

Questions on notice from members

Questions from Councillor Robin Stuchbury to Councillor Anita Cranmer,
Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services

Question 1

In light of the extremely challenging period for social care workers, can you provide members with an understanding of the case load for a social worker, how they manage that case load, as well as any time pressures over their normal working hours?

Response to question 1

The service acknowledges and recognises the amazing hard work, commitment and highly skilled job that our social care staff perform. The Covid-19 period has seen increases in demand and the seriousness of the circumstances some children and young people find themselves in. Caseloads are closely monitored and reported to senior managers on a weekly basis. This has allowed actions to be taken to address case load pressures as soon as they emerge. The Council has provided an additional 21 social workers in order to manage the increase in demand. Children's social care have a number of different teams that have very different functions. Caseloads vary according to that function. Statutory children's social work must be child centred and visits usually take place outside of school hours. Staff are supported to take back time owed to them whenever that is possible.

Question 2

How does the council encourage the recruitment and retention of social care staff and, if social care staff do leave employment with the council, what provision is in place to mitigate the impact on children? Please can you give members an understanding of turnover rate of social care staff (agency/ permanent), the process for exit interviews and collating feedback from staff leaving employment with the council, including how the council has responded to any feedback?

Response to question 2

It is essential that qualified social workers are supported to do the difficult job that they have. The service works hard to ensure that all staff have regular supervision and clear management direction on their allocated work. Both operational and senior managers are expected to support staff and provide appropriate challenge to ensure statutory and professional expectations are met. The service actively promotes opportunities for staff to move within the service, rather than leave when they want to develop their career further and managers actively consider how this can be achieved. It is recognised that staff will make active decisions to move role when they judge it is right for them to do so. Managers and the staff themselves must manage change in a child centred way and with least disruption. The service benefits from a Social Work Academy where newly qualified staff are supported to develop the skills they need to be successful as a social worker in Buckinghamshire. Our current rolling 12-month turnover rate is 14%.

Question 3

Please can you advise what training and support has been in place for social care workers over the past year, including what provisions are in place for staff to access clinical supervision, and the process for staff to feedback to managers, as well as what has been done in response to any feedback received?

Response to question 3

The service has a strong emphasis on building a learning culture and providing as many opportunities for staff to grow and develop their skills. This can be done in a variety of ways through peer audits, group supervision, external training and providing effective feedback. Staff have had opportunities to get clinical support via our psychology service and also from CAMHS professionals. Senior managers regularly speak with staff at team meetings, via quality assurance surveys, written communication and service level briefings. Staff feedback is encouraged and has led to specific support being made available to staff groups as a result of requests made.

Question 4

How is the council developing the service to provide the best outcomes for children within our care, whilst at the same time ensuring that the key needs of front line social workers are being met? Please can you make reference to any changes in allocated social workers children have had over the last year.

Response to question 4

The service is focused on improving all aspects of service delivery and is making progress according to monitoring visits by Ofsted. It is not possible to achieve a good level of service to our children and young people without ensuring front line staff are supported. The turnover rate provided gives an indication of changes of social worker.

Question from Councillor Robin Stuchbury to Councillor Gareth Williams, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration

Will Buckinghamshire Council improve its method of reporting and engagement on enforcement matters to Buckinghamshire's town and parish councils? For example, sending an acknowledgement email/ reference number to the town council when they have reported an enforcement issue to the council, and reintroducing monthly bulletins to town and parish councils? Further, in light of the information provided to the cabinet member, can the council consider a list of important cases to Buckingham Town Council specifically, and advise the town council whether or not these enforcement matters are progressing, and if not, why not?

Response

I'm sorry to hear that Buckingham Town Council are experiencing difficulties with obtaining information about enforcement cases and acknowledge the request for more regular updates.

Firstly, I would like to assure you that it is of the utmost importance that the Council has a good working relationship and an excellent communication channel with all our Parish and Town Councils. I am pleased to say we have recently appointed a new enforcement team leader. This appointment completes our management restructure in planning enforcement and our newly appointed Team Leaders will be driving our service improvements in their areas.

I understand that the regular bulletin style updates which were once issued were much appreciated by Buckingham Town Council and other parish councils. However, these bulletins were stopped several years ago and these are not a viable option for us to reintroduce at Buckinghamshire Council.

It is important to us to work closely with all our town and parish councils and this is well embedded in the way in which we want to development the team in the future

The need for information is understood and it is recognised that a lack of information can lead to frustration that nothing is happening.

