



Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee held on Thursday 28 January 2021 via MS Teams, commencing at 10.00 am and concluding at 12.10 pm.

Members present

Z Ahmed, D Barnes, D Carroll (Chairman), S Chapple, N Marshall, L Monger, G Moore, R Newcombe, C Poll, R Raja, B Roberts, C Rouse and M Winn (Vice-Chairman)

Others in attendance

S Bowles, I Darby and M Tett

Apologies

D Knights

Agenda Item

1 **Declarations of interest**

There were none.

2 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 26 November 2020 were agreed as a correct record.

3 **Covid-19 and local economic recovery**

Members received an update from the Leader of the Council, Martin Tett, and the Cabinet Member for Town Centre Regeneration, Steve Bowles, on Covid-19 and local economic recovery in Buckinghamshire. Also in attendance to update Members on economic recovery was Ian Barham, Partnership Manager at Bucks LEP, and Philippa Batting, Managing Director at Buckinghamshire Business First (BBF). The update outlined the lockdown situation since the last meeting and quoted the Office for Budget Responsibility's estimated statistic that UK gross domestic product (GDP) would be down 11% for 2020 compared to 2019. Local data suggested that Buckinghamshire's economy had experienced a similar drop in GDP. Data collected estimated that 7% of private sector firms in Buckinghamshire had cash reserves of under one month which equated to 2,100 firms, and it was also estimated that 38%

of businesses had experienced lower turnover than normal. In contrast, a small number of businesses had experienced an increase of their turnover.

The number of Buckinghamshire residents claiming 'out of work' benefits remained high at 15,110 in November 2020 which was an increase of 9,570 compared to March 2020. This claimant rate remained one of the lowest of all the 38 LEP areas and was at an average of 4.6% compared to the 6.4% national average. It was noted that these figures were made up of residents that may not have been unemployed before or worked in specialised industries. There was significant aviation employment in the north of Buckinghamshire, with workers commuting to Heathrow and Luton, and it was likely to take a relatively long time for this industry to return to normal. The hospitality, events and tourism sectors were also an ongoing concern due to being in lockdown for most of the year and these sectors employed 22,000 people in Buckinghamshire.

Further business support packages had been announced, including the extension of the furlough scheme, following the third lockdown. Business rate payers who had been forced to close due to national or local restrictions may have been eligible for the Local Restrictions Support Grant (LRS) and/or the Buckinghamshire Discretionary Grant top-up payment. Businesses impacted by restrictions that were unable to obtain support through the LRS were able to apply for the Bucks Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG). This grant intended to support businesses that did not pay rates or had no rateable premises which may have been the case for those self-employed. The grant was applicable to businesses that had suffered a minimum 30% loss of income during November 2020 compared to November 2019 and businesses could apply again to cover December 2020 compared to December 2019. The deadline to apply for December's grant was 31 January 2021. The same ARG was also available for January 2021. The amount awarded was tiered based on the number of employees the business had and included single individuals, and funds were being distributed across a range of sectors. The scheme had received positive feedback from those businesses unable to claim from Government schemes. The Council was already considering the recovery proposition for when lockdown ends and discussions were ongoing with Government about supporting Buckinghamshire. This would be challenging due to the Government's focus on recovery in the north.

Town centres would be different in the post-Covid future and the Council was considering how to assist high street recovery. Town Centre Regeneration Boards had been set up in Chesham and High Wycombe with a membership of the relevant Cabinet Members, local Members, Town and Parish Council Members and representatives from the public sector. It was felt that the Chesham master plan and High Wycombe regeneration plan both needed re-thinking as post-working practices may require more flexible office space that was not full time. Under the MHCLG Future High Streets Funds programme, High Wycombe had been allocated £11.8m out of its £17.2m bid. The bid had been based on projects pre-Covid but the pandemic was accelerating trends which the bid sought to address and so many were still applicable but a reviewed was needed in order to meet the reduced bid.

