



# Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee held on Thursday 17 February 2022 in The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 10.01 am and concluding at 12.30 pm.

## Members present

D Carroll, T Hunter-Watts, M Smith, Q Chaudhry, S Rouse, M Bracken, S Chapple, I Darby and D Town

## Others in attendance

S Ali, N Dicker, L Michelson, M Tett, J Towns, M Veryard, G Williams, M Winn and Richard Wood

## Apologies

A Baughan, T Hogg, C Etholen and C Poll

## Agenda Item

### **1 Apologies for Absence/Changes in Membership**

Apologies were received from Cllrs Baughan, Etholen, Hogg and Poll. Members noted that Cllr Peter Brazier was attending in place of Cllr Poll.

### **2 Declarations of Interest**

There were none.

### **3 Minutes**

The minutes of the meeting held on 9<sup>th</sup> December were agreed as a correct record.

### **4 Public Questions**

The Select Committee had received a public question from Mr Chadwick.

*Addressing the decline in town centres through town centre regeneration projects is clearly a good thing. It also provides great opportunities to adapt them and remodel them to create thriving communities, but in a way which also builds in sustainable and low carbon patterns of living – such as active travel, locating services and facilities close to residences to minimise the need for travel, incorporating high*

*energy efficiency standards in any related development, etc. Could the Cabinet Member please provide information and assurances about how town regeneration schemes are and will be developed and refined with these goals in mind?*

Cllr Gareth Williams, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration provided a response, making the following main points:

- The Council is committed to the net zero agenda. We have many policies and targets that respond to our carbon reduction goals.
- This is well in excess of what Government expects or mandates us to do
- The Council had already carried out an audit in Environment portfolio with stringent carbon reduction targets
- For Town Centre regeneration the Council uses national standards and guidance of what makes Places thrive and sustainable, such as guidance from Institute of Place Management - within these standards there is the theme of Environment and Resources, as well as Public Realm, and Movement and Connectivity.
- They all feature in our Regeneration Framework setting out how best to regenerate our places.
- All these themes drive the Council towards regenerating in a way that is meeting low carbon patterns of living, therefore our Programme plans reflect this.
- An example of this is the Garden Way project in Aylesbury which is looking to provide more sustainable connections and routes into the town centre
- In High Wycombe the Council ensured that the Brunel Shed build project salvaged as much as possible, the original materials and re used recycled materials and the design brief also had sustainability criteria.

## **5 Digital Infrastructure Update**

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Martin Tett, Leader of the Council and Lisa Michelson, Strategic Director – Economic Growth and Regeneration to the meeting. The Leader provided an overview of the history of broadband development in Buckinghamshire since he became leader of the previous County Council in 2011 and the various government initiatives that had been introduced and then explained the current projects that were underway to improve broadband coverage. The following main points were noted:

- The Leader had always seen digital infrastructure as a priority and felt broadband and superfast broadband was an essential utility. He had lobbied for more action on increasing broadband coverage nationally and alongside the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) had helped to negotiate the first Connected Counties contract with Hertfordshire and BDUK. Three of the four legacy District Councils in Buckinghamshire participated in the second Connected Counties contract with Hertfordshire and BDUK.
- The Connected Counties contracts included a gainshare and monies realised from that would be reinvested in new Broadband schemes going forward. Connected Counties contract 2 in April 2015 also had a gainshare element although it was not quite as generous. Whilst these contracts have helped to

achieve 97% coverage in terms of premises across the county, the current demands of zoom calls and streaming films means this infrastructure can sometimes struggle.

