



Communities & Localism Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Communities & Localism Select Committee held on Wednesday 22 November 2023 in The Paralympic Room, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 10.00 am and concluding at 11.29 am.

Members present

S Bowles, A Waite, S Barrett, J Chhokar, G Hollis, M Hussain JP, M Knight, F Mahon, C Oliver, N Rana, G Smith and L Smith BEM

Others in attendance

K Sutherland, A Hussain, Ms S Moore, M Everitt and R Goodes

Apologies

P Drayton and M Stannard

Agenda Item

1 Apologies for absence / Changes in membership

Apologies were received from Cllrs Penny Drayton and Mike Stannard.

2 Declarations of Interest

There were none.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 4th October 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

4 Public Questions

There were none.

5 Opportunity Bucks Update

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Arif Hussain, Cabinet Member for Communities and Matthew Everitt, Service Director, Business Intelligence & Community Support to the meeting. Cllr Angela McPherson, Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing had also been due to attend and had sent her apologies.

The Cabinet Member gave an overview of the work of Opportunity Bucks, making the following key points:

- Opportunity Bucks had been set up as a flagship programme to improve life chances for those Buckinghamshire residents whose outcomes were considerably worse than the average for the county. Wards had been identified where unemployment and crime were higher, and educational attainment and health outcomes were much lower than the county as a whole. For these wards, the data was similar to less affluent areas of the country, such as Leicester and Durham.
- The overall aim was that everyone in Buckinghamshire should have good education, career progression, a healthy and active lifestyle and a decent and warm home. Improved outcomes were needed for the current and future generations.
- Opportunity Bucks was launched in December 2022 and had been allocated a budget of £1.5 million per annum.
- The key to the success of Opportunity Bucks was partnership working with local groups from the public and charity sectors and local organisations.

A lot of work to date had focussed on establishing the structure and governance of the Opportunity Bucks programme within which there are three levels of delivery to achieve its aims, Strategic, Community and Individual:

1. Thematic partnerships which focused on education and youth engagement, jobs, careers and skills, the quality of the public realm, standard of living and health and wellbeing at a strategic level.
2. Ward partnerships operated at the community level, where local members, officers and stakeholders identified local challenges and interventions to meet local needs.
3. At the Individual level, the MEAM (Making Every Adult Matter) team had been established to engage with individuals or families in most need and link them with appropriate help and support.

Some significant achievements of the programme so far were:

- A scheme to introduce traffic calming measures and improvements to reduce anti-social behaviour and increase resident satisfaction in Castlefield.
- An initiative where registered social landlords were encouraged to leave any carpets which were in good condition for the next tenant at a nominal fee, rather than automatically disposing of them.
- An additional £2.1 million had been secured from central government to improve numeracy skills which helped residents, particularly with household budgeting.
- Litter picks, area clean-ups and a community café organised by ward partnerships.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for this overview and invited Members' questions. In response to questions and during subsequent discussions, the following main points were noted:

- The Cabinet Member emphasised that ward members and local organisations knew their wards well and were trusted by local residents, which was key in identifying targeted interventions that would be effective.
 - A Member asked what was being done to advertise and promote the work of Opportunity Bucks. The Cabinet Member gave details of a recent Community Action Day which had taken place in High Wycombe. The Community Action Day had been promoted using a leaflet drop, social media and via the Community Boards. The day included around 10 contributors including Community Safety and voluntary organisations.
 - Matthew Everitt added that the relevant Community Boards had encouraged participation and engagement across the 10 wards. Local events and community engagement sessions had also helped. A newsletter had gone out to Opportunity Bucks residents in October 2023, with another to follow in December 2023. The Opportunity Bucks programme also had a strong web presence.
 - In response to a Member's question on how the 10 wards were chosen for the programme, Matthew Everitt explained that a large amount of analysis had been carried out using indicators including unemployment, poor health, crime and educational outcomes. Solid evidence had led to the choice of the 10 Opportunity Bucks wards.
 - It was noted that any underspend of the annual £1.5 million allocation would be carried over into the following year.
 - Whilst the programme was planned for three years, the aim was to make changes which would have a lasting positive effect within the 10 Opportunity Bucks wards.
 - A Member noted the emphasis on Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) measures and asked about peer support programmes in schools. He also noted that Youth Forums had given a voice to young people in some of the legacy councils before the unitary authority was formed. In response Matthew Everitt stated that there was not a specific Youth Forum within the programme but that representatives from organisations working with young people were represented within the ward partnerships. All of the ward partnerships had been effective at identifying areas of need in their areas, including need relating to youth activities and safe spaces for young people.
 - A Member commended the way that Opportunity Bucks was harnessing partnership working and listening to residents and local members in a pragmatic way and suggested that this was something that all residents should expect from the Council wherever they lived.
 - A Member proposed that the Anti-Social Behaviour team should be invited to a future meeting to talk to the Committee about its wider work in the county. There was general agreement that this would be helpful.
- Action: Scrutiny Manager**
- A Member asked how the success of this project would be measured. The Cabinet Member advised that a dashboard with performance indicators would be updated regularly and any learning would inform future efforts. Matthew Everitt added that assessing the impact of the programme is key and would take place at three levels: Initiative, Theme and Programme, to ensure

activity could be counted as well as outcomes. An example was offered, explaining that metrics reporting the take-up of adult literacy and numeracy courses, would link through to the measurement of the number of unemployment benefit claimants.

