



## Cabinet minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Cabinet held on Thursday 4 January 2024 in The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 10.00 am and concluding at 12.41 pm.

### Members present

M Tett, A Macpherson, S Broadbent, J Chilver, A Cranmer, C Harriss, A Hussain, P Strachan and M Winn

### Others in attendance

D Barnes, J Baum, J Jordan, P Martin and R Stuchbury

### Apologies

G Williams

### Agenda Item

#### 1 Apologies

Apologies were received from Cllr Gareth Williams. Cllr Jilly Jordan, Deputy Cabinet Member for Environment, attended in Cllr William's place.

#### 2 Minutes

**RESOLVED – That the Minutes of the Meeting held on 12 December 2023 were agreed as a correct record, subject to including Cllr Macpherson under Cabinet Member attendance.**

#### 3 Declarations of interest

Councillor M Winn declared a personal interest in item 12 (Devolution of three Community Centres in Aylesbury) as a Member of Aylesbury Town Council.

#### 4 Hot Topics

The following hot topics were reported:-

##### Leader

The Leader referred to the recent flooding and commented that if there was a heavy rainfall for a prolonged period there was no easy solution to flooding, as the water had nowhere to go once soakaways and local streams were full. Officers would investigate any areas of bad flooding. The flooding would also cause potholes, which

would be exacerbated if cold weather followed. All members of the public were invited to report potholes to the Council. 28,000 potholes had been fixed since early 2023. Any unsafe potholes would be filled temporarily until the weather improved.

<https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/parking-roads-and-transport/report-problems-on-roads-streets-and-pavements/>

Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing

The Cabinet Member referred to the 6 day junior strike, which would impact on routine health services. Those patients who had not been contacted about the strike should attend their appointments as planned. Partners were working during this period to provide support. However, members of the public should only attend accident and emergency when necessary.

Cabinet Member for Transport

The Cabinet Member reported that there had been a number of issues with the network relating to the recent storm with flooding and standing water. They would continue to empty gullies and where necessary tankers had removed excess water. Over the three days there had been 140 emergency calls and other issues including fallen trees and branches. Temporary lights had been installed to help traffic management where needed. The Council were prioritising calls and undertaking temporary repairs to make the network safe. Members of the public were urged to drive according to the weather conditions.

The Council was set to partner with WeMove to launch a demand responsive bus service in the Aylesbury area. This follows the successful introduction of a similar scheme in Wycombe earlier last year, which had shown that demand responsive services were convenient and affordable for travellers. The new service, which was planned to start during the spring of 2024, was part of a pilot scheme funded by the Government's Rural Mobility Fund. Areas covered by the service would include Aston Clinton, Weston Turville, Halton, Hartwell, Stoke Mandeville, Bishopstone and Weedon. The service would drop off passengers anywhere within the operational area, which included Stoke Mandeville Hospital, Aylesbury town centre and the railway stations at Aylesbury, Aylesbury Vale Parkway, Stoke Mandeville and Wendover.

Cabinet Members thanked officers who worked hard to make the roads safe during emergency calls and also thanked the Flood Team.

## 5 Question Time

**Question from Councillor Robin Stuchbury to Councillor Angela Macpherson, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing**

"In the Q2 Budget Monitoring Report 2023/24, the Health and Wellbeing portfolio reporting an adverse variance of £3.4m pressures due to the growth in client numbers and the increased cost of care packages, particularly in residential, nursing and supporting living. Portfolio Action Plan initiatives to improve the budgetary position will look to achieve savings through measures including £1.3m relating to overdelivery.

Could the Cabinet Member please provide an explanation of the variance, on the overdelivery, and the schemes of delegation for future spend in the portfolio, as well as assurance that the resources will be available to meet the needs of the most vulnerable?"

### **RESPONSE from Councillor Macpherson**

Thank you for your question Councillor Stuchbury.

The Adults and Health Directorate at Quarter Two is forecasting an adverse variance of £3.4m (£3.9m in Quarter One) The main reasons behind this variance are both a growth in client numbers and an increased cost of care packages. This reflects the national situation facing Adult Social Care Services, where demand is increasing due to demographic growth, an ageing population, and the ongoing health and wellbeing impacts of COVID-19. In addition, the sector has been significantly impacted by inflationary pressures, with energy and fuel price inflation impacting on residential care home and home care providers, respectively. Continued pressures in relation to National Living Wage, Pension enrolment, energy costs plus labour market impacts add to the pressures on the care market.

Locally this year our Quarter Two position is reflecting pressures in three main areas, Residential Care, Nursing Care and Supported Living. The main drivers of these are:

- Increases due to demographic growth and an ageing population
- Increases in the number of people who have been funding their own care but who have depleted their funds, and
- Increase in the cost of new packages of care due to inflationary pressures on care providers

The Directorate is working hard to mitigate these pressures and have developed a number of savings and income targets and in year action plans. These include, reviewing care packages, maximization of block contracts, star chambers deep dive into all service budgets (including staffing), implementation of the Home Care Dynamic Purchasing Vehicle and maximisation of grants. The target for all these plans totalled £5.7m and is presently forecast to deliver £7m. The Leadership Team have established a Scheme of Delegation for all Care Packages that provide greater oversight, and a check and challenge mechanism. Thresholds for authorisation have recently been lowered further to provide even greater oversight when agreeing packages of care. The Adult Social Care Improvement Programme is also focussed on delivering a more sustainable local care system. Key elements of the programme include a community prevention offer for adults that helps prevent and delay the need for adult social care, more targeted use of Reablement to work with existing clients to reduce the amount of care they require and longer-term plans to increase the amount of shared lives, supported living and extra care support available.

Despite the budget pressures facing Adult Social Care, supporting, and protecting the most vulnerable remains a key corporate priority and the Local Authority will

continue to meet its Care Act duties.

**6 Forward Plan (28 Day Notice)**

The Leader introduced the Forward Plan and commended it to all Members of the Council and the public, as a document that gave forewarning of what reports would be discussing at forthcoming meetings.