The Council's policy as set out in the local enforcement and monitoring plan is to update our complainants at key points of the investigation, such as when we take formal action or when a case is closed. We are therefore unable to provide updates on regular timed basis, particularly when there is no update to provide. The reality of planning enforcement is that cases can often take months and sometimes years to reach a final conclusion and therefore weekly or fortnightly updates are extremely laboursome on our part and are impossible to sustain without impacting on the overall service.

The team has received the list of cases that you have provided and this will be assessed by the team and a response provide accordingly.

Going forward, it is important for us to work together to provide the best service we can to the residents of Buckingham. As part of this we would also ask that local councillors keep us updated with changes they see happening on planning enforcement cases in their area. We want your town councillors to feel welcome to contact us with information and photographs if they wish to and know that we welcome their contribution to ensuring that we maintain a robust planning control service.

Finally, I can also advise that the team remain keen to improve on our communication channels through the improved use of our IT and, where possible, create a self-serve system, so that updates on the status of cases can be at your fingertips 24/7. Whilst there are no guarantees made about the implementation of this system nor any timescales, please be assured that the team are looking at every option to make providing updates a simpler process for all involved.

Question from Councillor Andrea Baughan to Councillor Peter Strachan, Cabinet member for Climate Change and Environment

What can Bucks Council do in regard to encouraging parents to try using “real” nappies? The benefits environmentally are well known and although the initial cost outlay can be daunting for families, the long term cost is less. This is where a robust scheme to help with set up – e.g., a voucher scheme can really help parents who are curious to try real nappies but unsure or concerned about the cost. Please can we consider this? I would be delighted to help.

I appreciate there would be a cost provision but the cost to the County of disposing of disposables - and sorting them out when they have been wrongly put with recycling items will be reduced accordingly - as well as the environmental cost as a disposable nappy can take up to 500 years, also emitting methane gas into the environment. By the time a baby is potty trained they could have used 4,000 to 6,000 disposable nappies. Even if we could encourage parents to take a half and half approach it would be hugely beneficial to the environment.

Response

I agree that encouraging the use of reusable nappies is beneficial to both the environment, the councils waste disposal costs and the families that use them also save money in the long run. It's important that we try to help residents reduce waste wherever we can and whilst Buckinghamshire is a good recycling County, there is always more we can do and preventing waste in the first place has the biggest benefits.

We already support the local reusable nappy libraries in Buckinghamshire and have done so for some time now. These are fantastic events where local residents can get expert advice, have their questions answered and loan nappy kits to try at home. We also actively promote reusable nappies across the county to those who maybe haven't heard of them before.

If there are more opportunities to encourage families to try reusable nappies then we are keen to look into it and I will ask the appropriate officer to contact you and look at what more we can do.

Written questions from Councillor Robin Stuchbury for Councillor John Chilver, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources, Property and Assets

Question 1

Buckinghamshire Council has extensive assets inherited from the five local authorities through the unitary process. Going forward, what is going to be the policy if assets within a particular area are to be sold to generate income for the local authority, including how we ensure value for money, and will local members be engaged with, and consulted on, any sales in advance of decisions being taken on those properties/ lands? Further, will an independent audit of the value of Buckinghamshire Council's assets be undertaken to ensure good value is achieved in advance of any sales?

Response to question 1

The Council will from time to time consider and decide to sell Property assets to fund other capital projects, and corporate objectives. Local Members will be consulted on any potential sale as they are now on significant property decisions, and Local Member consultation and input is an important consideration on any disposal. The final decision on disposal will also be subject to either a Cabinet decision, or a Leader decision. The exception to this is with the Council's independent Companies in particular Aylesbury Vale Estates where disposals in accordance with the Business Plan can proceed with Company Board approval. The business plan for Aylesbury Vale Estates comes before Members once a year. Members can be reassured that the Council has an obligation to secure best value on disposals by virtue of S123 of the Local Government Act 1972, it does so by taking professional advice on the value of the asset being sold and then bringing it to market for best bids. The Council also undertakes an independent valuation of its property assets and this is often used as information when assessing the potential proceeds from sale and informs the Local Member and Cabinet decision making process.

Question 2

Since Buckinghamshire Council was formed, have any properties been sold/ reallocated or in negotiations to sell/ reallocate with the private sector, and if so, how will this be reported to local members to ensure their involvement/ consultation?

Response to question 2

A number of property assets which have been identified in the medium term financial plan have either been sold or have been sold subject to Planning. Again the process outlined in the answer to the first question has been adopted. All the disposals to date have been development sites and sold subject to Planning. Each disposal is covered by a Cabinet report. On other commercial development sites with pre let opportunities in place, the Council has retained the sites for the rental income which supports Council services.

