

Town and parish council localism workshops

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1. Introduction

Following a steer from the Shadow Executive, five workshops were held with town and parish councils to help inform the development of proposals on localism. The purpose of the workshops was to explore and develop thinking on how the new Council should work with town and parish councils; co-design options for how community boards might work; and consider a possible devolution offer to town and parishes.

The workshops were held in venues across Buckinghamshire in June 2019 and town and parish councils were informed of these events via an email send to clerks on 8 May 2019. In addition, the sessions were promoted on social media and through newsletters sent to all town and parish councils.

At each workshop an overview introduction was provided by members of the Shadow Executive for the Buckinghamshire Council, and an officer presentation. Two group exercises followed; one focussed on community boards and one focussed on devolution.



Workshop participation

In total, **156** people participated in the workshops, with **98** town and parish councils represented.

	Wycombe 4 June	Beaconsfield 10 June	Buckingham 12 June	Aylesbury 13 June	Chesham 25 June	Total
Co-Chairs	Mark Shaw Katrina Wood	Martin Tett Nick Naylor	Angela Macpherson Martin Tett	Angela Macpherson Martin Tett	Martin Tett Isobel Darby	N/A
No of Attendees	23	32	23	52	26	156
No of T&PC's Present	15	22	18	26	17	98

This report provides a summary of the key messages arising from these initial engagement events.

2. Community boards

At each workshop, participants were asked to discuss two questions on community boards. The section below summarises the key points on these issues.

Community boards and joint working

The question posed was “What would you like to improve in how the new Council works with your Town and Parish Council?”

Common themes across all workshops

- **Strong communication** was needed between the new Buckinghamshire Council and town and parish councils.
- **Increase the proposed budget** of £2 million in order to have more impact.
- That community boards are **representative** of the make-up of local communities and run effectively.
- Town and parish councils should have **voting rights** on the community board.

High Wycombe

- The new Council should enable better information sharing between councils (both local and unitary) to build better working relationships and knowledge.
- There should be meaningful consultation and engagement with local councils and residents to ensure that local voices were heard.
- More funding would be required in order to adequately support local councils and community boards to deliver projects and provide administrative support.
- Community boards should have powers to make decisions and take action to ensure that outcomes are delivered. Boards should also have the power to influence decisions made by the Unitary Council. Key to this would be attendance at community boards by unitary members and ensuring fair representation.

Beaconsfield

- It was suggested that technology and video conferencing were utilised as a potential tool to widen access for residents and increase engagement.
- Funds should be given directly to town and parish councils rather than distributed through community boards.
- There would need to be some scrutiny of the new Council and this should be part of the remit of the community board. There should also be a mechanism

to assess of the performance of the boards themselves and some contributors suggested that key performance indicators should be established and then published.

- Boards should have a diverse and reflective membership.

Buckingham

- A customer charter could be drawn up to keep officers accountable for ensuring that actions are followed up.
- Empowerment was a key theme at this workshop; many wanted voting rights and more powers to influence decisions and allocations of funding via the community boards.
- Representation was felt to be important. Participants wanted boards to represent communities and be attended by officers/ members who could make decisions at the meeting and take impactful actions to drive progress.

Aylesbury

- There was a desire for clear and consistent communication between councils to ensure transparency. Some suggestions included a dedicated parish liaison officer; a parish portal to share information and unitary councillors regular attendance at board meetings/ local council meetings.
- It was recognised that some aspects of the current LAF structures were effective and these good practices should be continued. It was suggested that these could be improved if boards were given more powers and influence over decisions affecting local communities.
- Better scrutiny would be needed to ensure performance was monitored and service levels would be met. One proposal was for task and finish groups to sit under each board to ensure agreed actions would be carried out.

Chesham

- Participants were keen to see a culture change and an improvement in the relationship between local councils and the new Unitary Authority; a joined-up approach was necessary to ensure that towns and parishes felt listened to and that information was being shared/ made readily available.
- Boards and local councils should be given more power to make decisions themselves and influence decisions taken by the unitary authority.
- Agenda setting should be done in a proactive way with participation from board members.
- The proposed budget would be too small to fund community boards, especially if wider issues (as dealt with by LAFs) were to be taken in to consideration. A needs based budget as opposed to a top down equal share could be a fairer way of distributing funds.