**RESOLVED – That the Cabinet Forward Plan be noted.**

**7 Select Committee Work Programme**

The Leader introduced the Select Committee Work Programme and commended it to all Members of the Council and the public, as a document that gave forewarning of what Select Committees would be discussing at forthcoming meetings.

**RESOLVED – That the Select Committee Work Programme be noted.**

**8 Council Tax Base Setting 2024-25**

Cabinet received a report on the Council Tax Base Setting 2024/25.

The Service Director for Finance reported that in 2024/25, the tax base for the year was 231,161.81 which was 0.94% higher than 2023/24. The increase in tax base from last year arises from:

- a) Adjustments in respect of changes in the number of chargeable dwellings, discounts or premiums; this will increase the base by 2250.86 band D equivalent properties;
- b) Increasing the collection rate from 98.3% to 98.4%; this increased the base by 231 band D equivalent properties; and
- c) Slight increase in Council Tax Reduction Scheme; this decreased the base by 318 band D equivalent properties.

Cabinet Members paid tribute to the Finance team for maintaining the collection rate during a difficult economic period. This was also due to the new benefit system, which had been put in place.

A Cabinet Member asked for clarification on the core spending power, which was the Government's preferred measure of council budgets and incorporated income from the revenue support grant, council tax and business rate income. This government settlement made available over £64 billion for local authorities in England, which was an increase of £4 billion or 6.5% in cash terms in Core Spending Power on 2023-24. In terms of capping council tax, it was noted that the Government confirmed that council tax referendum principles would not apply to parish and town councils for 2024/25, meaning that there was no legal restriction on how much a parish or town council could raise its precept by. However, this was not the case for unitary councils who could raise their core council tax by up to 3% with anything higher than that triggering the need for a referendum.

**RESOLVED –**

- (1) That the Buckinghamshire Council Tax Base of 231,161.81 for the year 2024/25 be APPROVED.
- (2) That the Buckinghamshire Council estimated collection rate for the year 2024/25 of 98.4% be NOTED.

## 9 Draft Revenue budget and Capital Programme

Cabinet received a report setting out the draft revenue budget for the financial year 2024/25 – 2026/27. The financial position for the Council was extremely challenging with significant pressures identified in relation to both inflation and ongoing increases in demand for key services, in line with those being experienced nationally. The Council discharged more than 1300+ statutory duties and was facing increased demand pressures in key services such as Adult Social Care, Children's Services, Home to School Transport and Temporary Accommodation. This year had become the most difficult to date in responding to these challenges whilst delivering a balanced budget, and this has been achieved through a significant programme of additional savings and income.

The Council had a strong track record of delivering savings with £45m delivered in the first 3 years, a further £30.4m of income and savings currently budgeted for delivery in 2023-24. A further cumulative programme of £96.1m of new income and savings had been identified as part of the 2024-25 Draft Budget. The draft budget proposed was built on the proposed Council Tax base and assumed a 2.99% increase in basic Council Tax and a 2% increase for the Adult Social Care Precept, giving a total increase of 4.99%. This was the maximum allowable without triggering a local referendum and was below the average rate of inflation experienced during 2023/24.

The Provisional Local Government Finance Settlement was published on 18th December and provided details of provisional central government funding allocations for 2024/25. Given the timing it had not been possible to fully consider the implications of these figures, and as such this Draft Budget was based on estimates consistent with the Autumn Statement and Funding Policy Statement. The implications of the Provisional Settlement would be fully considered in the Final Budget.

Whilst this budget provided the best available estimates for the 2024/25-2026/27 financial years, there was significant risk around future income, cost and funding projections. The external environment was continuously monitored, and significant and material changes would be reported and included within the final budget presented to full Council on 21st February.

The Capital Programme was presented for 4 years as many schemes span multiple financial years. In total the programme included £562.8m of projects. As with previous years it was proposed that a recommendation was made to Council in February for delegation to be given to Cabinet to add up to £100m worth of

schemes to the capital programme, to be funded through prudential borrowing, subject to a robust business case being approved. This would enable additional priorities, such as regeneration and housing projects, to come forward and be added to the capital programme once positive business cases were fully developed.

The Council Tax Resolution report would be presented as a separate report as part of the final budget in February and would contain the final information from the other precepting authorities leading to the total Council Tax for the area, which full council was required to approve. This report did not include special expenses budgets. Discussions were ongoing with the relevant committees to agree special expenses budgets for 2023/24, and these would also be presented alongside the final budget. The level of precept charged in Special Expenses areas formed part of the Council tax referendum threshold calculation, so final Council Tax levels cannot be finalised until this matter was agreed.

The Leader made the following points:-

- Further consultation would be undertaken with Bucks Business Group. Any further feedback from residents and wider stakeholders on this draft budget would also be considered.
- Budget scrutiny would commence week beginning 8<sup>th</sup> January and was available to watch on the webcast.
- The Draft Revenue Budget and Capital Programme supported the delivery of all of the Council's aims and priorities, which were set out in the 2020-25 Corporate Plan.
- A public consultation on priorities and budgets was conducted between 31 August 2023 and 15 October 2023.
- Details of the key risks to the budget were included in the Draft Budget and included: Inflation and national economic conditions, Central Government funding changes, Growth in demand and complexity in Social Care, Temporary Accommodation, SEND and Home to School Transport, Market sustainability and supplier failure and loss of income across a range of services.
- Recognition of the fact that pressures on local authorities were a national problem with six councils having declared bankruptcy. There were additional pressures, such as the national living wage increase and also decisions made by the Government, such as not being able to charge for commercial waste where no additional funding had been given by the Government to compensate for this.
- The Council had a strong track record of delivering savings as referred to earlier with £45m delivered in the first 3 years, a further £30.4m of income and savings currently budgeted for delivery in 2023-24.
- There were concerns regarding risks around income charges such as parking.
- The Council forecasted that by 2027, it would have saved a total of nearly £172 million from both savings and additional income.

