



Communities & Localism Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Communities & Localism Select Committee held on Thursday 18 March 2021 in Virtual Meeting via MS Teams, commencing at 10.00 am and concluding at 12.13 pm.

Members present

P Irwin, L Walsh, N Brown, P Cooper, M Harker OBE, T Hunter-Watts, P Kelly, G Peart, B Russel, L Smith BEM, A Waite and J Wassell

Others in attendance

A Hussain and G Williams

From Durham County Council: G Elliot, Cllr R Bell, Cllr B Stephens and Cllr R Yorke

Apologies

E Culverhouse and L Sullivan

Agenda Item

1 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2 Minutes

RESOLVED: The minutes of the meeting held on 21 January 2021 were AGREED as an accurate record.

3 Public Questions

There were two public questions which were both answered by the Cabinet Member for Communities and Public Health.

Cllr Jon Harvey, Buckingham Town Council asked how the Community Boards would be evaluated to which the Cabinet Member explained that the Boards remained in their early stages having formed eight months ago, the same time that the Council's new Localism team started. Regular meetings with Community Board Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen and Co-ordinators had been held and their feedback acted upon. A more thorough review exercise to gather feedback was now being undertaken to capture what has been done well and what areas could benefit from improvement and towns, parishes and partners would be invited to be involved in this process.

Cllr Mark Cole, Buckingham Town Council queried the voting rights of town and parish councils at Community Board meetings, highlighting the important role towns and parishes plays in devolution and encouraged a greater role to ensure town and parish council's voices were fully heard. The Cabinet Member explained that Community Boards were very different from the former County Council Local Area Forums (LAFs) and the Council was seeking to emulate the models used by Durham and Wiltshire where there was much greater community involvement. The Council had recently drafted a town and parish charter to encourage greater partnership working. The devolution work had not progressed as hoped due to priorities being focused on the Covid response. A team continued to work on devolution and some pilot projects had commenced. The voting arrangements had been agreed by Cabinet, with the board budgets being far greater than LAFs, this decision was made so that the Council took responsibility for ensuring tax payer money was used effectively. Local input remained very important when taking decisions and many Boards hold informal votes to understand how attendees feel about certain decisions. Community Board governance and processes were being reviewed and town and parish council views would be taken account of.

The Chairman thanked Cllrs Cole and Harvey for their questions.

4 Chairman's Update

The Chairman updated that the Inquiry Group's report on the effectiveness of community grants during the Covid-19 pandemic had been presented to Cabinet on 2 March by the Chairman and Cllr P Cooper. The Chairman thanked all Members of the Inquiry Group, the Cabinet Member and all Members who attended an inquiry session or answered the questionnaire. The Chairman also thanked partnership and VCS organisations and officers for their time and help to produce the report.

5 Community Boards: Review of the journey so far

The Chairman introduced a number of guests for this item that were in attendance to provide an update on Community Boards and insight into Durham Council's devolution model. The presentations were as follows:

Cllr G William, Cabinet Member for Communities and Public Health

The vision for Community Boards was to improve outcomes for residents through ensuring strong connections between Buckinghamshire Council and its communities. There were six themes in the vision:-

- Dedicated local go to: championing the local area and being an ambassador of community needs.
- Collaboration: an 'Everyone is welcome' ethos with a range of people and organisations coming together to understand local need and explore solutions.
- Meetings: five public meetings per year with further work outside meetings.
- Activity: community taking ownership of activities including smaller initiatives as well as deep dives.
- Engagement: community conversations to empower local voices with the Board

being well known in their respective areas.

- Impact: local data and intelligence to demonstrate outcomes for local people and leverage external funding.

There were 16 Community Boards across the county and each one determined their own priorities and took action accordingly with funds made available for local projects. The Council had allocated a budget of £3.9m across all the Boards and each Board had a dedicated coordinator. A service director would also be aligned to each Board. A review would be carried out during March to identify opportunities to refine the approach to Boards in future.

Claire Hawkes, Service Director, Localities & Strategic Partnerships

The launch of Community Boards had taken place in July 2020 during the pandemic. New staff had been recruited following the transition to unitary which had been difficult due to interviews and inductions being carried out remotely. The team had been proactive in embracing the cultural changes that the Communities Boards introduced and were looking to develop on lessons learnt after the first nine months. There were three localism managers to oversee the team with each having a core area of responsibility. New opportunities had been identified, such as virtual meetings and virtual working groups, which had been embraced and proved popular. One of the benefits of online meetings had been that they were available to watch on demand.

Across the Boards there were a number of common themes being focused on:-

- Environment & climate change
- Young people
- Older people
- Transport
- Covid recovery
- Health and wellbeing
- Infrastructure
- Community resilience

Councillors Arif Hussain (High Wycombe Community Board) and Anne Wight (Wing and Ivinghoe Community Board), Community Board Chairmen

The High Wycombe Community Board had engaged with its community at the start of the pandemic and had been proactive in improving the area. Outside of the meetings, awareness of the Board had been raised and a network had been created between community groups and partners. Examples of this included visits with local businesses to encourage their involvement and seek feedback which had been met positively. The High Wycombe Community Board had worked with Public Health and the Council to address rising Covid-19 cases in the area and had worked with local partners to address BAME vaccine hesitancy.

