



# Buckinghamshire Council

## Communities & Localism Select Committee

### Minutes

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMUNITIES & LOCALISM SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON WEDNESDAY 5 OCTOBER 2022 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 10.00 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 12.57 PM**

#### **MEMBERS PRESENT**

M Harker OBE, P Bass, P Cooper, P Drayton, G Hollis, M Hussain JP, M Knight, F Mahon, C Oliver, G Smith, M Stannard and L Smith BEM

#### **OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE**

K Sutherland, A Hussain, R Ambrose, R Barker, S Drummond, M Everitt, D Jones, L Davies, K Dejoux and L Mangisi

#### **Agenda Item**

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

Apologies were received from Councillor Ashley Waite.

**2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Councillors Mimi Harker and Stuart Wilson declared an interest in Item 6 as they each were hosting a Ukrainian family in their homes. Councillor Peter Cooper also declared this interest as he would be hosting a Ukrainian family soon.

**3 MINUTES**

The minutes of the meetings held on Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2022 were agreed as a correct record.

**4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS**

There were no public questions.

**5 CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE**

The Chairman updated Members on the following:

- Following the Joint Meeting between the Communities and Localism and Growth, Infrastructure and Housing Select Committees, Councillor David Carroll and the Chairman had written to the Leader of the Council to express support for the development of a visitor economy strategy that had been discussed. The response was included in the Agenda Pack, and the Chairman invited Members to provide feedback.

- A meeting had been held with HS2 and they confirmed their attendance at the next Select Committee Meeting in November.

## 6 UPDATE ON REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT SCHEMES

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Cllr Arif Hussain, Deputy Cabinet Member for Community Safety; Richard Barker, Corporate Director, Communities; Matt Everitt, Interim Service Director, Service Improvement, and Richard Ambrose, Director of Major Projects, Resources to the meeting, who provided an overview of the scheme:

- Over the past two years, Buckinghamshire had welcomed families from Afghanistan and Ukraine. Whilst the settlement schemes were slightly different, the key principle was to offer wraparound care and support. The voluntary and community sectors were working with the Council, alongside generous residents and local businesses.
- There were significant differences between the two different cohorts being resettled within the county: Arrivals from Afghanistan had a right to remain indefinitely, whereas those from Ukraine could remain for a period of three years.
- Partners including health, the police, Buckinghamshire Business First and charitable organisations were providing support including through working groups, for example, focussing on health and education, working collaboratively to ensure that families were quickly linked with healthcare services and all children who had arrived had secured a school place.
- Buckinghamshire's arrival figures were high compared to other local authorities. We had received over 1200 Ukrainian refugees, with another 551 which had been matched to Buckinghamshire. At the end of August, there were just under 700 active sponsors.
- Long term, the Council had a target of hosting 30 Afghan families, and to date, there were 12 families (a total of 52 people) housed across 13 different properties. All children in those households were linked to an appropriate education establishment. There were an additional 8 families in the pipeline.
- The presenters welcomed the generosity displayed by Buckinghamshire residents, both in terms of hosting guests, organising community activities, and providing donations.

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

- The Chairman thanked the Council and the voluntary sector organisations, particularly Community Impact Bucks and Heart of Bucks, for their support in settling their Ukrainian guests. She also complimented the Council for efficiently dealing with the home inspections and DBS checks that each sponsor host must have before their guests arrive.
- A Member raised concerns that the funding provided by Central Government was not being directed to support refugees to access private housing. Finding appropriate housing following the six-month hosting period was revealed to be particularly challenging due to the private housing market's highly competitive and expensive nature in Bucks
- Whilst a detailed breakdown of the funds could not be provided in this meeting, the Deputy Cabinet Member assured the Committee that funds were used carefully to ensure the appropriate services for refugees were provided and expanded on. Whilst the scheme provided the Council with funds of £10,500 per guest, these were received in quarterly arrears. Most of the funding would be spent on medium-term accommodation arrangements beyond the sponsorship period. Funds received so far (roughly £8m) had been allocated for housing and accommodation support, staffing, checks on welfare support and safeguarding. Some of the money had also been spent on support packages,

parenting programmes and mentoring. The Council had also commissioned Community Impact Bucks to ensure translators are available for effective communication with local hosts. It was also stated that funding for families who do not remain in the UK for 12 months of their sponsorship would not be received.

