



Town & Parish Charter

Report for the Communities and Localism Select Committee






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Background Context

- As a new council, we wanted to take the opportunity to strengthen the relationship between all tiers of local government.
- There has been an ongoing programme of work to create a document that outlines this commitment to town and parish councils and articulates some key areas to help cement a strengthened relationship.
- Work has involved extensive engagement with local councils & members and has been supported by an independent consultant.
- The Town and Parish Charter was agreed by Cabinet in July 2022 and has now been published on the Buckinghamshire Council website along with a link to a downloadable version for town and parish councils <https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/community-and-safety/town-and-parish-charter/>

Independent Review

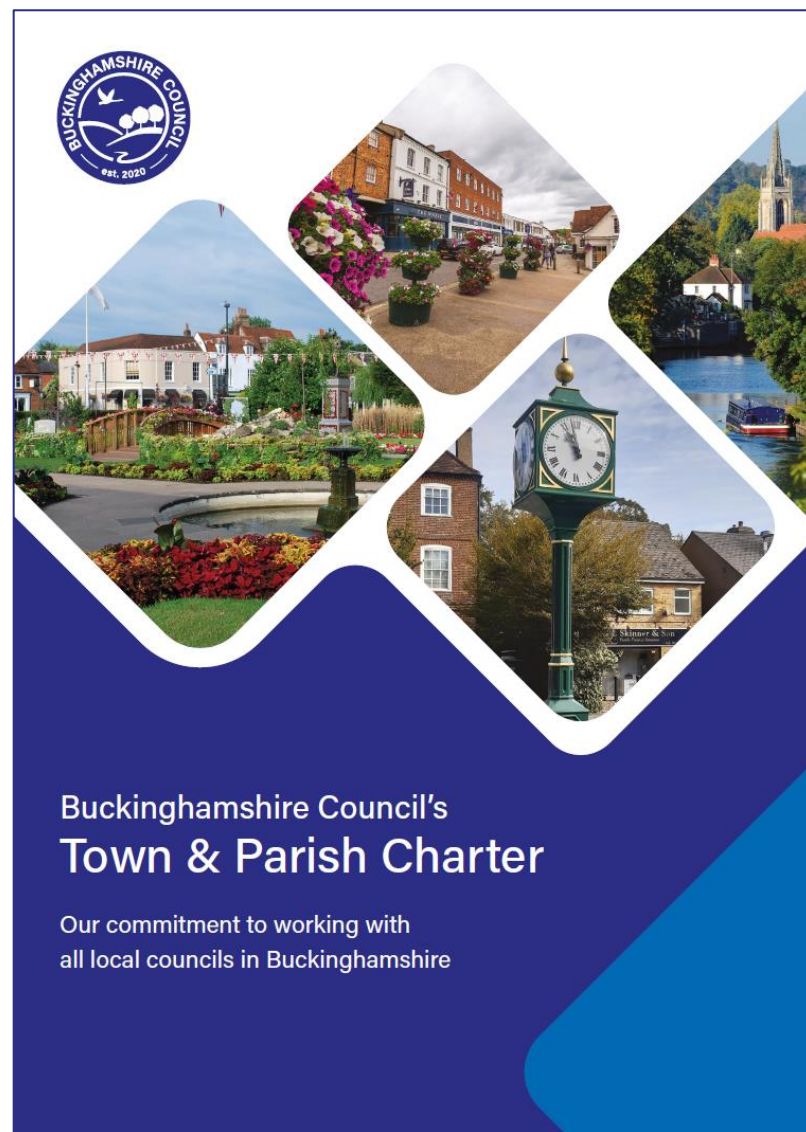
- An Independent Review of the charter was jointly commissioned by Buckinghamshire Council and Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Association of Local Councils (BMKALC).
 - The consultant engaged with selected local council chairs and clerks, plus cabinet members and BC officers, discussing themes including, the content of the charter, issues emerging, what good looks like and how we get there.
 - The key findings which emerged were:
 - Everyone wants to succeed for residents
 - Lots of good work is already happening
 - Biggest issues are trust and understanding
 - Delivery and communication is key to improving trust and understanding
 - The review found that the charter itself wasn't the real issue but the issues above were preventing us reaching an agreement.
 - Recommendation that Buckinghamshire Council produce a short one-way commitment which sets out assurances for how Buckinghamshire Council will work with local councils going forward.
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Purpose of the Charter

- The Charter articulates and demonstrates our commitment to work together with town and parish councils to serve the people of Buckinghamshire.
- We have a common purpose to improve the economic, environmental, health and social wellbeing of Buckinghamshire and its residents, businesses and visitors.
- To achieve this, Buckinghamshire Council will work together with town and parish councils to:
 - promote the best interests of the communities we serve,
 - provide quality, value for money public services and,
 - promote opportunities for greater public participation and involvement in public life.

