

Supplementary Papers

Council

To be held in The Ridgeway, The Beacon, Portway, Wantage, OX12 9BY
on Wednesday, 11 October 2023 at 7.00 pm

Open to the public including the press

10. Questions on notice (Pages 2 - 9)

Written responses to questions attached.

Written responses to questions – 11 October 2023 Council meeting

A. Question from Councillor Rayner to Councillor Thomas, Leader of the Council

Rural bus services should be the lifeblood of our community. Yet the growing community of Kingston Bagpuize has a completely inadequate bus service to Abingdon, our nearest town. Buses only run every two hours and only before 5.00pm. Public transport is essential for commuters, young people accessing education and training, for socialising in the evenings and supporting the local economy. It is also an equalities issue; older people, those who are unable to drive or afford a car, can struggle to visit the GP, dentists and do their shopping.

This council has previously stated our commitment to public transport and active travel, to reduce air pollution, parking problems and improve health, yet we seem to have limited power to make this a reality.

While this may be the case, could the Leader explain what is being done by other authorities and private bus companies to improve bus services between Kingston Bagpuize and Abingdon? And what more can be done, perhaps with the county council, to help our village secure a bus service that is fit for purpose?

Response

Oxfordshire County Council is the Local Highway Authority, and works closely with local bus operators. Public transport services are deregulated and therefore operate on the basis of which services are profitable. The recent adoption of an Enhanced Partnership has helped further the joint working on buses, seeking to regain bus patronage to pre-pandemic levels, as well as increase bus ridership in the future. The Government has introduced a £2 fare cap scheme, which applies to the S6 and number 15 buses that currently operate in Kingston Bagpuize.

Kingston Bagpuize is a growing community, with a Local Plan housing site to the east of the village. Demand for journeys to Abingdon and other locations is likely to grow with the new homes. The outline planning permissions for the housing development includes transport mitigation to provide additional bus stops and improve the regularity of the number 15 bus to and from Abingdon. So we can hope to see improved bus provision for Kingston Bagpuize arising from the new development.

Ahead of the new homes being delivered and the bus service being improved, local initiatives could help bridge the gap, such as car sharing with scheduled trips or events, and community transport. Community transport can target those who are unable to travel without support, and I understand that "Helping Hands 4 Villages" offers help with transport and befriending in the Southmoor, Kingston Bagpuize, Longworth & Hinton Waldrist areas. For further information and support I am sure your local county member for Kingston Bagpuize will be happy to oblige.

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B. Question from Councillor Smith to Councillor Coleman, Cabinet member for environmental services and waste

There is growing concern in my ward about the number of single use disposable vapes that are littering our streets and public spaces. People who want to ensure their used vapes are disposed of safely are not always sure of which bin to use and there is next to know information about returning used vapes to retailers.

What impact has the prevalence of single use vapes had on Vale services, and what is the council already doing to address this?

Response

Thank you for your question, it refers to a lot of technical information and because of this, I have relied heavily on the expertise of officers to answer it.

To clarify, single use vape pens are non-rechargeable electronic devices that typically come ready-filled with e-liquid, which may contain nicotine. These disposable pens contain a wide range of materials that often make them very difficult to recycle, and unfortunately many residents are unaware of the correct disposal of these products.

If consumers dispose of these items in the general waste, or recycling bins, this can potentially release hazardous chemicals into the environment, and, worryingly, incorrect battery disposal can cause fires, and health and safety risks in waste trucks and treatment processing plants.

There is always a potential for this to impact on our services. While Biffa have not yet raised this as a litter issue, they are more concerned by the risk to waste collection vehicles. Although it is not possible to be 100% sure, a fire on a waste truck early this year was thought to be started by batteries in the waste stream.

To prevent this, they should be disposed of at a household recycling centre or at the shop where they bought the device. We should encourage people to use this route of disposal as vapes are classed as waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE); residents who are disposing of vapes should put them in a carrier bag next to the bin for the small electrical collection. This information is on our website, and a part of our communication's campaigns. There are other possibilities that may be pursued by the council's waste team in the future if further problems are identified.

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C. Question from Councillor de la Harpe to Councillor Thomas, Leader of the council

Given that the Prime Minister has recently made announcements that it is his government's intent to roll back climate emergency initiatives and commitments, thereby making his target of hitting net zero by 2050 even less achievable, can the cabinet member assure residents that we remain committed to our climate emergency goals, explain how we might mitigate this new risk to our plans, and write to the Prime Minister to express our utter disappointment in his actions?