- Whilst it was noted that the flow of funding was very fluid and there was uncertainty around future funding from Government, another member agreed that it would be helpful to see the breakdown or balance sheet as it was important to be realistic about the options for Ukrainian guests when their 6-month placement comes to an end. It would be very difficult for them to move into privately rented accommodation due to the cost implications but also issues around credit history etc. Could the Council consider a rent guarantee scheme to support them in moving into private rented accommodation?

- The Deputy Cabinet Member agreed that a breakdown of the funding would be provided to the Select Committee.

**Action: Matt Everitt**

- It was pointed out that the pressure on housing was not just an issue for refugees, but also for local residents currently waiting to be housed. Concerns were also raised regarding families needing to leave their placements before the 6 months have elapsed. The Committee was advised that there were only a very small number of families who needed to leave their placement homes, for example, to move closer to employment opportunities. There were also several means of support in place, such as referral to private accommodation, financial incentives for sponsors who might be struggling or rematching the family with another sponsor.

- The Chairman drew attention to the support available from the voluntary sector, which dealt with a number of the issues raised in this meeting (Community Impact Bucks, Rothschild Foundation, Heart of Bucks, Leap and the Clare Foundation).

- Members noted that whilst the short- and medium-term support provided had been successful, attention must also be drawn to providing positive opportunities for the future. It was currently difficult to predict what the future of Ukraine could look like. However, the Committee were assured that education for children, but also funded training for adults for sought-after skills as well as English language training had been organised to ensure sufficient integration. Once more information about future plans and finances was available, this would be shared with the Committee. Overall, the Council deployed the national strategy of supporting people to remain settled in their current locations.

- In response to a member's question around Ukrainian children's educational experiences, it was noted that all children were in an appropriate educational establishment. Additional pressures in light of new scheduled arrivals would be discussed by a dedicated education subgroup. Furthermore, webinars for Ukrainian parents would be held in some schools to clarify expectations around the process and the UK schooling system. Teachers were also being prepared to deal with emotional distress that Ukrainian children could likely experience, and mental health support was also available.

- A member noted that whilst support for refugees was appreciated, support for current residents of Buckinghamshire was also needed due to the cost-of-living crisis. The member was advised to refer residents to the Helping Hand Scheme.

- In response to a question regarding Afghan families still living in hotels and their options for accommodation, members were advised that if a family refused two offers of accommodation, they could then present as homeless to any local authority. Locally, the Council was working closely with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) with a view to accessing some of the larger houses which the MoD had surplus for Afghan families.

The Chairman thanked Cllr Arif Hussain, Richard Barker, Richard Ambrose and Matt Everitt for attending the meeting. The Select Committee wished to thank all officers who had been

working on support to Afghan and Ukrainian guests, many of whom were doing this alongside their usual role and the residents and communities who had taken guests into their homes.

## **7 BUCKINGHAMSHIRE LIBRARIES - DEVELOPING A VISION AND A STRATEGY**

The Chairman welcomed Richard Barker, Corporate Director, Communities; David Jones, Head of Libraries; Laura Davies, Operations Manager; Lyn Mangisi, Support and Development Manager; and Katie Dejoux, Culture and Outreach Services Manager, to the meeting.

During the presentation, the following key points were made:

