



Communities & Localism Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Communities & Localism Select Committee held on Wednesday 28 February 2024 in The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 10.00 am and concluding at 12.24 pm.

Members present

S Bowles, A Waite, J Chhokar, P Drayton, F Mahon, C Oliver, N Rana, G Smith, L Smith BEM and S Morgan

Others in attendance

K Sutherland, C Harriss, A Hussain, S Moore, M Everitt, S Payne, A Rahim, G Springer and A Fowler

Apologies

Agenda Item

1 Apologies for absence / Changes in membership

There were none

2 Declarations of Interest

Cllr Mahon declared that he had worked closely with the Helping Hands team as Chairman of the Parish Council.

3 Minutes

The minutes of the meeting held on 22nd November 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

4 Public Questions

There were none

5 Country Parks Overview and Work Programme

The Chairman welcomed the following people to the meeting:

- Cllr Clive Harriss, Cabinet Member, Culture and Leisure
- Sophie Payne, Service Director, Culture, Sport and Leisure
- Andrew Fowler, Head of Parks and Green Spaces

The Cabinet Member, Culture and Leisure introduced the overview, making the following key points:

- The four country parks had been self-financing for many years.
- Each park had a unique offer and the parks offered a range of activities.
- The parks offered opportunities for education, volunteering and conservation.
- The parks contributed to residents' health and wellbeing and were particularly important during the covid pandemic.
- Visitor numbers were higher than pre-pandemic levels.
- The main income from the parks came from car parking charges.
- The parks had contributed to Council funds since the year 2005 to 2006.
- New facilities were planned for the parks.
- The parks had been a huge success for the council and were extremely well-maintained.

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

- The Changing Places facility at Black Park was expected to be completed in March 2024.
- Building projects were subject to external planning constraints but the target delivery dates in the report should be met.
- Increased car parking charges were the largest reason for customer complaint but the numbers complaining were relatively low. Cars often transported four or five people so the charges still represented value for money and as the car park was often full it appeared that visitors tended to accept the charges.
- The parks were able to be self-financing through income from parking charges, filming licences and forestry products and in addition, some of the facilities, such as cafes, were commercial businesses which paid rent.
- The new Black Park café would help ease the demand on the existing catering facilities. It would also encourage people to visit in poor weather as it will be right next to the car park. Visitors will be able to get refreshments indoors and may visit the park in quieter periods. The café will provide around 45 covers. Turnaround time would be relatively high as most customers visit the park for 1 to 2 hours. The running of the café would be outsourced and would provide significant rental income, (it should generate £20,000 to £30,000 per year in addition to the profit made by the kiosk) which will mean the building costs will be fully recovered over time.
- Plans were in place to replace a collapsed bridge over the River Colne in Denham Country Park by winter 2024 to 2025. Over the next 2 years, footpaths and habitat would be improved using HS2 mitigation funding and a Project Officer had recently been appointed to oversee this work
- It had been a busy year for filming in Black Park and the Film Office had seen an increase in applications since the writer's strike ended.
- Work was in progress to plan the Stoke Poges Country Park which would be

on the site of the Lanes Golf Centre.

- In relation to the Little Marlow Lakes Country Park, the Cabinet Member referred Members to the planning team who were working with Natural England on what is required to meet Suitable Alternative Natural Green Space.
- The Parks team had managed their finances well and a proportion of income from the parks was returned to the Council. Delivery of the new Visitor Centre was financed from a reserve which had been built up over a number of years.
- Volunteering in the parks could be a route to employment but the volunteers also gained a number of benefits to their health and wellbeing. The Blue Sky charity scheme had also enabled ex-offenders to learn skills by working in the parks.
- The parks maintain three reserve funds: 1) Equipment and machinery, 2) Maintenance, for example for a significant weather event and 3) Development, to fund improvements e.g. car parks and the new Visitor Centre.
- Any investment in the parks was expected to show a return with an income target set each year.

The Chairman thanked the team for attending the meeting and for their hard work in maintaining the parks.

6 Cost of Living

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Arif Hussain, Cabinet Member for Communities and Matthew Everitt, Service Director, Business Intelligence & Community Support to the meeting. He expressed his thanks and admiration for the work of the Helping Hand team and asked that his comments be passed on to the officers involved. The Committee echoed these comments.