Possible geography and number of community boards

Participants were asked to look at illustrative maps of 11 or 19 community boards and identify possible benefits, challenges and issues.

Common themes across all workshops

- 11 community boards were seen as possibly providing **better value for money** than having 19 boards as it would require less resource.
- On the other hand, **19 boards were supported overall** for being more local.
- There were concerns that **the voice of smaller parishes** would not be heard or that the larger towns would dominate conversation and votes. Smaller parishes with similar needs should be linked.
- There should not be a 'one size fits all' approach as it would be important to understand the local context and how one area would differ from the other depending on size, demographic and location.

Wycombe

- Overall, participants tended to support 19 over 11 community boards as it would feel more local; 11 Boards would possibly be too remote. This would allow smaller areas to have their say and not be over-shadowed by larger towns. A higher number of community boards could give a more even spread of different economically developed areas.
- 11 boards would allow a wider and higher-level view point to encourage joined up working.
- Fewer boards would mean that each area would have a larger budget.
- The structure of community boards should focus on ensuring that residents felt listened to and consideration should be given as to how small towns and parishes could make their voices heard in a larger forum alongside the towns; especially if the interests of each are conflicting.

Beaconsfield

- Overall participants tended to support 11 community boards. While more boards would ensure that each was more local, 11 boards were considered to be more cost-effective.
- While larger areas may be difficult to manage from a governance perspective, there was some suggestion that 11 boards would create less bureaucracy in that there would be fewer officers and less associated cost.
- Smaller town and parish councils should not be overlooked - similar areas should be grouped to ensure that voices of those in smaller areas would still be heard. The current structure should not be followed as this is not felt to be working.

Buckingham

- Joining similar local councils together would potentially be more impactful as there would be a larger budget for each board.
- 11 areas could be too large, especially taking into consideration projected growth, and if there are too many Members, it may be difficult to get a consensus to agree on decisions.
- Budget setting should be a 3-5 year process rather than an annual process to provide financial security. Also, match-funding should not be a requirement.
- There would be a smoother transition from the LAF structure by having 19 areas to match existing areas and it would offer better locality and therefore more local issues will be addressed.

Aylesbury

- The participants almost universally supported 19 community boards; although it was recognised that 11 boards would require less officer support; therefore being more cost effective.
- If there were few boards, there would be a possible risk of losing local identity and therefore not enough emphasis on addressing local issues and ensuring smaller communities would have their say.
- Consistency would be needed across boards as well as assurance that all boards would meet the same quality standard in terms of performance.
- To retain the existing LAF areas could mean a smooth transition and less resource would be required for this change.
- More smaller boards would ensure better relationships with the Unitary Authority as there would be closer links with councillors, but there would be less budget per board and having more boards would increase the costs.
- Membership would be important; there should be fair representation, Members need to have the right skill set and have local knowledge.

Chesham

- Larger boards would benefit from a larger budget and economies of scale. In addition to this, it could be cheaper to run overall and better staffed.
- Fewer large boards could do more- they would have a bigger impact on the community, Members could be more involved if less stretched and there would be more resources available. It could also be a better match with partners such as the police and health.
- It was felt that grouping communities together would dilute and delocalise many areas, especially smaller parishes who were concerned about how they would feed in
- Concerns were raised in relation to likely attendance at community boards and time constraints on Members.
- Splitting community areas across different boards should be avoided.

- It would be a challenge to work alongside partners and align with their boundaries.
- More boards would require more resource, which could put a strain on volunteers supporting community groups and boards. It was important that the voluntary sector was not forgotten.
- By having 19 boards, the structure would feel more local; would be more familiar during the transition period and there would be deeper knowledge of localised issues to better represent local communities.

3. Working Together & Devolution

Participants at each workshop were asked to discuss their ideas on how the unitary council should work with local councils and their views about taking on devolved services and assets. The next section is a summary of some of the key issues and feedback provided.

Working Together

Groups were asked to consider what they would want from the new council in order to establish effective working relationships between it and the local councils or meetings.

