online survey of elected members and planning staff.

> 59/147 Members responded which is 40% response rate. There were 89 responses from planning staff. Anonymised comments from the surveys feature in blue text in this report to illustrate certain points.

21st December 2021 – MS Teams meeting with Stephen Reed, Planning Development Manager, Durham County Council

21st January 2022 - Review Group meeting to consider evidence and findings

Context

Buckinghamshire Council launched in April 2020, a new Unitary Council replacing five legacy councils and one of the key priorities was to create one effective Planning service. This was always going to be a complicated task – whilst the National Planning Policy Framework applies across the country, Local Planning Policy varies across each of the former legacy Council areas, working practices and customs were significantly different and a number of different planning software systems were being used. In addition, legacy teams were not fully staffed, which meant that the new authority inherited a backlog of planning applications waiting to be determined.

At the end of March 2020, all Council staff had been asked to work from home where possible as the country went into lockdown due to the Covid 19 pandemic. This meant that planning staff who were going through a staffing restructure following unitarisation now had to work remotely and it was impossible to physically meet up with colleagues. Some senior planning managers were also redeployed to deal with the Council's Covid 19 response at this time. During the pandemic, there was a significant increase in the number of planning applications submitted, both nationally and locally – as people were unable to travel and many people were working from home, their attention turned to making changes and improvements to their home.

In 2021 planning application submissions rose in every English region; February 2021 saw a 25% increase across the country compared to the previous year. In March 2021 Buckinghamshire had the biggest spike in applications since 2017. This was followed by a prolonged period of demand, thankfully dropping away towards the latter part of the year. The Development Management team responded by increasing rates of determination. The number of applications being determined was around 28% higher when comparing April-June 2020 with the same period in 2021. Since August 2021 the planning service has sustained this effort and is determining more applications than received.

In May 2021, local elections which had been postponed in 2020 were held and Buckinghamshire Council's first intake of 147 councillors, including 55 brand new councillors were welcomed. All members appointed to one of the five Area Planning Committees (North, Central, East, South and West) or the Strategic Sites Committee, which considers applications for larger developments, received training to enable them to make informed decisions. In addition, planning training for all members was also available. These training sessions were well-attended and delivered virtually via MS Teams.

Due to the ongoing Covid 19 restrictions, by Autumn 2021 when this review began, it is fair to say that very few elected members had physically met with planning officers and even contact over the telephone had been limited due to the high caseloads that planning staff had been faced with. Some members were frustrated that they could not get updates on resident's planning applications in a timely manner and officers were perhaps more reticent in picking up the phone to discuss a case with a member, who they had never met or spoken to previously and because they knew that they may also be delivering 'bad news'. On the other hand, some members who felt acutely aware of the pressures that planning staff were under, were reluctant to disturb them and relied heavily on email communication when perhaps a short phone call could have resolved a number of queries in a short space of time.

In summary, in the first two years of Buckinghamshire Council, the Planning service has found itself in a 'perfect storm' of staff shortages, an existing backlog of planning applications (and enforcement issues), introduction of new management and team structures and a significant increase in demand during the Covid 19 pandemic. These difficulties were then compounded by the challenges of remote working without access to one consistent planning software system and a lack of 'tried and tested' methods of liaising with a large elected member body of 147 councillors, working in 3 member wards.

Key Findings & Recommendations

After carefully considering the evidence we collected through interviews, alongside the survey responses from both members and planning staff, the review group wish to report the following observations and key findings:

