



Buckinghamshire Council

Finance & Resources Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FINANCE & RESOURCES SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 14 OCTOBER 2021 IN VENUE CHANGED TO: MEZZANINE ROOM 1, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, WALTON STREET, AYLESBURY, HP20 1UA, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 3.32 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

R Bagge (Chairman), K Wood (Vice-Chairman), D Anthony, K Ashman, M Ayub, S Chhokar, D Goss, I Macpherson, J Ng, M Walsh and S Wilson

As substitute: P Cooper (for W Raja) and N Hussain (for T Dixon)

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

T Butcher, J Chilver, P Cooper and N Hussain

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE / CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised that unfortunately due to an unexpected late change to the meeting venue which was caused by an unforeseen facilities issue with the previous venue and despite best efforts, this meeting would not be webcast. An audio recording would, however be placed on the Council's website. The Chairman thanked those in attendance for their understanding and efforts in making it to the new venue at such short notice.

Apologies were received from Councillors T Dixon, T Egleton, G Harris and W Raja. Councillor N Hussain was present as substitute for Councillor T Dixon, whilst Councillor P Cooper was present as a substitute for Councillor W Raja.

Apologies had also been received from Councillor M Tett, Leader of the Council in respect of item 7. Councillor J Chilver, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources, Property and Assets would present this item.

The Chairman reported that Councillor T Dixon had become a member of the Committee since the last meeting, replacing Councillor S James.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 22 July 2021 were noted as an accurate record.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

No public questions were received.

5 CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE

The Chairman reported that the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group would be holding its sessions with individual portfolio holders from 10th to 14th January 2022 and that Members should have received invites for these dates. Should members know that they would be unable to participate in the meetings they were asked to advise the Chairman or Scrutiny Officer at the earliest opportunity. Confidential briefings with members had also been arranged for 17 and 18 November for the portfolio areas of Children's and Education and Health and Wellbeing, respectively. These sessions would provide members with a greater understanding of the budgets within these services ahead of formal budget scrutiny sessions commencing in January.

6 CUSTOMER FIRST

The Committee received a report which detailed the proposed Customer First Vision and Promises and Behaviours as a whole Council approach to the delivery of the corporate plan and Customer Experience ambition. Further, Members received information on the current Customer Service Centre (CSC) Performance, the operating context that impacts current performance levels and the improvements in progress.

Cllr J Chilver, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources, Property and Assets and Cllr T Butcher, Deputy Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources, Property and Assets introduced the report highlighting the following points:

- The Customer First approach had been approved by Cabinet and the principles of the vision could be seen on the Council's website. Customer champions were in place across service areas and the Customer First Board had been set up and had started to meet. The Customer First principles had been embedded in to the Better Buckinghamshire service reviews to ensure the customer was kept at the forefront and built in to service delivery. Key deliverables within the action plan were noted on pages 14-15 of the agenda pack.
- Recognising the importance of customers, the Customer Service Centre review had been accelerated and a number of key findings identified, as can be viewed on page 20 of the reports pack.
- The Council ordinarily receives a large number of calls each day, however for the period April to August 2021, call volumes had seen a 10% increase which had impacted call wait times.
- Having legacy council systems in place presented a challenge, and meant that CSC tools could not consistently be integrated. A suite of performance metrics identified where issues were and where unusual spikes in call volume / customer activity occurred. Progress on reviewing and consolidating the website content from the five legacy systems in to one was being made.
- The Council had recruited a product owner to review and improve all customer message and signposting for the FixMyStreet digital access channel, which was provided by a third party.

During the ensuing discussion, questions and comments raised by the Committee included:

- The Committee identified that improvements to the Council website's search function

were important in helping customers find what they were looking for efficiently and in turn preventing telephone calls. It was explained that the five legacy council systems being in place was having an impact on searches and this would be improved as work was underway to condense and simplify the website to avoid duplication whilst continuing to meet Government accessibility standards. An example was given of the planning service having recently removed 700 pages of content which was no longer necessary. It would not be financially viable to move to a higher specification 'google' type search function. The Deputy Cabinet Member invited members to send over areas that they were aware of that had been particularly difficult to access through the search function.

- In response to a question on anticipated changes to call volume in the next six to nine months, the Cabinet Member advised that there was confidence that demands could be met. Call volume was expected to reduce with the implementation of new IT systems which were budgeted for, this included the new revenue and benefits system. The improved self-service offer online should enable the customer to handle more routine queries whilst it would likely be more complex issues coming through on telephone.
- In relation to confidence in first call resolutions, it was said that calls were only signed off as having been resolved where the customer received the response they were looking for on the call. It was explained that some service areas had more in depth queries, such as adult social care that needed more research which impacted first call resolutions in those areas.
- In response to a query on the FixMyStreet access channel, the Committee was advised that any area previously 'split' by legacy council boundaries were now displaying as one area, making it easier for residents to report an issue. Non highways related issues that came through the FixMyStreet channel were being re-routed to the correct service.
- In terms of external benchmarking the committee was advised that the Council was part of a local authority benchmarking group, most of whom had experienced the same issues as Buckinghamshire in recent months. There were industry standard performance indicators for local authorities and the Council's performance was positive when compared to others. Technology was not particularly unique between authorities but local authorities do learn from another and Buckinghamshire has a strong network with whom information is shared. Where there were valid reasons to do so and savings could be made, the Council does work with partners to deliver improvements such as the joint IT procurement with the NHS.
- The Committee recognised that webchats would likely lead to a swifter response than telephone calls and questioned how to encourage residents to use these. Members were advised that advisors can answer multiple webchats at any one time and there was an ambition to improve the offering moving from two separate systems currently in place to a single one. Auto-chat was also enabled to populate some responses to residents and ways to increase uptake were being explored.
- A question was asked about how the ability to deliver a quality service in the CSC was impacted by other service areas, in terms of staffing and information being shared. Members were advised that this could be an issue and there was a range of data available to understand areas of concern. Telephony could be moved in to service areas where there were identified high volume areas and the team were able to see end to end reporting. Continuous work was ongoing to ensure call advisors had the most up to date information at hand, however some calls could be more complicated and areas including revenues and benefits may take longer to resolve issues on the first call.
- A member asked how community boards could fit in to customer service delivery plans and queried whether residents were being directed to boards. Members were informed that the CSC had good relationships with board co-ordinators and where it was necessary could direct customers to their boards. Wider marketing of the community boards was

