



Town & Parish Charter Engagement Survey Findings Report

May 2021

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1.0 Executive Summary

- 1.1 The aim of the charter is to provide a framework for all councils to work together to serve the people of Buckinghamshire. We have a common purpose to promote the wellbeing of Buckinghamshire, and we serve the same residents. This is the foundation of our charter.
- 1.2 The Charter sets out the relationship between Buckinghamshire Council and the county's town and parish councils. It includes how we will harness opportunities to strengthen partnership working and improve services for our residents. It sets out the joint principles and respective roles, responsibilities and expectations. The Charter will be a 'live' document that will be refreshed regularly in consultation with town and parish councils.
- 1.3 It is a collaborative document and it is therefore important to reflect on the feedback from the recent period of engagement in order to develop a charter to which most councils feel they can commit.
- 1.4 There were 75 responses to the online survey, 52% were from individual parish councillors or clerks and 48% were official parish council responses. There were also 7 responses received by email or letter.
- 1.5 48% of respondents felt that the charter met their expectations for future relationships with Buckinghamshire Council either quite well or very well while 25% of respondents felt that it didn't meet their expectations very well and 14%, not at all.
- 1.6 The key findings of the engagement period and the plans to address them are:

Summary feedback	Plan to address
Misconceptions about the purpose of the charter, e.g. the document is about telling local councils what they should do.	<p>In the review, the document has been amended to ensure more consistent and inclusive language.</p> <p>A commitment to continued engagement and strong a communications campaign and working with BMKALC and working group to address misconceptions</p>
Draft charter is long and 'wordy'	Detailed review has reduced overall length of document, addressed issues such as repetition and a 2-page executive summary has been added which can be used as a 'pull-out' shorter version for those who prefer, taking on board feedback from Aylesbury Vale Association of Local Councils (AVALC) who provided a one-page version as part of their feedback
Scepticism that the Charter is 'nice words' but will it be put into action	Buckinghamshire Council will run an internal campaign to promote the charter to colleagues across the council and encourage them to consider how their actions might impact on local councils.

Clarity about the role of community boards and overriding parish councils	Continue to engage with parish councils and assure them that this is not the case. Work to make sure community boards have appropriate mechanisms for engagement with town and parish councils (both clerks and councillors)
Concern over votes at community boards	Continue to encourage community boards to be inclusive and use indicative voting to ensure that town and parish councils are included and able to influence local issues.
Measuring success	The section in the document on 'Making it happen' has been strengthened with an additional commitment to work with the working group to develop a framework to evaluate and monitor the success of the charter.
'One size doesn't fit all'	Additional text added to make it clear that Buckinghamshire Council doesn't expect Parish Councils to take on devolved services unless they wish to do so. It's their choice.
High level of service specific comments e.g. planning, highways etc	Addressed as part of Action Plan and think local campaign.
Increasing understanding of Buckinghamshire Council Customer Service staff and wider services on what T&PCs (difference sizes of councils have different responsibilities etc)	Working with BMKALC, undertake an exercise to ask all 171 town and parish councils what their services and responsibilities are and create a simple quick reference database for Customer Service Staff to help them with signposting.
Clarity around the planning section and in some parts of the county, the planning response forms.	Continue to work closely with town and parish councils and colleagues in Planning to see where improvements can be made both in terms of the technical process and customer service.
Consultation on local plan needs to be included	Additional text added to confirm that Buckinghamshire Council will consult on the local plan.

2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 The charter started out with workshops in the summer of 2019 hosted by BMKALC and members of the Shadow Authority's Programme Management Office. Research also included looking at practice elsewhere. A working group of town and parish clerks, BMKALC and BC officers was then set up in order to shape the town & parish charter in a collaborative way. The group met several times to discuss what should be included and reflect on earlier drafts of the charter before an initial draft was shared with all town and parish councils in February 2020.
- 2.2 Following feedback on the first draft, unfortunately the charter had to be put on hold in March 2020 due to the emergency response to the Coronavirus crisis which involved all councils. It was picked up again in the Autumn of 2020 and the working group reformed. A second draft of the charter was developed, and a period of engagement followed, which began on the 25th January 2021.

