



## Standards and General Purposes Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Standards and General Purposes Committee held on Wednesday 7 July 2021 in The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, HP19 8FF, commencing at 2.00 pm and concluding at 3.38 pm.

### Members present

T Broom, M Baldwin, B Chapple OBE, S Chhokar, P Gomm, T Green, S Lambert, R Matthews, H Mordue, L Smith BEM and D Thompson

### Apologies

R Carington, C Oliver and M Smith

### Agenda Item

#### **1 Appointment of Vice-Chairman**

The Chairman appointed Cllr Bill Chapple as his Vice-Chairman of the Standards and General Purposes Committee for the ensuing year.

#### **2 Apologies**

Apologies were received from Cllrs Robert Carington, Catherine Oliver and Melanie Smith.

#### **3 Minutes**

RESOLVED that the Minutes of the Meeting held on 15 April and 26 May 2021 be approved as a correct record.

#### **4 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **5 Compliments and Complaints Report 2020-21 (End of Year)**

The Committee noted that this was the first report on compliments and complaints since the establishment of the new Council on 1 April 2020. This report would provide a baseline which could be used for monitoring going forward and was assisted by a centralised complaints system. The Feedback, Compliments and Complaints Policy was launched on 1 April 2020.

The Service Director for Policy and Communications made the following points:-

- There were Stage 1 complaints (initially dealt with by the Service area with co-ordination through the Complaints Team) and Stage 2 complaints (independent officers who reviewed complaints where there continued to be dissatisfaction ). In addition there were statutory complaints for Children's Services and Adult Services. If the resident was still not happy they had the right to refer the matter to the Local Government Ombudsman.
- The Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman had now confirmed that the annual review letter for 2020/21 would be issued to authorities in July.
- 1029 compliments have been received by the new Council in this reporting year.
- 2099 stage 1 complaints have been received during this year which compared to 2064 received during 2019/20 by the former five councils.
- The main areas for complaints were Waste and Recycling South, Council Tax, Benefits, Planning and SEND reflecting problems with some of the services. The report provided information on how the Complaints and Information Team and the Service areas were addressing these areas to help service improvement.
- The report put these complaints in perspective on the number of complaints received against the number of services the Council provided.
- The timeframe for responding to a stage 1 complaint was 20 working days. This timeframe was achieved for 55% of cases. Delays in providing stage 1 responses increased in the second and third quarter of the year mainly due to the increase in the number of complaints received together with pressures related to the pandemic. Work was being carried out with services to help reduce the timescales.
- Of the 2,000 complaints - 172 Stage 2 complaints were considered in total and this represented an escalation rate of 8.2% from stage 1 complaints and roughly half of those were not upheld when they were reviewed independently. .
- In terms of statutory complaints for adult social care (one stage process that encouraged local resolution) there were 44 complaints of which 25 were fully or partially upheld.
- The Children's Statutory Complaints process had 3 stages. Stage 1 was the local resolution stage and involved the service responding in writing to the complaint. Stage 2 was an independent investigation of the complaint which was carried out externally. The resulting report fed into the formal response which was completed by the relevant Service Director. Stage 3 was an independent review panel. There were 28 cases received at stage 1 of the process, 7 of which escalated to a stage 2 and in turn 1 escalated to a stage 3.
- The Complaints and Information Team would continue to work with services to provide improvement and a Learning Form had now been introduced which had been piloted in Children's Services and in addition training was being provided to staff to help them respond to complaints as clearly and as quickly as possible.
- Reference was made to the report appendices which provided some visual information on how complaints were responded to.
- The Committee would receive an annual report on this area which would

provide benchmarking as the Council moved forward.

