



Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee held on Thursday 6 October 2022 in The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 10.00 am and concluding at 12.26 pm.

Members present

D Carroll (Chairman), T Hogg, A Baughan, Q Chaudhry, I Darby, M Hussain, N Marshall, C Poll, S Rouse, S Wilson, P Brazier and S Morgan

Others in attendance

R Stuchbury, T Fowler, J Chilver, M Winn, P Strachan, J Cheston, N Dicker, D Eggleton, R Hart and R Brake

Agenda Item

1 Apologies for Absence/Changes in Membership

Apologies for Absence had been received from Councillors Nic Brown, Sue Chapple, Carl Etholen.

Councillor Susan Morgan was in attendance substituting for Councillor Tom Hunter-Watts.

Councillor Peter Brazier was in attendance substituting for Councillor Derek Town.

2 Declarations of Interest

Councillor Thomas Hogg declared an interest in item 7, National Modern Design Code Pilot Update, due to involvement in work establishing the code.

3 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the previous Joint Select Committee – Communities & Localism and Growth, Infrastructure & Housing meeting held on 13th July 2022 were agreed as an accurate record.

4 Chairman's update

The Chairman noted the response received from the Leader regarding the Visitor Economy Item discussed at the previous meeting.

5 Public Questions

There were no public questions.

6 Local Plan for Buckinghamshire Update

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Peter Strachan, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration, Darran Eggleton Head of Service for Planning, Policy and Compliance, John Cheston, Planning Policy Manager and Rosie Brake, Planning Policy Team Leader to the meeting.

Councillor Robin Stuchbury submitted a question for the Cabinet Member and Officers to consider.

While the local authority subgroup and officers are working on putting together a sustainable development plan for Buckinghamshire - What work is being undertaken to ensure policies are written into the new development plan, in respect to providing contributions from developers towards health services within Buckinghamshire through infrastructure levy or section 106 Agreements in partnership with the NHS? Noting at this point no serious contributions have been collected to mitigate from developers in North Buckinghamshire.

At what point will there be for consultation with the greater membership of Buckinghamshire Council, and are Buckinghamshire Council reaching out to partner councils and parishes soon to gain their involvement in these important matters? which will affect how Buckinghamshire grows and becomes prosperous in the coming years through the new Buckinghamshire development plan.

The written response to the question has been attached to the minutes.

The following points were highlighted from the report:

- The Council was awaiting an update on proposed planning reforms from central government, this would provide a steer for the Council in how they can pursue development of the Local Plan.
- It had been rumoured that the Council would be permitted to take a more local approach - rather than the top-down approach of housing targets, the plan would be built with local support. The Cabinet Member emphasised that this is the ideal approach to development of the Local Plan.
- The timeline was outlined in the report, if Buckinghamshire Council followed the 30-month timetable from the first quarter of 2024, the Local Plan for Buckinghamshire could be submitted to the Secretary of State in quarter 2 of 2025.
- Technical work was ongoing, as well as the call for sites which would inform the housing and economic land availability assessment. The key components would be the housing allocations.
- Results from the attitudes survey findings had been outlined and published.

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

- Policy BE3 in Wycombe Local plan provides for medical centre facilities in Bourne End and Wooburn, however Section 106 funds were not allocated for this. The CCG had responded that they believe section 106 funds should be used for this. It was emphasised that existing policies should be followed.
- Officers were working to consider the Investment Zone proposals before any expression of interest was made. While investment zones attracted additional funding, there was the expectation that further development would be included.
- Members were assured that Green Belt protection continued to be pursued by the Council, with several recent planning applications rejected. It was recognised that it is possible to build on the Green Belt only under very special circumstances.
- The Head of Planning Policy and Compliance expressed their confidence that the budget set aside would be sufficient for development of the Local Plan.
- Referencing 2.6i in the report, concern was expressed that neighbourhood development plans were being interpreted poorly by the Council. Officers clarified they do have full weight in the determination of planning applications and appeals, the misinterpretation would be discussed with the Member concerned.
- Following adoption of the Local Plan, parishes have the option to update Neighbourhood plans to conform with any updated strategic policies.
- The Committee was reassured that there was adequate staffing in Planning teams to enable the development of the Local Plan. The large number of vacancies present at the formation of the Council had been subsequently filled successfully.
- The Council is obliged to complete the local plan by 2025, however it can only progress when information, regulations and raw data are available. There was a lack of clarity in the Levelling up and Regeneration Bill, and subsequent secondary legislation would be needed to provide greater detail on how local plans should be prepared. 2024 was envisioned for when a new planning system might be fully in place that could enable the Council to develop their local plan within its framework.
- The attitudes survey findings would allow residents' views to be incorporated into the plan, this included developing the objectives of the plan around environmental sustainability, housing and jobs. Policies would then be drafted to deliver against these objectives.
- The Plan policies would ensure that any greenfield developments would meet the specified requirements. These could include key infrastructure and education requirements.
- It was confirmed that Transport for Buckinghamshire were statutory consultees and the Council would co-ordinate with them and other key organisations during the development of the Local Plan.
- Affordable housing requirements currently vary by location, e.g. 48% on greenfield sites in the Wycombe area and 25% in Aylesbury Vale area which reflects land value. Evidence would be gathered in viability studies on land

values to determine affordable housing targets in the new Local Plan.

