



Communities & Localism Select Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Communities & Localism Select Committee held on Friday 19 July 2024 in The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 10.00 am and concluding at 11.10 am.

Members present

S Bowles, M Hussain OBE JP, F Mahon, S Morgan, C Oliver, N Rana, G Smith, L Smith BEM and A Waite

Others in attendance

P Brazier, M Everitt, A Hussain, S Moore, W Morgan-Brown and K Sutherland

Apologies

J Chhokar, P Drayton, G Hollis and M Stannard

Agenda Item

1 Apologies for absence / Changes in membership

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Chhokar, Drayton, Hollis and Stannard.

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 Frank Mahon declared an interest in relation to item 6 as Chairman of Steeple Claydon Parish Council.

4 Minutes

The minutes of the meetings held on 28th February 2024 and 15th May 2024 were agreed as correct records.

5 Public Questions

There were none.

6 Town and Parish Charter

The Chairman welcomed the following contributors to the meeting:

- Cllr Arif Hussain, Cabinet Member for Communities
- Cllr Peter Brazier, Deputy Cabinet Member for Community Safety
- Wendy Morgan-Brown, Head of Partnerships and Communities
- Matt Everitt, Service Director, Business Intelligence and Community Support

The Cabinet Member for Communities summarised the report making the following key points:

- The Charter was introduced in 2022 to strengthen relationships and improve partnership working. It had the following three themes:
 1. Enable effective communication
 2. Provide effective services and collaboration
 3. Enable Parish and Town Councils to engage with and contribute to the planning process
- Relationships between the unitary council and Town and Parish Councils had improved. A Clerks' Forum had been established to encourage sharing of ideas and practices.
- A Town and Parish Focus Group had established enabling informal discussion on local concerns with the Cabinet and Deputy Cabinet Member. This in turn had fed into more formal Bucks Association of Local Councils (BALC) meetings.
- Communications issued by the Planning team had improved understanding of the process and local councils had been able to call-in decisions directly.
- The Community and Partnership team were ensuring that service areas understood the importance of engaging with and supporting Town and Parish Councils.
- Parish and Town Councils needed to understand that whilst Buckinghamshire Council fully support them, resources were under pressure so sometimes responses to queries may take a bit longer than they would like.

The Cabinet Member for Communities recommended that the Town and Parish Charter should be reviewed to ensure its fitness for the future in the light of the economic climate and the pressure on budgets.

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

- The Chairman noted that an intrinsic part of a Members's role was to attend Town and Parish Council meetings in order to network. He asked if attendance of Councillors at these meetings was monitored. The Cabinet Member for Communities noted that the Leader had reminded Members of the importance of attending Town and Parish Council meetings. The Head of Partnerships and Communities explained that whilst Members' attendance at Community Board meetings was monitored, there was no central record of Members' attendance at Town and Parish Council meetings.
- A Member noted that Parish Councils were not always aware of the VIP number available to them and asked about the level of enquiries to this

number. The Cabinet Member for Communities explained that the point of the number was to provide specialist help and the Head of Partnerships and Communities would provide details of usage. Town and Parish Clerks were provided with contact details for senior officers on a six-monthly basis to ensure that details remained up to date. It was agreed that as some Clerks administer several Town and Parish Councils, it would be helpful to also send the VIP number to Chairmen of local councils.

Action: Head of Partnerships & Communities

- A Member thanked the Cabinet Member for Communities for the positive report and asked to see the results of the Town and Parish Survey. The Cabinet Member for Communities agreed to share the survey with the committee.

Action: Cabinet Member for Communities /Scrutiny Manager

- A Member noted that the Parish Councils in his area often commented that they were unhappy with the service provided by Buckinghamshire Council. Items mentioned ranged from grass cutting to S106 funding for a new bus service where Oxfordshire had been more helpful. Also, some Parish Councillors had commented that they felt excluded from council discussions and decisions. The Cabinet Member for Communities explained that he would be willing to visit Parish Councils to explore whether relationships and communications could be improved.
- A Member noted that it would be useful to see if any issues which had been raised by the Town and Parish Council Survey had led to improvements. The Head of Partnerships and Communities explained that many of the issues raised had been minor problems specific to localities. It might be possible to report on issues which had been raised and improvements made at a higher level.
- A Member felt that partnership working had not been effective. She noted that Aylesbury Town Council had not been kept informed on some plans and suggested that communications could be improved and should be more inclusive. The Cabinet Member for Communities asked for details of specific examples and offered to attend a meeting of Aylesbury Town Council. He would investigate the communication links with council services and ensure that service areas followed the protocol for communications.
- A Member raised the subject of devolution, citing as an example a request from Westcott Parish Council to have a field in the village which was owned by Buckinghamshire Council, devolved to it. He appreciated that devolution had been a very complex process and asked if there was an update. The initial expression of interest had been made in 2020. The Cabinet Member for Communities explained that the devolution process had posed great challenges, particularly in respect of resources and the legal work needed. Only two devolution projects were being worked on at a time. He was confident that one project would soon be completed, allowing another to be started. He appreciated the value of the Westcott request to the local community and offered to provide an update on progress via the Chairman. The Cabinet Member for Communities suggested that either he or the

Deputy Cabinet Member for Community Safety would attend a meeting of Westcott Parish Council to provide an overview.

