

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Council

held on Wednesday, 16 February 2022 at 7.00 pm
in First floor, 135 Eastern Avenue, Milton Park,
Milton, OX14 4SB

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: Margaret Crick (Chair), Jerry Avery (Vice-Chair), Matthew Barber, Paul Barrow, Eric Batts, Nathan Boyd, Cheryl Briggs, Andy Cooke, Andy Crawford, Eric de la Harpe, Amos Duveen, Neil Fawcett, Andy Foulsham, Hayleigh Gascoigne, David Grant, Simon Howell, Alison Jenner, Diana Lugova, Ben Mabbett, Sarah Medley, Patrick O'Leary, Helen Pighills, Mike Pighills, Judy Roberts, Janet Shelley, Emily Smith, Max Thompson, Elaine Ware, Catherine Webber and Richard Webber

Officers: Patrick Arran, Head of Legal & Democratic and Monitoring Officer, Steven Corrigan, Democratic Services Manager and Suzanne Malcolm, Deputy Chief Executive – Place

Remote attendance:

Councillors: Ron Batstone, Samantha Bowring, Debby Hallett, Bob Johnston, Val Shaw and Bethia Thomas

Officers: Harry Barrington-Mountford, Head of Policy and Programmes and Simon Hewings, Head of Finance

85 Apologies for absence

An apology for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Hannaby.

86 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 8 December 2021 as a correct record and agree that the Chair sign them as such.

87 Declarations of disclosable pecuniary interest

None.

88 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The Chair of Council, Councillor Crick, advised that, in accordance with Section 100B (4) (b) of the Local Government Act 1972, she had agreed to take one item of urgent business at

the meeting – for Council to amend its Council Tax Reduction Scheme to disregard Energy Bill rebate payments when determining eligibility for Council Tax Reduction.

The reason for urgency being that Council must agree the change by the statutory deadline of 11 March 2022 and the matter arose since the publication of the agenda for this meeting. The Chair further advised that the item would be taken after the Council Tax setting item.

On behalf of Council, she congratulated Councillor Grant on becoming the proud parent of a baby girl.

On behalf of Council, she congratulated Councillor Johnston on reaching 40 years of service as a councillor with Vale of White Horse District Council. Councillors Fawcett and Mabbett made statements marking the achievement and thanking him for his service.

The Chair noted that the country was now officially in the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebration period. The Vale will be joining in and supporting the celebrations and plans will come forward shortly.

89 Public participation

Louise Brown addressed Council on agenda item 10 – Revenue budget 2022/23 and capital programme to 2026/27. Whilst welcoming the inclusion of the £50,000 in the budget to fund community climate initiatives, she urged Council to make more funds available to fund more initiatives. She also asked that the fund be made available to community businesses who are at the centre of their communities. In light of the cost of living crisis she urged Council not to increase council tax.

90 Petitions

None.

91 Section 106 request - Kingston Bagpuize with Southmoor Parish Council - Replacement sports pavillion, The Sports Field, Kingston Bagpuize

Council considered Cabinet's recommendation, made at its meeting on 4 February 2022, to create a budget for a total of £596,757.66 towards the replacement of the existing sports pavilion at The Sports Field, Kingston Bagpuize.

Cabinet supported the application subject to Council creating the budget from accumulated section 106 contributions. A number of councillors spoke in support of the proposal which representing a good use of section 106 funds to provide a much-needed replacement facility for the local community.

REOLVED: to create a further budget for £596,757.66 towards a replacement sports pavilion at The Sports Field, Kingston Bagpuize from the accumulated section 106 contributions set out in the head of finance's report to Cabinet on 4 February 2022.

92 Treasury management and investment strategy 2022/23

Council considered Cabinet's recommendation, made at its meeting on 4 February 2022, on the council's treasury management and investment strategy for 2022/23.

Councillor Crawford, Cabinet member for finance, reported that several changes were proposed to the strategy, designed to widen the scope of the available instruments the council can invest in with the aim of achieving an increase in yield whilst still maintaining the primacy of security and liquidity in determining where to place the council's investments.

The Joint Audit and Governance Committee had considered the report at its meeting on 25 January 2022 and had not recommended any adjustments to the strategy and resolved to recommend Cabinet to approve the treasury management strategy, the prudential indicators and limits for 2022/23 to 2024/25 and the annual investment strategy 2022/23 as set out in the report.

Cabinet agreed to recommend Council to approve the strategy.