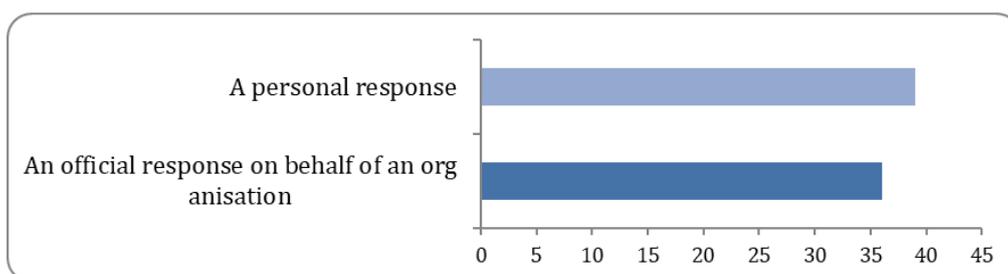
3.0 Approach

- 3.1 The period of engagement with town and parish councils on the draft charter, began on 25th January running to 24th February. This was then extended to 31st March at the request of parish councils, BMKALC and the clerks working group to provide more time for those councils who were not able to meet within the initial 6-week period. The draft charter was shared with town and parish councils electronically and everyone was asked to send their comments and feedback to the service through a short online survey or the option of direct email.
- 3.2 Buckinghamshire Council worked collaboratively with BMKALC to support this period of consultation and hosted three parish council drop in sessions via Zoom where we were able to address concerns, answer questions and provide clarification on the purpose of the charter as well as receive useful feedback. Around 30 parish councils attended across the three session to discuss any comments or concerns that they had about the charter. This also gave them an opportunity for clarify any questions they had before responding officially to the consultation.
- 3.3 The period of engagement was promoted by Buckinghamshire Council and BMKALC through newsletters, emails and liaison meetings. It was only open to town and parish councils and town and parish councillors. Promotions included:
 - Fortnightly Town & Parish Newsletter, before and throughout the engagement period
 - Member newsletter
 - BMKALC Liaison Meeting
 - Clerks Forums
 - Community Boards

4.0 Other considerations

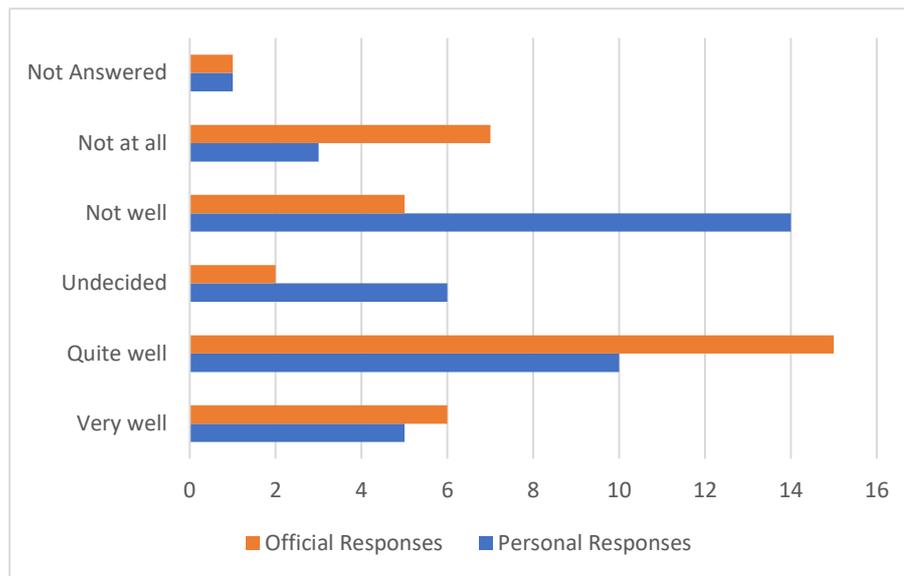
- 4.1 The survey was open to town and parish councils and town and parish councillors.
- 4.2 52% of the respondents were individual responses which may not be representative of the collective view of their respective town or parish council. For this reason, where there are marked differences, we have highlighted this.
- 4.3 Many of the views expressed were about the council as a whole and not specifically about the town and parish charter. All these comments will be taken into consideration and raised with the relevant service areas.

5.0 Profile of respondents



5.1 Respondents were asked to state whether they were responding as individuals or as an official council response so that the views of both councils and individual councillors could be understood. Although there were some minor differences between the individual and official parish responses they more or less followed the same pattern. There were 75 responses to the online survey, 52% Individual parish councillors and 48% Official parish council responses.

