



# Buckinghamshire Council

## Communities & Localism Select Committee

### Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE COMMUNITIES & LOCALISM SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON WEDNESDAY 19 APRIL 2023 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 2.00 PM AND CONCLUDING AT 4.00 PM

#### MEMBERS PRESENT

M Harker OBE, A Waite, S Barrett, P Cooper, M Knight, F Mahon, C Oliver, G Smith and L Smith BEM

#### OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

K Sutherland, S Garwood, R Goodes, L Jeffries, G Springer and S Bowles

#### Agenda Item

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

Apologies were received from Councillors Paul Bass, Guy Hollis, Mike Stannard and Penny Drayton. Councillor Karen Bates attended the meeting as a substitute for Councillor Penny Drayton.

##### 2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

In connection with agenda item 5, Councillors Catherine Oliver, Linda Smith, Steven Barrett and Frank Mahon declared an interest as Parish Councillors.

##### 3 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> February 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

##### 4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

There were no public questions.

##### 5 TOWN AND PARISH CHARTER

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Steve Bowles, Cabinet Member for Communities; Roger Goodes, Service Director, Policy and Communications, Simon Garwood, Senior Policy Officer, and Lloyd Jeffries, Service Director, Resources – Business Operations, to the meeting.

During the presentation, the following key points were raised:

- As a new Council there was an aspiration to strengthen the relationship between Buckinghamshire Council and the local town and parish councils. The Town and Parish Charter was published in July 2022. Its purpose was to outline this commitment and articulate some key areas to help cement a strengthened relationship. It can be found at <https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/community-and-safety/parish-town-and-boundary-information/town-and-parish-charter/>.
- An independent review had been commissioned in partnership with Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Association of Local Councils to improve trust and understanding. It was recommended that Buckinghamshire Council should produce a short document as a one-way commitment to local town and parish councils.
- The Charter had three main sections:
  - Effective communication: Ensuring that a wide range of channels were available for two-way communication;
  - Effective services and Collaboration: Working together to ensure the best possible outcomes;
  - Planning process: Ensuring local councils' involvement in planning decision-making.
- The Cabinet Member for Communities had been appointed as the lead member for relationships with town and parish councils. Simon Garwood was the strategic officer lead and point of contact for town and parish councils, who was also responsible for implementing the action plan.
- A town and parish survey would shortly be launched to identify areas of need and collect feedback on key services. A strategic engagement framework would be developed which would map all formal meetings and engagement and identify any gaps. Over the coming months, a 'Think Local' campaign would create a greater understanding of the needs and challenges of local councils amongst officers across the Council.

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

- Members commended the work on the Town and Parish Charter. Facilitating improved communication and a productive relationship with town and parish councils was identified as important by the Committee. A Member who was also a Parish Councillor commented that they had experienced improved communication and engagement and they thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for their work.
- A Member noted that the Charter did not mention Community Boards very much. The Cabinet Member was asked how he felt the Boards were evolving and how they would fit in with the Charter. In response it was noted that the Community Boards and their structures would be reviewed over the coming year. The Cabinet Member agreed that Community Boards needed strong links with town and parish councils, and they would be asked their views on Community Boards in the forthcoming survey.
- A Member raised concerns about the specific situation in High Wycombe as an unparished area, expressing the view that residents in High Wycombe were at a disadvantage. Mr Goodes noted that the introduction of a new parish or town council would require a governance review to be carried out and this would need to be linked in with the wider boundary review. It was agreed that Mr Goodes would speak to Nick Graham, Service Director for Legal and Democratic Services and provide a response on this.

**ACTION: Roger Goodes**

- In connection with the discussion on the unparished area of High Wycombe another member explained that the High Wycombe Town Committee currently undertook similar functions to a parish council, and he considered that this worked well so residents were not disadvantaged.