- A new initiative funded by Defra is the Rural Business Broadband Programme. This aims to support rural businesses to improve their broadband connections from below superfast connectivity (less than 30mb per second) to gigabit (more than 1000mb per second). The Council has a £1.8m contract with BT Openreach which is focussing on 'white areas', where there are no commercial delivery plans from suppliers.
- Covid had led to some delays in delivering the contract but it would connect 620 premises by June 2022.
- In addition, Government has opened a Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme for residents in rural areas, offering £1500 for residents and up to £3500 for rural businesses to gain gigabit capable broadband, via fibre to the premises. The Council was offering top up funding up to £2000 for residents and up to £3500 for businesses and was encouraging individuals to pool their vouchers and contract in groups. This local top up was making a significant difference in negotiating with commercial suppliers.
- To date 1767 vouchers had been requested with 500 premises connected out of a target of 2000. This had been funded by over £3.3m from Government and topped up by almost £1m from the Council.
- Project Gigabit is the Government's major drive to support increased coverage for gigabit broadband. Commercial providers had been asked to identify geographical they can supply gigabit capability and then the Government will step in to support the remaining 'white areas'. This was being driven by Government centrally although local authorities were being asked to provide a local steer. Buckinghamshire is in Lot 26 and an open market review has commenced. BDUK propose to start procurement for this area in Summer 22 and to commence the contract in Spring 2023 in Bucks, Herts and parts of Berkshire.
- Once the open market review has been completed and information published, the Council will have a clearer picture of contract coverage and where any 'white areas' may remain and be able to advise residents and businesses about plans to improve connectivity in their local areas.
- Finally, over the next 3 years, up to £110m of government funding UK wide will be invested into connecting rural buildings with no existing or planned superfast broadband such as schools, GP surgeries, libraries through Project Gigahub, in a hub and spoke network.
- The Government are looking for projects with a minimum of 100 sites, therefore the Council was in discussions with neighbouring authorities, Oxfordshire and Hertfordshire to identify potential sites to enable a joint project.
- The Leader noted that as part of the discussions at the HS2 Bill Committee in Parliament he received an assurance that HS2 would lay fibre along the track as this would provide low-cost interconnectivity for providers along the route. There was concern that HS2 might renege on this. A similar approach was being taken by East West Rail which would support local connectivity in

the north of the county.

- The Council by itself could not afford to provide digital infrastructure to the most remote rural properties as this was prohibitively expensive, but the Council was committed to supporting residents in taking advantage of the various programmes already outlined.

The Chairman thanked the Leader for this summary and invited questions. In response to members' questions and during subsequent discussions, the following main points were noted:

- The Council and Leader shared digital infrastructure successes on social media, such as the opening of new exchange areas, however this did have limited reach. As Project Gigabit developed, it would be important to publicise work that the Council was carrying out.
- There was good engagement with Buckinghamshire MPs and a working relationship was being sought with the new Digital Minister, Chris Philp.
- Regular meetings took place with Open Reach regarding contract targets. The Gainshare arrangement had been positive and showed other providers that there was potential high take up in Buckinghamshire. The Gainshare was split roughly 50/50 with the Buckinghamshire LEP.
- Amounts allocated as part of the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme would vary on a case-by-case basis up to £3,500. The extent these funds would go would depend on the connectivity being delivered in the rural area.
- Commercial viability played a significant role in the work of providers and there was little the Council could do to influence this. It was currently not known whether some reported 'sterile' broadband areas in the county would be assisted by Project Gigabit.
- Caution would need to be exercised by any Parish Council looking to partner with a provider to deliver a broadband service. This would be a very complex task and was best left to commercial providers.
- Once a voucher was issued, the impetus was on the user to spend it with the provider. Vouchers could be pooled together amongst the local community and the Council could consider bridging any funding gaps based on what a project sought to achieve. Local Members had a key role to play in coordinating projects within their Wards and communities.
- It was acknowledged the council's website regarding schemes could be improved for clarity and to demonstrate successful community projects. The Council had to be careful not to advertise specific providers.
- The Connected Counties programme had delivered a mix of coverage across Buckinghamshire based on commercial viability. Results from the Open Market Review would indicate commercial and non-commercial areas, and also show where delivering Project Gigabit would demonstrate best value.
- The Leader provided an undertaking to update the Select Committee on Project Gigabit as it developed.

The Chairman thanked the Leader and Lisa Michelson for the report and the information provided at the meeting.