RESOLVED: to

1. approve the treasury management strategy 2022/23 set out in appendix A to the head of finance's report to Cabinet on 4 February 2022;
2. approve the prudential indicators and limits for 2022/23 to 2024/25 as set out in, appendix A to the report; and
3. approve the annual investment strategy 2022/23 set out in appendix A to the report, and the lending criteria detailed in table 6.

93 Capital strategy 2022/23 to 2031/32

Council considered Cabinet's recommendation, made at its meeting on 4 February 2022, on the council's capital strategy for 2022/23 to 2031/32.

Councillor Crawford, Cabinet member for finance, set out the key proposed change to the strategy to broaden the areas where capital investment will be considered to include property investments, loans and renewable energy schemes. He stressed that in all cases investment would need to be within the council's legal powers, must be proportionate to the council's financial standing, and should support the council's corporate objectives. However, investment could not result in commercial gain.

RESOLVED: to

1. approve the capital strategy 2022/23 to 2031/32, contained in appendix one of the head of finance's report to Cabinet on 4 February 2022; and
2. agree the strategy for flexible use of capital receipts which is contained as annex 1 of the capital strategy.

94 Revenue budget 2022/23 and capital programme to 2026/27

The chair referred to regulations that require councils to record the names of those councillors voting in favour, against or abstaining from any vote on the budget, including amendments, and the council tax. In accordance with the regulations, she would call for a named vote on each of these matters at this meeting.

The chair reminded councillors that they were not entitled to vote on any issue affecting the level or administration of the council tax or other decisions which might affect the making of

any such calculation such as the budget, if they were over two months in arrears with their council tax payments. Where such circumstances applied, councillors were under a statutory obligation to disclose the restriction placed on them and refrain from voting at the relevant meeting. No councillor made any such declaration.

Council noted the report of the chief finance officer on the robustness of the budget estimates and the adequacy of the reserves.

Council considered Cabinet's recommendations, made at its meeting held on 4 February 2022 on the revenue budget for 2022/23 and the capital programme to 2026/27. Scrutiny Committee had considered the report of the interim head of finance on 1 February and had made no recommendations.

Councillor Crawford, Cabinet member for finance, presented Cabinet's proposals for the revenue budget and capital programme. He moved and Councillor Fawcett, seconded a motion to approve Cabinet's recommendations as follows:

to

1. set the revenue budget for 2022/23, as set out in appendix A.1 to the head of finance's report to Cabinet on 4 February 2022;
2. approve the capital programme for 2022/23 to 2026/27, as set out in appendix D.1 to the report, together with the capital programme changes as set out in appendix D.2 and appendix D.3 to the report;
3. set the council's prudential limits, as listed in appendix E to the report;
4. approve the medium-term financial plan to 2026/27, as set out in appendix F to the report.

In moving the Cabinet recommendations, Councillor Crawford, noted that the council had faced significant financial issues in the preparation of the budget. Its council tax was the fifteenth lowest in the country for a shire district and well below the national average; the council was unable to increase its council tax significantly. The council had not benefitted from the business rates retention scheme and, whilst the council had benefitted from the New Homes Bonus scheme, this was under review by the government and was expected to be less generous in future.

The revenue budget set for 2021/22 had been balanced through the use of reserves at a level that was unsustainable over the medium term. For 2022/23, officers had undertaken a review of all expenditure and income, which resulted in a significant reduction in the base budget. This allowed the council to set a balanced revenue budget for 2022/23 with savings of £1.4million, with the use of reserves being significantly lower than previously forecast and the council could claim to be solvent across the five year medium term financial plan period, based on future estimates of government funding. The budget proposed no cuts to services but included revenue growth to support climate initiatives. The council tax for a Band D property would increase by £5, the maximum allowed under the draft referendum rules. The capital programme included new schemes that would be funded from community infrastructure levy income.

Conservative Group amendment

Councillor Howell moved and Councillor Boyd seconded the following amendment:

- 1) Defer for one year the changes to the member Basic Allowances only for all Councillors. (£15,162)
- 2) Increase the Community Climate initiatives in 2022/23 by £75,000 to £125,000. This increase is for 2022/23 only. This is funded by the deferral of increase in member basic allowances above, and the use of the budgeted transfer of the 2022/23 surplus to reserves (£58,659).
- 3) Reduce office accommodation costs on departure from 135 Milton Park by using existing Vale of White Horse District Council owned property to save rental costs over the five years of the MTFP. Additionally, by accommodating staff serving both councils, the resulting income for use of existing council buildings by South Oxfordshire District Council will generate small additional income for the council.
- 4) As a result of the savings from use of existing properties the Council Tax required can be kept at £141.69 for the budget year of 2022/23, a one-off Council Tax Freeze.