- The service provided access to 29 libraries, plus the school library service, prisons and virtual libraries. 14 of those were Council-managed, with 10 being self-managed and 9 community libraries. Buckinghamshire's library offer was noted to be excellent due to the community-run model which has proven to be both financially robust and sustainable. The employment of digital technology and new approaches around income generation has also helped to sustain income over time.
- Many libraries were also customer access points which provided residents and visitors with a wide range of health and wellbeing programmes, cultural and learning opportunities and community engagement activities.
- In the past decade, costs for the library service had been reduced by 40%. Staff levels had been reduced to seven per capita of population, compared to a national average of 11.5 due to the use of technology and volunteering. The cost of premises had also been reduced through co-locations and partnerships. Despite the reduction in cost, there had also been some income challenges, particularly due to the increased use of online streaming services. However, the service had also moved away from traditional book-borrowing services and developed a strong service offer in terms of digital inclusion, health and wellbeing, and culture.
- A proposed purpose and vision statement had been published following discussions with staff, volunteers and community library partners. These discussions had also resulted in four strategies priorities being identified:
  1. Health and Wellbeing: This included health checks, blood pressure checks, smoking cessation and sessions to bring socially isolated people together.
  2. Culture and Learning: Cultural activities in libraries allowed people who are less likely to access culture to do so and continue to do so.
  3. Stronger Communities: Libraries helping to develop a sense of place and bring communities together.
  4. Access, Information, and Inclusion: The core of libraries was free access to information. Libraries worked with a range of organisations to ensure that information can be accessed also by people who were not used to using computers.
- The delivery of the service's vision included libraries being delivered as hubs. This way, premises could be remodelled according to the library offer, thus making better use of space. This would allow residents to get information and help from a single point. A countywide engagement process with meetings, focus groups and online surveys would be used to work up a detailed five-year plan.

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

- A member raised concerns that books appeared to be less of a priority to libraries. Mr Jones assured the Committee that books were still at the heart of the strategy. However, it was important to consider issues such as sustainability and resilience as well in order not to lose the facilities for books and reading.
- It was noted that Buckinghamshire were ahead of the curve in maintaining a great

service offer on a reduced budget. Whilst more funding for libraries would be welcomed there was pressure on the Council's budget.

- A member pointed out that community libraries should be given the opportunity to operate as freely as possible, as Buckinghamshire's community libraries had been successful in the past. Mr Jones agreed with the comment and noted that a third of the libraries were co-produced to ensure library offers were tailored to local needs. Funding, books, and premises were provided to the 14 community partnerships, but there were no plans to inhibit local and creative service offers.
- Concerns were also raised around Bourne End Library which had been under threat of closure some time ago. Mr Jones was asked how struggling libraries could be supported. He suggested that an active Friends of the Library group was always helpful so they could look for volunteers to support this. He also noted that the hall at the library in Bourne End could be a valuable source of income when hired out, so the local members could also promote this opportunity.
- A member suggested that more interaction with parish councils was needed to effectively offer support to libraries. It was noted that some communication with parishes was already underway and in Wendover, discussions were taking place with a view to co-locating the parish council and the library. Following the renovation of Marlow Library, the town council also now had an office in the building.
- At the last Select Committee looking at Visitor Economy, it had been suggested that libraries could host visitor information. David Jones agreed that with libraries acting as community hubs, they could provide information across many areas including tourism.
- In the winter it was likely that libraries would be marketed as warm spaces that could be accessed by anyone struggling to heat their homes and there would be information available on energy conservation and debt management. Library staff were known for their kind and helpful attitude.
- A member raised concerns about libraries losing funding and no longer focussing on their core offer of lending books. He questioned if the Council was complying with the 1964 Libraries Act. Mr Jones advised that the 1964 act was quite vague and due to the challenges of reduced local government budgets, the library service had to diversify in order to survive. Anyone visiting a library could still borrow books and access information for free, although this might be held digitally. He also expressed the view that the professional craft of librarianship was no longer as relevant because technology had taken over a lot of the traditional skills, so volunteer staff were able to help library visitors in meaningful way. The countywide Summer Reading Challenge and other initiatives still promoted literacy.
- Buckinghamshire had a proportionally higher number of libraries being open 20-25 hours/per week compared to the national average. A member expressed concern that his local library in Haddenham was only open three days a week and closed at 5pm, which meant that children couldn't use the library to do their homework. However, he was aware that there were concerns about energy costs. The individual library's opening hours were defined by the trustees so this could be discussed with them.
- In response to a member's concerns about gaps in physical access to libraries, it was noted that work had been undertaken to map areas and identify gaps in provision. Mr Jones noted these concerns and advised that this issue would be considered further.
- An analysis of the use of mobile libraries had shown that the majority of people who used mobile libraries were also using physical libraries. As the vehicles used for the service were not reliable, and the cost of service was inefficient in terms of use, the service was withdrawn some time ago following a formal consultation process.
- During the pandemic, the offer of physical newspapers had been removed. However, the digital offer had been enhanced, with 300 different titles having become available. As well as saving costs by not providing physical copies, a consultation also revealed the

residents' preference for digital newspapers.