The Service Director for Finance reported that there were risks around the budget,

particularly the pressures highlighted with increased demand on those four key statutory areas, but this should be managed through savings and income and that the Council had a strong track record of good financial management.

During discussion the following comments were made:-

- Reference was made that despite difficult financial times, the Council had invested an extra £5 million in the County's road network this year on top of £100 million it had already committed to spending over a four-year period. The Council also hoped that further funding would be provided by Central Government due to the impact of HS2 on Buckinghamshire with funding no longer required for the northern leg.
- The Council discharged more than 1,300 statutory services and these services were assessed regularly by Ofsted and the CQC who made recommendations without recognition that Councils were under financial pressures.
- A Cabinet Member emphasised that non-statutory services were also key and cutting a non-statutory service could significantly impact a statutory service. For example, services provided by the Council for health and wellbeing helped mental health and if cut could put pressure on children and adult services. The Leader commented that funding for non-statutory services inevitably got squeezed but it was those services, such as libraries and leisure centres, which residents expected Councils to provide. Some areas also brought in a good income such as the Film Office at £4.27 million.
- Another Cabinet Member commented on the previous point, that non-statutory and cross portfolio projects played a key part in managing pressures such as preventative work and promoting good mental health which impacted housing, adult and children's services. It was important to maximise efficiencies through these projects whilst still carrying out statutory duties. 90% of the health and wellbeing budget was spent on statutory duties. It was encouraging to see from the public consultation that protecting the vulnerable was a top priority.
- With regard to the public consultation and respondent comments, it was noted that one of the biggest reduced spends was council running costs with savings and efficiencies from back office services including HR, IT and Finance. In the next four years, the spend was being reduced from £59 million to £52 million, which was a reduction of 12% on top of all the savings previously delivered. There was also a project to look at the council estate and use of council offices, which had led to the closure of the Amersham office in the next six months. The Leader commented that this was a good example of maximising efficiencies from becoming a unitary council. He also mentioned that the back office was a key part of the Council operating, for example the Finance Team collected Council Tax.
- Reference was made to the Homelessness and Regulatory services key data. Homelessness was one area, which was causing pressure on the budget. A weekly meeting was held where every client was discussed and also there were projects to open more accommodation rather than rely on expensive bed and breakfast provision e.g., Bridge Court, High Wycombe. This included council owned accommodation to reduce costs. The Housing Strategy

provided a long term vision with information on how some of the gaps in provision could be addressed. There was also a shortage of accommodation for sheltered housing for older people.

The Chief Executive also reported on the savings made by the Council since 2020, which was a 38% reduction in the Council's budget against rising cost pressures in terms of unit cost for services, including volume of services, which the Council was legally required to provide such as special education need disabilities, homelessness, adult social care, children's social care and home to school transport. As the Leader had referred to, there was also continued oversight by the inspectorates, including Oflog (Office for Local Government) which would also be monitoring performance without taking account of budget pressures. The Council also worked alongside other statutory bodies who were also facing pressures such as the NHS. This meant that the Council faced difficulties in providing and improving services against such a challenging financial backdrop.

#### **RESOLVED**

- 1. That the revenue budget for 2024/25 - 2026/27 and capital programme be APPROVED as draft.**
- 2. That the outcome of the budget consultation (Appendix 1) be NOTED.**
- 3. That the Schedule of Fees and Charges for 2024/25 (Appendix 2) be AGREED.**
- 4. That the current risks associated with the draft budget proposals be NOTED.**
- 5. That the proposal to seek delegation from Council to Cabinet for up to £100m of new capital schemes to be added to the capital programme, through Prudential Borrowing, and where robust financial business cases have been made, be supported.**
- 6. That it be noted that a supplementary report, the formal Council Tax Resolution, will accompany the final budget submitted to Full Council.**

#### **10 High Wycombe 2050 Transport Strategy and High Wycombe Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP)**

Cabinet received a report on the High Wycombe 2050 Transport Strategy and High Wycombe Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP), which had been developed in parallel to ensure alignment and synergy. Their development had been informed by extensive engagement, including an 8-week public consultation in late 2022.

The High Wycombe 2050 Transport Strategy outlined a future ambition for the town's transport system, consisting of a vision statement, three 'connecting' themes (Connecting Locally; Connecting Regionally; Connecting Green Spaces), and a set of key outcomes for each theme. A range of transport interventions, focused in and around the High Wycombe area, were proposed to deliver the overall transport vision.

The High Wycombe LCWIP used 5 network planning concepts (Walkable Core; Main



Radial Routes, Key Links and Hubs; Healthy Neighbourhoods; Wider Network and Strategic Routes; A Cohesive and Connected Network) to outline a future walking, cycling and wheeling network and a prioritised programme of infrastructure improvements. The LCWIP covered a study area of a 20-minute walking and a 25-minute cycling catchment surrounding High Wycombe town centre and linked with surrounding settlements.

The purpose of producing these plans was to ensure that the Council had a clear policy direction and set of transport priorities for High Wycombe that could be taken forward for further development, to inform future funding applications, and to enable efficient delivery of schemes.

The report summarised the public consultation results and the subsequent amendments to both plans, which have been discussed with local members, and sought approval for the amended High Wycombe 2050 Transport Strategy and High Wycombe LCWIP to progress to adoption as a Council policy.

The Cabinet Member for Transport reported that at present, the proposed interventions were, in the main, unfunded, except for those where funding had already been secured to support scheme development or delivery. Future opportunities to secure funding from appropriate sources (such as grants, developer contributions and government funding) to progress and deliver the proposed interventions would continue to be explored. By adopting the High Wycombe LCWIP, the Council would be in a stronger position to seek government funding for walking, cycling and wheeling infrastructure. The Council had recently been successful in securing funding for a route between the Pine Trees development and The Rye as the LCWIP had shown the benefits of joining these locations. The Plan did recognise the problem of topography with the hills in Wycombe, but the use of e-bikes and e-scooters would help make those journeys easier. Furthermore, not all cycle trips in High Wycombe need to be routed through the hilly areas. For example, east-west movement along the valley floor was relatively flat.