- The five-year housing supply is currently calculated using former district council areas, as this allows more control over development. Once the Local Plan is adopted, it would be calculated using the county as a whole.
- A decision has not yet been made to equalise Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) across the county. The national Infrastructure Levy proposal by central government, if implemented, would bring levy payments to the former Aylesbury Vale area. The charging schedules would be reviewed should the Infrastructure Levy be implemented nationally.
- S106 contributions received for particular projects or initiatives need to be spent within the timescales specified to avoid the need for money to be returned to developers after the expiry period. CIL was noted as less prescriptive than section 106 agreements, which increased clarity for the developer.
- Members were supportive of cooperation with the Health and Social Care Select Committee on the topic of Primary Care. This would be reviewed by the Chairman and Officers to decide the best approach.
- Concern was expressed over the number of second homes in Buckinghamshire, Officers would look into the statistics and compare them to Devon, Cornwall and other authorities. **ACTION: Darran Eggleton**

The Chairman thanked all contributors to the discussion.

7 National Model Design Code Pilot Update

The Committee received an update from Cllr Peter Strachan, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration and Rebecca Hart, Natural Environment Manager on the Buckinghamshire National Model Design Code Pilot.

During the presentation, the following points were highlighted:

- A design code is a set of concise codes for the physical development of a site or area.
- In 2021, the government published a draft national model design code and invited Councils to take part in a pilot programme to test the production and use of Design Codes. Buckinghamshire was 1 of 15 successful pilot teams and 1 of only 3 producing an authority-wide code.
- Buckinghamshire Council was developing a 2 tier code, a high level “A Code”, focusing on strategic and structural issues, and a more specific local code “B Code”, including architectural designs and materials.
- In absence of a local design code, the Council would have to refer to the National Model design code as a material planning consideration. This could be problematic for Buckinghamshire as the National Model Design code has a more metropolitan focus.
- Engagement with the public took place through the website [Bucks.place](https://www.bucks.place). This was developed during the COVID Pandemic, where face-to-face interaction wasn't possible. This is the primary method for the public to engage prior to a formal consultation, expected winter 2023. It was noted that this

engagement method wasn't the best method for every demographic/age group.

- The project has overrun past the original 6 months' timescale set by the pilot. This was due to the extensive work required in developing a design-code, and none of the 3 local authorities producing an authority-wide code finished within 6 months.
- Following completion of the Design Code, options included full adoption as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), partial adoption as a SPD, guidance only with some weight, or further iteration and eventual inclusion in the Buckinghamshire Local Plan.

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

- Communications had been issued, including Twitter and Facebook advertisements. Due to the project taking place during the pandemic, the budget was structured around the use online engagement. Findings from the pilot projects noted that interest was higher for the more local codes and engagement via in-person events would've attracted a wider audience.
- A draft design code draft was expected to be ready for testing within the next few months. Once the Council is confident, public engagement will take place for feedback.
- Additional time was required due to the scale of the code and the need to ensure the code is correct. There was no expected additional cost to the Council from this project.
- A Member expressed concern over the work required for local Town & Parish Councils to develop a design code, and the amount of guidance necessary from Buckinghamshire Council which could incur high costs.
- The lessons learnt from the Pilot would be used to apply the codes. Guidance was being developed to assist Town & Parish Councils. It was noted that local codes could also be developed by Buckinghamshire Council.
- Localised Codes, "B Codes" could be within a Town/Parish area, or a particular character area. The difficulty was recognised in building codes suitable for a whole area and that codes could be limited in scope to address this. Codes when designed would have flexibility built in for modern architectural differences.
- It was clarified that Section 106 agreements were not affected by the use of design codes.

8 Affordable Housing Update

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Mark Winn, Cabinet Member for Homelessness and Regulatory Services, Cllr John Chilver, Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources, and Nigel Dicker, Service Director, Housing and Regulatory Services to the meeting.

The following points were highlighted from the report:

- The Cabinet Member for Homelessness and Regulatory Services noted and recognised the difficulty in addressing the need for affordable

housing within Buckinghamshire.