The Chairman thanked Richard Barker, David Jones, Laura Davies, Lyn Mangisi and Katie DeJoux for attending the meeting. Members commended Mr Jones for his passionate knowledge of his service and the positive way he presented his item at Committee.

## **8 UPDATE ON CHILTERN'S LIFESTYLES CENTRE**

The Chairman welcomed Sue Drummond, Head of Leisure, to the meeting.

During the presentation, the following key points were made:

- The Chiltern's Lifestyles Centre opened in December 2021. A flagship facility in Amersham, it was deemed an area of national best practice in terms of the quality of the sports and leisure offer, and a blueprint for leisure provision in Buckinghamshire going forward. The usage, access and customer feedback had been positive, but comments from members to shape the future leisure strategy were welcomed.
- Despite Covid restrictions still being in place when the centre had opened, the number of visitors during the first few months had been high, with numbers reaching 817,000 by the end of September 2022.
- The expansion of the centre had a particular focus on health and wellbeing. The number of swim memberships had exceeded expectations. However, residents were also using the centre for social meetings, with young people filling the library to study together.
- An outreach development officer had been appointed to engage with communities and public health partnerships, such as LEAP. A range of GP referral schemes such as health and wellbeing programmes were also offered. With its connection to the local youth community building, young people also received opportunities for training, such as qualifying as lifeguards. A programme to engage with Ukrainian refugees was also offered.
- The Chiltern's lifestyle centre also offered a variety of sports, with basketball clubs, cricket, table tennis and badminton.

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

- Members welcomed the development of the centre and were pleased about the positive reception from visitors. The teams involved in the project were thanked for their work.
- The centre had presented a number of challenges in the early days, particularly around cleanliness and the number of visitors. However, the team continued to monitor these issues closely. A member also noted that the booking system needed to be easier to use, which would be fed back to the operator.
- A leisure strategy for the whole of the county was noted to be in development. An analysis of gaps in leisure provision was currently being undertaken, with a particular focus on population growth. Provision of a similar facility in other areas would require a business case and discussions with partners, community boards, parish councils and local stakeholders.
- A member raised concerns about the rising energy costs and asked about ways these could be mitigated. It was noted that the Centre was equipped with solar panels, which not only provide energy to the facility but also produced additional energy. The facility had also received a high energy efficiency rating. The Chiltern Lifestyles Centre also proved to be lucrative, generating a net income of £2m per year. Thus, officers were confident that the offer would be maintained going forward.

- Pupils have been seen to use the facility for study, as did people who wished to work collaboratively instead of at home.
- A member asked whether there were plans to further engage people aged 16-24, as well as those over 50, who currently showed less usage of the facilities. More funding for school sports had been received for young people in recent years, encouraging them to be more active. The centre itself also looked at a range of holiday programmes offering specific sports such as basketball and cricket.
- More focus had been placed on older adults, with senior sessions of badminton and table tennis happening regularly. Furthermore, walking football and netball session would be introduced shortly. Campaigns were also being done to increase activity for older residents. A larger Health and Wellbeing programme had also been established with the Live Well Stay Well programme. It was also noted that targets had been set before the pandemic, which resulted in some groups being less represented. However, these were being reconsidered for the future, to ensure that the whole community was able to use and benefit from the facility.
- The Chairman suggested that consideration should be given to offering family memberships, as some residents had indicated that the cost of individual memberships was prohibitive. It was also noted that the car parking charges presented an issue for some residents. Whilst there were no current plans to change the parking charges on-site, there may be an opportunity to consider other areas nearby which would not amount to the same cost.

## **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 Communities and Localism work programme.

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

The date of the next meeting would be Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2022 at 10am.