



Buckinghamshire Council

Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee

Minutes

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE GROWTH, INFRASTRUCTURE & HOUSING SELECT COMMITTEE HELD ON THURSDAY 23 NOVEMBER 2023 IN THE OCULUS, BUCKINGHAMSHIRE COUNCIL, GATEHOUSE ROAD, AYLESBURY HP19 8FF, COMMENCING AT 10.00 AM AND CONCLUDING AT 12.02 PM

MEMBERS PRESENT

D Carroll (Chairman), T Hogg, N Brown, S Chapple, I Darby, T Hunter-Watts, Maz Hussain, N Marshall, C Poll, D Town, S Wilson, R Stuchbury and P Brazier

OTHERS IN ATTENDANCE

S Bambrick, L Michelson, T Fowler, M Aughterlony, C Bayley, D Smith and C Urry

Agenda Item

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/CHANGES IN MEMBERSHIP

Apologies had been received from Councillors Qaser Chaudhry, Andrea Baughan, Carl Etholen and Simon Rouse.

Councillors Peter Brazier and Robin Stuchbury were present as substitutes for Councillors Simon Rouse and Andrea Baughan respectively.

2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 7th September 2023 were confirmed as a correct record.

4 PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Question from Claire Molyneux, Clerk to Buckingham Town Council

Buckingham Town Council Planning Committee would like to ask:

Whether the system of referral to area committees is to continue; there are 150 – 180 Buckingham applications per year, some of which we or Shire councillors have called in, and yet none have been judged deserving of a public airing since February 2020.

So far 9 of the scheduled 13 meetings this calendar year have been cancelled, so it isn't pressure of business.

Response from Councillor Peter Strachan, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration

Planning Committee provides a very important scrutiny role over planning officer decision making. The current referral system has been flexibly designed to ensure that any planning application can be subjected to Planning Committee consideration as appropriate. This system has been in place since Buckinghamshire Council was formed and has always worked well. It has also been extended to allow Town and Parish Councils to request such scrutiny for certain deserving applications.

As the Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Committee report explains the role of Planning Committee is to focus on those planning applications which would benefit from scrutiny, such as reviewing officer recommendations where the weighing and balancing of the issues is considered to be finely balanced.

To ensure consistency, all requests are considered in consultation with the relevant Planning Committee Chairman. Taking any planning application to a Planning Committee means more cost and more delay in making a decision. This process ensures that only those applications that would benefit from scrutiny are taken to Committee, while the others are decided more efficiently under delegated powers. The cancellation of these planned meetings was therefore due to lack of business, i.e. applications that were not considered necessary to be considered by the planning committee meeting.

The case officer report can be seen after all deleted decisions. Parish or Town Councils can see how the matters were handled and can ask the case officer or their Team Leader about anything they are unclear about.

So, in response to the specific question raised, “referral” is part of the Council constitution and is intended to remain so

Question from Surinder Marshall

Please can you explain the process by which mitigation of, and adaptation to climate and environmental breakdown is addressed as a fundamental consideration in the housing strategy. For example, what expertise is employed, at what stage and what evidence is there that this is understood as a crucial factor in developing the strategy, rather than just an add on.

Response from Councillor Mark Winn, Cabinet Member for Homelessness and Regulatory Services

The Housing Strategy acts as a framework for the development of more detailed housing-related plans. These will be devised under the annual housing strategy action plans, the first of which will be produced for 2024-2025. Plans to increase the number of affordable housing schemes built to a high level of energy efficiency will be included. In Buckinghamshire there are examples of affordable housing schemes which have been built to a very high standard of energy efficiency; they can act as a model for the development of future schemes.

The Housing Strategy contains the following priority which focuses on improving the energy efficiency of housing stock in response to climate change:

Priority two – Better Homes: good quality, sustainable and matched to need.

The Housing Strategy supports the Buckinghamshire Council Climate Change Strategy. This strategy contains a section devoted to improving the energy efficiency of housing in Buckinghamshire, with the following actions:

Action 52: Supported registered housing providers' implementation of sustainable energy and climate change adaptation initiatives in their housing stock.

All affordable housing in Buckinghamshire is owned and managed by registered housing providers. Buckinghamshire Council works closely with its registered provider partners. This includes monitoring their plans to improve the energy efficiency of their housing stock in Buckinghamshire. All Registered Providers have asset management strategies, investment plans and net zero carbon road maps in place. Three of our partner registered providers have been awarded funding under the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund to improve the energy efficiency of their homes in Buckinghamshire. The improvements will include the installation of cavity wall insulation, external wall insulation, roof insulation, solar panels, and air source heat pumps. A number of innovative housing retrofit schemes are being carried out.

Action 53: Promote opportunities for residents to improve their homes to help them mitigate and/or adapt to climate change and poor air quality.