Cabinet took into account a representation, which had been submitted on 3 January 2024 by a local resident, that was published as a supplement. The Director of Legal and Democratic Services informed Members that he was satisfied that the correct governance process had been followed. During discussion, the Leader asked all Cabinet Members to confirm that they had read the representation that had been emailed to them on 3 January 2024 and been provided in hard copy at the meeting. All Cabinet Members confirmed that they had done this.

The Cabinet Member reported that a concern had been raised that some areas, such as Flackwell Heath did not feature in the static LCWIP network map. The Cabinet Member advised that the LCWIP included further maps that provided more detail. The maps in the LCWIP were illustrative areas where cycling and walking infrastructure could be implemented but no definitive routes had been prescribed. An important consideration was to consider ways to connect onto and off routes and the rights of way network helped with this connectivity.

Members were reassured that these two strategies did link into other policies of the Council including the climate change policy, planning and transport policies. In addition, partnership working was required such as the bus industry which had been deregulated and ensuring place based regeneration. Members were also reassured that an outline Equality Impact Assessment had been completed and further assessment would be completed. With regards to the accessibility of infrastructure, the Cabinet Member advised that suitable materials and features would be in the design of schemes, such as dropped kerbs and tactile paving. The two Strategies had been written for all users and recognised the need to provide more sustainable driving.

**RESOLVED –**

- (1) **That the public consultation results and subsequent amendments made to the draft High Wycombe 2050 Transport Strategy and High Wycombe Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) be NOTED.**
- (2) **That the amended High Wycombe 2050 Transport Strategy and High Wycombe LCWIP be ADOPTED.**

**11 Skills and Employment Strategy 2024-2029**

Cabinet received a report on the Skills and Employment Strategy that introduced an ambitious agenda for raising the productivity of Buckinghamshire through place-based skills and employment priorities. It detailed the role people, communities, employers, learning providers and investors could play in achieving the Buckinghamshire vision for growth.

The Council would continue to build on its reputation as a great place to live and work, with a clear skills and employment vision and ambitions helping to maximise on local opportunities and minimise challenges. The delivery of skills and employment priorities would improve the quality of life and help more people benefit from the opportunities the county had to offer.

The Buckinghamshire Skills and Employment Strategy brought together the latest analysis, stakeholder vision and the tertiary education providers to ensure that Buckinghamshire's current and future workforce were equipped with the skills to reach their potential, gain meaningful employment and boost productivity. The Skills and Employment Strategy:

- Set out the vision for place-based skills and employment priorities that would underpin delivery of the Council's ambitions for Buckinghamshire.
- Established the approach to economic growth through investment in skills and employment and focuses action.
- Enabled effective local partnership working, encouraging collaborative approaches to addressing local challenges and sharing best practice.

The Deputy Cabinet Member commented that the reason they were providing this

Strategy was that there were 13,100 residents in Buckinghamshire who were economically inactive who want to work but required additional support. This was according to last year's annual population survey (ONS). Therefore, there was talent and skills in the County being underused. This would also have an impact on other Council services, such as housing, and partners, such as the NHS. This was also a Strategy with targeted interventions in specific areas identified by stakeholders and monitored by the Skills Strategy Board. There were 26,930 residents over the age of 18 without qualifications and many of the interventions in the Strategy were designed to help them, such as the Multiply Programme or Horizons with its own employment programme. There had been good collaborative work around the Strategy with young people such as Youth Voice Bucks, Bucks Careers Leaders Hub of School Leaders and consultation with employers. If approved, the Strategy would be fully funded with a budget of £13 million, 14% of that funded by the Council and 86% by Government and their partners. Further funding opportunities would be sought to the sum of £10 million.

During discussion the following points were made:-

- Cabinet Members welcomed the fact that this Strategy applied to a wide age spectrum from school leavers to mature adults and linked into personal wellbeing (combatting deprivation and poverty) and improving the overall economy.
- Some Members had been involved as part of a Member Forum, but a question was asked about involvement from local members across Buckinghamshire. In terms of Member involvement, other Members would continue to be involved and there would be a launch event on 12 January, to which MP's had been invited. The Leader commented that this Strategy would link in well with the Opportunity Bucks Programme to help residents living in those wards overcome barriers to employment.
- There were also Skills Bootcamps, which were free short courses designed to help residents with the knowledge and skills which were required by employers across Buckinghamshire. These courses lasted up to 16 weeks and were fully funded. Skills Bootcamps were put of the Government's Levelling – Up agenda and the Lifetime Skills Guarantee Programme. This month was the start of the first wave of Bootcamps which would be held at Bucks College Group. A contract had just been signed for the second wave of Skills Bootcamps investing £3.2 million to provide another 788 learner outcomes in sectors which the Council were focussed on such as construction, engineering, digital, agriculture, leadership and management, gaming and creative (film/tv). These courses would commence in April.  
<https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/community-and-safety/skills-opportunities-and-employment/enrol-in-a-skills-bootcamp>
- This Strategy worked well with the Local Skills Implementation Plan. A Cabinet Member reported that the Plan included data from 800 businesses and 22 education providers and recognised what industry wanted. He asked about how adults mid-career fitted into the Strategy. The Deputy Cabinet Member referred to the 788 learner outcomes and ensuring that all needs

were met across the County, particularly in the Opportunity Bucks wards.