Question 3

In light of the agreement by Buckinghamshire Council to look into the option of becoming a social housing provider, what work is being undertaken to ensure any disposal or sale of assets in delivering key worker/ social housing?

Response to question 3

The Council has not yet sold any sites for residential housing, but Officers continue to work on the potential opportunities for the Council to deliver key worker and affordable housing. I am expecting to be able to report progress on this in the Autumn.

Question from Councillor Ed Gemmell for Councillor Martin Tett, Leader of Buckinghamshire Council

Temperatures in West Canada have reached life threatening all-time highs at levels once thought to occur every 1,000 years now, due to climate change, occurring 150 times more often. Already global temperature is up 1.2 degrees. The UN has said 1.5 degrees is our maximum "safe" level but we are on track for 3.2 degrees with the United Nations Children's Fund even upgrading this to 4 degrees. This would result in "devastating health consequences" for future generations - rise in ocean levels, heatwaves, severe malnutrition, spike in infectious diseases. This report placed the UK, with its 2050 net zero target, in 133rd place on providing a climate fit for future generations, and on track to emit 115% more CO2 than its 2030 target. Will Buckinghamshire continue to follow the UK government's policies or will it change its own policy and choose to lead with an earlier target, such as 2030, as have conservative councils in other parts of the country?

Response

The recent extreme weather in western provinces of Canada as well as north west states of the US are clearly concerning and highlight the scale of the impact which climate change can bring. It is an important reminder that climate change is already leading to extreme weather events and these will affect all countries across the globe.

I don't want to dwell too long on the report mentioned, however I must highlight that it is a rather selective extraction of the data which Ed Gemmell refers to.

The report does rank the UK 133 on the measure used as a proxy for sustainability in this report – however we should bear in mind that the top 3 countries by this measure are Burundi, Chad and Somalia where lower economic development means their carbon emissions are low and so rank highly on this measure. This is not as it may sound a measure of progress of reducing emissions. The same report places the UK 10th globally in terms of enabling children to flourish

Coming to the specific question of whether we will choose an earlier target than 2050, I want to clarify that the target for our direct emissions is already ahead of the government's, as ours is 'no later than 2050'. In addition, our direct emissions target for 2030 is a 75% reduction which is ahead of the Government's 2030 target of 68% target.

I would remind all councillors that whilst we need to and are taking action to address climate change, we need to be clear that whatever we achieve in Buckinghamshire will not be enough to halt climate change and prevent further extreme weather events as referred to. China, India and the US account for around half of Global carbon emissions – the UK less than 1%. So yes, we need to have ambitious targets, and both the UK Government and this council have set those. But we need to be clear that without equivalent action by the world's major emitters, climate change won't be halted.

For reference – [Main UN Report](#) and [link to figures including tables of performance](#)

Questions from Councillor Ed Gemmell for Councillor Peter Strachan, Cabinet Member for Climate Change and Environment

Question 1

The council currently has a target for net zero carbon emissions for Buckinghamshire of 2050 which the leader of the council has stated is costed out. The UN and UK government have endorsed a race to zero. Every scientist is asking us to reach net zero as soon as possible. Governments including the UK government are also being taken to court over their net zero targets with the recent result that Germany was forced to move its target forward to 2045. Would the Cabinet Member consider it to be more financially prudent for Buckinghamshire council to determine and compare what the true financial cost (and benefit) is of different net zero targets including 2030, 2040 and 2050? Will the Cabinet Member ensure such a determination is carried out and published as soon as possible?

Response to question 1

I want to first clarify a detail in the question. As Cllr Gemmell has said, we have a target for reducing carbon emissions across Buckinghamshire by 2050 but separately for the Council's direct emissions to reach net zero 'no later than 2050'.

We have costed out the work required to reach net-zero for the council's direct operations – not the whole of Buckinghamshire which would be an intractable task. The equivalent measures for the cost of the UK are developed by large teams of economists and take a economy wide measure of investment needed as a % of GDP, which for information is estimated at between 1 and 2%. We are not in a position to undertake that work and I see little benefit of us doing so as this is already articulated at a national level and we would anticipate the cost for Buckinghamshire to reach net zero would be within this range.

What we have done is cost the range of measures we need to implement for Buckinghamshire Council to reach net zero no later than 2050. In terms of undertaking further work to cost out 2030 and 2040, I have no desire to do so at the present time and my priority now is to adopt the climate change strategy developed by this council and to increasingly focus our resource on delivery of the actions. Clearly if the government changes the date for the national target for net zero we would of course relook at this issue to support this, whilst noting that our interim targets are already ahead of the government's interim targets.

