



Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee held on Thursday 25 March 2021 in MS Teams, commencing at 10.00 am and concluding at 11.40 am.

Members present

D Barnes, D Carroll, S Chapple, N Marshall, R Newcombe, C Poll, R Raja and M Winn

Others in attendance

S Bowles, M Tett and W Whyte

Apologies

D Knights, G Moore, B Roberts and C Rouse

Agenda Item

1 **Declarations of Interest**

There were none.

2 **Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 January 2021 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. Although the country was still in lockdown, the Government had revealed its four-step roadmap back to a more normal life. This had included children and students returning to face-to-face education in schools and colleges. The report outlined the current situation for businesses and those unemployed in Buckinghamshire. Businesses continued to face cash flow pressure and reduced turnover. However, there was evidence that businesses were adapting during the three lockdowns and had become more resilient. Financial support grants for businesses remained in place to compensate for loss of business due to the third lockdown. The Council continued to administer these grants, which included the latest Government grant announced on 22 February, and its own Bucks Additional

Restrictions Grant (ARG) to support businesses unable to apply for Government grants. It was estimated that the Council had distributed 94% of funds delegated by the Government and it was hoped that Government funds would be released to allow another round of ARG grants.

The Government's recent Budget 2021 included an extension of the furlough scheme and the UK wide Self Employment Income Support scheme until September 2021. The 'Build Back Better: our plan for growth' publication had also been presented by the Government and the report highlighted some of the main headlines. Eight new freeports would be opened in England with the nearest ones to Buckinghamshire being in East Midlands and Thames.

Local authorities would assist with the reopening of high streets through various measures such as temporary pavement licences being extended for a further 12 months and relaxation of planning rules to allow pubs and restaurants to operate as takeaways. The Council had been allocated £481.5k from last year's 'Reopening High Streets Safely Fund' which had specific spend criteria. Outstanding funds needed to be spent by 30 June 2021. A work programme was in place to support the reopening of Buckinghamshire high streets and a 'Welcome Back' campaign had been developed.

During the subsequent discussion, Members made the following key points:

- There was a need to evaluate the negative impact Covid had had on inequalities within Buckinghamshire. Another important aspect was assessing Covid's impact on education.
- The Council's ranking of 8th out of 265 local authorities for ARG distribution was based on percentage of funding distributed.
- The Council planned to address litter across Buckinghamshire and had a schedule of events planned to coincide with the phasing of lockdown easing between April – June.
- Town centres had benefited from being allowed to have pavement licenses as they had created a more vibrant atmosphere that enticed footfall. The high street would look different post-Covid and the Council needed to consider further ways to attract footfall through methods other than retail such as leisure and heritage.
- The Council was conducting an audit of all its properties to consider any suitable alternative uses. There were Customer Access Points in libraries for residents that had been set-up after Buckinghamshire became a unitary authority however the pandemic had temporarily closed the majority of these.
- The Community Boards had funding to work with local communities and high streets. The Council had allocated funds for the Boards to consider climate change and economic regeneration in their areas.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Members for their attendance and the update.

4 Future High Street Fund

The report was introduced by Steve Bowles, Cabinet Member for Town Centre Regeneration. Buckinghamshire Council had submitted a full bid to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in July 2020 for £17.2m of capital funding for Future High Streets Funding for High Wycombe. The bid also included £3.4m Council Capital contribution and £400k of private sector funding to generate a total programme of £21m. On 26 December 2020 an announcement was made by MHCLG that funds were allocated to the High Wycombe bid at a level of 69% of the total bid so £11.8m or a total programme of £15.4m including capital contribution. To receive the allocation, the Council needed to revise the bid and had done so by removing some of the projects within the programme. The projects were grouped into three strategic aims and geographical locations:

The Western Gateway

Buckinghamshire Council was undertaking improvements around High Wycombe station independently and this project sought to remove redundant, vacant space at the Western Gateway. The details of the programme were outlined in the report.

Old Town, New Town

This aimed to address one of the fundamental challenges within High Wycombe high street. The Eden Centre had created a footfall draw for the Town however this footfall did not go past the Shopping Centre doors. The project aimed to create a critical mass of activity just outside the door of Eden by developing a space that attracts attention and draws people further into the high street.

The Southern Gateway

This project aimed to create an Arts, Culture and Entertainment cluster based upon the existing Swan Theatre at the Southern Gateway. Plans for the Liberal Club were ongoing as was the possibility of creating a new riverside piazza in front of the Swan Theatre.

The Council had produced its revised bid ahead of the end of January deadline. Officers expected MHCLG to release £11.8m funds in May/June 2021. After this, the programme for delivery would commence. It was hoped that the funds would also assist in the regeneration of High Wycombe's high street.