Following the update, Members had questions and were advised that:-

- Most community halls were not eligible for the Bucks ARG but there were some exceptions for halls that employed staff, had community shops or cafes. The Council had put deadlines on applications due to payments being on a monthly basis and there was a need to know how much budget was committed to inform the next month's budget. Retrospective audits of ARG applications were also being carried out.
- All information on the schemes was on the Buckinghamshire Council's website or via the customer service centre for advice.
- The focus was on business recovery and employment recovery through re-skilling. Social care issues had been lobbied at central Government for the past 6-12 months which had received a good response with costs being met through support grants.
- Discussion was ongoing regarding regeneration in town centres and market towns. The future was uncertain but it was acknowledged that more remote working may impact towns that had grown around commuter points into London. The town centre plans from the previous District authorities needed to be reviewed to ensure they reflect changes in the business environment.
- The recent Government announcement that committed £760million in support to East-West rail plans did not explicitly include reference to the Aylesbury spur which was key so that the network could be accessed and full benefits realised. The Leader and the Aylesbury MP, Rob Butler, had both written to the Government to reiterate the importance of the spur.
- Superfast broadband coverage in Buckinghamshire was 96% by premises which was not the same as geographical coverage. Current use of the internet (e.g. streaming and remote learning) had moved on from the superfast infrastructure in place. Increasing capacity would be a massive undertaking in terms of cost and engineering due to the need to replace copper cables with fibre. The Government had committed £5bn towards national upgrade programmes and a team within BBF was working to see where these funds would be allocated. The Government Minister had indicated there would be a national prioritisation towards the north of England and economies that were lagging.
- There were electric vehicle charging points at the Gateway and the former County Hall. Discussion was underway with a private company that would potentially double the amount of electric vehicle charging points in Buckinghamshire. It was acknowledged that developing the infrastructure would reassure those considering the purchase of electric vehicles. There were resource limitations on what the Council could do to support garages switch from servicing petrol vehicles to servicing electric vehicles.
- Buckinghamshire Council's capital programme had been inherited from the sovereign councils which was now being re-evaluated as some of the ideas were from 3-5 years ago. The post-Covid environment also needed to be considered. £100m borrowing capacity would be proposed to Council which would be used to fund new schemes from the recovery programme with a

potential for match funding. New schemes had not yet been considered in the past 12 months due to the re-allocating of staff to support the Council's Covid work but the intention was to start developing new schemes.

- The Council would not be able to support residents that had increased home insurance costs due to home working.
- Following Brexit, contacting HMRC was challenging due to a lack of staff. HMRC were recruiting in an attempt to rectify this. It was suggested that Members raised any concerns with their MP.
- In High Wycombe, the re-opening of the River Wye and the removal of the flyover would need to be carefully considered as part of any long-term project. The reality of this project would be incredibly complex and would require a business case to be demonstrated. Moreover, the flyover was incorporated into the roof of the Eden Shopping Centre underneath and so works would hugely disrupt retail and significantly harm the High Wycombe economy. Due to this being a complicated topic and one that had received questions from the public, the Chairman suggested that the Future High Streets Fund and regeneration projects be added to the work programme for further discussion.
- The Council was looking at the properties it owned across Buckinghamshire and considering proposals on their future usage.
- The Cabinet Member wanted the High Wycombe Regeneration Board to work together cohesively to produce a strategy for the town centre. One of the areas of improvement was Frogmore which was linked to the Dandara application for the Chiltern shopping centre. Potential ideas were suggested on how town centres could attract footfall.

Ian Barham and Philippa Batting were invited to provide any further comments related to the activities their organisations had carried out. Bucks LEP was carrying out its Economy Recovery Plan which had three phases: React. Respond. Rebound. The plan was currently in the first and second phases. Looking ahead to the third phase, Bucks LEP believed the Chancellor's March budget would be heavily related to Covid. The Respond phase propositions were looking at the high growth sectors and high performance technologies (electric vehicles, management and battery technologies) which would be centered around Silverstone. Education and training would need to be developed to support this. The Innovation Centre at Westcott had opened in Autumn 2020 and proposals for a DISC hub facility were being developed to be cited at the Venture Park. Retraining and redevelopment had also been focused on in the Buckinghamshire Recovery Plan and, as part of this, the Aviation to Screen Skills programme had been extended into a national programme and being supported by DWP.

BBF had recorded 52,104 business assists in the nine months prior to 31 December 2020 supporting businesses with queries and problems. By comparison, the previous year's figure was 34,000. £6.7m grant funding had been distributed which was in addition to funding that had already been discussed at the meeting. The assistance from BBF had led to the creation of 712 new jobs and the introduction of 311 new products or services to the market. BBF was working with a broad spectrum of

businesses and one of the biggest concerns was the increased number of businesses that had seen costs increase during the pandemic which was challenging the viability of the business. These increases had included PPE provision, broadband upgrades and furlough support. Moreover, in January 2021 the Government had introduced the option for employees to request furlough from their employer which meant employers had to balance order fulfillment and employee satisfaction. Aside from initial challenges on rules of origin checks and reported extra shipping costs, the impact of Brexit was yet to emerge and it was difficult to disentangle Covid issues with Brexit ones. It was expected this would become clearer over the coming weeks. BBF had seven members of staff in place to proactively contact businesses to see if they required any assistance with importing and exporting. BBF were running a pilot with five of the council's Community Boards (Beaconsfield & Chepping Wye, Beeches, North West Chiltern, South West Chiltern & High Wycombe) to help participants develop skills required to start their own business. Regarding skills, BBF had 83 enterprise advisors working with secondary schools around careers provision and also had support in place for SEND and PRU schools. The annual skills show had been held virtually this year and attracted over 5,000 visitors, and included speakers from McAfee and ESRI.