## **6 Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy**

The Chairman welcomed the Deputy Cabinet Member for Homelessness, Councillor Mark Winn, to the meeting and invited him to introduce the Strategy. The Homelessness Act 2002 required the Council to have a strategy and Buckinghamshire Council's draft Strategy had been discussed at Cabinet 15 February 2022. A four-week public consultation, including notification to all Community Boards, would follow and amendments to the Strategy would be considered based on the comments. It would then be considered by Full Council in April.

The following main points were noted:

- Prior to the pandemic, there were 34 classified rough sleepers in Buckinghamshire; this had now been reduced to 7 with 4 of these having been offered accommodation.
- The 'Everyone In' scheme during the pandemic had given the outreach team the opportunity to engage with clients and assist on their journey to self-support in accommodation.
- In January 2022, the service carried out 28 interventions to prevent occurrences of rough sleeping.
- As well as Ardenham House, Aylesbury, there were two government funded support packages: the Next Step Accommodation Programme and the Rough Sleepers Accommodation Programme.
- The Next Step Accommodation Programme had nine completed units and seven further units had been acquired at Harrow Churches for 'move on' accommodation for former rough sleepers.
- The YMCA, Wycombe, had 11 units under development as part of the Rough Sleepers Accommodation Programme. The Vale of Aylesbury Housing Trust (VAHT) would soon be opening seven units in Aylesbury.
- Support for mental health, training and employment opportunities would be available through projects.
- One of the challenges identified in the Strategy was relationship breakdown which was often linked to domestic abuse. Mental health and offending history were also contributory factors.
- In addition the Council was working to support young care leavers in securing and maintaining a tenancy.
- Early intervention was important and over 2,000 households had approached the service for advice and support in 2020/21. Of these, over 50% of eligible households had successfully been prevented from becoming homeless and around 30% were moved to alternative accommodation.
- The Deputy Cabinet Member outlined the six main priorities within the Strategy which underpinned the overall vision. Two themes crosscut the Strategy: making best use of resources and partnership working.

In response to questions from Select Committee Members, the following points were noted:

- The Deputy Cabinet Member would review follow up on information that had been submitted in response to a question raised in September 2021's meeting.
- Benchmarking against other local authorities was difficult due to individual circumstances within each council area. The service would consider finding a suitable local authority that was comparable for benchmarking purposes in the Strategy.
- A Member briefing on the Strategy would be held in the next month and a Member training session was already scheduled. Members were encouraged to submit their feedback during these sessions.
- It was clarified that the 28 individuals assisted in January 2022 were at risk of becoming a rough sleeper. The 34 units in development were 'move on' accommodation for rough sleepers.
- Members of the Committee felt that they would benefit in receiving statistical data on homelessness and rough sleeping which would inform their comments when responding to the consultation. It was also noted that updates on this data would be necessary to monitor the issue. Additionally, clearer information on defined terminologies, waiting lists and successful preventions would be welcomed.

**Action: N Dicker / M Veryard**

- There was a detailed action plan and evidence base publicly available in the Cabinet papers on Tuesday 15 February. These papers would be included as part of the consultation.
- It was acknowledged that homelessness and rough sleeping was multi-faceted and that the council services needed to work together to reduce its likelihood. The Deputy Cabinet Member referenced the recent Ofsted report which recommended closer working with Children's Services and this had been incorporated into the draft Strategy. Aspirations to provide more affordable housing in Buckinghamshire also underpinned the draft Strategy.
- Detailed work on the Bucks Home Choice Allocation Policy would be carried out this summer with engagement with Members and stakeholders. The policy had already been changed regarding care-leavers and the local connection requirement.
- The outreach service liaised with charities such as the Oasis Partnership, Wycombe Homelessness Connection and Aylesbury Homelessness Action Group (AHAG). Oxford Health also assisted with mental health. These organisations spoke to rough sleepers and homeless individuals to offer support and encourage the accommodation offer.
- The 11 units at YMCA and the 8 VAHT units had been embargoed by MHCLG which meant that the Council had not been able to discuss them publicly. The opening of the Bridge Court site, Desborough Road, had been scheduled to open last year but had been delayed due to Covid; the aim was to open these 58 units this spring.
- The Council had numerous methods of stopping homelessness such as offering support with rent arrears and providing financial advice. Each individual case was managed carefully due to differing circumstances.