- The priority telephone line has received 74 calls since October 2022, equivalent to three calls per week. All inquiries received in the contract centre were reported by type of inquiry. Inquiries were predominantly received via email. This direct telephone line had been set up solely for town and parish councils to use and had been advertised to them. Uptake of the number was low, but this was attributed to clerks having received a contact list with Fix My Street, Key service mailboxes and direct line numbers including service directors and heads of service. Mr Jeffries advised that the number was at the bottom of every Town and Parish newsletter and would continue to be promoted to town and parish councils.
- A Member asked about the process for town and parish councils to call-in planning decisions. It was noted that as well as being able to request a call-in of decisions themselves, town and parish councils could also lobby Buckinghamshire Council members to request call-ins on their behalf. Call-ins raised by an individual town or parish member currently needed to be considered by the Chairman or needed support from two further local members.
- A Member referenced Fix My Street and asked if any work had been undertaken to include parish owned assets. Mr Garwood explained that there had been a lot of development work to include devolved services so that queries from residents would be directed to the correct Council directly. Officers agreed to speak to the relevant team and provide an update.

**ACTION: Simon Garwood**

- To ensure strong communication between town and parish councils and Buckinghamshire Council, local meetings to discuss key issues around service delivery, as well as bespoke training sessions on processes such as FixMyStreet, would be held in future.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and the Officers for their attendance and contribution to the meeting.

## **6 SAFER BUCKINGHAMSHIRE STRATEGY**

The Chairman welcomed Gideon Springer, Head of Community Safety, to the meeting, and invited Steve Bowles, Cabinet Member for Communities, to present the report.

During the presentation, the following key points were raised:

- The Safer Buckinghamshire Plan for 2020/23 outlined the priorities of helping communities become more resilient; protecting vulnerable adults and children; addressing the impact of drugs, alcohol, and poor mental health; reducing levels of crime and harm; tackling domestic violence and abuse and dealing with offenders. The strategy required partner organisations to share skills, knowledge, and resource to ensure Buckinghamshire was a safer place to live, work and visit.
- Over the past three years, the Council had launched its street warden team to cover both High Wycombe and Aylesbury town centres.
- Buckinghamshire Council had been awarded accreditation as a Friends Against Scams organisation. The Council's Community Safety Team were working alongside Thames Valley Police to establish a local multi-agency task and finish group to raise public awareness for fraud and scams.
- The Safer Buckinghamshire Strategy 2023-2026 sets out five priorities:
  1. Neighbourhood Crime
  2. Anti-social Behaviour
  3. Serious Violence
  4. Violence against Women and Girls

## 5. Exploitation of Vulnerable People

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

- A Member raised concerns about the raising crime rate in High Wycombe, particularly in terms of drug dealing activity at the station. It was noted that the Council was actively working in partnership with Thames Valley Police to tackle this issue, predominantly through secret intelligence which train companies were informed about. The British Transport Police were also involved, particularly in relation to the exploitation of vulnerable people.
- Currently, no statistical information about the exploitation of vulnerable young people was available due to the difficulty of evidencing such crimes. Many young people would not share such experiences due to fear of reprisals. However, there was a national referral mechanism for this issue which also kept a record of the number of referrals at a national level.
- The Police and Crime Commissioner (PCP) provided a community safety grant of circa £450,000 per year, which was guaranteed for up to a three-year period. After this time, the funding could be reduced as the current PCC's tenure would also end after three years. This would impact the services offered. The Cabinet Member assured the Committee that he would lobby to keep the funding in place in the future. The PCC was also a member of the Safer Buckinghamshire Board, which reviewed all grant and funding applications. The PCC received quarterly reports about how their funds were spent.
- The Community Safety Board aligned their strategy with the Opportunity Bucks strategy to focus on wards with high crime rates. High crime wards did not exactly align with Opportunity Bucks wards, but they were in close geographical proximity. A key priority was to focus on reducing crime and antisocial behaviour in those wards in partnership with the police. Small working groups had been set up to identify how to improve crime rates in these areas, in line with the strategic priorities, which were developed through a community safety survey and strategic needs assessment. Consultation with the public was held at all stages of developing the strategy, which would be reviewed once a year. Although public confidence in the police was noted as an issue, the police were a key partner in ensuring public safety.
- Street wardens were visible representatives of the Council who were able to interact with communities and deal with issues such as littering, graffiti, and antisocial behaviour. They recently received additional powers to issue Fixed Penalty Notices once additional community safety training had been completed. However, Fixed Penalty Notices were viewed as a last resort. Funding for these roles in Aylesbury and High Wycombe was in place until next year.
- Members noted that the visible presence of street wardens was an effective way of reducing crimes and discouraging anti-social behaviour. Whilst there was currently no funding available to provide street wardens in other towns, the charity Heart of Bucks provided funding for work on early intervention and prevention activities with vulnerable and young people.
- The police had been struggling with the number of staff in neighbourhood teams for the past year. The PCC launched a new strategy in which they committed to having twice the number of officers in neighbourhoods around Thames Valley. However, the recruitment process was long, and most vacancies were for 12-month contracts, leading to high turnovers.
- A Member suggested that Town and Parish Councils could also fund street wardens where needed. It was noted that if Town and Parish Councils were to recruit street wardens, a commitment to long-term funding for these roles (at least three years) was

