



Buckinghamshire Council

Finance & Resources Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FINANCE & RESOURCES SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 23 FEBRUARY 2023 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 3.10 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

R Bagge, D Goss, D Barnes, M Bracken, S Chhokar, G Harris, I Macpherson, R Newcombe, M Walsh and S Wilson

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

N Al-Sabouni, T Butcher, J Chilver, S Murphy-Brookman, J Reed, D Skinner and C Ward

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE / CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies were received from Councillors D Anthony, T Dixon, M Tett and K Wood.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were none.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 1 December 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were none.

5 BUDGET INQUIRY 2022 RECOMMENDATIONS: 12-MONTH REVIEW

The Chairman welcomed Councillor J Chilver, Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources, and the officers to the meeting. The Cabinet Member advised that most of the actions had been completed and invited Members to ask questions.

The following points were noted during the Committee's discussion:

- A Member was interested in what lessons the Council had learnt from the Social Work Academy. The academy cohorts were managed by Children's Social Care so further information would be provided outside the meeting.

ACTION: S Murphy-Brookman

- Due to the success of the Social Worker Academy, the Talent Academy had been rolled out across the Council. The Social Worker Academy primarily attracted people at the start of their careers, whereas the Talent Academy included people returning to work, people wishing to become managers or subject experts.
- It was noted that the timetable of key strategies had not been shared with Members on a quarterly basis however it had been published on the website in March and updated quarterly. This commitment would be reviewed.
- In terms of contingencies, the emerging position was to improve from Q2. Based on the current forecast, not all contingencies were expected to be fully utilised.
- In response to a Member's request, data relating to the cost of preparing the local plan would be circulated to the Committee.

ACTION: D Skinner

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for the 12-month update.

6 PERFORMANCE REPORT Q3

The Chairman invited the Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources, Councillor J Chilver, to introduce the report. In the Cabinet Member's presentation, the following points were highlighted:

- The report outlined the Q3 performance with national and regional benchmarking information. 67% of indicators were green and 22% were red. The proportion of green to red indicators had remained similar, though red indicators had slightly increased from 18 to 22.
- The average web chat response time was 59 seconds, slightly below the target of 50 seconds. The service had been suspended in the last quarter due to resources needing to be redeployed. The service had restarted this quarter, with additional staff being trained to support it.
- Two red indicators related to the average processing time for new housing benefit claims and housing benefit change claims. This was due to an 11-week system closure as a result of implementing a new countywide revenue and benefits system which was now in place. The service had brought in additional resources to clear the backlog and also improved automation to enable faster processing.
- The average phone call waiting time had improved significantly and was now at 2 minutes and 42 seconds against a target of three minutes. 97% of phone calls were answered against a target of 90%. Customer satisfaction was maintained at 80%.
- The investment portfolio continued to increase, currently being at 74% against a target of 64%.
- The percentage of staff who feel happy, motivated and valued at work was 74%; an increase since the last reporting period.

The following points were noted during the Committee's discussion:

- A Member noted that the unemployment measures did not distinguish between unemployment and economic inactivity. It was suggested that a more in-depth analysis could be carried out to compare figures with other authorities in a more meaningful way. The Cabinet Member noted the suggestion.
- A number of links on the Council's website were still being hosted on the former District pages. It was noted that the process of implementing a single planning system would take around two years. The content and material on the website had been brought up-to-date.
- Housing benefits had been partially replaced by Universal Credit. In limited circumstances, people could be eligible for housing benefit rather than universal credit. Information on

these criteria would be forwarded to the Committee for information. It was noted that processing times for housing benefit claims were still a useful KPI and was also monitored nationally.

ACTION: D Skinner

- The residual waste per household indicator referred to waste that had not been recycled. The figure represented an average across households per quarter.
- The number of planning appeals referred to valid appeals, meaning any appeal that met the criteria for appeals, not the number of lost appeals. This figure excluded enforcement appeals. It was suggested that the wording should be made clearer to avoid confusion.
- A Member highlighted the importance of scrutinising performance across portfolios. The Cabinet Member noted the suggestion and advised that each portfolio holder spoke in depth about red indicators at Cabinet meetings.
- It was noted that whilst revenue and capital variances were reported, financial performance was not. The Cabinet Member noted the suggestion.
- A granular review of sickness rates was planned for the Finance and Resources Select Committee Meeting in April 2023.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for the report.

7 WORK SMART ESTATES STRATEGY

The Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources, Councillor J Chilver, introduced the report and highlighted the following points:

- The Work Smart Estates Strategy had been approved by Cabinet in January 2023. Flexible working arrangements were now embedded across the Council, with a standard of two days a week working in the office.
- The piloted office redesign on the second floor of the Gateway office provided a higher staff-to-desk ratio and more collaborative meeting spaces. The design was well-received and would be rolled out further.
- Four floors at the Walton Street Offices (Aylesbury) and one floor at King George V House (Amersham) were being closed to reduce occupancy costs. These offices would permanently close in the future, with an application for a certificate of immunity from listing for the Walton Street Offices being progressed. Relocation of the archives, emergency operations centre and registry office would need to be addressed as a result of the closure.
- Options for a smaller office in the town centre of Aylesbury and Amersham were being explored to ensure availability of a Council Access Point for face-to-face delivery of services for residents.
- The Gateway in Aylesbury was confirmed as the Council headquarters.
- Staff were also currently being relocated from the Library in High Wycombe into Queen Victoria Road Offices.
- Consultations were being held with staff, unions and members, and updates would be provided regularly throughout the process.