In moving the amendment Councillor Howell stated that it would re-balance a couple of specific items in line with priorities for residents and that the amendment is net cost neutral to the Council over the life of the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) period and therefore operates within the current overall revenue and spending plans.

A number of councillors spoke in support of the amendment. The provision of additional funds for the Community Climate initiatives would increase support to community groups and parish councils to apply for grants to tackle the climate emergency and promote sustainability in communities. The view was expressed that the grants should be awarded via the Area Committees. A freeze in the level of council tax would help residents at a time of rising fuel bills and inflation. However, other councillors expressed the view that the amendment represented a last-minute party-political manoeuvre. A freezing in the level of council tax would not address the long-term financial stability of the council. Proposals in respect of reduced office accommodation costs were not costed.

In accordance with regulations requiring councils to record the names of those councillors voting in favour, against or abstaining from any vote on the budget the chair called for a recorded vote which was not carried with the voting being as follows:

For	Against	Abstentions
Councillors	Councillors	Councillors
Matthew Barber	Jerry Avery	
Eric Batts	Paul Barrow	
Nathan Boyd	Cheryl Briggs	
Simon Howell	Andy Cooke	
Ben Mabbett	Andrew Crawford	
Janet Shelley	Margaret Crick	
Elaine Ware	Eric de la Harpe	

For	Against	Abstentions
	Amos Duveen	
	Neil Fawcett	
	Andy Foulsham	
	Hayleigh Gascoigne	
	David Grant	
	Alison Jenner	
	Diana Lugova	
	Sarah Medley	
	Patrick O’Leary	
	Helen Pighills	
	Mike Pighills	
	Judy Roberts	
	Emily Smith	
	Max Thompson	
	Catherine Webber	
	Richard Webber	
Total: 7	Total: 23	Total: 0

A number of councillors spoke against the budget proposal which, following the defeat of the amendment, had a lower level of support for Community Climate initiatives. The proposed council tax increase was not necessary providing for an increase in reserves at a time when residents were facing increased costs.

However, the majority of councillors supported the budget proposals and welcomed the news that the base budget had been reduced, allowing the council to balance its budget over the five-year medium term financial plan with an increase in reserves. The budget included funds to support schemes to address the climate emergency, to fund new technology to provide green solutions, community safety initiatives and to improve leisure facilities and children’s play facilities for local communities. The budget also included a number of capital schemes to fund much-needed infrastructure.

In accordance with regulations requiring councils to record the names of those councillors voting in favour, against or abstaining from any vote on the budget the chair called for a recorded vote which was carried with the voting being as follows:

For	Against	Abstentions
Councillors	Councillors	Councillors
Jerry Avery	Matthew Barber	
Paul Barrow	Eric Batts	
Cheryl Briggs	Nathan Boyd	
Andy Cooke	Simon Howell	
Andrew Crawford	Ben Mabbett	
Margaret Crick	Janet Shelley	
Eric de la Harpe	Elaine Ware	
Amos Duveen		
Neil Fawcett		
Andy Foulsham		
Hayleigh Gascoigne		

For	Against	Abstentions
David Grant		
Alison Jenner		
Diana Lugova		
Sarah Medley		
Patrick O'Leary		
Helen Pighills		
Mike Pighills		
Judy Roberts		
Emily Smith		
Max Thompson		
Catherine Webber		
Richard Webber		
Total: 23	Total: 7	Total: 0

RESOLVED: to

1. set the revenue budget for 2022/23, as set out in appendix A.1 to the head of finance's report to Cabinet on 4 February 2022;
2. approve the capital programme for 2022/23 to 2026/27, as set out in appendix D.1 to the report, together with the capital programme changes as set out in appendix D.2 and appendix D.3 to the report;
3. set the council's prudential limits, as listed in appendix E to the report;
4. approve the medium-term financial plan to 2026/27, as set out in appendix F to the report.

Councillors thanked the head of finance and his team for the work undertaken to prepare the budget.

95 Future provision of external audit services

Council considered Cabinet's recommendation, made at its meeting on 4 February 2022, on the appointment of the external auditor to the council for the accounts for the five-year period from 2023/24.

The Joint Audit and Governance Committee, at its meeting on 25 January 2022, supported the recommendations set out in the report.