Common themes across all workshops

- All participants wanted clear communication. To name a few suggestions, **a town and parish newsletter and an online forum.**
- **Training and support for technical services** would be required in order to assist with devolved service requests some suggested mechanisms to deliver this was a library of online (printable) toolkits, training sessions, dedicated specialist officer.
- Funding would need to adequately **cover the costs of running services.**

Wycombe

- Improved communication from the Unitary Council in order to better provide advice and support to towns and parishes. It was also discussed that, as part of this communication, it was important that the new Buckinghamshire Council was open and transparent in sharing information and knowledge.
- There was an appetite for town and parish councils to have more control of assets and services such as carparks, enforcement and street scene maintenance.
- Participants wanted assurance on the amount of funding they would receive to allow them to plan and budget.

Beaconsfield

- A single point of contact; a dedicated officer who could be available out of hours if required was suggested.
- Concerns were raised that the Unitary Authority's response to service issues reported by town and parish councils should be prompt, effective and provide value for money.
- Local councils should receive the same level of service or support regardless of whether they choose to take up the devolution offer.

Buckingham

- Participants wanted community boards to be empowered by taking on services and assets and running these in the best interests of the community.
- A fair, transparent and flexible approach would be needed to ensure that each area was receiving a consistent quality of service and monitoring the performance of delivery, regardless of what services or assets they chose to take on.
- The participants wanted partnership working to share knowledge and expertise amongst local councils and officer expertise from the Unitary Council officers. Use newsletters, noticeboards, dedicated link officers and regular Member liaison.

Aylesbury

- Suggestions were made on having dedicated liaison officers who could be available for face to face meetings and telephone communication; a parish portal/ newsletter for local councils to access information and training materials; and regular meetings should be held where councillors should share meaningful updates.
- Training and technical support for towns and parish councils was especially important. Participants expressed the need for guidance materials to be easily accessible as well as training for clerks in areas such as HR and legal services.
- While there was an eagerness for more powers and responsibilities, it was clearly communicated that not all would want to take up the offer and this should be recognised by way of a flexible approach.

Chesham

- There was a strong need for communication both between the local councils and from the Unitary Council. Participants wanted to feel listened to and supported in taking on devolved services and assets. A common desire was for a dedicated officer or support team to be available who would be responsible for answering queries.

Assessing devolution requests

A list of possible criteria for assessing requests for devolution requests when made. These included:

- a) Cost-neutral to new Council (overall consideration over long term).
- b) Potential for improved outcomes for local communities.
- c) Capability– e.g. financially sustainable organisation etc.

Common themes across all workshops

- **Cost neutral** should apply to local councils as well as the unitary council.
- This was important to all and **improved outcomes** should be reviewed to be based on the needs of the community and should take costs into consideration.
- There should be a process to establish the **capability** of the local council and clerks, and there should also be training and expert support provided to ensure that smaller towns and parishes would not be disadvantaged.

Wycombe

- Participants were largely in agreement that one of the criteria should be that costs should be neutral and there was an emphasis on ensuring that cost neutrality should be delivered at a local level as well as cost of devolution being neutral to the Unitary Authority.
- All participants agreed that any devolution request should have potential for improved outcomes for local communities.
- While the majority of attendees agreed that there should be a capability assessment, it was felt that smaller town and parish councils would be at a disadvantage in terms of budgeting and financial support.

Beaconsfield

- Town and parish councils were eager to work together to run services in a joined up way.
- While improved outcomes for communities would be the most important aspect, it was noted that this should be made applicable to the areas where there is local demand; this could only be delivered with adequate funding or if local communities were willing to pay over the sum devolved by the Council.
- Any skills gaps at town and parish council level should be identified and training should be provided.

Buckingham

- There would need to be a correlation between the outcomes for communities and the services/ priorities that the new Council will deliver.
- There were divided opinions on capability assessments; while local councils should show that they can maintain and sustain a service/ asset some thought that the unitary Council should not be 'checking up' on the sustainability of

towns and parishes and it was highlighted that parish councils are a legal entity who have the ability to set precepts.

- Participants wanted to see a culture change and more language aimed at partnership working and support to local councils rather than an 'assessment.'
- The town and parish councils should be given a budget directly to fund services in the short term to support the transition stages.

Aylesbury

- Participants would like assurance that costs would be neutral across the board and that there should not be an increase in cost to local councils.
- Participants were keen to ensure that town and parish councils did not receive a reduced allocation of budget than currently allocated as per the devolution agreements already in place and services should continue to be delivered regardless.
- It was generally agreed that this should be a criteria for assessing devolution requests. Queries were raised on how this would be measured and what the baseline would be with suggestions that the criteria should ensure that services are maintained as a minimum rather than improved.
- Capability would need to be considered and this could be done through a business case format. Community assets should be protected during the transition period.