The following points were noted during the Committee's discussion:

- A number of Members commended the report, work of the teams delivering the strategy and the momentum of its implementation.
- A Member asked about detailed timeframes for the project to be completed. The Cabinet Member advised that an indicative timeline could be found in the report, though an exact timeframe was not set as of yet. The Committee would receive regular updates on the progress, which would outline the timeframes for completion in more detail.
- The impact of remote working on inductions for new staff were discussed. The induction

process had been redesigned due to the pandemic, taking into account what had worked well and what processes other organisations followed. The candidate experience prior to commencing employment was identified as important. An onboarding programme has been developed with managers, providing prospective staff with workbooks prior to commencing employment. New employees were provided with a local induction plan and were also required to attend a corporate induction by the Corporate Management Team. There was also a specific induction progress in place for people working on service desks. New managers were given a corporate induction to outline ways to support their teams. Inductions were a mix between digital and face-to-face meetings, though emphasis was on face-to-face contact with other departments to develop networks and relationships.

- The new ways of working were well-received by staff. The together survey revealed that 87% of staff within the Resources Directorate felt they had a good working relationship with their manager. All Corporate Directors focused heavily on staff engagement and satisfaction to ensure consistency. Meetings were also held regularly, which included Service Directors and Heads of Service to ensure these values were implemented across departments.
- The options regarding the sale of King George V house were still under consideration. An affordable or market housing scheme might receive support from the planning department. However, it was important for some staff to remain working in Amersham, though this might not be at the current office space. The residual need would be assessed through staff consultation and consultation with service and corporate directors. There was also a requirement for Community Boards, planning and licensing meetings to occur. One Member was mindful of delays potentially impacting capital receipts.
- A Member emphasised the importance of local authority buildings as statements of local pride should a new office space be created in the county. The Cabinet Member agreed that this was an important element and would be considered in any future plans, and consultations would be held with residents and Members.
- Staff occupancy data had been collected through ServiceNow, an online platform, and through manual counts for nearly a year. The general occupancy rate was 25 to 30% across offices, and monitoring would continue to ensure any decisions were based on robust data. The Cabinet Member agreed that an extension to the Gateway may not be necessary and cost effective.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for the report.

8 WORK PROGRAMME

Members were asked to note the work programme and were asked to email the Chairman and the senior scrutiny officer with further suggestions.

9 DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

Thursday 6 April at 2pm.

Information Circulated After the Meeting

Lessons Learnt from the Social Worker Academy

- A briefing note was circulated to Members.

Local Plan Preparation Costs

- The Buckinghamshire Local Plan has a budget of £3m, split in the MTFP as a straight line £750k per annum over 4 years (2022 to 2026).
- Local Plan spend is largely weighted towards the final 2 years, when the majority of the consultation activity takes place.
- The spend to date, plus the known commitments for March 2023, total £91,615, as detailed in Table 1.
- This leaves £2,908,385 available for the continued development of the Local Plan.
- The reason spend to date is comparatively low is because activity so far has been driven by existing staffing, who are funded from the separate base Revenue budget for Planning Policy.
- Given the low spend to date figure, the team have full confidence that the plan will be delivered within the remaining budget. The Local Plan team are in the process of updating their detailed plan for the remainder of the programme, including estimating the remaining spend needed on the plan. This can be provided to the Committee once completed.

Table 1: Breakdown of Local Plan Financial Data

	2021-22	2022-23	TOTAL
Budget	£ 750,000	£ 750,000	£ 1,500,000
Actual Costs Incurred to date			
IT costs OPUS (online consultation platform)	£ 17,600		
Internal Printing recharges	£ 30		
Internal Legal Charges	£ 3,782		
AECOM: scoping reports (Sustainable Appraisal and Habitats Regulations Assessment)		£ 8,400	
Catriona Riddell Associates: Critical Friend support		£ 3,600	
JBA Consulting: Strategic Flood Risk Assessment Lvl 1 and Water Cycle Study		£ 9,828	
Landscape Partnership: Fees & Expenses SANGS & SAMMS (Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace; Strategic Asset Management & Monitoring).		£ 8,053	
Internal legal costs		£ 248	
Internal recharges		£ 30	
Forecast Costs to be incurred by 31 March 2023			
Lichfields Employment and Retail Land Review (inc. household telephone survey)		£ 40,045	
TOTAL (Actual + Forecast costs to 31 March 2023)	£ 21,412	£ 70,203	£ 91,615
Balance of remaining budget, transferred to Local Plan Reserve at year end	£ 728,588	£ 679,797	£ 1,408,385
Budget in MTFP for future years 2023-24 and 2024-25 (£750k pa)			1,500,000
Total Local Plan Funding available for future years			2,908,385

Housing Benefit New Cases

- 1.1 This report details the circumstances in which housing benefit is claimed and the annual new claims caseload over the latest 3 years.
- 1.2 You can only make a new claim for Housing Benefit if either of the following apply:
 - a) you have reached State Pension age
 - b) you're in supported, sheltered or temporary housing
- 1.3 The number of people on housing benefit is declining since the introduction of Universal Credit for the working age population. Managed migration of working age claimants off Housing Benefit to Universal Credit is targeted to complete by the end of 2024 based on existing DWP deadlines.
- 1.4 The number of housing benefit claimants as of January 2023 in Buckinghamshire was 11,981 down from 13,597 in April 2022.
- 1.5 The total number of new claim applications since Buckinghamshire Council was formed is:
 - a) April 20 - March 21: 11,595 total new claims
 - b) April 21 - March 22: 6,888 total new claims
 - c) April 22 - January 23 (ytd): 8,239 total new claims
- 1.6 The increase in new claims in the current year is due to two major reasons:
 - a) The demographic change in the population with more people becoming of pension age.
 - b) An increase in more people of working age in temporary accommodation.