RESOLVED: to

1. accept Public Sector Audit Appointments' invitation to opt into the sector-led option for the appointment of external auditors to principal local government and police bodies for five financial years from 1 April 2023; and
2. authorise the head of finance to opt into the national scheme for auditor appointments for the provision of external audit services, starting with the audit of the 2023/24 accounts.

96 Council tax 2022/23

Council considered the report of the head of finance on the setting of the Council Tax for the 2022/23 financial year.

In accordance with regulations requiring councils to record the names of those councillors voting in favour, against or abstaining from any vote on the council tax the chair called for a recorded vote which was carried with the voting being as follows:

For	Against	Abstentions
Councillors	Councillors	Councillors
Jerry Avery	Nathan Boyd	
Matthew Barber	Simon Howell	
Paul Barrow	Ben Mabbett	
Eric Batts	Janet Shelley	
Cheryl Briggs	Elaine Ware	
Andy Cooke		
Andrew Crawford		
Margaret Crick		
Eric de la Harpe		
Amos Duveen		
Neil Fawcett		
Andy Foulsham		
Hayleigh Gascoigne		
David Grant		
Alison Jenner		
Diana Lugova		
Sarah Medley		
Patrick O'Leary		
Helen Pighills		
Mike Pighills		
Judy Roberts		
Emily Smith		
Max Thompson		
Catherine Webber		
Richard Webber		
Total: 25	Total: 5	Total: 0

RESOLVED:

1. To note that at its meeting on 8 December 2021 the council calculated the council tax base 2022/23:
 - (a) for the whole council area as 55,362.8 [Item T in the formula in Section 31B of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, as amended (the "Act")]; and
 - (b) for dwellings in those parts of its area to which a parish precept relates as in column 1 of appendix 1.

2. That the council tax requirement for the council's own purposes for 2022/23 (excluding parish precepts) is £8,121,169
3. That the following amounts be calculated for the year 2022/23 in accordance with Sections 31 to 36 of the Act:
 - (a) £74,301,774 being the aggregate of the amounts which the council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(2) of the Act taking into account all precepts issued to it by parish councils.
 - (b) £61,492,993 being the aggregate of the amounts which the council estimates for the items set out in Section 31A(3) of the Act.
 - (c) £12,808,781 being the amount by which the aggregate at (3)(a) above exceeds the aggregate at (3)(b) above, calculated by the council, in accordance with Section 31A(4) of the Act as its council tax requirement for the year. (Item R in the formula in Section 31B) of the Act).
 - (d) £231.36 being the amount at (3)(c) above (Item R), all divided by Item T (1(a) above), calculated by the council, in accordance with Section 31(B) of the Act, as the basic amount of its council tax for the year (including parish precepts).
 - (e) £4,687,612 being the aggregate amount of all special items referred to in Section 34(1) of the Act, as set out in column 2 of appendix 1.
 - (f) £146.69 being the amount at (3)(d) above less the result given by dividing the amount at (3)(e) above by Item T (1(a) above), calculated by the council, in accordance with Section 34(2) of the Act, as the basic amount of its council tax for the year for dwellings in those parts of its area to which no parish precept relates.
4. To note that for the year 2022/23 Oxfordshire County Council has stated the following amounts in precepts issued to the council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:

Band A	£1,101.07
Band B	£1,284.59
Band C	£1,468.10
Band D	£1,651.61
Band E	£2,018.63
Band F	£2,385.66
Band G	£2,752.68
Band H	£3,303.22

5. To note that for the year 2022/23 the Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley has stated the following amounts in precepts issued to the council, in accordance with Section 40 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, for each of the categories of dwellings shown below:

Band A	£160.85
Band B	£187.66
Band C	£214.47
Band D	£241.28
Band E	£294.90
Band F	£348.52
Band G	£402.13
Band H	£482.56

6. That the council, in accordance with Sections 30 and 36 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992, hereby sets the aggregate amounts shown in appendix 3 as the amounts of council tax for 2022/23 for each part of its area and for each of the categories of dwellings shown in appendix 3.
7. To determine that the council's basic amount of council tax for 2022/23 is not excessive in accordance with principles approved under Section 52ZB Local Government Finance Act 1992.

97 Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme - Energy Bills Rebate disregard (Prescribed amendment)

Council considered the urgent report of the head of finance seeking approval for the council's current Council Tax Reduction Scheme's wording to be amended so that it can disregard Government's £150 one-off Energy Bills Rebate as income, in accordance with new legislation, when calculating a person's entitlement for council tax support and the amount of the support deduction.

RESOLVED: to approve an amendment to its Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme (working age & pension age), inserting appropriate income disregard wording which takes account of Government's one-off £150 Energy Bills Rebate.