- Members of the review group and also those members surveyed had found staff in the planning teams to be very professional and helpful, although it was noted that it had sometimes been more difficult to contact them during the lockdown period and some queries had required a degree of chasing. It was understood that members of the public sometimes felt that they were being 'fobbed off' when their planning application remained undetermined and members wanted to ensure that they were working together with planning staff to help the process run as smoothly as possible.
- Members could be important advocates for the planning team out in the community as well as being useful sources of very local information.
- It was noted that the backlog of work combined with the significant increase in planning applications during the lockdown period had led to high workloads and pressure for staff and increased emails and phone calls from members also added to that. It was therefore important that members should be encouraged to 'self-serve' where possible – if they could access information for themselves and felt confident in dealing with basic planning queries from their residents, then this could help to relieve pressure on staff.
- With this in mind, the review group propose that a Member Planning Handbook should be produced to provide members with practical information that will assist them in dealing with local planning casework. This should be online, but in a format that would allow elements of it to be printed off if members wish to do so. It should focus very much on practical advice to support members in dealing with local planning casework, for example, a clear explanation of how a member of the public can get involved in the planning process and how they should go about it, lists of useful contacts and what specialist teams need to be involved when and an Acronym Busting guide. Planning staff will probably have a very good idea of frequently asked questions which could help to inform the content of a handbook and members of the review group would be willing to work with officers to refine it further.

Recommendation 1 - A Member Planning Handbook should be produced to provide members with practical information that will assist them in dealing with local planning casework.

- Following on from this recommendation and the idea of members being able to 'self-serve' the review group discussed the benefits of being able to access a GIS map which contains a lot of information pertinent to planning discussions such as flood plains and conservation areas, as well as historical planning application data. An example can be seen at this link - https://www.aylesburyvaledc.gov.uk/quick-map-search.
- It was noted that access to GIS had been available to members at some of the legacy councils but not all of them and members were uncertain as to the current availability. The review group believe this would be a useful tool for members, alongside the Member Planning Handbook.

"I have just learned about the GIS map and its many layers. Access to this could save everyone a lot of time and repeat questions"

Recommendation 2 - All members should be able to access and receive training on how to use a GIS map to enable them to look up planning application details and other useful information such as flood plains, conservation areas etc to help them respond to planning queries from residents.

- The Cabinet Member was keen to emphasise that part of the planning service improvement plan was looking at quick wins to help staff to assess applications more quickly, which was key to addressing the backlog. Householder templates had been simplified and a risk-based approach was being encouraged to streamline the process. In addition, a checklist for agents was being introduced to enable their applications to be reviewed more efficiently.
- It was hoped that slight changes to working practices would help to boost morale of staff, as well as making the service more responsive to customers. It was also clear that a culture of collaboration between members and officers was key. We heard from Stephen Reed, Development Manager at Durham, that it was important that members and planning staff work together and this approach had been encouraged at Durham from the very beginning of their unitary journey. It had been essential in delivering the Council's ambitious regeneration plans and the planning staff worked hard to build relationships with members through regular training sessions and dealing with members' queries in a timely manner. It was noted that Durham had been fortunate to have a fully staffed team from the outset.
- From the survey results and discussions with senior planning staff, it was also clear that whilst remote working had some advantages, it had led to a disconnect between colleagues and between members and planning officers. As the planning service was trying to establish itself in a new configuration, as well as recruiting a number of new staff when the pandemic hit, it was obviously quite challenging for everyone to adapt. However, as already mentioned, the number of planning applications processed between April and June 2021 was 28% higher than in the corresponding months of 2020 which is all credit to the hard work of staff and the revised working practices that were introduced.
- We heard of some incidences where members had been rude to junior members of staff and some survey responses indicated that there had been occasions where members had not treated officers as equals. This could knock the confidence of more inexperienced staff and led to senior managers wanting to protect their team members. The review group were clear that this behaviour was unacceptable and that all staff should be treated with courtesy and respect. All officers should be able to interact with members, as restricting this to the realm of senior managers would only make the situation more difficult in the long term.

- The review group would like to make a number of recommendations (3-5) to promote a more collaborative approach between members and officers, as follows:

Recommendation 3 - A short guidance note should be provided for officers and members explaining the benefits of working in partnership, to enable public participation in planning and promote a wider understanding of the process. This should set out reasonable expectations in terms of how queries will be managed, including timescales.

- In connection with recommendation 3 above, whilst the review group acknowledge that the Planning Protocol referred to in the Council's constitution does cover expected behaviours between officers and members and advice around planning decision making, it was felt that a brief, more informal guidance note might be useful in helping to set expectations for members and officers.