The Cabinet Member for Communities introduced the report, making the following key points:

- Buckinghamshire was seen as a very affluent area but there were pockets of deprivation, especially in the Opportunity Bucks wards.
- A new cohort of residents has emerged. They had not suffered financial hardship before and did not know how to get help.
- A number of initiatives had been set up to help residents including welcome spaces, warm boxes and Helping Hand partnership working between council officers and voluntary and community partners was vital to the delivery of these schemes.
- Nine work streams had been set up using officers and the voluntary sector. Each of these had bespoke communications so that residents could understand what help was on offer.
- The Energy Doctor service also helped with household fuel usage. The Citizens' Advice Bureau offered help with debt relief.
- A grant of £4.8 million from the Government's Household Support Fund had helped 7,500 residents with a range of needs.

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

- The Cabinet Member for Communities explained that the Council was currently lobbying the government for funding for the year 2024 to 2025. He would share any updates with the committee. The team was looking at ways to continue the Helping Hand offer should the Household Support Fund be withdrawn.
- The Buckinghamshire Food Partnership (BFP) communicated with food banks and suppliers to ensure that their work was not duplicated and is working with the Rothschild Foundation and other providers in the Chesham area to adopt a food ladder approach. This approach aims to help residents in crisis or struggling to get good food and then work towards developing sustainable community solutions.
- The networking and partnership approach had been very successful. Partners had been investigating sustainable solutions to help residents move out of financial insecurity, which would drive down demand for the Helping Hand service.
- The Service Director, Business Intelligence & Community Support agreed to share information about how many residents per ward request support from Helping Hands and data to show whether demand was rising.

Action: Service Director, BI & Community Support

- It was explained that Food champions were volunteers who co-ordinate donations to food banks for an area, such as their street or an estate.
- A Member pointed out that there was some confusion between food banks and community fridges. There was also a concern that some residents could collect food from more than one food bank. He wondered if there could be more emphasis on donations and collections for food banks. The Service Director, Business Intelligence & Community Support explained that Food Actions Plans were being developed to bring the various parties together. Some community fridges worked better than others but their main purpose was to ensure that food was not wasted. Any specific concerns could be dealt with outside the meeting.
- The Cabinet Member for Communities explained that there was a list of Food Banks and Community Fridges which could be shared and Food Banks were detailed in the Bucks Online Directory. Underlying problems, such as help with bills and Council Tax relief were being tackled by the Community Boards. There were a range of initiatives which could promote sustainable warmth and cheaper energy.
- A Member raised concerns about the continuance of the Household Support Fund for 2024 -2025. The Service Director, Business Intelligence & Community Support explained that this fund was only available until 31st March 2024. A report at the end of the financial year would set out how this fund had been used to support residents. The Council provided detailed information to central government on how the funds were spent and the number of households supported. There were currently 200 applications for

support on average each week, up to half of these were repeat applications. Demand for help tends to rise in the colder months.

- There was a discussion on what could be saved when a tenant moves out of social housing. Currently, through Opportunity Bucks, the Council had negotiated with social landlords that carpets in a reasonable condition would be retained and a Member suggested that furniture and white goods could also be re-used. The Service Director, Business Intelligence & Community Support agreed that this could be explored further.
- In response to a question regarding the key successes of the Opportunity Bucks programme, the Service Director highlighted a number of successful initiatives including Multiply, which improved numeracy and literacy, some career initiatives to help young people into work and Health on the High Street projects, as well as Community Action Days.

The Chairman thanked the contributors for the comprehensive report and their responses to the questions raised. The Committee hoped that the valuable support for residents would be able to continue.

7 Anti-Social Behaviour

The Chairman welcomed Gideon Springer, Head of Community Safety and Abdul Rahim, Community Safety Manager to the meeting.

