



## Communities & Localism Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Communities & Localism Select Committee held on Thursday 29 June 2023 in The Paralympic Room, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 10.00 am and concluding at 11.30 am.

### Members present

S Bowles, A Waite, S Barrett, P Cooper, P Drayton, M Knight, C Oliver, M Stannard and L Smith BEM

### Others in attendance

K Sutherland, R Goodes, C Harriss, A Hussain, D Jones, S Payne, J Pearce, K Dejoux, L Mangisi, H Thynne, I Malik and F Mason

### Apologies

F Mahon and G Smith

### Agenda Item

- 1 Apologies for absence / Changes in membership**  
Apologies were received from Cllrs Frank Mahon and Greg Smith.
- 2 Appointment of Vice-Chairman**  
The Chairman was pleased to confirm that Cllr Ashley Waite had agreed to continue to serve as Vice-Chairman of the Communities and Localism Select Committee for the ensuing year.
- 3 Declarations of Interest**  
Cllr Peter Cooper declared an interest in relation to item 7 as he was Chairman of the Queens Park Arts Centre which received a grant from the Council.
- 4 Minutes**  
The minutes of the meetings held on 19<sup>th</sup> April and 17<sup>th</sup> May were confirmed as a correct record.
- 5 Public Questions**  
There were none.

## 6 Healthy Libraries

The Chairman welcomed Sophie Payne, Service Director, Culture, Sport and Leisure, David Jones, Head of Libraries, Katie DeJoux, Culture and Outreach Services Manager, Frances Mason, Public Health Principal, Lyn Mangisi, Libraries Support and Development Manager and Irzam Malik, Public Health Programme Officer to the meeting. The Chairman noted that Cllr Clive Harriss was stuck in traffic so would join the meeting shortly and invited Sophie Payne to introduce the item.

Sophie Payne reminded members that the Vision for Libraries had been discussed at a meeting earlier this year and included four key priorities – Encouraging Culture, Stronger Communities, Promoting Access and Inclusion and Health and Wellbeing. There was also a commitment to work with partners, empower staff and develop libraries as key hubs in the community. Healthy Libraries was a pilot project developed with Public Health to promote and support the Health and Wellbeing strategy, which aimed to encourage residents to ‘Start Well, Live Well, Age Well.’

Katie DeJoux, Culture and Outreach Services Manager and Frances Mason, Public Health Principal gave a presentation on the Healthy Libraries pilot and the following main points were noted:

- Libraries have 29 sites and almost 200,000 members who visit over 600,000 times in a year. For this project, they partnered with Public Health and 13 other partners, including Buckinghamshire Mind, Dementia Action Alliance, Alzheimer’s Society, The Reading Agency and Wycombe Wanderers Foundation and delivered the pilot in Buckingham, Aylesbury, Chesham, High Wycombe, Gerrards Cross, Iver Heath and Burnham libraries. Aylesbury, Chesham and High Wycombe were chosen as they include the Opportunity Bucks wards and Buckingham and the libraries in South Bucks were included to ensure a geographical spread across the county and to ensure some representation in more rural areas.
- During the pilot, 64 events were held across the 7 libraries and 122 staff and volunteers were trained in ‘Making Every Contact Count’ from a health and wellbeing point of view. A variety of specialist events ranging from dementia action week talks, baby sleep advice sessions, NHS health checks, seed sowing workshop for children and menopause workshops were offered and blood pressure monitoring kits were also available to borrow from some libraries. 30 kits had been loaned out since May.
- 11 Cosy Corners were also set up to provide a friendly welcoming environment for residents with dementia and their carers in the library, alongside helpful information.
- Better Points is a free app that has been launched to encourage residents to make healthy choices in their lives. Anyone over 14 can use it and collect points which can be donated to charities or redeemed in local shops. When Healthy Libraries is rolled out more widely, people may also be rewarded with points for attending their health and wellbeing events.
- The full evaluation of the pilot is still ongoing but the plan is to roll this out across all libraries and hope to expand it to the prison library service as well. This summer’s reading challenge also has a sports and being active theme.

In response to members' questions and during subsequent discussions the following main points were noted:

- The Chairman asked about early lessons that had been learned from the pilot. In response, Katie DeJoux explained that some sessions were very popular so they would be organised as pre-booked events in future and libraries expect to be very busy with families over the summer due to cost of living pressures. Also engaging with partners has been invaluable as it has enabled libraries to increase their reach further into communities, attracting new visitors to the libraries.
- A member asked if the healthy libraries initiative meant that the Council was taking on duties that should be the responsibility of the NHS. In response David Jones commented that the unique selling point of libraries was that they were an accessible space for all. Healthy libraries was an opportunity for Public Health to reach out to communities and it wasn't a replacement for GPs but would complement their services. Frances Mason concurred and emphasised that it was about prevention and reaching people in the local community.
- Community libraries would be supported to run similar events. A member also noted that their local community hospital has now been rebadged as a Health and Wellbeing Centre and asked if it might also be used to support this initiative. Frances Mason explained that public health used an assets-based approach so this would likely be included. Public health data was also helpful in identifying how best to target sessions in different locations.
- There was a discussion about how people who have not been diagnosed with dementia might be encouraged through healthy libraries to seek assistance if they have been reluctant to approach a GP. It was noted that anyone can go into the library and it could offer an opportunity for someone to go 'incognito' to access resources to help them.
- A member noted that the libraries were moving into the space left by the closure of family centres in offering sessions aimed at parents, babies and pre-schoolers. He also asked how libraries would contribute to Opportunity Bucks in Micklefield and Castlefield and whether they were sufficiently resourced to support these new projects. Sophie Payne explained that Opportunity Bucks was about using existing resources to target support to the Opportunity Bucks wards and through leveraging partners.
- Members also emphasised the importance of reading and books as the central tenet of libraries whilst celebrating the success of these wider initiatives. It was noted that particularly in deprived areas, being able to borrow children's books was vital as schools didn't have the budget to renew their books regularly. David Jones welcomed members' comments and emphasised that nurturing a love of books and reading remained at the heart of the service. However, libraries could also make important contributions to other Council priorities and this helped to keep the library service relevant and sustainable.
- There was a discussion about how local members and community boards could help to promote and support Healthy Libraries. It was noted that in

Marlow and Wendover where libraries have been refurbished, the local members and community boards had been involved in discussions during the planning stages. Officers would think about how to link in with community boards more effectively.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and the officer team for their contributions to the meeting and for the display that members had been able to look at during their pre-meeting.

## **7 VCS Grant Overview**

The Chairman welcomed Cllr Arif Hussain, Cabinet Member for Communities, Roger Goodes, Service Director, Partnerships, Policy and Communications, Hannah Thynne, Head of Policy and Improvement and Jack Pearce, Senior Policy Officer to the meeting. The Cabinet Member took the Select Committee through a short presentation outlining the VCS Grant Overview and the following main points were noted:

- £2.3m grants were inherited from the five legacy councils. These, along with Community Prevention Grants totalling £350,000, have been reviewed, with a view to taking a longer term approach to grant funding which will allow VCS organisations to have more stability and be able to plan for the future more easily.
- The Shadow Executive agreed in February 2020 that a review should take place and that it would be helpful to move towards multi-year funding agreements in place of annual grants. Funding for shorter term local projects could be sought via Community Boards or other external funding opportunities.
- In February 2022 a decision was made that the second stage of the review would include the development of a single register of VCS funding across the Council and a comprehensive funding guide to local and national funding opportunities. Proposals would also be developed for the Buckinghamshire Lottery.
- In addition, services across the Council were asked to review the existing legacy grants and put forward proposals for future proposals to ensure multi-years funding opportunities which would encourage VCS activity which supports their service strategy. Consultation on these proposals would take place with local members over the Summer and the member working group would also review them ahead of a final decision.
- VCS organisations would then be notified by the end of September 2023 of any changes to their grants for the next financial year.
- Subsequently it was decided that there was limited value in producing a new funding guide as there was already a plethora of information on the Council's website and specialist support was also available from Gail Hudson, Senior Policy Officer and via Community Impact Bucks and other larger VCS organisations.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member for this overview and invited members' questions. The following responses and comments during subsequent discussions

were noted:

- A member noted that the total budget under discussion was £2.6million that the legacy councils had considered valuable and he asked what the budget was for the next financial year. In response it was noted that this was not a savings exercise and the base budget available for grant funding remained the same. The review was more about focussing on a more strategic approach that would enable the Council and VCS partners to plan more readily for the medium to long term.
- A member endorsed the decision not to produce a new funding guide and felt there was more value in ensuring the efficiency of grant funding processes. He applauded the community board grants as a progressive funding model but expressed concerns that sometimes the amount of officer time expended on small grant applications seemed disproportionate.
- A member expressed concerns about the Council's ongoing support to some community centres and asked if officer support could be given to help them become financially viable instead of allowing them to rely on grant funding. Roger Goodes explained that the Council was in discussion with Aylesbury Town Council with a view to devolving the operation of several community centres to them.
- A member commented that often it was cheaper and more efficient for the VCS to provide services on the Council's behalf and questioned what might happen if a VCS organisation failed and the Council had to step in and takeover. Again it was noted that through this new funding approach, the Council wanted to provide more certainty to VCS partners although it was acknowledged that the Council's own funding could also be subject to change.

The Chairman thanked the Cabinet Member and the officer team for their contributions to the meeting and asked that the Committee should be kept updated.

## **8 Digital Exclusion Review Scope**

The Select Committee considered and agreed the scope for a review into Digital Exclusion. The Chairman advised that Cllr Ashley Waite would chair this review and invited other members to volunteer to join the group – Cllrs Cooper, Knight, Oliver and Linda Smith agreed to take part. It was agreed that the Scrutiny Manager would arrange an initial meeting on MS Teams in July to discuss the evidence gathering approach. It was likely that the evidence gathering meetings would begin in September.

## **9 Work Programme**

The Select Committee considered and agreed the work programme for the year ahead. The Chairman advised that the work programme would continue to evolve and if members had any topics that they wished to suggest as potential agenda items they could contact him or the Scrutiny Manager directly.

## **10 Date and time of the next meeting**

4<sup>th</sup> October 2023 at 10am