Content of the Charter - Overview

- The Charter includes a brief introduction and three main sections:
 - Effective Communication
 - Services and Collaboration
 - Planning Processes



Content of the Charter - Effective Communication

To enable effective communication Buckinghamshire Council will...

- Appoint key member and officer leads for relationships with town and parish councils
- Ensure a wide range of effective channels are in place to enable two-way communication, spanning all levels of the organisation
- Priority phone lines for parish councils and key senior officer contacts list
- Focus groups and local meetings to address issues around service delivery where necessary
- Provide parish councils with advance notice / schedule of consultations and aim to allow at least 6 weeks for responses wherever possible

Content of the Charter - Services and Collaboration

To provide effective services and collaboration Buckinghamshire Council will...

- Encourage Buckinghamshire ward councillors to attend parish and town council meetings
- Ensure there are opportunities to comment on proposed changes to services
- Provide early communication and support in all financial transactions with parish and town councils
- Work with BMKALC to provide training, support and resources to assist parish and town councils
- Provide specifications for relevant services along with procedures for monitoring and reporting any developing service issues
- Improve and agree response times for key services to respond to information requests from parish and town councils
- Support parish and town councils to address local needs through the provision of advice and signposting.

Content of the Charter - Planning Processes

To enable Parish and Town Councils to contribute to the planning process Buckinghamshire Council will...

- Statement of Community Involvement regarding consultation with parish and town councils on planning issues
- Equip parish and town councils with knowledge/skills to enable them to share the views of the communities they represent
- Enable parish and town councils to set policies for their own local areas by preparing Neighbourhood Plans
- Ensure parish and town councils have the right to request a 'call in' of an application (or request a Buckinghamshire Councillor do that for them) and are given a dedicated speaking slot where they have made representation
- Consult parish and town councils when producing a Local Plan that will replace the current adopted local plans on completion

Summary of the Action Plan

- The action plan will establish mechanisms for accountability and ensure the charter will become embedded within the council and in the ongoing relationship with local councils
- It also addresses a number of areas for improvement which came out of the development of the charter
- The Partnerships, Policy and Communications team will act as the lead service in implementing the action plan and building on the existing relationship at a strategic level to ensure effective partnership and joint working
- This won't however replace existing operational relationships and arrangements for engagement and consultation with local councils on specific service issues

Key achievements

- Cabinet Member for Communities appointed as the lead for relationships with parish and town councils and champion of local councils
- Senior Policy Officer appointed as key strategic lead and point of escalation for unresolved operational matters. Also responsible for implementation of the action plan
- Priority phone number and mailbox for parish councils within the customer service centre
 - The priority phone line has received 74 calls since October 2022
 - The parish support mailbox has received 106 emails since October 2022
- Key contacts list provided to parish councils of key numbers, mailboxes and senior officers

Key achievements

- Regular newsletters to all town and parish councils
- Invitations to all meetings within their community board areas
- Strong relationship developed with BMKALC
- Quarterly Parish Liaison Meetings hosted by BMKALC
- Quarterly Planning Forums supported by BMKALC
- Clerks Forums



Areas identified for further development

- Understand the needs of town and parish councils and any concerns they have around communication, collaboration and service delivery.
- Ensure that Buckinghamshire Council's engagement and meetings with town and parish councils are effective, avoiding duplication and filling in any gaps.
- Embed the charter across the whole of the organisation and ensure that there is a good understanding of how town and parish councils work, the challenges they face and how they can help us improve services.

Additional support

- The Legal and Democratic Services Team provide support and training to town and parish councils on governance issues.
- In the past year they have supported local councils with 15 complaints about parish councillor's conduct.
- They have delivered three training sessions on code issues (in partnership with BMKALC).
- They have delivered training for individual councils e.g. Buckingham Town Council and Hughenden Parish Council.
- The team are often called upon to provide support at challenging times, on sensitive issues and have received excellent feedback from a number of local councils on their work.

Next Steps

- Town and Parish Survey
 - Survey of town and parish councils covering communication, community boards, governance and finance and service delivery.
- Strategic Engagement Framework
 - Full audit of all formal meetings and communications with town and parish councils.
- Think Local Campaign
 - Internal campaign across all services to help officers understand how town and parish councils work and the challenges they face. Particular focus on key service areas that interact regularly with town and parish councils.