Recommendation 4 - A series of 'informal' Meet the Planners events should be held to enable members and officers to meet and chat in a relaxed atmosphere, to help to cultivate trust and collaboration.

- Whilst recommendation 4 could appear to be a relatively trivial suggestion, it was noted from survey responses that some staff had not had a single interaction with an elected member since 2020 and some members were finding it difficult to know who to go to when they had a planning query.
- With 147 members and over 200 staff working in planning, this will not be a situation that can be remedied overnight, but when people are able to put a face to a name and remember meeting someone, then it is much easier to pick up the phone and have a useful discussion. Some members of the review

group described meeting a new senior planner as a 'breath of fresh air', as after a short face to face meeting they had been able to answer a number of planning queries and reassure the members that they wanted to assist them in dealing with concerns raised by their parish council and residents.

"Since vesting day (and lockdown) I've had little interaction with members, and most of my teams have had no engagement at all. It is very difficult for members to trust us to do our jobs and deliver their agendas if they've not met us (and vice-versa) This needs to change."

Recommendation 5 - Political Awareness training should be offered to planning staff to support them in working effectively with Members. This could be facilitated by the Democratic Services team, who would work with the Head of Planning and Development to agree content and delivery timescales.

- As noted above, the review group were concerned to see evidence of a disconnect between members and officers following the service restructure and the remote working that had been necessary during the pandemic. In addition, it was acknowledged that a negative experience with a member might lead to officers being reticent to proactively communicate with members going forward.
- We heard from the Cabinet Member that he wanted to encourage officers to pick up the phone for a discussion rather than relying on sending lengthy technical emails, which might lead to more questions than answers. We also noted that Stephen Reed, Development Manager in Durham reported that building strong working relationships with members was a key skill for anyone wanting to build a long career in planning.
- With this in mind, the review group believe it would be helpful to offer some political awareness training to staff, particularly relatively new planning officers who may not have had a lot of experience in working in local government before. This could be facilitated by our in-house Democratic Services team who have delivered training on working with members for officers across the Council in the past.

"I haven't really ever had any interaction with the members. There seems to be little scope for interaction unless you are a manager or above."

- During our review, the Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration advised the review group that he was hoping to introduce a new system of Member Planning Surgeries from January 2022. These would be pre-bookable slots for members to meet with a planning officer, either in person (Covid 19 permitting) or via MS Teams. Members would be able to outline what they wished to discuss e.g. progress of specific planning applications or enforcement issues to ensure that the correct member of staff could attend and would have time to collate relevant information.
- These surgeries have now gone live, with members being able to book a 20-minute slot and agendas and action notes are circulated by a Planning Member Liaison Officer.
- As part of our online surveys, we asked both members and officers for their thoughts on the suggestion of Member Planning Surgeries. 80% of members were either positive or very positive about the proposal, with many holding up the Local Area Technician Surgeries as an example of how this could work well. Officers were more neutral in their response to the proposal, with some questioning whether it would add to an already heavy workload.
- Whilst members welcome the introduction of this new initiative, they would not want the Member Planning Surgeries to limit day to day interaction between members and officers around a quick planning query. A short chat on the phone is a simple way to save a lot of time and ease concerns.
- The review group would like to revisit how the new Member Planning Surgeries are working once they have had sufficient time to become established. It seems sensible to review progress after 6 months. This would then allow for any proposed changes to be considered over the Summer and be in place for September 2022.

Recommendation 6 - There should be a review of the new Member Surgeries in June 2022 to consider the level of participation and feedback from both members and officers regarding their effectiveness.