6.0 Overall Response



6.1 Overall 48% of respondents thought that the charter ‘quite well’ or ‘very well’ reflected their expectations of how Buckinghamshire Council and town and parish councils will work together in the future compared to 38% who responded, ‘not well’ or ‘not at all’. Official council responses were more positive to this question (around 58%) than individual respondents (around 38%)

6.2 Comments received relating to this section include:

“We do welcome this charter as a new chapter of a collaborative and closer working partnership because we are often the first port of call by residents with problems”

“In order for the charter to be effective, there needs to be a change of attitude throughout Buckinghamshire Council towards town and parish councils and greater recognition and understanding of their roles and responsibilities”

“We look forward to working with Buckinghamshire Council to make this charter a successful example of joined up working”

“A thorough and inclusive document overall”

7.0 Respecting and valuing each other

7.1 Although there wasn’t a specific question in the survey about respecting and valuing each other it is clear from the general responses that this is really the ‘heart and soul’ of the charter. It is central to making it work. In the one-page example of a charter

produced by Aylesbury Vale Association of Local Councils (AVALC) as part of their feedback, they very much emphasised the need for the mutual respect and value of councillors and officers from all councils.

- 7.2 There was some useful feedback around the language and tone of the charter being too 'top down' or 'unbalanced' which, in some cases, has heightened a misconception about its purpose and intentions. This is crucial because it is the opposite of what the charter is intended to achieve, a collaboration to which all councils feel they can sign up.
- 7.3 As a result of these comments the language has been revised to be more inclusive and consistent. However, it is recognised that there also needs to be a commitment to continued engagement and a strong communications campaign, working with BMKALC and the working group, to address concerns and misconceptions.
- 7.4 Comments received relating to this section include:

"Overall, the town council is encouraged by the intent of the Charter, and particularly the commitment to ongoing liaison, joint working and mutual respect"

"Minor inaccuracies are easily rectified. It is the lack of balance that runs through the draft that is the problem"

"It should present the relationship between the unitary council and parish/town councils as being between equals having different roles. Incorrectly the draft implies a hierarchical relationship"

"We find the top-down tone of the document ironic"

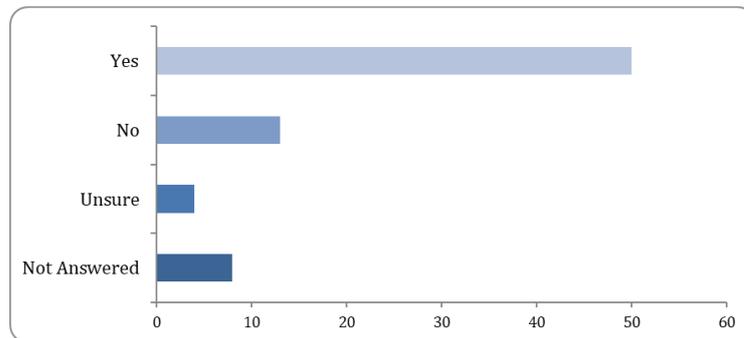
"It was interpreted as patronising or putting P&TC's in their place"

"Every councillor and every officer of all Bucks councils know that we can do this best when we work in profound partnership together, serving all our local citizens"

8.0 Section comments and accuracy

- 8.1 The main body of the charter is split into 10 sections. The next few pages of the report will give an overview of the responses given to the accuracy of each section and some of the specific comments.
- 8.2 The charts in this section represent the overall responses to questions and not the split between individual and official organisation responses. It has been noted on individual sections where there is a significant difference between individual and organisational responses.

Accuracy – Introduction

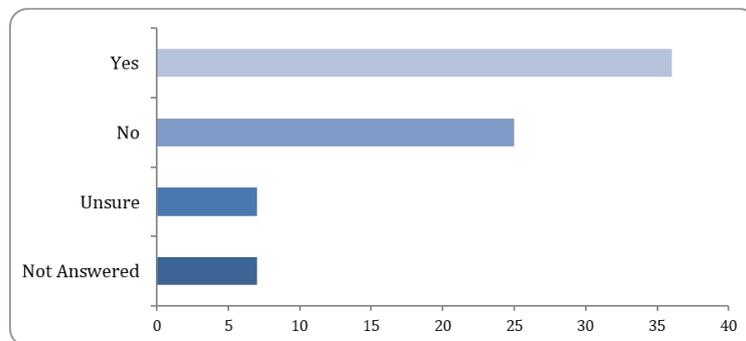


8.3 The majority of respondents (66%) agreed that the introduction was accurate and included the right information. However, there was some useful feedback on the fact that the charter was too long and repetitive in places. To address this the repetition has been removed from the introduction, reducing it to a page, with the wording tightened and condensed. Comments received relating to this section include:

“Wording should be simple, ensuring the document is accessible to all with no room for misunderstanding”

“Introduction and Understanding Town and Parish Councils; Contains the correct information but is too wordy and repetitive”

Accuracy - Understanding town and parish councils



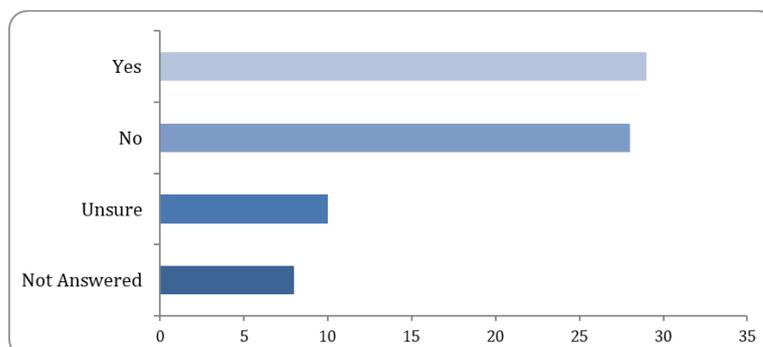
8.4 There were 68 responses to this question. 48% of respondents agreed that the section contained the correct information while 33% disagreed. Feedback included clarification around the role of the clerk and a distinction between more complex staff structures in larger parish and town councils as opposed to smaller councils. It also included helpful feedback on the role of the councillor including an acknowledgement that not all parish councillors are elected. The consensus was again to keep this section concise whilst being clear about the role of town and parish councils. Comments received relating to this section include:

“There needs to be a clear statement of the role and responsibility of parish & town councils”

“Not all councillors are elected, there are occasions when councillors are co-opted onto a council”

“Add a reference to councillors representing the interests of their constituents on outside bodies and with other tiers of government”

Accuracy - Effective communication



8.5 Effective communication was recognised as a key component in terms of the relationships between councils in Buckinghamshire. It is therefore no surprise that this is the longest section in the charter. The response to this section was mixed. A quarter of the respondents were unsure or did not answer this question and of those who did, roughly half thought it contained the correct information. As a result of the feedback and ongoing work around communication channels the section has been amended with more communication channels added.

8.6 There was also concern that there would be an expectation for councils to take on devolved services and assets. This was raised several times. However, there was also a concern that there wasn't enough about Buckinghamshire Council's commitment to devolution. This means that a delicate balance needs to be maintained by giving councils, who want devolution, confidence that that council is committed to this, and assuring councils, who do not want to take on any additional services, that there is no obligation to do so. As a result, the following comment was added to this section: **Please note, it is recognised that not all councils have the resources or the desire to take on additional services and assets and that there is no compulsion or expectation to do so.* Comments received relating to this section include:

“There are many channels yet no simple method to ensure we choose the correct one. Many of our communication requirements are with Planning (including enforcement) and Highways. Both prefer using online forms for recording issues. One-way communication is not collaborative. How does this change?”

“We are pleased to see that the Clerks Forum created by WDC is to continue and be expanded, however we are disappointed to note that the Rural Forum is not mentioned under effective communication”

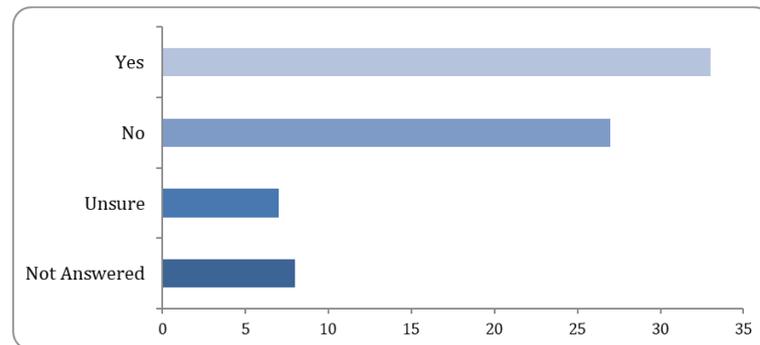
“In order to support effective communication, Buckinghamshire needs to provide adequate training to its reception staff and those answering the phones about what town and parish councils do”

“Effective communications with the list of BC contacts is a start but what is the commitment to respond, what are the service levels for the resulting actions? Most of the meetings mentioned are already in place and well attended”