- A Member commented that there were no metrics in the Action Plan. The Service Director of Major Projects reported that a dashboard was being created and there were already metrics in place, as well as more being developed, which would be reported on frequently. The metrics would be considered by the Skills Strategy Board which would be reported into the Growth Board.
- A Cabinet Member welcomed promotion of the virtual work experience platform, which had been rolled out recently and was on the Council website in partnership with Youth Employment UK. This included online videos showcasing careers and opportunities within Buckinghamshire Council. The Bucks Skills Hub was also a great resource. The Buckinghamshire Jobs and Apprenticeships Fair also advertised live vacancies.  
<https://bucksskillshub.org/>  
<https://bucksskillshub.org/news/live-virtual-nhs-healthcare-careers-work-experience-programme>

#### **RESOLVED –**

**That the Skills and Employment Strategy 2024-29 be ADOPTED, as a key corporate document of Buckinghamshire Council.**

#### **12 Devolution of three Community Centres in Aylesbury**

Cabinet received a report detailing that, in line with the Council's Service Devolution and Asset Transfer Policy, it was proposed to progress with an offer of terms to transfer the leases of 3 Council owned community centres to Aylesbury Town Council from 1 April 2024. The proposed devolution included the Quarrendon and Meadowcroft Community Centre, the Haydon Hill Community Centre and the Aylesbury Multicultural Centre.

If approved, Aylesbury Town Council would be offered 25-year full repairing and insuring (FRI) leases and become the 'head landlords' of the centres. Buckinghamshire Council would therefore retain overall ownership of the assets. Buckinghamshire Council would retain authority as a 'superior landlord' meaning any impactful decision Aylesbury Town Council (ATC) might wish to make regarding development of sites would have to first be approved by Buckinghamshire Council.

Under the proposal, the 3 existing Community Associations who currently occupied and utilised the centres would be offered internal repairing insuring (IRI) lease renewals of 10 years, which would ensure their continued use and access to the facilities.

The Cabinet Member for Communities suggested an amendment to the recommendation that the Town Council required a 10 year lease for bowlers field rather than a short term two year lease mentioned in the report. This was because the field needed some investment as it had a flooding issue so a longer term lease was more practical. There were also changing rooms.

Because of the way Special Expenses funding worked through the MTFP, the only Revenue saving for the Council would be on Aylesbury Multicultural Centre (£20k), as this was not part of the Special Expenses arrangement.

A Cabinet Member reported that it was right to devolve facilities to town and parish councils where appropriate, but in the current financial climate it was important to lease to councils and retain ownership as the Council could not afford to gift any land. He asked a question whether this was a one off or whether there were any other plans to devolve further. In response, it was noted that this was a one off project relating to this area (although there were other projects being planned), the playing field had not been used for a long time and needed some investment and it would be better value to devolve. The Centre had a 25 year lease.

The Leader referred to a previous Cabinet and one of the issues with devolution was that it required a lot of staff resources which impacted on the budget. The work was very intensive in terms of negotiations so there was a restriction on the amount of devolution proposals that could be implemented at any one point in time. Each opportunity was looked at on its own merits and for this proposal it made sense in terms of consolidation of the facility.

#### **RESOLVED –**

- (1) That the proposed offer and Heads of Terms for the devolution of three sites under long term leases to Aylesbury Town Council, including that the offer of a short term lease on Bowlers Field will be for 10 years and not 2 years, be AGREED.**
  
- (2) That the Revenue Budget changes to remove the Special Expenses budget of £41,372 within the Communities portfolio, and a new Revenue Saving of £20,000 per year in the Accessible Housing & Resources portfolio, be AGREED.**

### **13 Six Monthly Adult Social Care Update**

Cabinet received an update report setting out recent developments in adult social care, both locally and nationally, and plans for the next period. The main highlights were:-

- Demand for adult social care continued to grow across the country due to rising life expectancy and the changing needs and preferences of service users.
- Updates on developments since May including the Next Steps to put People at the Heart of Care government White Paper and the findings of the Hewitt Review into Integrated Care Systems.
- Although originally planned for 2023, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) was yet to publish the programme of formal assessments. However, the Council was prioritising ongoing preparations to ensure readiness for the future CQC assessment in Buckinghamshire. There had been pilot local authorities who had been inspected by the CQC.
- Staff turnover remained high at 28.3% during 2022/23 and the sector was

particularly challenged in retaining younger staff.

- The Housing Strategy was a key piece of work and meeting the needs of residents including supported living care.
- Reference was made to the Autism Strategy on which the Council had recently consulted on.
- Local public health and care sector organisations had established the Buckinghamshire Executive Partnership (BEP). A key element of their work was overseeing delivery of the Buckinghamshire Health and Care Integration programme. The programme's focus was to support speedy discharge when a person was fit to leave hospital and to provide rehabilitation and therapy support to enable people to regain as much of their former independence as possible to reduce the likelihood of readmission.

The Cabinet Member for Health and Wellbeing discussed the challenges which were being faced locally and nationally with increases in demand and an ageing demographic. There was a difficult social care market with many providers struggling, inflationary increases, staffing costs and increases in the national living wage. These issues were beyond the direct influence of the Council. All possible mitigating actions were being taken to manage demand in the market.

During discussion the following points were noted:-

- The number of people working in adult social care was larger than those working in the NHS. There were 3 million people working in the NHS and social care. Staff turnover was high at 28%. There were 128 care homes in Buckinghamshire. The Cabinet Member reported that there were a large number of low paid workers in this area who were lost to the retail sector which was paying higher wages. 63% of new starters worked in social care.
- The Council was not a major care provider and therefore relied on external providers. A question was asked on how the Council tapped into the external market to obtain the best value. The Cabinet Member reported that there were strong local connections with providers through the integrated commissioning team. There was a sophisticated framework for this called a dynamic purchasing vehicle, which provided a broad range of services. The Council obtained intelligence on local providers and also linked in with the CQC. The Corporate Director also reported that costs were benchmarked and monitored carefully including ensuring that quality services were being provided.
- The Corporate Director thanked staff for the great work being carried out on discharges including occupational therapists.