- Housing costs in Buckinghamshire are far above average for the whole of England. The price of land was expensive and this affected the ability to house key workers and recruit staff for key sectors.
- In Buckinghamshire, developers continued large house building projects, averaging 643 homes a year (Aylesbury & Wycombe areas) affordable homes since the unitary authority formed in 2020.
- Affordable Housing by definition is up to 80% of market rent. It was acknowledged that this was too expensive for many within the county due to high costs.
- There are 4800 people registered on Bucks Home Choice awaiting social housing.
- Discussion was ongoing with Buckinghamshire Councils registered providers to see how we could increase the number of affordable homes. A small development was set to be announced that looked at providing affordable homes at social rent level for over 55's who are looking to downsize.
- The number of empty homes has been catalogued for Buckinghamshire, work would now take place to review these properties. This would be part of the Housing Strategy.
- Opportunities were available to use Section 106 funds to convert affordable housing to socially rented. Within the planning system, breaking down the definition of required affordable housing to include socially rented could be looked at.
- The delivery of affordable housing on council owned land continued to be investigated. An update on the progress of the former Stoke Mandeville sports & social club site was highlighted in the report. Cabinet approval was given for 30 units out of 100 for affordable housing units. This was called into GHIS and was again considered by Cabinet on 12/7/2022 when permission was given to work towards submitting an outline planning application
- Outline planning permission had been secured for the site at Horns Lane which included affordable housing provision of 48 percent in accordance with the Wycombe Local Plan. This followed a public consultation which included local Members and other stakeholders.
- The Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources drew attention to several developments. Outline planning consent had been secured for 68 apartments of affordable housing on Bellfield Road in High Wycombe subject to reserved matters. Collins House on Desborough Road was in the process of being transferred to a Housing association, where the Council will retain 100 percent of nomination rights on units constructed, ensuring they are usable by those on the Buckinghamshire Housing register.

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

- Members expressed concern on the length of time it was taking to achieve development of affordable housing. The Council aimed to

accelerate delivery as quickly as possible, however the complexity of affordable housing proposals could limit these efforts.

- The Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources assured the Committee that there were significant potential numbers of truly affordable housing from Council owned assets. Where development was pursued, it was noted there had been significant pushback from local Town and Parish Councils in some cases.
- The Key Worker Housing definition was considered wide ranging and the need for Key Working Housing questioned. A survey was done to establish the case for a need for key worker housing, and recruitment shortages for key workers was noted as prevalent for Police/NHS/Fire service and internally for front line Council staff which key worker housing could address.
- Affordable Housing could be converted from affordable rented [up to 80% of market rate] to around the more affordable social rented level [50% of market rate] levels through a variety of means including the use of section 106 and right to buy receipts and this had been achieved previously at Aylesbury Vale District Council.
- Concerns were raised about flooring - when new tenants moved into social housing in some cases flooring was not provided. There were charities and support mechanisms in place to assist those who needed this. Previous Carpets were sometimes gifted to new occupants where appropriate.
- The affordable housing position statement was noted as an interim statement while the Housing Strategy was being put together. Milestones were not present in the interim statement but these could be incorporated into the Housing Strategy.
- Purchasing new properties to convert to Affordable Housing had also been considered however wasn't considered viable.
- The purpose of the development of the former Bucks sports and social club was confirmed as a net loss to the council, but was being developed to deliver on the aspiration for affordable and key worker housing and to regenerate a site in decline. The development would still allow for significant public green space.
- The Cabinet Members recognised the urgent need for affordable housing. Along with the use of Council owned assets, and development agreements, the development of the local plan which would include provisions to address this. The Housing Strategy would also examine the efficient use of the Housing stock, as well as possible usage of Section 106 funds to convert 'affordable housing' to socially rented.
- The number of households awaiting social housing was increasing. A Member reported that there were 480 new social housing applications per month, but only 154 lettings per month.
- Members raised concerns about the existing level of registrations on Bucks Home Choice and the additional pressures that might arise with demand from Ukrainian refugees and possible increase in homelessness due to the cost of living crisis.

- All vacant properties were under constant review and brought back into use where possible. The Council was actively seeking new opportunities where they could house people on a temporary basis. These include looking at opportunities for using former care homes.
- Waiting times for social housing were reported to vary across the county, from several months to years and might be dependent on the size of property required and the location. For example those seeking 1-bed housing typically had lower waiting times compared to families seeking larger homes and residents in the south of the county could face longer waiting times.
- Resources were acknowledged as a limiting factor in pursuing Affordable Housing aims and Members were assured that Cabinet Members were pursuing all avenues to achieve this.
- The Cabinet Members were happy to attend the committee in future and further address Members concerns. The Housing Strategy would likely return to the committee at a future date for scrutiny. **ACTION: Nigel Dicker/Michael Veryard**

9 Work Programme

Members were advised to contact the Scrutiny Officer for the committee with any additional topics they wished to be included in the Growth, Infrastructure and Housing work programme.

10 Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committee would be on 1st December 2022 at 10am.

**Subsequent to the meeting the date was changed to 15th December 2022 at 10am.*