- A Member asked if any unexpected issues had arisen during the first year of Opportunity Bucks. Matt Everitt explained that the nature of the problems experienced in some communities was more complex and entrenched than anticipated.
- Again, Members expressed concern about other wards in the county, explaining that the cost of living crisis had led many residents into difficulties. The Cabinet Member explained that for other wards, various sources of help were available including the Helping Hand team. The Cabinet Member also suggested that members should speak to their Community Board Chairmen and Managers to discuss initiatives that could help their local areas.
- The Chairman and a number of members commented that the Helping Hand team had been doing a magnificent job and asked that their thanks should be passed on to the team members. The Cabinet Member expressed his gratitude for this recognition of the team.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and Matthew Everitt for attending the meeting and advised that the Select Committee would be interested to receive further updates on the progress of Opportunity Bucks.

6 Devolution Update

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for Communities for staying and welcomed Roger Goodes, Service Director, Policy and Communications to the meeting. The Cabinet Member outlined Buckinghamshire Council's commitment to localism, which included the establishment of the Community Boards and a Town and Parish Charter. Town and Parish Councils and local groups had been invited to submit expressions of interest for devolution of assets or services and the Council had chosen six initial pilot projects, as follows:

1. Prestwood Recreation Ground – This had been completed recently, with a 25-year lease granted.
2. Aylesbury Christmas lights – a 3-year agreement had been put in place in July 2023.
3. Green Street Community Centre – negotiations were ongoing but it was hoped that a handover would be completed by 31st March 2024
4. Aylesbury Community Centres – three centres were planned to be devolved in 2024 and leases were currently with Aylesbury Town Council for consideration and agreement.
5. Denham Scout Hut – unfortunately the Scout Hut had burned down during negotiations and the Parish Council had looked at raising funds for a rebuild.
6. Aylesbury Town Annual Remembrance Sunday Service – this devolution application had been rejected due to the status of the ceremony as a county event.

The Cabinet Member explained that the process of devolution was much more complicated than had been anticipated and required significant legal and property resources, in order to progress the projects. Covid 19 had also contributed to delays.

A revised policy was agreed at Cabinet on 11th October 2023 which aimed to make the devolution process quicker by undertaking an initial viability assessment of applications. In addition, car parks would not be included in the devolution programme and the freehold of an asset would not usually be devolved. Cabinet also agreed that in future, no more than two devolution projects will be worked on at any one time.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for this summary, noting that only two devolution projects had been completed to date and asked him to elaborate on the key challenges. In response to this question and others and during subsequent discussions, the following main points were noted:

- The main delays with the devolution process had been the legal issues involved. Surveys of properties had been required and, in some cases, remedial work was necessary. It was important that the Council and the new asset owner were clear about their respective liabilities. Roger Goodes gave the example of the Green Street Community Centre where Japanese knotweed and an on-site telephone mast had posed difficulties. With regards to the Aylesbury community centres, the Council had consulted with existing users to ensure that they would be able to continue to use them.
- A Member gave an example of a field which Westcott Parish Council had asked to be devolved on several occasions. This was a relatively straightforward devolution request as the field had no utilities etc. but the parish council had not received any feedback. He asked how devolution projects would be chosen in the future if only two were worked on at any one time.
- The Cabinet Member stated that where devolution could be done quickly and easily, these projects could be progressed and he agreed to provide an update on the specific application in Westcott. Roger Goodes stated that there was a waiting list for devolution projects and that new projects would be taken on in early 2024. The Council would look for 'easy wins' - projects that would most benefit the Council and the organisations applying for devolution.

ACTION: Roger Goodes

- A Member asked about the community centres which were to be devolved in Aylesbury, enquiring about what Buckinghamshire Council was spending to get the assets up to the standard where Aylesbury Town Council could take them on. The Cabinet Member replied that this was subject to negotiation.
- A Member pointed out that where requests had been made to devolve play areas to parish councils, it was disappointing that no progress had been made. Local play areas could only be a cost to Buckinghamshire Council and it was disappointing that small projects had not been completed to produce quick wins already. The Cabinet Member agreed that this was a lesson

learned.

- A Member stated that he saw three failings with the devolution process to date - 1) the previous district councils had not been quick to hand assets over, 2) the process had been advertised as quick and simple – this had not been the case and 3) there had been delays in formulating a comprehensive devolution policy.
- He also raised concerns about a lack of communication between Buckinghamshire Council and Denham Parish Council regarding the scout hut. The Cabinet Member agreed to look into this matter and report back.

Action: Cllr Hussain

- A Member noted that it seemed that parish and town councils had tried to take control of assets that were formerly important to them. He felt that the emphasis should be on the needs of the local community. Roger Goodes agreed that any decision on devolution should be right for the council and the local community.
- A Member expressed the view that the council was being too risk-averse where devolution was concerned and that local councils could use their precepts to help fund a local asset if necessary. The Cabinet Member appreciated the Members' frustration and agreed to look at assets which could be devolved quickly.
- A Member pointed out the wording in the report which stated that devolved projects should benefit local communities and the council. She felt that the emphasis should be on community benefit. The Cabinet Member stated that value should be added to both parties.
- Roger Goodes advised the Select Committee that there was one officer leading on devolution projects. However, he explained that a number of officers from different teams, for example Legal Services or Property, were involved in each application. Every application was treated as a project in its own right and would have its own lead officer. For future projects it was agreed that Roger Goodes would ensure that relevant contact details were shared.

Action: Roger Goodes

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for Communities and Roger Goodes for their contributions to the meeting.

7 Work Programme

The Chairman reminded members that this was an opportunity to raise potential agenda items. Any suggestions could also be emailed to the chairman or the Scrutiny Manager at any time. The suggestion of inviting the Anti-Social Behaviour team to a future meeting had been noted.

The Chairman noted that since the last meeting, the Digital Exclusion Group had made visits to adult learning centres in High Wycombe and Aylesbury. At their next meeting, the group would be hearing about broadband coverage in the county.

8 Date and time of the next meeting

28th February 2024 at 10am.