the responsibility of other portfolios.

- The 'others' category of calls was identified as being a significant number and a question was asked whether work had been done to categorise these calls further. Volume of 'other' calls was checked regularly and looked in to by the CSC, these could be, for example, calls coming through when the CSC had not been informed of a mailing going out from a service. A weekly update was provided to the corporate management team on performance with a narrative on what had created peaks and 'other' calls were picked up through this. Where reviews had been needed these were set up quickly through task and finish groups to put a resolution in place for customers. The Customer First Board and Customer Champions would now also assist in this aspect of performance improvement.
- Council Access Point visits were said to be recorded in face to face footfall, this included all access points such as libraries in addition to the main Council offices. These access points include self-serve devices to encourage digital inclusion and translation services. The Customer First Board planned to monitor site usage and engage with local members and community boards in how to make best use of these facilities. It was noted that if a resident were to visit a library and subsequently phone in whilst there to access a service, the contact would likely be double counted.
- In terms of accessibility, the committee was advised that a number of resident panels and an accessibility panel were engaged with in an attempt to ensure the mix of communities in Bucks had their needs met.
- Members were invited to watch recordings of fortnightly digital 'show and tell' sessions to further understand improvements being made. These can be viewed at [Digital Buckinghamshire Council - YouTube](#) (please note that videos are currently being re-indexed)

Future actions

- A member requested to view how the Council's CSC performance compared to other authorities at a future meeting, although it was noted that not all local authorities report on their performance the same way Buckinghamshire does. Members would also like to view a breakdown of the numbers of first call resolutions and progress chasing calls.
- The Committee would also welcome a progress update with feedback on the impact of customer champions in helping services to support the CSC as best they could.
- The Committee encouraged staff training to continue to recognise the vulnerabilities of many of the customers the council deals with on a day to day basis and build this in to how customers are dealt with.
- The Committee was also keen to view a timeline of when the updated single council website would be in place, a project being led by the Council's communications team.

7 6 MONTH REVIEW OF RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE 2021 BUDGET SCRUTINY INQUIRY GROUP

The Committee received a six-month update report to the fifteen Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group recommendations that had been recommended to the Executive in January 2021. The table appended to the report gave an update against each recommendation, together with the timetable for actions to be completed.

Cllr J Chilver, Cabinet Member for Finance, Resources, Property and Assets introduced the report, highlighting the following points:

- As the recommendations were made whilst the 21/22 budget remained in its draft format, many of these were picked up and included within the final budget itself. A number of recommendations related to individual portfolios and members were invited

to contact the specific portfolio holders if they had any queries on these.

- A four-year revenue budget would be produced for 2022/23, following the one-year budget having been produced for 2021/22 due to the uncertainties arising from the covid-19 pandemic.
- It was highlighted that following budget scrutiny comments on the aspirations of the capital programme, a ten-year strategic programme was being developed, from which a formal four-year programme which identified those projects fully funded would be produced for Council to agree in February 2022.

Questions and comments raised by the Committee included:

- The six-month update was received positively with many of the recommendations having been completed and the more strategic capital programme was welcomed by the committee.
- The zero based budgeting approach was discussed and it was explained that this style of budgeting was not only to focus on savings but also to ensure that the budget was robust and through undertaking assessments areas would be identified that needed additional budget set aside. The importance of the role of this committee in testing proposals during the budget scrutiny process was noted.
- Affordable housing was said to remain a priority, with Tatling End, Denham having been completed, Horns Lane, Wycombe having received planning permission and seven further potential sites identified. Councillor Chilver advised that he was working closely with the portfolio holder for housing, homelessness and regulatory services in delivering these projects which were also key considerations in the development of the Buckinghamshire Local Plan. A task and finish group were meeting regularly.
- Members were advised that key worker housing remained a priority and a number of sites were being explored. Councillor Chilver advised that the committee would be welcome to have more details on schemes as they progress.
- The committee was informed that the contingency set aside for property income loss had been adequate and had been required, particularly for the hard hit retail and hospitality sectors. Members were advised that these areas were now starting to recover.
- A member recommended that further emphasis be placed on climate change in the draft budget for 22/23 and it was suggested that a key line of questioning to every portfolio holder during the budget scrutiny sessions could be around what their plans were to address climate change. Members asked where possible, could portfolio holders budget submissions define climate change actions and costings to allow greater visibility and understanding.

8 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee received a draft work programme to cover this municipal year. Members were advised that items had been scheduled for the most appropriate meetings where member input would be most valuable. The Committee was advised that there were no items provisionally scheduled for the April meeting as yet, and there was agreement that the budget scrutiny sessions in January may highlight areas that should be looked at in April.

Resolved:

That the 2021/22 work programme be noted.

9 DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING

Thursday 9 December 2021 at 2 p.m.