APPENDIX

Rapid Review Scope

Title	**Member Engagement in Planning**
Signed-off by	Cllr David Carroll, Chairman, Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committee
Author	Kelly Sutherland, Scrutiny Manager
Date	14th October 2021
Rapid Review Group Membership	Cllrs Chris Poll, Andrea Baughan, Michael Bracken, Peter Brazier, Nic Brown
Scrutiny Team Resource	Kelly Sutherland, Scrutiny Manager will manage this rapid review.
Lead Cabinet Member	Cllr Gareth Williams, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration
Lead Service Officer	Christine Urry, Head of Planning and Development
What is the problem that is trying to be solved?	As part of a service improvement programme, the Planning and Environment service has identified a need to ensure that members are well-supported to deal with enquiries from residents in connection with planning matters. For members who sit on one of the 5 Area Planning Committees (APCs) or on the Strategic Sites Committee (SSC), statutory training must be undertaken before the committees can make any decisions. Induction training is also provided for all members to raise their awareness of planning. Buckinghamshire Council has 147 elected members and the Planning service are dealing with circa 13,000 planning applications and 1,650 enforcement enquiries per annum. This generates a significant amount of queries/liaison between planning officers and members, therefore it is important that member engagement is meaningful and can resolve issues at an early stage.
What might the Rapid Review achieve?	Key lines of enquiry: • Identify key concerns of members and officers in the service (an open & frank exchange of views and ideas) • Define what 'member engagement' means? • Identify what is already offered by the service and assess its effectiveness– what works? What could work better? • Speak to other comparable local authorities to gain insight into their approach and identify best practice ideas that BC might wish to consider adopting. (via MS Teams) By investigating the above, outcomes will include: • Increased trust between members and officers • Members will feel more confident to engage in planning queries with residents and to advocate for the planning service • Reduction in number of emails to the Cabinet Member and specific complaints about a lack of communication This is an ideal opportunity for Select Committee members to influence the evolving culture and work practices of the Planning and Environment service.
Is the issue of significance to Buckinghamshire as a whole and is the topic within the remit of the Select Committee?	Yes

What work is underway already on this issue?	This project was identified by the Planning Improvement Board and it has been suggested that the Select Committee investigates as this will enable the voice of members to be amplified and recommendations to be made to Cabinet.
Are there any key changes that might impact on this issue?	Buckinghamshire Local Plan Planning White Paper Both of the above are in early stages and therefore unlikely to impact on this rapid review.
What are the key timing considerations?	This will be a focussed rapid review to enable the Planning and Environment service to respond to any recommendations for improvement as soon as possible. Post-election and post-service redesign presents an ideal opportunity to propose new ideas to continue to improve/refine the service.
Who are the key stakeholders & decision-makers?	• Elected Members • Planning & Environment Officers • CM for Planning & Regeneration • Service Director – Planning & Environment • Head of Planning and Development
What is out of scope?	Liaison with Parish and Town Councils
What media/communications support do you want?	

Evidence-gathering Methodology

What types of methods of evidence-gathering will you use?
List them here: • **Desktop research** • **Meetings** • **Discussions with other local authorities** • **Possible member survey/call for evidence**
How will you involve service-users and the public? • Main focus of the rapid review is internal communications and engagement between elected members and planning officers.

Outline Project Plan

Stage	Key Activity	Dates
Scoping	Inquiry Scope Agreed by Select Committee	14th October
Evidence-gathering	Evidence-gathering phase – anticipate 3-4 meetings	November/December
Reporting	Final Inquiry Group report with recommendations completed (signed-off by SC Chairman)	
	Report published for Select Committee	
	Select Committee agrees report to go forward to decision-makers	
	Cabinet/Partner considers recommendations	

Definition of a Rapid Review

A Rapid Review is a focussed investigation with fairly narrow parameters, that can be conducted in a relatively short time scale. For example, you may hold three or four meetings as a review group – one to establish and understand what the key issues are, one or two to gather evidence from service users or other authorities to gain insight into best practice and a final meeting to discuss what members have heard and identify any useful recommendations. A rapid review format will be useful when considering less complex issues and may be helpful in delivering 'quick wins' for the Council's service users and residents.

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Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committee (Chairman: David Carroll, Scrutiny officer: Kelly Sutherland)

Date	Topic	Description & Purpose	Lead Officer	Contributors
7 April 2022	Buckinghamshire Local Plan – Update	For members to assess progress made to date on the Local Plan.	Steve Bambrick	Gareth Williams, Steve B
	Skills discussion	To assess the development of the strategic partnership on skills with DWP.	Lisa Michelson	Martin Tett, Lisa

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