Response

The Vale of White Horse has a target to reach net zero for the district by 2045 with a 75% reduction by 2030. Progress towards achieving these target dates will be determined by actions that can be taken within our district by the Vale and a wide variety of stakeholders and will be significantly influenced by Government targets and legislation. Our ability to meet our net zero target date and the ability of the Government to reach the national target of net zero by 2050 will be impacted by the recent announcements from the Prime Minister in relation to the Governments climate initiatives. Some of the key changes announced in Prime Ministers speech include:

- Moving back the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by five years, so all sales of new cars from 2035 will be zero emission.
- Delaying the ban on installing oil and LPG boilers, and new coal heating, for off-gas-grid homes to 2035, instead of phasing them out from 2026.
- Setting an exemption to the phase out of fossil fuel boilers, including gas, in 2035, so that households who will most struggle to make the switch to heat pumps or other low-carbon alternatives won't have to do so.
- Scrapping policies to force landlords to upgrade the energy efficiency of their properties, but instead continue to encourage households to do so where they can.

The Oxfordshire Net Zero Route Map and Action Plan sets out carbon budgets for the County that are broken down by district. Some of the key milestones on that route map were based on the Government targets which have now been pushed back, including the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles in 2030, bans on gas boilers in future years and energy efficiency measures in rented properties.

The scrapping or pushing back of targets for areas such as transport and decarbonising existing housing which are two of the largest emitters of CO₂ are problematic for the Vale as these are areas in which we have few powers to make direct changes, relying instead on national legislation and targets and the actions of partners. To decarbonise the Vale, we need a mix of push factors which force change as well as behavioural change amongst our residents.

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The picture is however nuanced, as alongside scrapping and pushing back targets the speech also announced a number of new incentives, such as changes to the Boiler Upgrade Grant which will help to incentivise households to replace fossil fuel boilers, helping in the drive to decarbonise domestic properties.

The Vale remains committed to its targets for reaching net zero but, like all local authorities is currently trying to understand the implications of the government announcements and to look at how best to respond to these changes to ensure we remain able to meet our targets.

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D. Question from Councillor Edwards to Councillor Pighills, Cabinet member for community health and wellbeing

Recently the dental practice in Faringdon has closed its doors to all NHS patients. This has caused great concern as it is the only practice in Faringdon and serves the residents of the town and many of the outlying villages in the Western Vale.

Could you clarify what influence the council could have in these circumstances and what if anything we can do to help improve the level of service in Faringdon and the rest of the district?

Response

We are aware of the problems facing residents regarding reduced access to NHS dental services, including the highlighted issue in Faringdon. Sadly, this is not just a local issue but something we are seeing across the country, with the increasing appearance of 'dental deserts' due to the chronic underfunding of NHS Dental Services.

Locally, the NHS/ICB has provided a formal response on this matter which explains the progress to address this issue. In summary this indicates.

- the ICB has recently implemented a Flexible Commissioning scheme to provide extra capacity at practices to support patients who have faced challenges accessing NHS dental care, particularly those who have not attended a service in recent years. In Vale, Wantage House Dental Practice in Wantage and Wootton Dental Care in Abingdon both take part in this scheme.
- the ICB is working on plans to commission additional NHS dental activity from 2024-25 to replace capacity which has been lost.
- the ICB are looking at other innovative solutions to encourage dentists to stay within the NHS.

While encouraging, these solutions will not provide the services we need for some time, and I will, in my capacity as Chair, continue to raise this at future Health Improvement Board meetings and also with the Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, who is the district council representative for Oxfordshire on the Integrated Care Partnership (ICP) so that we continue to seek further action and monitor progress being made regarding this matter for our communities.

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E. Question from Councillor Cooke to Councillor Thomas, Leader of the council

Thames Water have now published their latest plans for the proposed mega-reservoir in the Vale. They appear to have ignored the many strong points raised that challenged the proposal and have increased the size of the reservoir from one hundred megatonnes to a hundred and fifty megatonnes of water.

The huge scale, massive disruption and lengthy timelines of the project mean that not a drop of water will be seen from the reservoir in a generation. Solutions that could be put in place rapidly, cheaply, and with minimal disruption, such as the National Water Grid, appear to have been sidelined.

The one positive in it is that they claim to be increasing work on cutting leaks. Thames Water currently loses the equivalent of the entire capacity of Farmoor reservoir every fortnight across their network.

Can the Leader tell us which meetings we will be able to have with Thames Water and what pressure will we be placing on them to listen and respond to our questions and respond to the issues, and whether we are able to speak directly to the new Leader of the Environment Agency to ensure that they are aware of the very strong objections from our residents?