**RESOLVED –**

**That the latest developments in relation to Adult Social Care both locally and nationally be NOTED.**

- 14 Six Monthly Children's Services Update**  
Cabinet received a report providing:

- an update on the national and local developments across the Children's Services Directorate in Buckinghamshire. The document covered the key policy changes relating to safeguarding, school attendance, and the social work workforce.
- a summary of the progress of the Children's Services Transformation programme, which aimed to streamline the service delivery across Early Help and Social Care, reduce handoffs and prioritise the development of supportive and enabling relationships between families and professionals.
- an overview of the increasing demand and financial pressures on the services for children with SEND, unaccompanied asylum seeking children and placements for children in care, as well as the actions the service was taking to mitigate the pressures.
- feedback received from Ofsted and the DfE on the performance and improvement of the services and the areas that require further attention and support.

During discussion the following points were noted:-

- Education Secretary Gillian Keegan had commented that tackling school attendance was her priority. Attendance figures had dropped since the pandemic. Buckinghamshire was below the national absence rate although Opportunity Bucks areas had higher than normal absence rates. There were two full time attendance officers, but help would also be provided by locality teams. There was focussed work with schools particularly with persistent offenders. The DfE was being lobbied for additional funding to help increase school attendance nationally and workshops were being held with DfE advisors. There was a concern regarding Opportunity Bucks school attendance as this could impact on health and wellbeing and employment issues and it was important to have a Strategy to address this.
- A Cabinet Member made reference to a table in the report that referred to demand levels which looked like numbers were decreasing but costs were escalating. The Corporate Director reported that whilst there was a decrease in certain categories of threshold of need, there was an increase in terms of contact and demand from the safeguarding hub. However, with better decision making they were working with children in those categories in a more appropriate way and not just pushing work through for an assessment. The increase in cost was primarily looked after children, which related to the unit cost as numbers had remained static. As there was a sufficiency issue independent providers could charge more money and also the cost of agency social workers was still high.
- In terms of casework a recent audit said that 70% was good, 5% outstanding and 15% which did not meet good. This did not necessarily mean that it was inadequate but that it did not meet the criteria of good. This was a stable position that had been sustained for the last 6-9 months. There were still improvements to be made in casework e.g., he had noticed a recent example of where casework was in the wrong domain of need where social worker input might not be required and there had been some delay as it was awaiting a decision as to whether it could be referred to an early help

worker.

**RESOLVED –**

**That the national and local developments across the Children's Services Directorate be NOTED.**

**15 Buckinghamshire Area Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Update**

Cabinet received a report providing:

- a progress update on the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Improvement Programme since inspection.
- a brief overview of the new SEND Inspection Framework and outcomes to date.
- an overview of current challenges across the system and the evolving strategic plans to try to mitigate the challenges.

The local authority and the Integrated Care Board (ICB) were jointly responsible for services provided to children and young people with SEND in Buckinghamshire and were subject to inspection by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission (CQC). Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West (BOB) was the partner ICB. Ofsted and the CQC inspected the services provided for children and young people with SEND in Buckinghamshire between 7 March and 11 March 2022. Following the local area inspection, the Local Authority and the Integrated Care Board (formerly the Clinical Commissioning Group [CCG]) were jointly responsible for submitting an action plan to Ofsted, detailing how 3 areas of significant weakness would be addressed. The plan, submitted on 8 August 2022 was approved by Ofsted on 25 August 2022.

The 3 areas of weakness identified related to:

- The lack of a cohesive area strategy to identify and meet the needs of those children and young people requiring speech and language, communication and occupational therapy.
- Waiting times for assessments on the autism and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder diagnosis pathways and the system-owned plans in place to address this.
- Waiting times to see a community paediatrician.

The current challenges across the SEND system related to:-

- waits for access to diagnoses and therapy support still being too long.
- a sharp rise in requests for EHCP assessment, together with a shortage of Educational Psychologists (This had led to a decline in performance against the statutory 20-week EHCP needs assessment measure).
- the number of EHCPs maintained by Buckinghamshire was also increasing.
- there were very significant financial pressures on the High Needs Block.

Buckinghamshire was not alone in facing challenges in meeting the needs of children



with SEND. The local area had sought to deliver against a wider improvement programme to ensure the experience of children and families improved across all areas of SEND.

The Cabinet Member reported that all eligible children had to have an Education, Health and Care Plan and there was a strict legal framework around this, which meant there was no flexibility in provision of services. There had also been a radical change in demand; in 2022 there were 6000 young people and this year there was 7000. There were also staff shortages. There was a restructuring of therapists and also a restructure of the SEND workforce.

The Leader introduced Rachael Corser, Chief Nursing Officer with the Integrated Care Board. She reported that the partnership working across the sectors was strengthening. There had been some financial and people investment in the service area but there was still further work to be undertaken. The Inspection had been undertaken following a new area SEND inspection framework and also was mindful of problems being experienced in neighbouring authorities such as Oxfordshire. One of the advantages of having a wider integrated care system was that Councils could ensure that any learning from past experience was taken on board. There were some significant workforce challenges with up to a third of vacancies and it was important to work with partners in terms of streamlining referral processes and maximising the workforce in conjunction with parent and carer forums and children to ensure their needs were met as much as possible. Partnership working with providers was strengthening with Oxford Health Foundation Trust and Buckinghamshire Healthcare Trust, who were working with the ICB in strengthening those referrals and getting better access to community paediatrics pathways (and had been cited as a national exemplar). They were also working with speech and language therapists and occupational therapists. Whilst improvements were being made, there were still areas to progress which were being monitored by the ICB Chief Executive monthly personally. The Corporate Director for Children's Services also referred to the Delivering Better Value Programme to redesign and introduce early support to children and families due to the increasing demand. The recommissioned Therapies Service would further support delivery of this when the new contract goes live in 2024.