During discussion the following points were made:-

- A Member queried whether complaints to Members were included in the report and also commented that it would be helpful to be given feedback on complaints in their area so that they were aware if the issue had been resolved. The Member also commented that training was important as often the first person to deal with the complaint could placate residents with a robust response in the first instance. The Head of Information Management reported that complaints to Members were included in the numbers but had not been separated out in the report. She would look at the best way of providing information on complaint resolution for Local Members. With the five legacy councils there were discrepancies with the ways each Council dealt with complainants and their response times. A piece of work was being undertaken on the cross cutting customer experience to embed training for officers not just when a customer complained but any customer interaction.
- Reference was made to a complaint being an indicator of customer dissatisfaction. In terms of learning a question was asked about whether there were service reviews over clustered complaints and how this was logged in terms of activity and subsequent intervention. In addition how many complaints were directed to Service Directors for resolution. The Head of Information Management reported that the Council was getting a new case management system and that would be crucial in how the Council tracked its learning and they also worked with the Business Improvement Team to ensure it was followed through with services. In terms of the complaints process Service Directors were included and it was important that councillors were also kept up to date and the reason why certain decisions had been made.
- It was important to separate out the reason for dissatisfaction to see if it was directly related to the pandemic as opposed to a structural problem with the service area. The Head of Information Management reported that in the first lockdown the number of complaints went down and compliments went up, including for the waste services. However, when the first lockdown ended residents became more concerned about local services. The difficulty of becoming a new unitary council during the start of the pandemic could not be underestimated and this did impact on service delivery. A number of service reviews had been undertaken across the new authority where strengths and weaknesses had been identified and action taken on improvement. The Service Director added that if there were any structural problems that had been masked by the pandemic this would become apparent in the months ahead.
- Some complaints had related to a change in process from the legacy Council to the new Council where it would have been helpful for Members to have been provided with clearer information e.g. planning. Another issue related to residents not being able to speak to officers directly and because of this ended up contacting their local member, which could have helped them not

becoming formal complaints. In terms of the change in processes the Service Director reported that he could look into this area and provide further information. The Council would aim to alert Members and residents to any changes that impacted on them. With phone calls there was a cross cutting piece of work being carried out on the customer experience and work was being carried out on responding to phone calls. The pandemic did have a significant impact on the transition to the new Authority. If Members were still experiencing problems in this area they should contact the Service Director for Customer Services.

- A question was asked about response times (20 days) which had not been achieved for 45% of the cases but whether this had improved after the impact of the first lockdown. The Head of Information Management reported that the Council were still struggling with response times which was often due to the resident entering the Council through the wrong process and should be directed to service delivery e.g. waste services. The Complaint and Information Team was reliant on the service area to address the issue. The Service Review should help this and the embedding of a new culture. The Council was very serious about customer engagement. They were working closely with the Service and Business Improvement Teams. Big improvements had also been made to improving responses to Freedom of Information requests. Residents were made aware if there was going to be a delayed response. Response times were also being carefully monitored by the Corporate Directors. In terms of a target there was a workplan which had been drawn up with the Business Improvement Team, of 65%. The 20 days could be extended with complex issues and it was important to keep the resident updated.
- A Member stated that whilst it was helpful to consolidate information it was also important to differentiate on different types of service. For example in the South waste services were being delivered through a new contractor and in the North, in-house staff were used. Operationally some services were delivered as per their legacy districts and this information was useful to local members. The Head of Information Management reported that this would be difficult with the new case management system across the Board although information could be provided on waste services. This would be helpful information for service improvement and this was being addressed.
- Local Members were not currently provided with information on complaint resolution which was often due to data protection issues but where a resident had engaged directly with a local member they should be copied into the response. High level information could be provided where the resident had not given permission for information to be shared. The Member commented that often the resident would expect the local member to be aware of their concerns. The Head of Information Management reported that this could be pursued with the Information Commissioner as the Council could update their privacy notices that information on complaint handling could be shared with local members. Not every resident would be happy to share their complaint information.
- Complaints were an opportunity for corporate improvement but also could

be related to high customer expectation. The Service Director commented that more could be done so that officers viewed complaints as positive and a clear indication on how they could improve services. The Corporate Management Team took this very seriously and wanted to embed any learning from complaints into service improvement. Policy changes were part of how local government operated which could easily result in a complaint being made and was challenging to avoid.

- A question was asked on how much time was wasted with vexatious complaints. The Service Director Policy and Communications reported that sometimes it was difficult to differentiate with a complaint and a service request. It was important to triage information to ensure it was genuine. He also commented that half of the complaints were given the same response second time round as the Council was happy with the way they had responded the first time. There were stages in the process to weed out vexatious complaints as early as possible.

The Chairman reported that this was an evolving process in terms of settling into the new council and the post pandemic period and commented that it would be useful to revisit this area before next year to get an update on those issues that had been raised.

**RESOLVED that the report be noted.**

## **6 Honorary Alderman Scheme for Buckinghamshire Council**

The Committee received the report on an Honorary Alderman Scheme for Buckinghamshire Council. Section 249 of the Local Government Act gave principal councils the power to confer the title of 'Honorary Alderman' on persons who had in the opinion of the Council, rendered eminent services to the Council as past Members but who were no longer politically active.