necessary. Mr Springer also advised that adequate management and training were important considerations and that performance measures would also need to be discussed.

- Members raised concerns about the effectiveness of CCTV cameras. However, it was noted that when used in areas of high crime, they increased prosecution and conviction rates. A review around the use of CCTV was currently being prepared to inform the future direction of travel with the installation of CCTV across the county. The PCC was keen on developing a Thames Valley-wide network but there was currently no funding to support this.
- In response to a question regarding the membership of the Safer Buckinghamshire Board, Members were advised that Community Safety Partnerships were defined through the Crime Disorder Act, and South Central Ambulance Services (SCAS) was not identified as a strategic partner. However, ambulance personnel do have a lot of contact with vulnerable people and anonymised data regarding injuries was provided by SCAS to inform the needs assessment which underpins the strategy.
- A member asked if community payback could be used as a way of cleaning up litter and graffiti etc to improve the public realm for everyone, but it was noted that this wasn't always feasible due to a lack of resources to supervise this activity.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and Mr Springer for their attendance and contribution to the meeting. She requested that an annual report on the delivery of the strategy could be shared with the Committee in the coming year.

## **7 COMMUNITY RESILIENCE UPDATE**

The Chairman invited Steve Bowles, Cabinet Member for Communities, to present the report.

During the presentation, the following key points were raised:

- The new Community Resilience Service commenced on 1 April 2022. The majority of the year was spent developing the service and launching the winter framework, which received positive feedback. Based on this work, a summer framework was being developed. A power outage plan and cyber action plan were also being developed.
- Community engagement was an important part of community resilience and a recent exercise in Marlow had been very well received. A survey of Town and Parish Councils was underway and of 75 responses so far, 47 had expressed an interest in holding workshops to consider community resilience planning.

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

- A Member noted that there were discrepancies between the amount of resilience planning carried out by different Town and Parish Councils. The importance of finding the right balance between coordination, communication with residents and intervention was highlighted.
- In preparation for the national emergency alert test taking place at the weekend, the customer service centre had been made aware of a potential rise in contact from concerned residents. At present, it was not possible to use a similar system for local alerts.
- A member raised the issue of High Wycombe being unparished and asked what could be done to liaise with the local community around resilience planning. Lloyd Jeffries explained that engagement could still take place via faith groups and other voluntary organisations in the town.
- A Member emphasised the important work carried out by volunteers in relation to

community resilience. However, concerns were also raised around the availability of sufficient resources in the event of an emergency. Mr Jeffries assured the Committee that coordination with different services, such as strategic flood management, and external partners, such as the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum, was a key priority to ensure community resilience. He also expressed confidence in the plans that had been developed and the resource available for responding to difficult situations going forward. The experience of Covid had demonstrated how communities can work to support their most vulnerable in a time of crisis.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and Officers for their attendance and contribution to the meeting.

**8 WORK PROGRAMME**

The Chairman thanked Members for their questions and contributions throughout the year. A work programming discussion would be held on Teams in May. The scope for the inquiry on digital exclusion was currently in development.

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

The date of the next meeting would be held in June, with the date to be confirmed.