During discussion the following points were noted:-

- With regard to EHC needs assessment requests these had increased from 680 in 2016 to 1,365 in 2022 which showed an increase of 107%. 7,000 ECHP's would need to be processed, which was a significant workload in terms of assessments and provision of service. The Chief Nursing Officer reported that whilst children were waiting for assessments early help was provided using a variety of tools including Artificial Intelligence and digital platforms as often children responded well to those mechanisms. The Corporate Director reported that ECHPs were dependent on Educational Psychologists who were difficult to recruit and during the Summer they had used Associate EP's to complete parts of the ECHP (Appendix D) to help alleviate workloads. EP's

had also been asked to prioritise ECHPs but that had taken them operationally from schools.

- A Cabinet Member referred to ICB investment as £4.6m had been invested from the ICB in April to support additional specialist/clinical capacity across the pathways. Recruitment against this investment had commenced but the impact had not yet been realised. The Chief Nursing Officer reported that recruitment was a challenge, but they were looking at how they skill mix qualified occupational therapists and qualified speech and language therapists with support and associate roles and looking at other collaborative platforms bringing in groups of children, parents and carers together to make collective assessments. This was working well and they were looking to build on that investment. In terms of recruitment they were looking wider with internationally educated therapists. There were challenges but benefits of that investment were being realised.
- In response to another question, the Corporate Director reported that they were involving parent groups in the Strategy and they have also had a Shout out for SEND Session with young people which he attended, along with the Cabinet Member, where young people with SEND had discussed their experiences of being involved in processes and working with schools. The child was always involved in a ECHP as it was their plan.
- Reference was made to the transformation scheme implementation plan which dovetailed into the SEND programme. The aim was to encourage children and families to identify issues at a young age so that needs could be met at an early stage, which should avoid any escalations later in their school life. Schools also had a budget for higher needs and were taking part in accessing local therapy and dealing with issues to avoid any further escalation.
- In terms of best practice, the Chief Nursing Officer reported that they had been looking at models used by Hampshire and Isle of Wight, which was an advantage of having wider partnerships and networks. Implementation Plans used by other Councils who had been through challenging times were also being looked at.

#### **RESOLVED –**

**That the update from the Area SEND Partnership be NOTED.**

#### **16 Provision for Looked After Children - a new approach**

Local authorities had a statutory duty to provide sufficient high-quality placements for their looked after children. Towards the end of the Covid pandemic in Autumn 2021 the external (private) placements market collapsed. This had caused a national crisis in placement sufficiency, which had been deepened by a range of new challenges linked to the cost-of-living crisis and economic downturn.

The scale of these challenges had prompted local authorities to develop new and radical approaches to achieving placement sufficiency. Local authorities across the South East were exploring options for expanding in-house (Council-run) provision.

Cabinet received a report presenting a business case for Buckinghamshire to invest in up to 10 new in-house children's homes (32 beds) taking a phased approach. These proposals would enable the Council to meet its statutory duties around placement quality and sufficiency for future years, deliver £4.998m savings (by 2027/28), while also reducing exposure to financial and legal risk. The potential to work in partnership to deliver this proposal was being explored.

Despite maintaining a stable proportion of children in care, the Council's spend on placements had increased significantly over the last 3 years from £27.3m to a forecast £38.4m this year. This reflected growing demand for residential placements due to a loss of foster carers and unit cost increases of 25-30% across all external placement types during this period. This started to reveal the impact of the post-pandemic global economic crisis on the national placements market. It was a complex and dynamic picture, with various interconnected factors creating a 'perfect storm' – with all placement types becoming harder to find and costing significantly more. As a result, in November 2021 the Council placed their first child in 'unregistered' provision. Unregistered placements were also very expensive. This was where a local authority placed a child under the age of 18 in accommodation that was not registered with Ofsted. Wider engagement across the South East (via the South East Sector-Led Improvement Partnership) had shown that all Authorities in the region were facing similar pressures and challenges to Buckinghamshire in terms of demand far outstripping supply and significant increases in average placement costs.

**RESOLVED –**

- (1) That a phased approach to invest in up to 10 new in-house children's homes (including 32 additional beds), to be delivered in stages over the next 3 years be AGREED and ADOPTED, to include:**
  - (i) The addition to the capital programme of £11.184m of capital expenditure, of which £984k to be added to the 2023-24 Capital Programme and £10.2m to the Capital MTFP, phased over 4 years, funded from borrowing.**
  - (ii) The inclusion of a net -£0.662m saving in 2025-26 rising to -£2.981m saving in 2026-27 and -£4.998m in 2027-28 to the Revenue MTFP resulting from moving children currently in high-cost unregistered and external residential provision into in-house children's homes.**
  - (iii) Delivery of the programme in clear phases including a further review of the business case by Cabinet within 12 months.**
  
- (2) That authority be delegated to the Service Director of Property and Assets, in conjunction with the Service Director Major Projects, the Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration and the Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services, to use the Council's existing property portfolio for this programme (where the costs are in line with the agreed**

**Capital and Revenue budgets).**

- (3) **That, if it is not possible to identify suitable properties within the Council's existing portfolio, authority be delegated to the Service Director of Property and Assets, in conjunction with the Service Director Major Projects, the Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources and the Cabinet Member for Education and Children's Services, to undertake property searches, exchange and complete on the initial four homes referenced in this report (homes 5-10 will be subject to Cabinet decisions before phases 2 and 3 commence).**

## **17 South East Aylesbury Link Road (SEALR) Phase 2**

Cabinet received a report on the South East Aylesbury Link Road (SEALR) project which was the construction of approximately 1.1 miles of dual carriageway including 3 new roundabout junctions. The report related to SEALR Phase 2, between B442 Lower Road and the Stoke Mandeville Relief Road being constructed by HS2.

The Stoke Mandeville Relief Road was mitigation identified through the HS2 Act, arising from the closure of the A4010. The A4010 was the main route between Aylesbury and Princes Risborough and was a blue light route. The Council had previously entered into a funding and delivery agreement with HS2 for the SEALR phase 2 project, which enabled the Council to replace a section of the single carriageway Stoke Mandeville Relief Road with a dual carriageway road and a new roundabout providing access to the future South West Aylesbury Link Road.