All the legacy Councils apart from South Bucks District Council had a Scheme and the Local Government (Structural Changes)(Transitional arrangements) No 2 Regulations 2008 provided for the continuation of the conferment of Honorary Alderman status from legacy Councils to a new Authority. As a result, 32 Alderman can continue. Prior to the abolition of the legacy Councils both Wycombe and Chiltern District Council agreed to confer that status of Honorary Alderman to 11 individuals. However, due to the pandemic Members continued on as Buckinghamshire Councillors as elections could not be held.

Mr Cartwright was conferred the Honorary Alderman status by the former Wycombe District Council Scheme, which set out that, "in the event of an Honorary Alderman seeking election to the District Council, or any other Council within the area, he or she shall, from the time this scheme is adopted, cease to hold the position of Honorary Alderman if he or she is still standing as a candidate immediately following the deadline for withdrawal of candidature. At that time the entitlement to such rights and privileges attached to the position of Honorary Alderman shall cease automatically." Members were therefore being asked to

consider whether Mr Cartwright should be invited to continue with Honorary Alderman status under the provisions of the new proposed Scheme for the Council.

During discussion the following points were raised:-

- At paragraph 10 of the proposed new scheme it stated that being an Honorary Alderman was an apolitical role so individuals should not hold any political office such as parish councillor. A Member expressed concern that many parish councillors were apolitical and did not stand under a political banner. Another Member commented that there was confusion here in terms of standing for a political party and undertaking political activity. A Parish Council was a political organisation and conducted parish politics and an alderman should retire from political activity. An Independent candidate would still be political. Members were advised that as a parish councillor you were elected to hold political office. Another Member reported that the status of Alderman was conferred on someone who had given exceptional service to their community and Parish and Town Councils were separate to this and they should not be excluded from continuing their role. Another Member commented that not every Parish Councillor was elected.
- A Member commented that it would be helpful to have a renewable time limit for Honorary Alderman (perhaps of five years) as people move away etc and life moved on and there was no easy way for them to stand down. Another Member disagreed and said that the appointment should be for life. Another point was made that in a legacy council if you became an alderman you were unable to stand for election which had caused some issues. A proposal was made that the two Members who had been put forward as Honorary Alderman but did not get elected this year should be appointed.
- A Member commented it was important to use the skills of Honorary Alderman as ambassadors for the Council in a non-political role to aid the Council. Another Member felt that the appointment of Honorary Alderman was a point of recognition for work done and that no further role was required and should be carried out by unitary councillors.
- In terms of moving forward into the new Council current Honorary Alderman could be asked whether they would still like to continue in this role.

The Committee recommended that the individual identified in the report should continue with Honorary Alderman status. On a vote being taken (10 for and 1 against) it was:-

**RECOMMENDED that Full Council:**

**a) adopt the proposed Buckinghamshire Council Honorary Alderman Scheme as set out at appendix 'C' to the report, noting it will be subject to a review prior to the 2025 Unitary Elections, and authority be delegated to the Monitoring Officer to insert the Scheme into the Council's Constitution.**

**b) note that future nominations for Honorary Alderman status be in accordance with the proposed scheme.**

**c) invite the individual identified in paragraph 3.6 of the report to continue with the Honorary Alderman status.**

## **7 2023 Review of Parliamentary Constituencies**

The Committee received a report from the Service Director for Legal & Democratic Services on the 2023 Review of Parliamentary Constituencies. Members noted that this Committee was responsible for electoral arrangements. The independent Boundary Commission for England (BCE) were redrawing the map of Parliamentary constituency boundaries. This followed a request from Parliament to review constituencies in England to ensure that there was a more even distribution of electors across them. Due to population changes since the last review, the number of electors in some constituencies was much higher than in others. The 2023 Boundary Review, which was launched in January this year, would make the number of electors in each constituency more equal, thus ensuring individual votes were of broadly equal weight. In making these required changes, the number of constituencies in England must increase from 533 to 543. The Committee were being asked to note the initial consultation and asked to consider any response they may wish to make.

In the Buckinghamshire Council area the Boundary Commission's proposals were for the following 6 parliamentary constituencies (currently there were 5):

Proposed Constituency and electorate  
Aylesbury 75636  
Buckingham & Bletchley 73644  
Chesham & Amersham 76158  
High Wycombe 71769  
Marlow and South Buckinghamshire 70312  
Princes Risborough 72240

During discussion the following comments were made:-

- To rename High Wycombe to just Wycombe
- Milton Keynes and Bletchley was in the historical county of Buckinghamshire but were not part of Buckinghamshire Council.

The Service Director reported that in the past specific questions had been sent round to Members and these were then brought together in a report so the Committee can highlight the issues they wished to be considered. If during this process it was apparent that it would be helpful to meet then a Working Group could be set up. All Council Members would be informed of the consultation as they would be able to make their own individual response. This process was agreed by the Committee.