98 Pay policy statement 2022/23

Council considered the report of the deputy chief executive on the adoption of a pay policy statement to meet the requirements of the Localism Act.

RESOLVED: to approve the statement of pay policy for 2022/23 attached to the report of the deputy chief executive to the Council meeting on 16 February 2022.

99 Update on Future Oxfordshire Partnership

Council received a written update report on The Future Oxfordshire Partnership from Councillor Fawcett, Cabinet member for Strategic Partnerships and Place.

100 Report of the leader of the council

Councillor Emily Smith, Leader of the council, provided an update on a number of matters. The text of her address is available on the council's [website](#).

Council noted the details of an urgent decision taken by Councillor Bethia Thomas, Cabinet member for Community Engagement, to approve amendments to the Vale of White Horse District Council Additional Restrictions Grant (ARG) scheme.

101 Questions on notice

A. Question from Councillor Bob Johnston to Councillor Catherine Webber, Cabinet Member for Climate

Over the Christmas period, because of Covid absences and drivers being poached by supermarkets, newspapers reported that a considerable number of Councils struggled to maintain waste collections. Some had to suspend them altogether.

Could the Cabinet member tell me if there have been any problems with the Vale's waste and Recycling collections in recent months, and how our performance is holding up in these challenging times?

Answer

I would like to congratulate the Waste Team along with Biffa for the excellent service they have succeeded in maintaining throughout the especially busy period of Christmas. Biffa have carefully managed staffing over this period and like most employers suffered from difficulty in recruiting and some absence due to Covid. Unlike many other councils, there were no unplanned service suspensions over the Christmas period and little disruption to service over recent months. Although a few collections have been delayed due to staff absence, all collections have been completed by the end of the week that they were due.

During the whole Covid period I have seen increasing evidence of our residents' appreciation of all the work waste operatives do to keep our Waste operation going and servicing our communities. On behalf of the residents of the Vale, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all those involved for their hard work and commitment, including the waste crews, the support staff and our officers who manage our waste contract.

B. Question from Councillor Alison Jenner to Councillor Judy Roberts, Cabinet Member for Development and Infrastructure

What affordable housing provision has this council achieved in recent years and how does this compare with our Oxfordshire neighbours?

Answer

Vale of White Horse has a robust track record in delivering affordable homes. The council has consistently delivered between 300 and 400 affordable homes per year in the district since 2015, a consistency that has not been seen in our Oxfordshire neighbours. Affordable housing delivery within Oxford City is significantly below the level of the other Oxfordshire Councils. Over the period 2014/15 to 2020/21 the council has delivered 2,301 affordable units. In comparison, Oxford city has delivered 581, West Oxfordshire 1,475, South Oxfordshire 1,841 and Cherwell 2,465. In the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, and global supply chain issues in the building materials sector, the council is continuing to perform very well.

Annual affordable housing delivery, Oxfordshire LPAs

LPA	Net additional dwellings per year(1 April - 31 March)							Total
	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	
South Oxfordshire District Council - total	600	615	722	935	1369	1477	866	6584
- affordable	114	180	172	259	382	517	217	1841
Vale of White Horse District Council - total	739	1132	1609	1573	1258	1601	1108	9020
- affordable	250	326	336	311	392	353	333	2301
West Oxfordshire District Council - total	395	246	518	556	813	1086	868	4482
- affordable	103	75	123	158	227	454	335	1475
Cherwell District Council - total	946	1425	1102	1387	1489	1159	1192	8700
- affordable	191	322	278	426	507	446	295	2465
Oxford City Council - total	332	440	435	373	351	784	320	3035
- affordable	17	164	20	27	105	104	144	581

Supplementary question and answer

In response to a supplementary question asking for details of the amount of affordable housing commuted sum and growth deal money the council had spent, Councillor Roberts responded that £735,400 of the affordable housing commuted sum funds had been allocated, from the growth deal funds £2.4 million had been provided for extra care housing within the Didcot Housing 21 Project and £2,481,400 had been allocated for the Heylo Scheme and the Oxfordshire Community Land Trust Scheme.

C. Question from Councillor Amos Duveen to Councillor Helen Pighills, Cabinet Member for Healthy Communities

It was excellent to see that our two districts had zero rough sleepers recorded on 31 December. I would like to take a moment to praise all of the council officers who have played their part in achieving this milestone. I also note that South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse councils regularly outperform other Oxfordshire councils on homelessness prevention.

