



# Buckinghamshire Council

## Finance & Resources Select Committee

### Minutes

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FINANCE & RESOURCES SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 22 SEPTEMBER 2022 IN THE PARALYMPIC ROOM, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 3.57 PM**

#### **MEMBERS PRESENT**

R Bagge, D Anthony, M Ayub, D Barnes, M Bracken, G Harris, T Hunter-Watts, N Hussain, R Newcombe, M Walsh, S Wilson and K Wood

#### **OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE**

J Chilver, M Tett, C Jones, S Keyes, S Murphy-Brookman, D Skinner and C Ward

#### **Agenda Item**

##### **1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE / CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP**

Apologies were received from Councillors T Butcher, S Chhokar, T Dixon, D Goss, I Macpherson and W Raja, and I Thompson. Councillors T Hunter-Watts and N Hussain were present as substitutes for Councillors T Dixon and W Raja.

##### **2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillor K Wood declared a personal interest in item 7 as an historic Cabinet Member that had implemented the single revenue and benefits system.

##### **3 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 28 July 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

##### **4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

There were no public questions.

##### **5 SIX MONTH BUDGET SCRUTINY UPDATE**

The Select Committee received a six-month update report to the Budget Scrutiny Inquiry Group recommendations that had been recommended to the Executive in January 2022. The table appended to the report gave an update against each recommendation, together with the timetable for actions to be completed.

The Chairman welcomed Councillor M Tett, Leader of Buckinghamshire Council, Councillor J Chilver, Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources, and the officers to the meeting.

The Cabinet Member introduced the report and invited questions from Members. The following points were made during the Committee's discussion:

- A Member noted that 70 actions around policies and strategies were not included in the forward plan. It was explained that whilst not all items were currently on the forward plan, they were documented and would be covered in the forward plan in future.
- It was explained that there had been a restructure of Cabinet portfolio responsibilities in May 2022. The provision of affordable homes was now a cross-portfolio responsibility. Both Cabinet Members responsible worked closely together, with the Cabinet Member for Homelessness leading on housing lists and social housing, whereas the Cabinet Member for Planning was responsible for the number of affordable homes included in the Buckinghamshire Plan.
- In response to a Member's question regarding deadlines for the review of special expenses, the Leader reiterated that the Section 151 Officer would undertake this within the current financial year. It was hoped that Members of the High Wycombe Town Committee would be consulted on the review.
- Assurance was given that the Better Buckinghamshire Programme was on track for delivery and had achieved the promised savings last year. The Leader explained that the issues of property rationalisation and workforce working patterns were intricate and needed to be aligned, and that Members had differing opinions around rationalising property and flexible working. A pilot programme investigating workspace habits was underway at The Gateway, the results of which would be considered in the Programme. The Cabinet Member added that the current consolidation of the four legacy revenue and benefits system would deliver both staff savings and increased efficiency of staff time.
- The Electric Vehicle Action Plan had been to Cabinet so further scrutiny on this would be within the Transport, Environment and Climate Change Select Committee's remit. It was noted that a more up-to-date action would be helpful and that, to avoid confusion on roles, only necessary information be included in future iterations of this report.
- The Leader explained that not all strategies were required to be added to the risk register, but any relevant risks would be identified within each strategy and referred to the Audit & Governance Committee if appropriate.

The Chairman thanked the Leader and Cabinet Member for the report.

## **6 EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE AND WORKFORCE AMBITION**

The Chairman invited the Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources, Councillor J Chilver, to introduce the report. The Cabinet Member highlighted the following points in the report:

- The report set out the five-year Buckinghamshire Council People Plan and highlighted the achievements made over the first two years since the creation of the Unitary Authority, and the Council's priorities for the remaining three-year period. Targets had been met for five indicators, but fallen short in seven.
- The report also assessed the positive factors supporting recruitment and retention in staff, such as flexible working arrangements and good working relationships. Areas of concern were staff turnover, limited career progression and opportunities for personal growth, which had been noted and addressed in the new key deliverables over the next three years.
- The team had faced some challenges in light of the pandemic and the national context of job availability. The resilience of staff had been identified as a key component for the Council's People Strategy, and also for delivering high-quality services to residents.
- The Coaching for Performance process and the Buckinghamshire Staff Awards had been identified as crucial for providing recognition and reward to maintain employees. The

Buckinghamshire Manager and Leader Programme had been successful in providing leaders with the skills needed to manage their workforce development and growth. Social work academies, apprenticeship programmes and the Kickstart programme had also been successful.

The following points were noted during the Committee's discussion:

- In the last 12 months, 86 staff had left the Council in their first year of employment: 35 (41%) of were on fixed-term contracts. 15 employees worked in the Communities Directorate and 12 in Children's Services. The Cabinet Member advised that discussions were taking place with Children's Services to understand issues around staff retention in more detail. Further analysis would also be undertaken to understand if there were any patterns in leavers, for example in terms of age groups. Furthermore, the 'Kickstart' programme provided temporary work experiences, with only some of the employees becoming permanent. A Member questioned whether it was reasonable to include fixed-term workers in the 'leavers' statistic, as this may not be a fair reflection on retention and recommended this be reviewed. It was confirmed that the Council used recruitment organisations for temporary contracts, and a 'clawback period' would be invoked if appropriate.
- It was noted that the Council had several mechanisms in place to retain good staff members and manage organisational changes. Coaching for Performance served as a way for staff and managers to establish a dialogue. Particular attention is paid to equip managers with the skills necessary to manage change through a series of workshops. The staff survey also included employee feedback from all staff below the Chief Executive level to ensure satisfaction. A change charter had also been implemented to inform staff of how change would be managed. Furthermore, the staff award ceremony would be taking place in 2022 to recognise staff for their contributions. The 2% pay increase and 1% one-off award had gone some way to retain staff however pay was identified as not being the only factor contributing towards retention; factors such as holiday, sick pay, pension and wellbeing were important for maintaining staff satisfaction.
- In response to a Member's concerns around staff leaving due to workspace rationalisation, it was noted that feedback was regularly sought from employees through the Work Smart Programme. It was also highlighted that full-time staff were expected to work from the office for a minimum of two days a week and this expectation was also outlined to candidates. Staff would use the time in the office primarily for meetings and other collaborative tasks, and productivity remained constant throughout. Issues that had arisen in terms of call response time were not linked to flexible working, but rather the increased demand on services throughout annual cycles (e.g. home to school transport).
- There was a difference in sickness levels between frontline and back-office staff so it would not be suitable to lower the KPI for sickness further. Whilst the overall sickness rate was at 9.7 days per FTE, this decreased to 8.18 when excluding covid related absences. Furthermore, the Resources and Deputy Chief Executives Directorates reported sickness levels well below this point. Sickness rates were benchmarked against other local authorities, with Buckinghamshire Council being in the mid-range. Members requested that this benchmarking be circulated to the Committee

**ACTION: S Keyes**

Staff were also offered physiotherapy and mental health support to enable a smoother return to work.

- A Member's feedback about providing a clearer sense of the organisations' direction through communicating the Council's values and building the Council's culture through social media channels, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, was welcomed. It was also noted that more information from staff was needed to establish where the Council's sense of direction was clear.

- It was highlighted that the Council's HR and OD activities and strategies were necessary to remain competitive as an employer. Different detailed work plans were in place to ensure that future developments could successfully be implemented and were relatively low cost in terms of resources.
- Agency social work numbers were reviewed by the Corporate Management Team on a monthly basis. The costs for these employees were also monitored against what a permanent staff member would receive. Although the use of agency workers had not been decreased as much as had been hoped for due to increased demand, the cost had reduced significantly due to a new rate with the agency being negotiated. There had also been an increase of social workers being trained in-house.
- Training for managers was targeted based on organisational needs so courses such as managing discipline and grievance had not been held to date. Whilst such content would still be delivered, a needs assessment had identified that areas such as managing change were a priority for both staff and managers.
- The Council planned to target the older labour market that may be looking to return to work having retired early.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for the report.

## **7 COUNCIL TAX AND BUSINESS RATES**

The Chairman invited the Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources, Councillor J Chilver, to introduce the report. In the Cabinet Member's presentation, the following points were highlighted:

- The report outlined that the Council Tax collection rates compared favourably with other local authorities. Business rates had decreased slightly due to Covid but had recovered. Around £650m per year was collected on Council Tax and Business Rates.
- The second project outlined was the consolidation of connecting the revenue and benefits networks across the legacy authorities. The Wycombe and Aylesbury systems had been merged last year, with direct debits increasing over 1.5%. The Chiltern and South Bucks system closed in September 2022. There were some technological challenges in merging live databases and a significant amount of transactions that had to be maintained whilst the systems were updated. The data showed that the variability in business rates collections between the different legacy areas reflected the area demographics. There had been a performance improvement in Wycombe between 2021 and 2022, primarily due to the business rates managers' expertise. The single system project was expected to deliver around £750,000 in savings. The system was also subject to an overall project governance framework, chaired by the Head of Revenues and Benefits. Wider aspects such as customer service, communication and resources were also considered. There was a clear communications plan which encouraged residents facing hardship to contact the Council for support needed to avoid debt; nine emergency payments had been paid to Chiltern & South Bucks residents since August. The team had also examined the challenges faced by Durham and Wiltshire authorities who had undergone a similar project, as well as the lessons learnt from Phase 1, to ensure the best possible outcome for residents.
- The arrears position nationally had dramatically increased over the past few years, as had the timeframe to recover from enforcement action. The total cumulative arrears were only a small percentage of the £650m collected annually. The Council also applied a rigorous write off process in line with finance procedures. Write offs were only authorised in limited circumstances, such as insolvency or unenforceability due to location.

The following points were noted during the Committee's discussion:

- The Council did not sell unrecoverable debt as there was a good track record of collection, however this would be kept under review. Collection rates were higher than in the previous year, though the changing economic position could impact this. The overall target for collection rates was expected to be met in this financial year. The team also ensured that due process was followed for issuing reminders and notices, resulting in strong collection rates before proceeding to court. Work was also carried out with the financial insecurities partnership and the Helping Hand scheme to signpost residents towards assistance programmes.
- A Member suggested that the data could be analysed in more depth to better understand the reasons for not receiving payments. Whilst this would be ideal, currently this would not be possible due to the different systems in place but may be considered in the future.
- The lower collection rates in the South Bucks area may be attributed to the historic resource model of an outsourced team with a combined management structure. This had been brought back in-house. The Chiltern area had the highest direct debit take-up, and the Aylesbury and Wycombe areas had experienced a 1.5% increase in direct debit take-up.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for the report.

## **8 WORK PROGRAMME**

Members were encouraged to suggest items for consideration in work programme and could email these to the Chairman and the scrutiny officer. One suggestion was an item related to inter-authority loans.

## **9 DATE AND TIME OF THE NEXT MEETING**

The date of the next meeting would be Thursday 1 December 2022 at 2pm.