**RESOLVED that the initial proposals for the 2023 review of Parliamentary Constituencies from the Boundary Commission for England (BCE) be noted.**

**8 Election Petition: a challenge to the result of the election in Totteridge & Bowerdean Ward (Wycombe area) on the 6 May 2021**

The Committee received a report from the Service Director of Legal and Democratic Services informing Members that the Council had received an election petition relating to the Totteridge and Bowerdean Ward. Totteridge & Bowerdean Ward was in the Wycombe area. It was noted that there had been historic allegations of postal vote fraud in this area and there was a pending prosecution of a former County Councillor. In the run up to polling day on 6 May 2021, the Returning Officer had received a number of allegations in the Totteridge and Bowerdean Ward, relating to postal vote 'harvesting' or that electors were being intimidated. All information received was passed directly to the Thames Valley Police for investigation.

At the Count on the 8 May 2021, there was an incident involving one of the candidates, who had challenged the Deputy Returning Officer (DRO) when the details of the bad and doubtful (spoilt) papers were considered.

The thrust of the petition was not that the Returning Officer has done anything wrong –rather that there should be a recount and an investigation as to whether the spoilt ballot paper had been improperly interfered with. This action was being taken against the Returning Officer who was responsible for the election rather than the Council. Acting as Returning Officer the Service Director stated he was confident all the correct procedures had been followed.

A question was asked about the cost to the Council and was informed that the action brought against the Returning Officer was covered by the insurers.

**RESOLVED that the receipt and legal process of an Election Petition relating to the Totteridge and Bowerdean ward be noted.**

**9 Buckinghamshire Council Electoral Review (Update) and Member Working Group arrangements**

The Committee received a report on the Buckinghamshire Council Electoral Review. Initially it was anticipated that the Boundary Commission would make its decision about the first phase of the review on the Council size, after the election in May 2021. They have now deferred that decision until July 2021. The decision would be either of the following: they accept the proposed number; or, they may accept a number as proposed by another group who makes a submission; or, they may seek further information from the Council. The proposal from the Council was 120 Members.

Once a determination of the Council size had been made phase 2 of the work would commence. This would involve the drawing up of boundaries for the new wards. It was anticipated that this would commence from July/August 2021 and the work would be carried out during the Autumn of 2021.

During discussion the following points were noted:-

- To circulate the link to the appendices to the submission.
- The current and projected population figures were used which included proposed planning growth.
- Members were asked to put their name forward if they wished to sit on the Member Working Group to the Chairman.

**RESOLVED that the work undertaken by the Member Working Group of the former Standards & General Purposes Committee be noted including the Council size submission to the Boundary Commission authorised by this Committee on the 25 February 2021 and that a Member Working Group be appointed to take forward Phase 2 of the Boundary Commission’s Electoral Review.**

#### **10 Constitution Working Group (update)**

The Committee received a verbal report from the Service Director for Legal and Democratic Services who reported that the Constitution was reviewed from time to time through a Member Working Group made up of the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of this Committee and the Audit and Governance Committee. Both Committees have matters relating to the Constitution in their terms of reference. At the end of Council in February there were a number of proposed changes that were approved by Full Council, many of which related to Area Planning Committees.

During discussion the following points were made:-

- A Member was concerned that there was reference that planning was 100% officer driven. This was a Member led authority and decisions needed to be taken by Members in this highly contentious area. He also suggested that it was important to undertake site visits once they had listened to comments made by local residents. The Service Director reported that in the last review there were a number of changes made in relation to call-in and town and parish councils. He commented that planning was not 100% driven by officers but that there were some delegations to officers with regard to planning matters. This could be considered by the new Cabinet Member for Planning.
- Members were asked to inform the Chairman if they wished anything to be considered for the next review.
- One Member commented that he had been on the Working Group which looked at the Constitution as part of the Shadow Authority and the hybrid model which was then put forward taking good practice from the legacy councils. A number of issues with the hybrid model was addressed in the last review. Members would continue to reflect how the new Council was operating and look at any anomalies. It was important to work towards best practice and work with the Chairman of the Area Planning Committees.
- As a new Council of 147 Members a review would be welcomed. Officers and Members could recommend areas which required improvement to the Member Working Group through the Chairmen. The Constitution was a living document.

**RESOLVED that the report be noted.**

**11 Draft Work Programme for 2021- 22**

The draft Work Programme for 2021-22 was noted as a working document.

**12 Date of Next Meeting**

7 October 2021 at 2pm