The Chairman thanked the Deputy Cabinet Member and officers for attending.

\* **ADDENDUM** – Following the meeting, it was agreed that members of the Committee should feed in their comments on the strategy via the Member Briefing which was held on 21<sup>st</sup> March as part of the consultation process, rather than revisiting the strategy at the April meeting.

## **7 Town Centre Regeneration**

The Chairman welcomed the Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration, Councillor Gareth Williams, and Deputy Cabinet Member for Town Centre Regeneration, Councillor Jocelyn Towns. The Deputy Cabinet Member introduced the report and highlighted the following points:

- Town Centre regeneration in Buckinghamshire needed to consider each individual locality. Work was being carried out to develop shared visions and narratives to see how local places see the future of their town centres taking into account hybrid working and shopping habits.
- Early indications were that large brands were vacating town centres, thereby leaving large empty spaces. These could be repurposed to meet needs such as homes, culture, leisure and hospitality spaces.
- The Buckinghamshire Regeneration Framework was being developed which would set out key factors to make town centres successful. This had started in Aylesbury and High Wycombe.

Richard Wood, High Street Task Force Ambassador, delivered a presentation to the Select Committee which highlighted the following:

- Regeneration needed to be place-based with a long-term vision that was multi-dimensional.
- The Cities Outlook 2022 report was an in-depth piece at the state of UK high streets. The report highlighted uncertainty over future working patterns.
- The vaccine roll out had supported high street footfall recovery with smaller centres recovering more quickly than larger cities and regional centres.
- High streets were increasingly looking to become multi-functional by combining shopping, employment and culture.
- The Buckinghamshire Regeneration Framework intended to be an enabling approach to allow local areas and communities to work collaboratively addressing local priorities.

In the Committee discussion that followed, the following main points were noted:

- It would be confirmed that the accommodation at the Chilterns, High Wycombe, would be of mixed capacity. Officers would also investigate the re-siting costs for businesses.

**Action: L Michelson**

- The Regeneration Framework would work with individual villages, Town and Parish Councils to also meet their needs. The Framework was expected to be

finalised by the autumn with a draft coming back to the Committee before then.

- Some of the capital projects in the report were from legacy council arrangements. The service was investing in better strategy work to consider what regeneration meant outside the larger Buckinghamshire towns. Additionally, a Chesham Regeneration Group had been set up.
- Accessibility was a consideration with regeneration projects. For instance, the Aylesbury Garden Town Board contained a member representing Buckinghamshire Disability Service (BuDS) with comments fed into planning to meet public needs. Some areas of the county also had devolved services to meet these needs.
- One Member commented that Community Boards would benefit from having examples shared with them of regeneration initiatives across the UK.
- The Council was considering identifying some areas which they might want to protect from permitted development. This would maintain a local level of planning control on high streets.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member, Deputy Cabinet Member and officers for the report and information.

## **8 Member Engagement in Planning report**

In the absence of the Inquiry Chairman, Councillor Peter Brazier introduced the Inquiry Report to the Select Committee. The Group had found the review useful, and the report outlined a number of recommendations on Member Engagement in Planning. The Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration advised that Member Surgeries had now commenced and that officers were encouraged to telephone Members more. The Member Handbook and GIS Map training for Members were under consideration.

Feedback was noted by the Cabinet Member on streamlining the process of booking a Member Surgery timeslot. Another Member commented that reducing the need for chasing up the Planning service and reducing invalid planning applications would assist service resource.

The Chairman thanked all Members for their input into the Inquiry.

## **9 Work Programme**

The work programme was noted.

## **10 Date of next meeting**

7 April 2022.