Chesham

- Participants were largely in agreement that any requests for devolved services should demonstrate how outcomes can be improved.
- There should be an audit to establish what the issues were but generally participants agreed that capability was a key aspect of assessing devolution requests.
- This should also include the willingness of the council to take on the service and should not lead to service cuts if towns or parishes decline the offer.

Support from the new Buckinghamshire Council

Participants were asked what support they might need from the Buckinghamshire Council, if any, should they choose to take on a devolved service or asset.

Common themes across all workshops

- **Fairness and consistency:** there was an emphasis on ensuring that devolution requests were assessed fairly and that consideration should be given to the fact that one size would not fit all.
- **Knowledge and expertise** should be shared and readily available through a number of resources. Attendees recognised that staff/ volunteers may need to **upskill** in order to take on more responsibility. In addition to this, the local councils would need a forum to be able to share best practice and create solutions in partnership with each other.
- **Clarity** should be provided on where the overall **responsibility** would lie; i.e. with the unitary Council who's duty it would be to provide a service or with the town and parish council who would deliver the service.
- Resource was a key concern as many participants wanted the facility to receive services such as HR, legal and technology services in order to be **maintain service levels.**

Wycombe

- Town and parish councils wanted the new unitary Council to share knowledge and expertise through dedicated support teams. This would include assistance with legal and information technology services, assistance with contracts and training.
- Funding support was important to participants and assurance that volunteers would be recognised as a key part of service delivery.
- There was an appetite to take on assets such as libraries, public spaces and facilities, road schemes and low level planning and licensing decisions.

Beaconsfield

- Training, advice and support would be required if town and parish councils were to take on devolved services. This should include training staff; expert technical advice on matters such as legal services, procurement, equipment and budgeting. It was a key consideration that there should be regular two way communication between town and parish councils and the new Council's officers and Members; Members should attend regular meetings and there should be a dedicated support available for town and parish councils.
- Resource and funding was a key concern should there be increased costs to local councils who agreed to take up the devolution offer. Town and parish councils would therefore look to receive additional funding if they were to accept devolution however some town and parishes felt that they would not want to take on the responsibility and instead efforts should be focused on

better service delivery and value for money centrally as opposed to devolution in order to benefit from economies of scale.

- Councils that wanted to take on devolution were interested in taking on services including carparks, community buildings and public spaces. This was viewed as empowerment and this could be further improved with clustering smaller parish councils. If this were to happen, this would require a central understanding of the politics at a local level; especially with partners such as interest groups. It was also noted that there should be a safety net to ensure that interest groups did not lobby smaller parishes for the interests of the few rather than the many.

Buckingham

- Participants wanted insight into what could be devolved at an early stage. They wanted to be part of the conversation and work in partnership with the Unitary Council to decide what could be taken on and to identify potential partners.
- Some of the attendees had doubts about the capacity and resources available to them in order to manage a devolved service/ asset.
- There should be a value for money benefit.
- It was suggested that devolved services could be taken on should there be a transfer of powers and adequate support to procure services/ contracts.

Aylesbury

- There would need to be a close relationship between councils to ensure transparency, clarity and assurance on the roles, responsibilities and boundaries to avoid ambiguity of who would be responsible for what; the condition of assets and any associated running costs. These costs should be secured for towns and parishes to continue to maintain and run services following devolution.
- Support and advice should be readily available for town and parish councils; especially with regards to technical areas. There should be a direct line to specialist officers who can provide information and guidance. There should also be an accessible toolkit where template documents, approved provider lists and training materials could be accessed. There should also be a forum for local councils to share knowledge and information and support each other.
- Local councils would require extra resource including funding/ expenses, equipment and expertise. This should be allocated fairly.

Chesham

- It was clear that designated support would be welcomed by Members in local councils to assist with devolution requests and providing specialist support with technical areas. Some participants wanted back office support from the new Council.

- It was important that there was consistency in terms of service quality and as such training should be offered as well as adequate funding. Additionally, there should be online resource available.
- Local councils wanted assurance that the responsibility would lie with the unitary authority.