What we can say with some confidence is that moving to an earlier net zero date will cost more as that would involve investing in technologies at scale ahead of them being entirely market ready. I want us to move at pace on this agenda, but we must all recognise that this council has a wide range of responsibilities including many statutory ones and we must be prudent in how we fund all services. To put it simply, if we want to start taking decades off this target, what services should we cut to do so?

Lastly, we must remember here that saving a tonne of carbon has the same climate benefit, regardless of who was going to emit it. The atmosphere doesn't recognise the difference between this councils' emissions, those of our residents or those from a train or plane

passing through the county. There is an important role for us to play in reducing our emissions and showing leadership on the agenda, but I am keen to not lose focus on the wider picture here. This council represents around 1% of Buckinghamshire's total emissions – and I do not want us to become preoccupied by this 1% at the expense of forgetting the other 99%.

Question 2

Bucks and the UK's natural assets are in a terrifying state of decline. Locally we have only 13% woodland cover and dropping due to Ash dieback and 0% of our rivers in a good health. 56% of UK species have declined in recent decades, 15% have gone extinct, insect decline in the UK and Europe are rapid with studies in Scotland and Germany showing a drop of nearly 70% in the last 50 years, the WWF reports that 17 bee species have become regionally extinct in UK. Einstein is quoted as saying "If the bee disappeared off the surface of the globe, then man would only have four years of life left. No more bees, no more pollination, no more plants, no more animals, no more man." In this context of this peaking of natural disasters how is the Cabinet member working with partners to urgently rejuvenate our natural world and specifically to boost pollinator numbers and clean up our rivers and streams?

Response to question 2

This is a really important issue and as you highlight nature is in long-term decline globally and in this Country. This matters, not only because people care about wildlife in its own right, but because nature - our ecosystems and their component species - plays a vital role in climate change mitigation, by removing trapping and storing carbon, as well as in pollination, flood alleviation, and public health and wellbeing.

As an authority we are spearheading two of the governments key policies in relation to the natural environment contained in the Environment Bill currently passing through parliament, so that we can lead and take a step change in nature's recovery within Buckinghamshire.

Firstly the Environment Bill introduces a mandatory requirement for biodiversity net gain in the planning system, to ensure that new developments enhance biodiversity by a minimum of 10%. Integrating biodiversity net gain into the planning system will provide a fundamental change in how planning and development is delivered to enhance biodiversity. We consulted on a Supplementary Planning Document regarding the local implementation of a biodiversity net gain scheme in Buckinghamshire in February 2021. Once adopted this will enable us to deliver biodiversity net gain via the planning system ahead of the national requirement set out in Environment Bill.

Secondly the Environment Bill will require the development of Local Nature Recovery Strategies across England by upper tier authorities. These will be a really important tool that will support better spatial planning for nature recovery, by setting out priorities and opportunities for protecting and investing in nature and habitat restoration and creation within a local area but that also deliver wider environmental benefits such as natural flood management. These tools will also support and help inform our decision making in relation

to strategic planning for housing and infrastructure and help direct biodiversity net gain investment so that it has the greatest benefit for local wildlife and people. They will also be used to help guide and highlight opportunities regarding funding under the new Environment Land Management Scheme which will reward more sustainable practices regarding farming and land management.

Buckinghamshire was chosen by the Government as one of 5 Pilot Authorities to test the process to produce a Local Nature Recovery Strategy. As such we have led the way in producing a draft prototype Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Buckinghamshire between autumn of 2020 until spring 2021 and the draft was submitted to government in early June in order to help inform the new national regulations and guidance to support the Environment Bill.

There are other projects worthy of mention including our work with the Bucks and Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership to trial a new Wilder Road Verges project, where we are changing our approach to highway verge management at carefully selected pilot sites. At these locations, which have been chosen so safety isn't compromised, we have been letting the grass and wild flowers grow longer, which provides a source of nectar for butterflies, bees and other pollinating insects.

Hopefully you will be aware we have committed to planting over ½ million trees over the next 10 years and work is well underway with initial Woodland Creation Design Plans for the Phase 1 sites being produced and respective grants are being applied for. These sites are being designed in accordance with UK Forestry Standard and Woodland Carbon Code to ensure the woodlands and habitats created deliver multiple benefits such as carbon capture, biodiversity and flood prevention as well as health and wellbeing.

Finally, we are working closely with the Community Boards to support their aspirations and local projects to improve the environment which is one of their priorities for 2021.