Response

Thank you for your question. As members know, this council strongly opposes the proposed reservoir, confirmed in a unanimous vote at our meeting of 8 December 2021.

We have continued to oppose this proposal, however, national Government have taken the decision out of local hands. This is deemed a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project and, if it continues, the final decision will be taken by the Secretary of State in around four to five years' time.

We expect there to be further formal consultations in the summer of 2024 and again in 2025, with a public examination in 2027. We will of course respond to the consultations and expect to take part in the examination process.

Meanwhile, we have already had regular meetings with Thames Water and there is no reason why they should not continue. In those meetings we have pushed hard for them to speed up and strengthen measures to reduce leaks. They have also engaged with us on technical matters of the reservoir design and engineering.

Thames Water have recently published their detailed responses to comments made on their draft Water Resource Management Plan 2024. This includes 12 pages in response to comments submitted by the Vale. After this material was published I wrote to them to express my strong desire for them to listen more seriously to residents' views in local communities. They have replied, giving some assurances, and this correspondence is published on the council website.

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You asked about the Environment Agency. We can also ask to speak to their new chief executive. His influence over the proposal for the Reservoir is limited.

The current process for considering Thames Water's proposals is via RAPID, an alliance of regulators which includes the Environment Agency but also Ofwat and the Drinking Water Inspectorate. We have submitted our views to RAPID at every opportunity and we will carry on doing that.

I'm determined that we will keep on speaking up for our residents, making the council's position clear and challenging the proposal at every stage.

F. Question from Councillor Katherine Foxhall to Councillor Bethia Thomas, Leader of the council and Cabinet member for climate action and the environment.

In response to an Environmental Information Request, submitted in my role as Nature Recovery Champion, Thames Water have shared data showing every single one of the sewage treatment works and storm overflows in the Vale (except Botley syphon at zero), has already exceeded the total 2021-2022 discharges. At the Wantage works, which discharges directly into the Letcombe Brook chalk stream north of Grove, we have already seen more than 250 hours released this year, five times the total recorded for the whole of 2022. In Drayton, which discharges into the Ginge Brook chalk stream, there had been 969 hours by 5 August, already nearly double the total for 2022. At Shrivenham, there has been 467 hours of discharge, already four times the entire total for 2022.

Disappointingly, Thames Water have also confirmed that they are only considering Abingdon, Kingston Bagpuize, and Wantage as "high priority" sites in the Vale as defined in the Storm Overflows Discharge Reduction Plan, which requires improvement to 75% of storm overflows discharging into or near 'high priority sites' by 2035. This would leave, for example, the Shrivenham outfall to continue to discharge directly into the Tuckmill Brook, immediately upstream of the Tuckmill Meadows Site of Special Scientific Interest (which Vale owns and is managed by volunteers) for another decade. It will also provide no protection to the Ginge Brook, which receives horrifying amounts of raw sewage from the Drayton works.

Does the Leader agree that Thames Water's current performance, its investment strategy, and its long-term commitment to reduce the impact of sewage releases in the Vale are woefully inadequate? And is the council able to do more to ensure that precious local habitats such as Tuckmill Meadows and Ginge Brook, as well as the entire Thames Catchment in the Vale, can receive some protection?

Response

Seeing the data highlighted in the question and other related news publications, it is difficult to recognise Thames Water's current performance, investment strategy and its long-term commitments as anything but inadequate.

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As you know I have been to a number of parish council meetings recently where you have reported the data you have described here. Our residents have been visibly shocked and angered that this is happening in their villages and so have I – this is not acceptable.

As a council we will continue to highlight the issues and lobby both Thames Water and the Government for changes and an increase in the levels of investment in wastewater infrastructure required to deal with the ever-increasing population of the Vale.

As a district council we can;

- Explore options to introduce new/enhanced policies within the developing Joint Local Plan.
- Continue to work with Thames Water on the surface water reduction scheme, which seeks to reduce the amount of surface water that enters the wastewater system. This includes identified projects at Cattle Market and Portway car parks.
- Work with the Catchment Partnerships to deliver enhancements to the river systems, reducing the level of polluting inputs and delivering physical improvements to the river systems. The Vale actively supports the Letcombe Brook Project and the Ock Catchment Partnership
- Continue to work closely with bodies such as Natural England and the Environment Agency to set and enforce agreed measures to protect Sites of Scientific Interest and other local habitats.
- Lobby Government to improve the protection for our river systems and for changes to LPA powers to allow us to refuse new development proposals unless the wastewater infrastructure is provided to support them.