However, as I am sure all of us are all too well aware, rough sleepers only make up a proportion of those facing homelessness so could the Cabinet member confirm that we did indeed achieve a day of zero homelessness and comment on measures this council is taking to continue to address rough sleeping and what prevention measures are taken to assist those individuals and families at risk of all types of homelessness?

Answer

Thank you for acknowledging the dedication of the Housing Needs team in achieving zero rough sleeping across both districts. The housing need team provide housing advice to members of the public. They adopt a problem solving approach focusing on prevention of homelessness by engaging with people as soon as possible to avoid homelessness or eviction. As at January 2022 there were 2091 households on the housing register of which 852 were "in need" i.e. bands one to three.

The best way to tackle homelessness is to stop it happening in the first place. The housing needs team operate a range of initiatives that identify households at risk of homelessness and provide housing solutions to avoid homelessness. In 2021/22, more than 200 households in Vale were prevented from becoming homeless.

The initiatives include outreach provision for rough sleepers, floating support services for households at risk of homelessness, Housing First, housing and support for refugees, Enhanced Housing Options and White Horse Lettings.

White Horse Lettings (WHL), for example, are a small team in housing needs that help secure affordable private tenancies for households at risk of homelessness. In 2021/22, WHL secured 61 new affordable tenancies and are currently working with 63 private landlords in Vale.

To put the numbers into context the flow of rough sleepers is constant and we seek to identify and support all individuals who are reported to us by visiting all sites reported:

- **2019/20** we received **92** referrals either from the individual or public advising that individuals were rough sleeping of which **31** were verified. We recorded **three** rough sleepers at the end of the year.
- **2020/21** we had 124 referrals of which **48** were verified and recorded **one** rough sleeper at the end of the year.

The table below shows the comparison statistics across the South East region for 2020-21.

Comparison statistics for the year 2020 - 21	Total number of households whose prevention duty ended ^{1,2}	Secured accommodation for 6+ months			
		Total secured accommodation	% successful prevention	Stayed in existing accommodation	Moved to alternative accommodation
England	116,460	69,120	59.0	24,690	44,440
South East	16,110	8,960	55.6	2,690	6,270
Cherwell	172	97	56.4	22	75
Oxford	211	128	60.7	46	82
South Oxfordshire	271	204	75.3	46	158
Vale of White Horse	268	208	77.6	50	158
West Oxfordshire	81	50	61.7	4	46

D. Question from Councillor Max Thompson to Councillor Emily Smith, Leader of the council

During the most stringent and lonely phases of Covid19 restrictions, before social bubbles and any household mixing, thousands of Vale of White Horse residents were helping their shielding neighbours, following the guidance, and foregoing birthdays, weddings, work drinks, and in some cases funerals.

At the same time, we now know that members of the Conservative government who made the rules were at best stretching their meaning and, at worst, breaking the law, by holding a large number of parties, get togethers and social events, several of which involved the consumption of alcohol.

Can the Leader confirm that no such events were organised for our members and that at all times she has sought to ensure that the Vale of White Horse has acted in compliance with all covid guidelines, and comment on her position regarding whether it is acceptable for elected representatives to consume alcohol whilst making decisions?

Answer

The council has always taken its responsibility to protect public health very seriously and since the start of the pandemic has been working closely with system partners to raise staff, members and our communities' awareness and understanding of the Covid-19 guidelines and restrictions set by government and Public Health England, and importantly stressing the need to follow them.

The council has also taken all the steps necessary, throughout the pandemic, to ensure its facilities, services and processes have been operating in line with the restrictions and guidelines in place at the time, to protect its own staff, members and residents.

I believe it highly inappropriate for members of councils, and parliament, to be drinking or under the influence of alcohol whilst making decisions on behalf of the public. This evening, for example, council is making decisions about how to spend millions of pounds of public money and that requires clear thinking and our full attention and concentration.

The photographs of members of government and their staff enjoying wine and cheese at a "work meeting" at number 10, were clearly at odds with the spirit of the Covid-19 rules and were possibly illegal in relation to Covid-19 laws at the time. But on top of that, I personally thought it concerning that drinking any form of alcohol, while conducting formal government business, was implied to be 'normal' by those responsible for running our country.

It may be fine for elected representatives to enjoy a drink in the context of a formal dinner, reception, or celebration, but when in the office or the chamber conducting council (or government) business we should be fully engaged and approaching our responsibilities respectfully and with a clear head.

102 Motions on notice

No motions were submitted for consideration by Council.

The meeting closed at 9.25pm