The following schemes are included in the Housing Strategy:

- i) The Housing Sustainable Warmth and Home Upgrade Grant.
- ii) The Energy Doctor Scheme.
- iii) The Buckinghamshire Solar Together Scheme which aims to assist residents in installing solar panels and battery storage.

Question from Alan Thawley

Given the acknowledgement that demand for affordable homes outstrips supply by 3:1, as well as concerns that homes built by developers under this category are not always genuinely affordable, how can the strategy look more creatively at other means to narrow this gap, such as support for Community Land Trust initiatives of the sort that already exist in Buckingham, and construction of social housing directly by the council, which would make it easier to more effectively address sustainability, another of the strategy's priorities, for instance by building to Passivhaus standard as has successfully been done in places such as Norwich or Exeter?

Response from Councillor Mark Winn, Cabinet Member for Homelessness and Regulatory Services

The Housing Strategy contains the following priority:

Priority three – New Homes: affordable, accessible, and appropriate.

Buckinghamshire Council will commit to undertaking the following:

- i) Support and enable Registered Providers in delivering new affordable homes, including for those with special needs.
- ii) Explore the use of local authority assets and resources for the purposes of delivering additional new housing.
- iii) Ensure that Residential Development (including Affordable Housing) is considered in Regeneration Strategies, brownfield and redevelopment proposals for mixed use developments where appropriate.

The council will undertake the following actions in order to adopt an innovative approach to increasing the supply of affordable housing in Buckinghamshire:

- Ensure that residential development, including affordable housing, is considered in regeneration strategies, brownfield and redevelopment proposals for mixed use developments where appropriate.
- Support registered providers with funding for the development of affordable homes on under-used or disused land in their ownership.
- Ensure that housing, including affordable housing, is included in regeneration plans by the council and partners.
- Explore opportunities for Build to Rent schemes, including the use of institutional Investment.
- Explore opportunities for the council to deliver more housing using its land, property and financial assets through the creation of an Affordable Housing Enabling Framework
- Identify three council-owned sites to bring forward for new development and complete these developments by 2027. Three new developments completed and let by December 2027.
- Agree priorities for capital funding (including commuted sums) and implement a list of priorities for section 106 monies to be developed. An option which can be considered is lowering the level of rents in certain affordable housing schemes.

Direct delivery by the council is a possibility and an outcome that should be considered. At present we are not able to advise if the council can commit to this, as it would require extensive consideration by the council's senior management team.

In order to understand direct delivery, the council would have to obtain substantial new resources in terms of funding, land, and staff with sufficient skills in finance, development, and property and housing management. A dedicated housing company would need to be set up. Funding would need to be obtained from the Public Works Loans Board; interest rates are high so this would incur significant costs from council resources. In addition, the direct development of affordable homes carries a range of risks. Registered housing providers are generally better equipped to carry this level of risk than local authorities.

As part of the affordable housing development programme, the council will encourage and support the development of affordable homes built to a high standard of energy efficiency. We have two schemes in the county which are being/have been constructed to Passivhaus Standard, and we monitor good practice from other local authorities.

5 DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE REVIEW 22-23

The Committee received an update from Councillor Peter Strachan, Cabinet Member for Planning and Regeneration, Chrissy Urry, Head of Planning & Development, Mark Aughterlony, Development Manager (Core) and Claire Bayley, Development Manager (Majors).

The Cabinet Member introduced the development management performance review for 22-23, highlighting that the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning service was taken very seriously.

During discussion, comments and questions raised by the Committee included.

- In response to a Member query about staffing, the Cabinet Member assured the committee that the planning service was adequately staffed and was able to keep up with demand. A reduction in planning applications was due to a mixture of economic factors and uncertainty around planning legislation.

- The number of planning application extensions of time was an indicator closely monitored by the planning team. At 54%, the team were looking to improve this - in practice the extensions were agreed with the applicants to address issues with applications and to allow for amendments.
- Parish and Town Councils were advised to continue development of neighbourhood plans, even in parallel with the development of the Buckinghamshire Local Plan. It was noted the process itself can offer a degree of protection. If parishes were unsure about developing a neighbourhood plan, they could contact the planning policy team for further advice.
- Planning officers were able to assist with spikes in demand across Buckinghamshire. More recently, there was an increase in work required for major planning applications and a slight decrease in 'minor' applications. This is being addressed with resourcing shifts across planning teams.
- The drop in five-year land supply seen recently in the north & central planning areas could be explained by multiple factors. The overarching industry position, increased cost of materials, the cost of living crisis as well as measures relating to the Chiltern Beechwoods special area of conservation were contributing to the drop. There were planning performance agreements in place with large housing developers on strategic allocations to support delivery on prioritised sites.
- Benchmarking comparison with neighbouring authorities could be included in future versions of the report for the committee.
- The One Uniform project would eventually provide efficiencies for the Council. The use of legacy systems across Buckinghamshire required separate access and when merged would allow for greater flexibility in how the Planning team utilised their resources.
- 97% of planning applications were determined under delegated authority, compared to 3% taken at planning committee. Not all planning applications benefited from the increased scrutiny at planning committee, and it was up to the chairman of the relevant planning committee to determine whether it is necessary. It was noted the 97% figure for delegated decisions was exactly the same as Cornwall Council, a comparable unitary authority.