The Head of Community Safety introduced the report, making the following key points:

- In 2014 the Government had changed the definition of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) to put the emphasis on the victim's perception. This meant that ASB could be difficult to define and could cover a wide range of behaviours and actions. ASB could affect an individual and the environment.
- Various bodies could help tackle ASB, including social landlords and charity partners. Buckinghamshire Council did not have a response service – urgent complaints were dealt with by the police. Street wardens employed by the Council, worked in High Wycombe and new wardens were being recruited for Aylesbury.
- For low level ASB, informal means were used to resolve problems. The ASB Action Group (ASBAG) dealt with more complex cases. The vulnerability of victims was taken into account. ASB had led to some victims taking their own lives so risk assessments were carried out.
- The victim could ask for an ASB case to be reviewed. If the complaint was about the Council, the Police and Crime Commissioner would appoint an external reviewer, otherwise the Council would set up a Panel to investigate if the ASB case had been dealt with properly. This year only 1 case had been reviewed which showed that partners were dealing with ASB at an early stage. The Safer Bucks Board has oversight of ASB case reviews.
- Year to date there had been 147 reports of ASB and 135 resolved complaints. Not all reports of ASB would progress to an ASB case as they could be signposted to parking or waste colleagues or to Thames Valley Police. Of 124 new ASB cases, 72 were considered at the ASBAG, where different approaches to resolving ASB would be discussed with partners. One

injunction had been issued and two Community Protection Notices (CPN).

- Buckinghamshire was below the national average for ASB cases and crime in general and compared favourably with Milton Keynes and Oxford in the last year.

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

- There were only 3 officers dealing with ASB but a number of teams and partners have been involved, for example to combat fly tipping.
- Referrals from members of the public could be made via the Buckinghamshire Council website and were then triaged by the team. Any partner agency, whether internal or external, could refer.
- People could also ask for ASB case referrals via the website. Often repeated problems were due to a person's mental health issues. This behaviour could be very challenging to deal with and relied on the involvement of mental health services.
- It was important to strengthen communications with the police and other agencies. The Head of Community Safety would be happy to arrange meetings with members. He stated that the most challenging problems needed a creative, multi-agency approach. The Cabinet Member for Communities explained that member seminars would continue to be offered.
- ASB cases which result in the victim being reasonably satisfied were shown as resolved. The police service deals with criminal cases. Much of ASB was low-level crime and when this was dealt with by the police, the council will work with the Police, but the criminal matter will take priority.
- The fall in the number of case reviews was a consequence of better communications between the Council, Police and Housing Associations to resolve problems sooner. If the ASBAG team dealt with a case review, the procedure was costly and time-consuming so the team focussed on resolving ASB earlier so that reviews could be avoided.
- The Community Safety Manager agreed to record more data on unresolved cases and those which had taken a long time to resolve.
- The Head of Community Safety explained that the police service would have ASB figures by ward and offered to request the data.

ACTION: Community Safety Manager

- As far as responsibilities of Town and Parish councils were concerned, the Crime and Disorder Act was vague, stating that a council should do "all they reasonably can to prevent crime and disorder".
- CCTV was not a panacea and could shift ASB to another area. It had been better to tackle the underlying causes of ASB but these initiatives, such as youth groups, largely depended on volunteers. There was a great deal of third sector work with young people supported by the council. The Cabinet Member for Communities pointed out it was always worth contacting Community Boards about ASB.
- A Member raised the issue of a business in Denham which was badly impacting residents. The Head of Community Safety explained that it was often difficult to catch a business in the act of causing a nuisance. Planning

and environmental health legislation could help but it could be a lengthy process. He advised that those affected should continue to monitor the problem and collect evidence. It might help if the Member could speak to the business owners. Notices could be served on businesses which caused a nuisance but a strong standard of evidence was needed first.

The Chairman thanked the contributors for the presentation and their insight into ASB which had been very interesting.

8 Work Programme

- In April the Committee would look at the Leisure Strategy.
- The work of the Digital Exclusion Group was ongoing.
- Cllr Frank Mahon suggested that Hannah Tomlin from the Helping Hands team could talk to the committee about the everyday work of the team.
- Cllr Greg Smith asked if it would be appropriate for the committee to discuss community energy projects which could help residents struggling with household bills. This could straddle the remit of the Transport Environment and Climate Change Committee. The Scrutiny Officer and Cllr Smith would discuss this after the meeting.

Action: Cllr Smith/Scrutiny Manager

- Cllr Susan Morgan asked if the committee could look at the Autism Strategy to ensure inclusivity. The Scrutiny Manager explained that the strategy had already been considered by the Children and Education and the Health and Adult Social Care scrutiny committees but she would discuss with the Chairman if there was a further angle for the Committee to investigate.

Action: Chairman/Scrutiny Manager

9 Date and time of the next meeting

10th April 2024 at 10am