The funding agreement was the contractual mechanism whereby HS2 provided partial funding, based on the cost of delivering the single carriageway Stoke Mandeville Relief Road, in return for the Council delivering SEALR Phase 2, within a specified time period. The report sought the necessary delegations to deliver SEALR Phase 2 within the required timeframes to achieve the intended programme and meet its contractual obligations with HS2.

The delegations provided in December 2022 by Cabinet were conditional and time limited, based on predicted triggers being met, however these had been unobtainable. Therefore, to give effect to the past Cabinet decisions, a revised delegation was now being sought. The report sought the necessary delegations to deliver SEALR Phase 2 within the required timeframes to achieve the intended programme and mitigate HS2 closure of the A4010.

The programme for SEALR Phase 2 was extremely tight due to the requirement for the road to be open to traffic by the 1 December 2024. In order to meet this deadline, the Council would be required to issue the notice to proceed to the contractors by February 2024. There were several risks to the construction programme including the discharge of pre-commencement planning conditions, Thames Water diversions, ground conditions, land acquisitions and access arrangements.

The Leader commented that there were a number of risks to the overall project cost including liaising with landowners and the possibility that inflation could increase further beyond the identified budget. The Cabinet Member for Transport reported that whilst this was a small stretch of road it was complex to implement and involved a number of stakeholders e.g. Network Rail and HS2. This project involved a series of decisions but hopefully this report would provide reassurance to the public that it was being progressed. The Leader referred to the map showing Phase 2 of the Project, which had been included in the report.

**RESOLVED –**

- 1. To amend the Cabinet delegation in December 2022, and delegate authority to the Corporate Directors of Communities and of Planning Growth and Sustainability, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to:**
  - i) Proceed with the delivery of Phase 2 of the South East Aylesbury Link Road.**
  - ii) Take all necessary steps including to enter into any associated agreements, contracts or licenses required associated with the delivery and funding of the works in relation to (i) above.**
  
- 2. That it be AGREED to approve and release an increase to the budget in the Capital Programme for SEALR Phase 2 as set out in the confidential Appendix B, funded from reappportioned HIF grant subject to Homes England approval, HS2 Funding Agreement and Section 106 contributions.**

**18 Woodlands and Delivery of the Eastern Link Road South**

Woodlands was a major mixed-use development site on the east side of Aylesbury, including the Eastern Link Road (South) (ELRS) connecting with the Eastern Link Road (North) and the A41 Aston Clinton Road. The ELRS was a fundamental part of a long-term strategy to deliver an orbital traffic route around Aylesbury. The Council had secured funding towards the delivery of the ELRS through the Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) and Local Growth Funds (LGF), to support early delivery of the ELRS.

Due to inflation/cost rises, HIF funding was now insufficient for the Council to deliver the ELRS as a dual carriageway within existing budgets. It was therefore concluded that the best way to bring forward the delivery of the ELRS and the Woodlands development was through the marketing of the site and a possible Joint Venture/Special Purchase Vehicle Partnership, including the Council, or a site sale facilitated by the Council. This would enable the provision of critical highway infrastructure, as well as supporting the planned growth in Aylesbury.

The report paper provided a high-level overview of such an approach and sought support for further work to be undertaken ahead of a formal decision on the full business case for investment being presented and taken by the Council.

The Leader reported that he was disappointed that this was now a single carriageway as the aspiration had been for it to be a dual carriageway, but land had

been reserved for a future date if funding became available. The Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing reported that there was some HIF funding, but due to cost price inflation the Council could not deliver a dual carriageway with the current pricing. It was hoped that a private developer could deliver this at a lower cost. A report would be submitted to a future Cabinet meeting once the market exercise had been completed with recommendations on the next steps.

## **RESOLVED**

- 1. That the preferred delivery option for the Eastern Link Road South be APPROVED.**
- 2. That authority be delegated to the Service Director for Property and Assets, in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Accessible Housing and Resources:**
  - i) To market through a Council procurement process the Woodlands development site to include the Eastern Link Road South as a single carriageway road with passive provision for dualling.**
  - ii) To negotiate revised Heads of Terms with Landowners and Buckinghamshire Advantage to enable the marketing of the site to developers.**
  - iii) To explore opportunities for a Joint Venture / Special Purchase Vehicle Partnership and/or sale to bring forward the Woodlands development to include the Eastern Link Road South as a single carriageway road with passive provision for dualling (developer-led approach).**
- 3. That £800,000 be released from the existing Eastern Link Road South Budget, funded from Housing Infrastructure Fund, agreed by Homes England to cover establishing and negotiating the Heads of Terms, the marketing of the Woodlands site, creating the supporting documentation for the revised Woodlands approach to Homes England, and project management costs.**
- 4. That it be NOTED that a subsequent report for Cabinet will be prepared once marketing has been concluded for the Council to complete negotiations with a selected Developer, Landowners and Buckinghamshire Advantage and enter a Joint Venture/Special Purchase Vehicle Partnership and/or Sale with a development partner once marketing has been concluded and terms from the Selected Developer have been clarified through the marketing and procurement process.**

## **19 Exclusion of the public (if required)**

**RESOLVED -**

that under Section 100(A)(4) of the Local Government Act 1972 the public be excluded from the meeting for the following item(s) of business on the grounds that it involves the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Part I of Schedule 12A of the Act.

Paragraph 3 Information relating to the financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the authority holding that information)

**20 Confidential minutes**

The confidential minutes of the meeting held on 12 December 2023 were agreed as a correct record.

**21 Confidential Appendix - Provision for Looked After Children**

The confidential appendix was discussed.

**22 Confidential Appendices - South East Aylesbury Link Road Project**

The confidential appendices were discussed.

**23 Confidential Appendix - Woodlands and Delivery of the Eastern Link Road South**

The confidential appendix was noted.

**24 Date of next meeting**

13 February 2024