In response to a Member's question, the Committee was advised that the Community Board pilot offered the opportunity to reach out to local residents who may be considering a business start-up thereby extending the reach and impact of BBF and the programme. The BBF scheme would help ensure that individuals had access to a broad spectrum of support and advice depending on each person's circumstances.

Members thanked the Leader and the Cabinet Member for the update, and also thanked Ian Barham and Philippa Batting for their attendance, update and the work they were carrying out across Buckinghamshire. The Chairman also thanked the Members for the questions they had put forward.

4 Temporary accommodation

Members received an update from the Cabinet Member for Housing and Homelessness, Isobel Darby, on the temporary accommodation provision in Buckinghamshire. The Council had a statutory duty to provide accommodation to persons and households who the Council had reason to believe were homeless, eligible and of priority need. When these thresholds were met, or there was reason to believe these thresholds were met, there was an immediate duty to provide accommodation. There were seven temporary accommodation sites across Buckinghamshire and currently 161 statutory homeless households on the housing register. 95 mainly former rough sleepers had been accommodated due to the pandemic and there were currently five known rough sleepers in Buckinghamshire. Each known rough sleeper had been offered accommodation. At the time of the meeting, there were around 4,700 households seeking housing via Bucks Home Choice. Of this figure, 600 were people aged over 55 seeking older person accommodation and over 900 were households who were considered to be overcrowded.

Around 30% of homelessness was caused by the loss of private rented accommodation. The Government were looking at how better protection could be put in place for private renters. Another key cause of around 30% of homelessness was an eviction from a parent or relative. In these cases, the Council tried to mediate to prevent this from occurring as long as this was a safe option for the potential applicant. There were two types of temporary accommodation:

- Section 188 which was an interim arrangement whilst officers investigated the circumstances
- Section 193 once enquiries were completed and found the homelessness was unintentional and cannot be relieved. Section 188 accommodation automatically became Section 193 accommodation once the investigation had been concluded.

The update included some examples of accommodation in Saunderton, Griffin Place, Chesham and Taplow. Accommodation was currently being built in Desborough Road, High Wycombe. This building comprised of 58 one bedroom flats of modular design construction and would be ready to open in Summer 2021. As at June 2020, Buckinghamshire Council had 278 households in temporary accommodation. For comparison purposes, this was measured as persons per 1000 households and was as follows:-

- Buckinghamshire 1.28
- South East 2.82
- England 4.18
- London 17.69

Following the update, Members had questions for the Cabinet Member and were advised that:-

- The Council was mindful of the potential for private rented accommodation evictions to increase but the service was in a good position to manage this.
- It was a noted trend that some London Boroughs had allocated a portion of their temporary accommodation in Buckinghamshire which meant that Buckinghamshire Council's service would likely need to assist in future. This had the potential for Buckinghamshire Council's adult and social services to become involved.
- The accommodation being built in High Wycombe provided a self-contained flat, had its own front door and was fitted to a high standard. Noise transfer between each apartment would be mitigated through a void space and insulation. Each apartment was also triple glazed. When the project was first considered, officers had inspected a similar modular building design in Ladywell, Lewisham, and had been impressed by the quality and lack of noise transference.
- The Council was trying to assist break the cycle of rough sleeping by helping those with high needs such as mental health issues or alcohol and drug

additions. The purchase of a property was being completed to offer temporary accommodation in these high need cases.

- There was a national home swapping website that meant individual users could make arrangements to swap accommodation. To use this, each user would need to have either a long-term or permanent tenancy. Registered providers also assisted with cross-boundary moves.
- The former District authorities had changed their policies whereby a new applicant would not automatically become a high priority in the banding if mediation was available as an option.
- Consideration could be given to moving the older person accommodation age bracket from 55 to 65 however it was challenging to know when the right age to move would be. One of the benefits of having the age set to 55 was that it had the potential to release a family home to a waiting household sooner.
- It was difficult to keep track of those that had refused the service's offer of temporary accommodation but the team monitored these as best as possible.

Members thanked the Cabinet Member for the update and congratulated the service for the work they had done to reduce the number of rough sleepers in Buckinghamshire. The Committee saw merit in a site visit being arranged in future to visit the temporary accommodation being built in High Wycombe (subject to Covid restrictions).

5 Work programme

As had been discussed earlier in the meeting, an item regarding the Future High Streets Fund would be added to the programme to be considered at a future meeting.

6 Date of the next meeting

The next meeting would be on 25 March 2021 at 10:00am.

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