



# Buckinghamshire Council

## Finance & Resources Select Committee

### Minutes

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FINANCE & RESOURCES SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 28 JANUARY 2021 VIA VIDEO CONFERENCE, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 3.45 PM**

#### **MEMBERS PRESENT**

R Bagge (Chairman), J Jordan (Vice-Chairman), D Anthony, M Appleyard, M Bateman, T Butcher, S Chhokar, A Christensen, R Gaffney, G Harris, H Mordue, D Shakespeare OBE, M Smith, M Stannard and C Whitehead

#### **OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE**

J Chilver and K Wood

#### **Agenda Item**

**1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE / CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP**

There were no apologies for absence.

**2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

**3 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 November 2020 were agreed as an accurate record.

**4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

No public questions had been received.

**5 CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE**

The Chairman reported that Members of this Committee had formed the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group which held a series of meetings between 11 and 14 January 2021 to assess the robustness of the draft revenue budget and capital programme and questioned Cabinet Members directly on budget proposals. The report and recommendations of the group would be presented to and discussed by Cabinet at its meeting on 16 February 2021, following which the final budget would be presented to Full Council for approval on 24 February 2021.

The Chairman paid thanks to members of this Committee for their commitment and participation in the process and to Cabinet Members and Officers for attending the sessions and responding to a wide range of questions.

## 6 STAFFING UPDATE

Katrina Wood, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Resources presented an update on staffing and engagement nine months into the Council's unitary journey and invited comments from the Committee. The Cabinet Member was supported by Sarah Murphy-Brookman, Corporate Director for Resources and John McMillan, Service Director for HR & OD.

Councillor Wood summarised the report which was appended to the agenda pack and reported that the staffing update was broadly positive against a backdrop of the covid-19 pandemic, transition to unitary and ongoing service reviews. The following key points were raised by the Committee during discussion:

- A turnover level of 10-15% was considered 'normal', the level of 7.6% noted in the report was a result of the ongoing pandemic having decreased the rate of turnover, a trend that had been seen nationally.
- As part of the transition to unitary there had been challenges for staff in getting accustomed with new software and processes. Online training had been initiated and webinars held to support staff. Colleagues from Finance and HR along with employee representatives had formed a small working group to help address issues and review training materials to ensure consistency.
- In relation to the high percentage of mental health absence, the Committee was informed that this was a theme seen across local authorities. Mental health was recognised as a significant issue, however members were informed that one reason the percentage appeared high was due to a significantly reduced number of absences linked to colds and illnesses due to the majority of the workforce working from home. As such, the sickness absence base was not at the level it would be in an 'ordinary' year which resulted in absence reasons appearing to have magnified numbers.
- In terms of mental health support available, members heard that the PAM Assist service was available free of charge for all staff and seminars had been held for colleagues in customer service, many of whom were having to handle difficult calls at home. The Council's intranet contained a health and wellbeing section with a range of sources staff could go to for support, including specific guidance for line managers on how they could support colleagues. The Council has health and wellbeing champions, and the Chief Executive promoted the range of support services through her regular all staff briefings.
- Concerns were raised about safety measures for staff should they be assisting with election duties and it was explained that the Council's elections team were taking guidance from the Cabinet Office and specific issues would be managed by the Returning Officer and Public Health Team.
- Members were advised that there was a group of officers from Property, IT and HR looking at longer term plans on rationalising office space following the relative success of working from home for so many staff. This longer term accommodation strategy would be brought before members to review and the Committee was keen to have an understanding of how the new ways of working would be designed, what they would deliver and how the long term impact on staff would be managed at the earliest opportunity.
- The Committee discussed concerns that the Better Buckinghamshire Service reviews may have caused staff some anxiety and heard that there was a clear programme for the reviews to commence and staff were being kept informed throughout. The covid pandemic had affected some of the timescales for these reviews but thirteen were already underway and positive results had been seen in the staff survey around managing change. In relation to co-design, the Committee was advised that managers, staff, external partners and service users had been given the opportunity to have input in

the way services were delivered.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Wood and senior officers for their report, noting that the contents were very positive under the circumstances staff currently found themselves in.

**7 WORK PROGRAMME**

The Committee noted the work programme as appended to the agenda pack.

**8 DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING**

The next meeting would take place on Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> March 2021 at 2 p.m.

**9 EXCLUSION OF THE PUBLIC**

**Resolved** to exclude the public from the meeting by virtue of Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 on the grounds that discussion will involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act, namely paragraph 3 – information relating to financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information).

**10 AYLESBURY VALE ESTATES / CONSILIO UPDATE**

John Chilver, Cabinet Member for Property and Assets introduced an overview of Aylesbury Vale Estates (AVE) and Consilio, two land and property Companies set up by Aylesbury Vale and South Bucks District Councils respectively which have now transferred to Buckinghamshire Council. The Cabinet Member was supported by John Reed, Service Director for Property and Assets.

The business plans for AVE and Consilio would be presented at the next meeting of this Committee on 25 March. During the presentation, Mr Reed advised the Committee of each company's performance over the last 12 months; the challenges and risks within the respective portfolios; and the impact of the covid pandemic on performance.

Members held a detailed discussion where they questioned at length a range of issues including governance arrangements; respective investment strategies; estate valuation timescales; affordable housing opportunities; potential for Consilio to register as a provider of social housing; and other future use of land opportunities. The Committee felt that there were opportunities to explore for both companies in the coming year and looked forward to reviewing the respective business plans at its next meeting.

The Chairman thanked Councillor Chilver and Mr Reed for their presentation and attendance.