The following key themes were discussed by the Committee:

- The proposed plans intended to draw footfall into the town centre through the different offerings in the programme. Other plans for High Wycombe were being considered by the Regeneration Board.
- Beyond acquisition, some projects or sites may involve partnership working to deliver improvements in the areas.
- The Chiltern Centre was part of the Dandura planning application. One Member felt that incorporating more restaurants into this area would increase footfall. The Cabinet Member would investigate whether the ground floor of the application was residential or commercial.

- One Member commented that the Chiltern Centre would benefit from an allocation of affordable housing.
- Any project involving the reopening of the River Wye was aspirational and required dedicated funding.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for the update.

5 The local authority planning process and the Local Enforcement Plan

The Chairman welcomed Warren Whyte, Cabinet Member for Planning and Enforcement. The Cabinet Member presented an update on the council's planning enforcement service and the progress on the Buckinghamshire Local Plan. The Council had adopted the Local Enforcement and Monitoring Plan in June 2020 and the planning enforcement service had adapted significantly to react during the pandemic. The pandemic had presented challenges due to a lack of simple face to face communication between officers as well as additional Covid safety measures in place at site inspections. The service had been working hard to deliver service improvements during the pandemic. The Planning & Environment Service was nearing the end of its management restructure and the team was halfway through its service review having recently completed its discovery phase. The team had received 1,278 new reports of alleged planning breaches during the first three quarters of 2021/22 which was similar to the combined cases across the five legacy authorities over the past two years. Since April 2020, the team had increased the number of formal actions taken against breaches of planning control. 50 enforcement notices had been issued since vesting day. The team was focused on progressing cases swiftly and taking decisions as early as possible in the enforcement process. The Cabinet Member encouraged Parishes, Members and residents to report alleged breaches as soon as possible so that the service could react accordingly. Some recent successful enforcement cases were highlighted which included cases at Nash Park, Great Missenden and Iver.

A consultation for further modifications to the Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan (VALP) had closed on 9 February. Four further days of hearings would be held by the Examination Inspector 13 – 16 April. It was hoped that, subject to the Inspector's final report, the VALP would be adopted by Summer 2021. The Buckinghamshire Local Plan for the whole Council area was in its early stages. The Local Development Scheme had been agreed and consultation on the Statement of Community Involvement was currently taking place. A call for brownfield sites was also currently underway. A number of Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) had been prepared to provide more detailed guidance on implementing specific proposals and policies in local plans. The report highlighted particular SPDs such as Biodiversity Accounting, Hollands Farm and Princes Risborough Expansion. Additionally, the Council had submitted a robust response to the Government's Planning White Paper consultation and MHCLG was working through the consultation responses they had received.

After the Cabinet Member's update, the Committee raised the following points:-

- A Member commented that it would be useful for all Councillors to be briefed on all types of possible enforcement action and notices that could be carried out by the service. There were plans for enforcement to be included as part of Member induction following elections in May.
- The Planning Committees received updates regarding enforcement activity at their public meetings. Enforcement updates to ward Members would be considered as part of the service review.
- The enforcement service had the resource and intention to follow through complex cases to resolution with the recent case of waste clear up at Nash Park field being an example of this. Regarding staffing, the service had a new Enforcement Manager and was recruiting two Team Leaders. The service currently had two Technicians (one vacancy), 11 officers and 1 Principal (0.8 vacancy). It was expected that the team would be fully staffed by late Spring/early Summer. The service did not second staff from other areas but there was a cross council taskforce to discuss cases (e.g. advice from Legal or Waste).
- Land ownership issues were not within the remit of the enforcement service.
- One Member suggested utilizing an enforcement app for reporting that would work similarly to the Transport for Bucks 'Fix My Street'. The Cabinet Member advised that IT would have a significant role in the service improvement plan and development of reporting tools would be considered.
- The Cabinet Member was aware of concerns about the impact that new developments had on existing nearby pavements and highways. The Head of Planning Policy and Compliance, Darran Eggleton, advised that it was important that planning conditions were carefully worded to enable proper enforcement.
- One Member highlighted that Local Plans took considerable time to implement which risked the finalized plan becoming outdated. The service did aspire to deliver a future proofed Buckinghamshire Plan and would consider how the overarching policy framework would link in with Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs) to enable some flexibility to respond to changes e.g. environmental standards.
- One Member suggested that access to Community Infrastructure Levy (CILs) should be considered by the Committee at a future meeting. The Cabinet Member advised that CILs would be reviewed and updated as part of the new Buckinghamshire Plan. The Government White Paper also referred to a National Infrastructure Levy which the Council was awaiting further information on.
- The Policy team was well resourced and working on the local plan with experienced staff from all the legacy councils.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and officers for attending the meeting and providing the update.

6 Date and time of next meeting

This was the last meeting of the Select Committee ahead of the local elections in

May. The Chairman thanked all Members and officers for their work and support at the meetings over the past year.