“More communication and briefings are always welcome. Even post Covid, these could easily take place online for easy access to all”

“Needs to be amended to make clear that devolution will not be forced on those councils that do not want to expand their service provision”

Local democracy and community leadership



8.7 There were 67 responses to this question. (44%) agreed that the contents of the section were what they wanted to see and 36% disagreed. Other than tightening up the wording and making it a little more concise there were not too many changes requested for this section. There was some feedback that parish and town councils shouldn't feel that they must produce neighbourhood plans and emergency plans and as a result the wording was changed, and a further sentence added to help clarify: *Buckinghamshire Council will provide training, support and resources to assist local councils who wish to develop their own local neighbourhood plans or local emergency plans. Comments received relating to this section include:

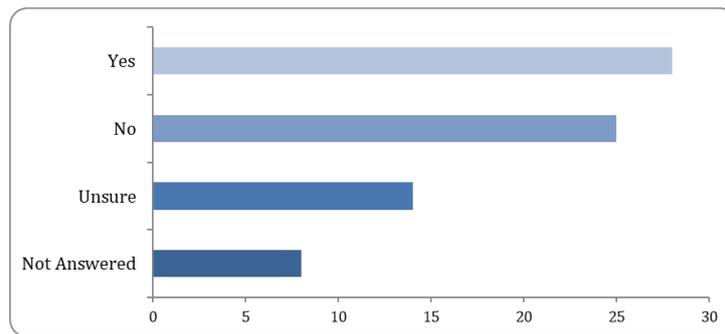
“Change to 'Produce neighbourhood plans when appropriate'. The same change might be made for local emergency plans”

“This section does not ask for collaboration it instructs.

Example; Community Boards; "Buckinghamshire Council encouraged", Parish/Town Councils "required to"

“By the very creation of the unitary authority, we have seen a reduction in the number of twin hatters and a reduction in natural crossover between the tiers of local government. Whilst attendance of BC councillors may be welcome on specific issues there will remain a necessity to maintain a degree of separation on other issues”

Accuracy – collaboration



8.8 There were 67 responses to this question with 37% of respondents agreeing that the contents of the section were appropriate and 33% disagreeing. There also seemed to be more confidence in this section among official parish responses than individual councilor responses.

8.9 There were concerns about the term ‘match funding,’ so the wording has been amended to “contributing to ideas, projects and funding, if appropriate.” Other concerns were that references to devolved services would mean that town and parish councils would be compelled to take services on, but also concerns from others that the promise of devolution doesn’t go far enough. Wording has therefore been amended to give more assurances that parishes will not be compelled to take on services or assets. Comments received relating to this section include:

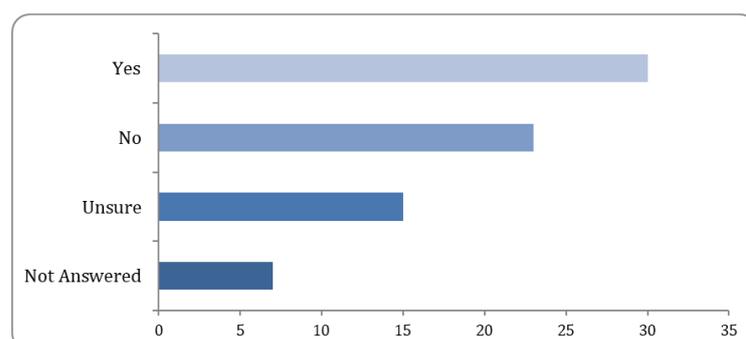
“BC needs to understand the budgetary cycle of town & parish councils and appreciate that they cannot be expected to come up with match funding for projects if they have not made provision in their budgets at the beginning of the financial year”

“Parish Councils have very little discretionary funding so providing match funding for a project in their parish is not an option, but councils might be able to make a small contribution commensurate with the size of their budget”

“Collaboration sounds good but there needs to be details of how this is going to work”

“We will be happy to support this aspiration [address local needs, including through advice and signposting] so long as priority is given to local services provided by local organisations”

Accuracy – Consultation



8.10 There were 68 responses to this question. 40% of respondents agreed with the contents of the section while 31% disagreed. Again, the official parish positive responses were somewhat higher than the individual responses. The commitment to consult was generally welcomed. Most concerns were either around the timing of consultations, both in terms of how and when they are presented e.g. weekdays / daytimes and for how long they run, in order to fall within the cycle of local council meetings. However, there was also a concern in ensuring that they are not tick box exercises and that feedback is given due consideration. The wording on the council’s statement of involvement was also amended slightly to set out how BC will “consult with town and parish councils on local planning issues”. Comments received relating to this section include:

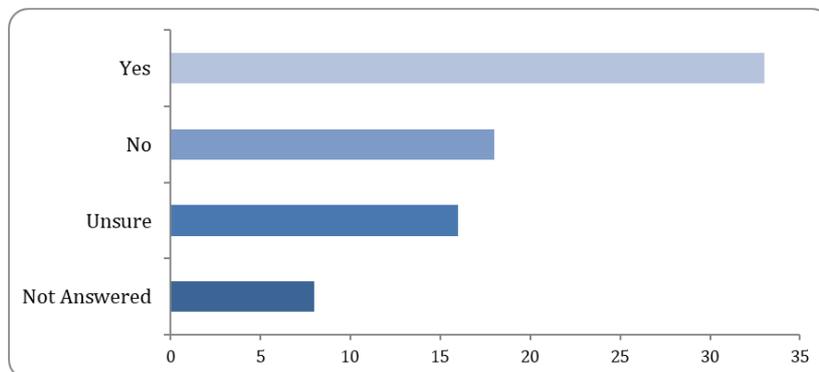
“Welcome consultation on all aspects concerning our residents but do not want these to be a tick box exercise to produce predicted answers”

“In principle, this section contains the right information, please demonstrate how this will work, especially the recognition of cycles of local council meetings, something which seems to be regularly ignored”

“This is a commitment that needs to have real substance as recent consultations have been viewed by some Members and residents as token gestures prior to the rubber stamping of pre-determined outcomes/policies”

“Prefer ‘consult with town and parish councils on local planning issues’”

Accuracy - Advice and Support



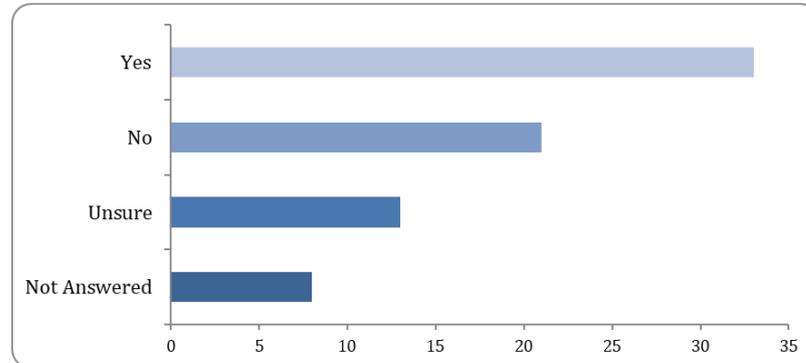
8.11 There were 67 responses to this question and 44% of those agreed that the section contained the right information. This is significantly more than the 24% of people that disagreed although there were also 21% who were not sure. Generally positive comments. Comments received relating to this section include:

“Advice and Service Support, training, we already have this though NALC membership. Councillor training is already a requirement in our Standing Orders”

“The provision of an Emergency Plan is extremely complex with serious ramifications if ever required to be put into action. This council (and presumably all parishes) would welcome hands-on support with this rather than a basic written guide”

“We are keen to see this being instigated as soon as possible since, previously, council has simply been referred to BMKALC” [on subject of providing planning training to town and parish councils]

Shared commitments



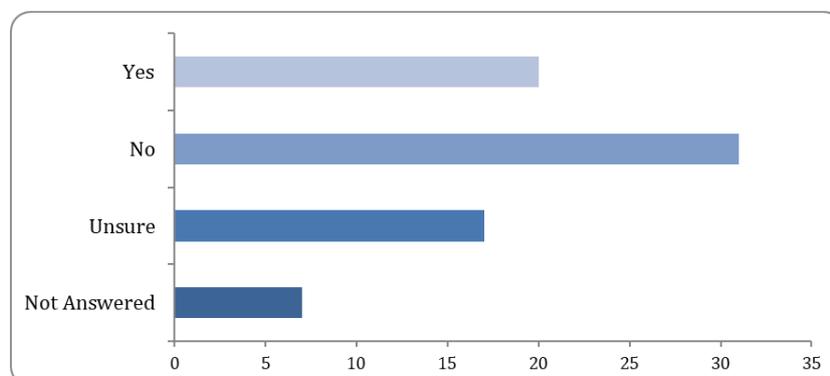
8.12 There were 67 responses to this part of the question. 44% of those responses were positive and agreed that this section contained the correct information. 28% of respondents disagreed and 17% were unsure. Many responses, while agreeing with the importance of these shared commitments questioned whether they should be in the body of the charter. As a result, the section has been moved to appendix 1. Comments received relating to this section include

“There needs to be more widespread communication about the safeguarding process and more resource allocated to ensure that all queries are dealt with quickly and efficiently”

“This appears out of place, and mostly a summary of some of the Buckinghamshire Council’s responsibilities, much of which are statutory requirements so why are they needed in a Charter?”