Action: Cabinet Member for Communities

7 Community Boards Update

The Cabinet Member for Communities introduced the report, making the following key points:

- The Annual Community Board (CBs) report was presented to the Council meeting on 15th May 2024 and was available to Members.
- Due to funding pressures, the CB managers had been concentrating on engaging with partners and tapping into external funding to facilitate community projects. In some cases, no funding had been needed from the council to complete a project.
- CB managers had worked hard to facilitate workshops, action groups and task and finish groups which had been working well and focussed on outcomes.
- Relationships with Parish Clerks had also improved.
- Social media communications had been improved and used to circulate newsletters which had raised recognition of CBs. The number of followers on social media had increased for all CBs.
- Evaluations of community projects were included in the report. These detailed which aspects had gone well and which not so well for each project. Evaluation outcomes had been honestly assessed from the CB and the applicant's viewpoint and learning used to inform future projects.
- The CBs were currently going through a review which would consider their overall structure. The Community Boards Boundary Review would be presented to Cabinet on 10th September 2024. More information would be provided to the committee as it became available.

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

- A Member thanked the Cabinet Member for Communities for the report, specifically the project evaluations, which had been recommended by the committee. He sought reassurance that CBs would continue to have a role in the future. The Cabinet Member for Communities noted that CBs add huge value to the Council's work at a local level.
- A Member noted that some CBs were working better than others and referred to the committee's recommendations on sharing good ideas between CBs. He asked if this was in place and how well it worked. The Cabinet Member for Communities explained that CB Managers and Chairmen met on a regular basis to share ideas and learning.
- A Member noted that there was a large gap between the Buckinghamshire Council and local councils and that CBs were not always able to fill this gap. He felt that some CBs were working better than others. The Cabinet Member

for Communities offered to investigate further and noted that CBs served as the local face of the Council. CBs also had an important role in representing the voice of local councils to Buckinghamshire Council.

- Budgets had reduced significantly since the inception of CBs due to the financial pressures on the Council. The CB Managers had brought people with common interests together and had also provided links and signposting to local and national organisations. A database of funding sources had been developed to aid local projects seeking financial support.
- A Member noted that the distribution of funding favoured some communities over others. The Head of Partnerships and Communities agreed to look at the spread of funding in the Member's local area.

Action: Head of Partnerships & Communities

- A Member noted that attendance at his local CB meetings had declined significantly since their start 4 years ago and queried the reason for this. The Cabinet Member for Communities explained that this was not a general trend and whilst overall attendance was not a concern, he would be willing to investigate this specific issue with the Member.
- A Member asked where the ideas for CB projects came from and wondered if it was worthwhile for Members to have a brainstorming session. The Cabinet Member for Communities offered to investigate this idea.

Action: Cabinet Member for Communities

- Where it was unclear whether an issue was the responsibility of CB or the Council, the CB Manager would be able to help and give advice.
- The Chairman requested that an update on CBs be given at the committee meeting scheduled for 12th February 2025.

Action: Cabinet Member for Communities/Scrutiny Manager

8 Performance Monitoring Quarter 4

The Chairman introduced the performance reports, making the following key points:

- The reports had been discussed at Cabinet and would now be considered by the relevant Select Committee to help inform their work programme.
- Both the items detailed in the Communities Portfolio report were marked green, showing that performance targets had been met.
- In the Culture and Leisure Portfolio report, the item detailing visitor numbers at country parks was categorised as red.
- In the Homelessness and Regulatory Services Portfolio, there was an amber categorisation for the item on businesses which were registered as primary partners to receive various advice through a single point of contact at the authority.

The Chairman invited comments on the performance reports.

- There was a discussion on the visitor numbers at country parks. It was noted that the number was not far off the target and did not show a significant

reduction from the previous quarter. The downturn had been driven by wet weather.

A new building with catering facilities was being developed at Black Park in the forthcoming year. This would encourage customers to visit the park in poorer weather.

9 Work Programme

- There was a discussion on police presence in the community with some Members noting that police officers had formerly attended local council and Community Board meetings to give updates but had not done so recently. A Member requested an update from the police at a future meeting.
- A Member requested an update from the Head of Community Safety on the domestic abuse strategy.
- A Member asked if the committee could discuss youth provision as a counter point to previous discussions around anti-social behaviour. The Scrutiny Manager explained that a discussion would need to take place as this issue might overlap with the work of the Children's and Education Select Committee. The Scrutiny Manager would report back to the committee.
- The Scrutiny Manager would draft a document on the Digital Exclusion Review, showing possible themes and areas for recommendation. After a discussion with the working group, the report would begin to be drafted over the summer.

Action: Scrutiny Manager

10 Date and time of the next meeting

2nd October 2024 at 10am.