The Wing & Ivinghoe Community Board's approach was to be flexible, inclusive and non-political. The Board had a steering group, made up of residents, Members and

key players, to discuss ideas. The informal nature of the Board had received positive praise as it was accessible to all audiences. An example of the Board's work included one subgroup investigating potential locations of electric vehicle charging points in the area. A 'Fun, food and fitness fair' was being planned for May 2022 as part of a project aimed at youths and improving health and food education within families.

Amy Jenner (Aylesbury Community Board) and Jack Pearce (Beeches Community Board), Community Board Coordinators

The coordinators worked with the various internal and external partners and stakeholders on the Community Boards. The coordinators also facilitated conversations between organisations and identified opportunities that external partners could become involved with the Boards. As well as organizing the meetings and content, coordinators also assessed and processed funding applications and kept the Board budgets up to date. During the pandemic, the coordinators had worked with VCS organisations and liaised with council officers that were supporting the Covid-19 response such as the Helping Hands programme. The coordinators enjoyed the variety of the role and working within the local Board communities.

Gordon Elliot, Head of Service Partnerships & Community Engagement, Cllr Richard Bell, Cllr Brian Stephens and Cllr Rob Yorke (Durham County Council)

Durham Council had been running Area Action Partnerships (AAPs) for 12 years having been established in 2009. County Durham had 14 AAPs across the area with each differing in geographical size and population. The boundaries had been agreed with the communities at the time of formulation. The AAPs had a high-profile launch in April 2009 with events in each AAP area which were attended by the Council Leader, Chief Executive. The Secretary of State also attended the first launch. At the launch, each AAP picked its own name and local priorities. Each AAP had localised engagement and consultation mechanisms which tackled local issues. The structure of the AAPs and their budget was outlined. Each AAP Board was made up of 7 public representatives, 7 partner agencies and 7 councillors. The councillor membership changed every two years (where an AAP had more than 7 County Councillors) and was non-political, whilst the chairman, which could be a public representative, from a partner agency or a councillor, was revolved annually. AAP Task Groups supported the work of the AAP Board and each AAP had at least 2.5 council officers assigned to support them. Each AAP had the same Council funding with additional top up from partners such as the Lottery, CCG or local trusts.

Some of the work of the AAPs was highlighted which in many cases was in addition to the work carried out with AAP project funds. This included a village broadband provision campaign that resulted in BT Open Reach supplying broadband to a rural village at no cost to local residents, the AAP or the Council. Connections within the AAPs raised £300,000 for the creation of a Victoria Cross memorial garden to commemorate Victoria Cross stones awarded within the county. In market towns, AAPs had worked with Highways to mitigate damage caused by HGVs and were involved with a project to expand the A66. It had been felt that local councillors had a level of legitimacy when approaching external organisations as a member of an AAP.

Durham Council commenced an asset transfer programme to local residents in 2011-12. AAPs were involved in this process with over 3,500 people being consulted. The benefit of this transfer had meant that residents managed the local assets and raised funds through their usage. The practice of AAPs had assisted in Durham being awarded the LGC's Council of the Year 2014 and representatives from overseas had visited the Council to learn from their model. The AAP staff had been key during Durham's pandemic response through their connections linking residents with VCS organisations. AAPs would have a role during the Covid recovery programme through their core budget as well as additional programme funds.

Jennifer Cameron, Chief Executive Action4Youth and Vice Chair VCSE Recovery Board

Ms Cameron shared reflections on the engagements the VCS organisations had experienced with the Boards over the past year. It was felt that the VCS needed stronger representation on Boards and the VCS Recovery Board wanted to work closer with the Community Boards to tackle issues arising from the pandemic. One suggested improvement was how organisations that were county-wide could engage with all the Community Boards without having to engage with each individual one. It was also suggested that funding procedures and timelines be standardised so that the VCSE could share best practice guidance to the wider VCS organisations.

During the discussion the following key points were raised by the Committee:-

- Durham had found that there had been benefits with coordinators working within their AAP areas such as in village halls. Work was ongoing to consider working practice post-Covid. In Buckinghamshire, some Parishes and VCS groups had offered coordinators local 'touchdown' space that would be considered once pandemic restrictions eased. The Committee saw merit in coordinators working within their local area.
- One Member commended how the public influenced service delivery through the Durham AAPs.
- The AAPs in Durham were non-political and one Member hoped this would be adopted in the Buckinghamshire Community Boards.
- AAPs had evolved over time to become more influential bodies with some decision making capabilities as the Council and residents became more aware of their potential. A Member hoped that Buckinghamshire's Community Boards could reach this level of influence in future.
- The AAPs changed every year how local residents could become involved and each AAP had its own way to engage depending on what worked locally. Methods included online questionnaires, stands at local shows, social media and local papers/magazines. 'The Durham Ask', the county council's asset transfer programme, was being run online whereby communities and organisations could submit an expression of interest for particular assets.
- Members agreed that the Durham model was commendable and should inform how the Community Boards develop in future.

The Chairman thanked all attendees for their presentations.

6 Inquiry into the effectiveness of community organisation grants during the covid-19 pandemic

The Select Committee noted the inquiry report that had gone to Cabinet and the Cabinet's response to the inquiry's recommendations.

7 Date of the Next Meeting

This was the last meeting before the local elections in May. The Chairman encouraged members to email him suggested items for the future work programme.