“Council wondered why this was needed, Safeguarding, Ethics and Equality are all issues the Council has to recognise and could have been put in as one line if it had to be included”

Accuracy - Planning



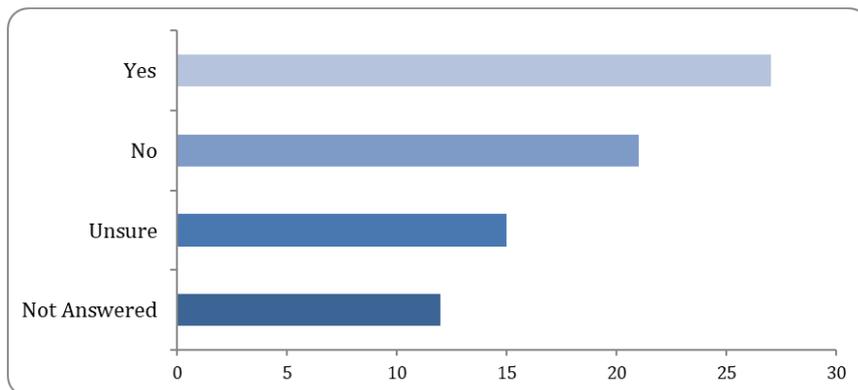
8.13 There were 68 responses to this part of the question. This section had the highest number of respondents who felt that it does not contain satisfactory information. However, many of the responses refer to service policy and specific issues rather than the content of the charter. These concerns will be shared with the service as it continues to develop as part of the new authority.

8.14 There was some useful feedback on the charter’s section on the local plan and planning committees. It was felt that it was important for the charter to state explicitly that town and parish councils will be consulted when producing a local plan rather than assuming it. A sentence was also added to confirm that town and parish councils have the right to request a Buckinghamshire Councillor to ‘call in’ an application to the planning committee. Comments received relating to this section include:

“We would welcome BC planning officers seeking our views at the early stage of a planning application, either with our officers or local members directly”

“The Charter should explicitly state that Buckinghamshire Council will consult town and parish councils when producing the local plan”

Accuracy - Making it happen



8.15 There were 63 responses to this part of the question. 36% of responses agreed with the content of the section and 28% disagreed with a further 36% either unsure or not giving an answer. There were many concerns about how the charter will be evaluated and how often that it should be reviewed. Within this section there is a commitment to review the charter after the first year (which is likely to be about 9 months by the time the charter is signed). It is also proposed that the working group continue to meet to discuss a framework for how to measure its success. Even after the first year’s review the charter can be revisited and reviewed as regularly as is needed but at the very least following any local government elections. Comments received relating to this section include:

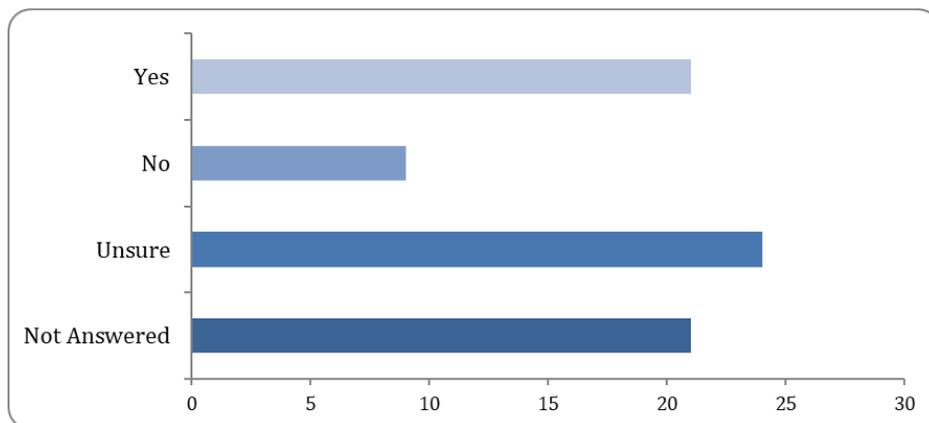
“Communicated widely”; Surely it should be communicated to all staff in Buckinghamshire Council?”

