



# Report to Select Committee

**Date:** 19 November

**Title:** Town and Parish Council Charter Update

**Author:** Claire Hawkes, Service Director Localities and Strategic Partnerships

## 1.0 Introduction

1.1 Town and Parish Councils (T&PC's) are the grass roots of local government in Buckinghamshire. The establishment of the new Buckinghamshire Council brings an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between all tiers of local government.

1.2 T&PCs are vital partners for the council. The new Localities and Strategic Partnerships Service will focus on developing strong links and nurturing the relationship to ensure effective partnership and joint working between the two tiers of local government. The service will introduce several new working arrangements to help build collaborative cultures including publishing a Charter which articulates that ambition. It is an important document that helps define the relationship between Buckinghamshire Council and T&PCs.

## 2.0 Coronavirus

2.1 Although coronavirus meant the charter work needed to be paused, the desire to build good relationships with T&PC's remained. The Localities service were heavily involved in the coronavirus community response, which was naturally the priority between March and September, this involved collaboration and building relationships with local councils:

- Covid area coordinators
- Clerks calls
- Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Association of Local Councils (BMKALC) liaison
- Town and Parish Council newsletter
- Team Bucks campaigns
- Clerks directory of unitary key contacts
- Starting community board conversations

2.2 At the start of the pandemic, in the absence of community board coordinator posts, staff from across the council were quickly redeployed to be 'covid area coordinators'. These roles were a critical link for members, Town and Parish councillors and clerks as well as community groups. The relationships formed with parishes at these times were incredibly important. The area contact helped trouble shoot and signpost as well as champion those area needs within the council. Towards the end of lockdown and a move more into business as usual it was possible to begin building up elements of the service that were paused. The service recruited to key positions including a senior manager responsible for parish development and Community Board Coordinators all of which will be a critical operational contact for T&PCs. Those recruited who were involved in the pandemic cited how rewarding the area role had been and how important those effective relationships with local councils were. July and August saw intensive induction programmes which included presentations from BMALC and parish clerks on the importance of strengthening the relationship between all tiers of local government.

2.3 The clerk's role is diverse and unusual, it was fundamental to ensure effective communication channels between the clerks and the council during the first lockdown given so many unknowns to quickly share insight, avoid duplication and escalate issues. As well as the area coordinators, the council established several 'clerks calls' dedicated to sharing insight and key messages. The calls were open to any clerks interested with attendance limited to 10 to ensure inclusive two-way conversations. These proved popular with often 3 sessions a fortnight being scheduled with the Deputy Chief Executive or Service Director for Localities. With no agenda it allowed for informal conversations and also gave an opportunity for clerks to support one another. As the pandemic started to ease these moved to fortnightly and then scheduled upon request. We valued T&PC's insight, our learning from this experience is the importance of formal and informal liaison on a regular basis. As a result 10 clerks forums have been scheduled for the year. These will be chaired by the Deputy Chief Executive with service directors in attendance in accordance with agenda topics. The first forums took place in September with agendas formed by listening to clerks and BMKALC suggestions.

2.4 The Localities service had fortnightly meetings with BMKALC ahead of the pandemic, these quickly became weekly with the Service Director and the Cabinet Member. They were helpful check in points in addition to the clerks calls to explore key themes and collaborative cultures. These again were valued meetings to share honest reflections, our learning going forward is these meetings are essential. They have also been scheduled for the whole year; fortnightly with the senior strategic lead for parishes, monthly with the service directors of Localities and Democratic Services and quarterly with the Cabinet Member. The honest and open relationships formed with BMKALC during covid have enabled more codesigned service planning. Dates for the quarterly BMKALC (member) liaison meetings are also secured in the diary for the remained of the year.

2.5 Good communication during the pandemic was paramount. The volume of updates, key messages and showcasing of our local council's work prompted an introduction of a weekly Town and Parish newsletter started on 7 April until 7 May, reducing to fortnightly till the end of August. This was a joint BMKALC and Buckinghamshire Council newsletter to help show that we were active partners.

*"It was extremely helpful and very valuable for our community – great job."*

*"I'll be sad to see this particular newsletter go. It is by far the most informative, concise and best structured of all the Bucks communications and it is not being replaced by anything nearly as good in terms of communication flow. The lack of Covid does not mean that a lack of communication is ok. indeed most of what has been interesting about this newsletter has been non-covid content."*

2.6 This newsletter has restarted at the end of October following feedback from town and parish councils. Our learning going forward is the need for a correctly pitched newsletter with content developed alongside BMKALC. We will continue to work with the communications team and do stakeholder analysis to make sure we get the right balance of content and regularity. Having one area coordinator collating the wonderful examples of parish work during Covid helped illustrate what good joint working can achieve and showcase our T&PC's through Proud of Bucks campaign illustrating the team Bucks aspect. These examples will be used in the charter and promotional material.

### **3.0 Drafting the Charter**

3.1 The Charter is still under development given the time lost due to coronavirus, but a lot of preparation work and focus on building collaborative cultures has been done. We have focused on developing those key relationships and many of the operational aspects we expect to see listed in the charter, such as regular liaison arrangements with BMKALC, clerks and communications, are in place.

3.2 A working group of clerks had been established ahead of vesting day, their expertise and shared vision of wanting to develop collaborative cultures and good joint working is helping the charter evolve. There is appetite from local councils to not simply produce a product that sits on the shelf but instead take time to co-design a charter so the dynamic end product adds value. The group has met again since the pandemic started to ease to check on progress and consider how a 'launch' might now work given social distancing measures and a parish conference no longer appropriate. They are currently reviewing a second draft ahead of sharing this wider across all of our town and parish councils.

3.3 The charter will act as a framework (memorandum of understanding) to support partnership working and inform Buckinghamshire Council's approach to liaison with local councils. It will set out the relationship between the new Buckinghamshire Council and the 169 town and parish councils in Buckinghamshire, including how we will harness the

opportunities to strengthen partnership working and improve services for our residents. It sets out the joint principles and respective roles, responsibilities and expectations, and it will be a live document which will be refreshed regularly in consultation with town and parish councils.

3.4 The council and our town and parishes share a common goal to promote the wellbeing of Buckinghamshire, and we serve the same residents. The document will also bring the 'spirit of the partnership' alive, including case studies to help shine a spotlight on town and parish councils and describe the benefits delivered to communities when we work together. The charter will also help promote the unusual role of the clerks and aid understanding of the different tiers, the responsibilities, the differences and connections.

3.5 Having a vibrant document which helps explain what T&PC's do as well as showcase the benefits and commitment of joint working will help mean this document can be used in inductions (both T&PC's and the council). It can also be used as a driver in a 'Think Local' campaign which would support a whole council approach of working closely with community boards and collaborative cultures with parishes. The charter will provide clarity on what we want the relationship to be and help outline the stepping stones in place to help that journey.

3.6 Many of these liaison / relationships aspects we want to see listed in the charter have started to be in place. Contents include:

- A new title and strapline that shows how we are all working together for Buckinghamshire
- A joint welcome from the council and BMKALC
- Introduction statement about the vision and shared commitments
- Examples of working together for Buckinghamshire – brilliant examples from Covid and economic recovery (town centre regeneration)
- Understanding the role of town and parish councils and a mutual respect for each other
- Effective communications and liaison arrangements: BMALC liaison, clerks forums, emergency planning
- Governance, complaints, advice and support
- Think parish campaign

3.7 The Localities and Strategic partnership team will be working on the charter development with the working group over the next few weeks with a final document to be ready by the end of the year.