6 BUCKINGHAMSHIRE HOUSING STRATEGY 2024-2029

The Chairman welcomed Councillor Mark Winn, Cabinet Member for Homelessness and Regulatory Services, Lisa Michelson, Service Director, Housing & Regulatory Services and Duncan Smith, Head of Housing Assets & Development to the meeting.

The following points were highlighted from the presentation.

- There were critical success factors for the listed priorities in the Housing Strategy. For priority 1, following adoption of the Housing Strategy, a Housing Needs Assessment would commence and this would feed into the Local Plan process. A new allocations policy, tenancy strategy and 100% compliance with the Councils nomination rights with registered providers would deliver fair, consistent and effective allocations of tenancies for affordable housing. Temporary accommodation costs and homelessness would be addressed within the strategy through effective maximisation and "move on" options.
- As part of Priority 2, the Council would look to ensure Private Landlords and Registered Providers actively maintain the quality of the properties provided. Effective remediation of housing issues as well as enforcement of HMO licensing would take place through intelligence led cooperation with partners. Accessibility in new and existing homes would be improved through the Disability Facilities Grants Programme Delivery.
- The Housing Strategy committed Buckinghamshire Council to support and enable registered providers in delivering new affordable homes, including for those with special needs. As part of this, the use of local authority assets and resources would be considered for delivery

new housing. The creation of an affordable housing framework will allocate additional financial resources (£106 contributions) which would be used to bring forward sites for new affordable housing development for completion over the Housing Strategy horizon.

- It was noted that there was a large gap between need for one-bedroom residences and those currently provided. By examining gaps in current provision, the best approach to future housing provision could be determined.

During discussion, comments and questions raised by the Committee included.

- Reference was made to a historic council motion, regarding the evaluation of whether the council or a Local Housing Company, should be involved in the direct delivery of affordable housing. It was acknowledged that this piece of work was to be undertaken both to respond to the motion and as a commitment in the Housing Strategy. The aspects of risk and reward of this direct delivery model were to be evaluated, but it was acknowledged that there would be a requirement for significant land and resources to be available. The work to evaluate the opportunity would be provided in due course.
- Steps taken to brief Members on the Housing Strategy, as well as the attendance of the Cabinet Member to present the strategy to the Growth, Infrastructure & Housing Select Scrutiny prior to approval at Cabinet was praised for transparency and allowance for proper scrutiny.
- A variety of members challenged whether the 500 new affordable homes (per annum) was a sufficiently aspirational target. It was stated that the target was derived by speaking to the Registered Providers who will be delivering the homes. There is pressure placed on their business plans to fund the new 'decent homes' programme, net zero carbon targets and building safety. As a result, it was suggested that 500 per annum is an achievable target, but the council would be seeking to encourage and enable Registered Providers to deliver additional homes to this target and if a higher one were set, this may not be achievable. This target would be kept under review as part of the strategy horizon.
- Lack of house building was a national issue that the Council could only partly address. National solutions would need to be put forward by the government to help solve the problem. There was no obligation for Registered Providers to build affordable homes, and building new homes would be part of their individual business plans. Buckinghamshire Council works in partnership to encourage homebuilding schemes with registered providers through, for example, assistance in applying for grant funding from government.
- It was noted that if a scheme for housing development was submitted without affordable housing included, the starting point for the planning team would be to ensure its policy compliant. Where there are economic viability justifications, these are vigorously tested by the planning department to ensure accuracy, and not taken at face value.
- It was noted that the second table on page 75 of the agenda pack was mislabelled and should be titled 'Households whose homelessness was relieved – reasons for homelessness'. This would be corrected on the version available on the consultation page, as well as another minor typographical error highlighted by Members.
- Affordability was raised as an issue within Buckinghamshire. 'Affordable' housing/rent was set at 80% of the commercial level, which would still be too expensive within the county for many residents. The social rent level of 50% was more affordable, however this was difficult to achieve due to viability constraints.

7 WORK PROGRAMME

The Committee noted the Work Programme. Members could contact the Scrutiny Officer for the committee with any additional topics they wished to be included in the Growth, Infrastructure and Housing work programme.

8 DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting will take place 15th February 2024 at 10.00 a.m.