“There must be an evaluation/scoring of any Charter of this type that is a 'living document' not revisited in 5 years”

“There should be a review of communication channels and day to day operations after 6 months and a further review of all operations after one year. It was noted that subsequent reviews every three years were not frequent enough”

“We are concerned that there is nothing that sets out how performance against the charter will be measured or reported”

Comments - Appendix 1 Engagement and Representation in High Wycombe



8.16 There were 54 responses to this question. More than half of respondents either answered unsure or did not answer this question. There were a few respondents who felt that this section should not be included within the charter because the High Wycombe Town Committee is not a town or parish council. The remaining 28% said that they thought the information was correct. Comments received relating to this section include:

“Appendix 1 does not adequately explain why residents of High Wycombe have been disenfranchised and are not entitled to vote for local town councillors, independently of their vote for county councillors”

“The appendix seeking to explain (justify?) the odd arrangement for High Wycombe which desperately needs its own town council is out of kilter with the entire principle in the charter”

Annex 1: Survey Questions

We invite you to comment on the Draft Town and Parish Charter we have developed in collaboration with Buckinghamshire's town and parish councils. Please read the Charter before providing your feedback.

This Charter has one simple aim - to provide a framework for us to work together to serve the people of Buckinghamshire. We have a common purpose to promote the wellbeing of Buckinghamshire, and we serve the same residents. This is the foundation of our charter.

The Charter sets out the relationship between Buckinghamshire Council and the county's town and parish councils. It includes how we will harness opportunities to strengthen partnership working and improve services for our residents. It sets out the joint principles and respective roles, responsibilities and expectations. The Charter will be a 'live' document that will be refreshed regularly in consultation with town and parish councils.

The content of this Charter has been informed by:

- national best practice elsewhere, particularly in other unitary councils
- feedback from workshops with town and parish councils as part of planning for the new unitary council
- Working with Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Association of Local Councils (BMKALC) and a group of town and parish council clerks, who shared their expertise and vision for collaborative working

Please complete the feedback form below and return it to us at Localities Team, Buckinghamshire Council, Walton Street Offices, Aylesbury, Bucks, HP20 1UA..

We will use the information you provide only for the purpose of this activity. We will store the information securely in line with data protection laws and will not share or publish any personal details.

Feedback form

About you

1. Which of these are you submitting?

- A personal response
- An official response on behalf of an organisation

2. If you are representing an organisation, what is your role?

- Town or parish councillor
- Unitary councillor
- Parish clerk
- Other (please specify)

3. What is your email address?

This is optional, but if you provide your email address, we can contact you should we need to clarify anything in your feedback. You will also automatically receive an acknowledgement email when you submit your response.

Email

Your views

4. Overall, how well does the Charter reflect your expectations of how Buckinghamshire Council and town and parish councils will work together in the future?

- Very well
- Quite well
- Undecided
- Not well
- Not at all

5. Do you think each section of the charter contains the correct information?

	Yes	No	Unsure
Introduction			
Understanding town and parish councils			
Effective communication			
Local democracy and community leadership			
Collaboration			
Consultation			
Advice and Support			
Shared commitments			
Planning			
Making it happen			
Appendix 1 Engagement & Representation in High Wycombe			

6. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions about the Charter?

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Annex 2: List of Parish Council Respondents to the Survey (where known)

There were 75 responses to the online survey, 39 responses from individuals (Parish Councillors or Clerks) and 36 official parish council responses. Not all councillors and clerks answered the question

Adstock	Little Chalfont
Buckland	Little Marlow
Chalfont St Giles	Little Missenden
Chalfont St Peter	Middle Claydon
Chepping Wycombe	Nash
Chesham Bois	Padbury
Chesham	Piddington and Wheeler End
Fulmer	Preston Bisset
Gerrards Cross	Quainton
Granborough	Stoke Hammond
Haddenham	Thornborough
Halton	Wendover
Hambleton	West Wycombe
Hazlemere	Westbury
Hillesden	Wingrave with Rowsham
Leckhampstead	Wooburn & Bourne End

There were also a further 7 submissions by email or letter.

Aylesbury Vale Association of Local Councils (AVALC)
Buckingham
Edgcott
Great Horwood
Mentmore
Taplow
Weston Turville