

# Council leader's statement

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## VALE OF WHITE HORSE DISTRICT COUNCIL - 10 OCTOBER 2018 – LEADER'S STATEMENT

1. Oxfordshire Leaders' Meetings. As Chairman of the Oxfordshire Leaders meetings, I can report the six councils are working positively together on a wide range of issues:

Jane Murphy Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council and I wrote to the Secretary of State about housing land supply and received a Written Ministerial Statement (WMS) giving us a three-year land supply – HCW - S955 which gave time limited flexibilities in planning, provided Oxfordshire could demonstrate a three-year land supply. This lasts until the adoption of the Oxfordshire-wide Joint Spatial Strategy by the District and City councils.

I wrote separately to Ed Vaizey who passed on my letter to James Brokenshire about the effects of the potential loss of New Homes Bonus (NHB) and requesting early clarity, especially on retention levels.

We also joined with the District Councils Network in requesting Government to confirm the four-year NHB deal offer made in 2016-17. Our approach to the current uncertainty is also reflected by the LGA's national position and response. I wrote to Kit Malthouse, Minister of State for Housing about the implications of building more houses than planned by local councils in the Corridor. I and other leaders reminded him at a self build/custom build site meeting at Craven Hill in Bicester that any reduction in NHB would have serious consequences.

2. Corridor and Expressway. I attended my second Corridor Leaders meeting comprising the leaders of all county, district and borough councils from Swindon to Cambridge. The Joint Vision and Scope of joint working is now being amended to reflect the wishes of delegates, which is to remain supportive of the Corridor and await further thoughts from the government. The government has contacted all councils along the Corridor outlining their intention to provide a common data set to support new settlement identification and development and this will feed into the Corridor Leaders thinking

3. Economic Heartland of England. Championed by government as the Silicon Valley joining Oxford and Cambridge, which is planning to deliver the businesses and commercial aspects of cross Corridor working. Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, Robert Jenrick spoke and confirmed this at the meeting. He is keen to see councils across the Corridor work collectively to promote it 'end to end', rather than 'compete' on behalf of a sub-section and undermine wider growth. This was very much the NIC view and is now held across government. It is one I support.

4. Growth Board. Cllr Jane Murphy SODC is Chairman and I am Vice-Chairman. There is largely consensus and unanimity on the major strategic issues such as: JSSP, the developing ToRs; Scrutiny of the Board; housing numbers and affordable housing opportunities. Uppermost in our minds is the health and well-being of all our residents. Along with our partners, the Environment Agency, Active Oxford, Rural Connectivity and Homes

England, Cllr Jane Murphy wrote on behalf of all members to Chris Grayling, Secretary of State for Transport, on 1 October 18 seeking greater certainty around the Expressway Route. This is essential if we are to secure Oxfordshire's spatial planning commitments and associated infrastructure and investment.

5. OxLEP. I have participated in the Audit and Governance Review of OxLEP and attended the AGM and Board meeting. This has been a game changing year for Oxfordshire reflecting the significant economic developments that have emerged over 12 months. As Oxfordshire continues to demonstrate how it can be a 'global asset' to UKPLC both now and in the longer term, having delivered 43,000 new jobs in the last five years and developing one of only three government-backed pilot Local Industrial Strategies. The draft Local Industrial Strategy has been well received by council leaders. We will now examine it critically with officers and offer amendments.

6. Unitary MHCLG. Jane and I wrote jointly to James Brokenshire, Secretary of State for MHCLG, asking about our proposal for unitarisation. Minister Rishi Sunak replied that as we are all working well together in Oxfordshire, at present, he sees no need to proceed with a unitary decision. [His response](#) is on our website.

7. LPP2. Sessions have been completed with Harwell, Dalton Barracks. The inspector called for additional information on: WMS on three-year land supply in Oxfordshire; Harwell Campus housing tenure; Ox Cam Expressway; Wootton 7 St Helens NDP. We await a formal letter from the inspector asking for modifications. LPP2 is being examined under the original NPPF. Policies in the previous NPPF will apply to plans submitted before 24 January 2019, thus there are no implications for LPP2 from revised NPPF and LPP2 is supportive of the council-approved Growth Deal. Once adopted there will be a consistency check as required by the revised NPPF.

8. Five Councils. I represented the council at an informal Five Councils Joint Committee where the dashboard of results showed significant improvement in services, many at 100 per cent and, almost all on target. Some are now possibly exceeding previous levels of service. Capita's new CEO John Lewis is modernising the business quickly and his local government board director, Jonathan Prew, is working closely with us as part of this. Our CEO Mark Stone is leading on behalf of the wider group of Five Council CEOs in his work and ongoing redesign. We have made significant steps forward, which are acknowledged across the partnership. I welcome and endorse the positive response from Scrutiny to recent updates on our approach and progress.

9. Council Tax. We wrote next to the CEO Valuation Office asking for more help with officers inspecting and classifying houses on the register to enable councils to collect the council tax as soon as possible. This has generated a positive response. Our collection rates remain among the very highest in the country and I thank all involved for their efforts.

10. Accounts. Audit and Governance Committee met at the end of September to consider feedback from our External Auditor EY to ensure that the accounts were signed off by the end of the month. I am pleased to report to Council that the audit concluded with a clean audit opinion on both the financial statements and the Value For Money statement. This improvement from the prior year reflects a significant level of engagement and support

from officers and I would like to thank them for their professionalism, perseverance in overcoming challenges and diligence in achieving this outcome.

11. Board Report. Our own internal performance measure of services is the Board Report, which again reflects a solid performance across all services, with many being at levels that are above the national standards set by government

12. Residents' Survey. I reported the residents' survey, which was largely positive, to the Scrutiny Committee. The survey continues to show high levels of satisfaction amongst those who use our services and our results are higher than others in the region.

13. Town and Parish Forum. I hosted the briefing on 24 September, which was presented by our eight heads of service, explaining their roles and team responsibilities. As previously approved by full council, I confirm the CEO will now work with the Heads of Service to populate the chart according to funds available. Please be aware that over the next 12 weeks many of our staff will be having a change of line manager and some will be applying for jobs as we complete the operational layers of the officer structure and reduce the number of agency staff within the organisation.

14. Crowmarsh. The old council buildings have been demolished. We are negotiating an extension of current 135 MP to allow for continuity prior to the move to Crowmarsh. We will shortly enter the design and build phase of the programme

15. WWI. Ed Blagrove laid a wreath from the Vale at The Menem Gate Memorial at Last Post. Vale representatives for wreath laying at towns and villages on 11 November can collect wreaths from my PA.

16. In Summary. We continue to build a strong economy, creating opportunities for all, ever improving our already high quality council services and continuing to listen to, and addressing, our residents' concerns.

However, I have been disappointed by some recent comments in the press. In response, I offer the comments of the council's Section 151 Officer.

The reason the current uncertainty over our future revenue position is impacting our approach to capital spending is that the two are directly related to each other.

This is partly because we are currently planning within the Medium Term Finance Strategy (MTFS) to incur capital borrowing, the repayment of which is revenue-funded (as with a mortgage). It is also because capital receipts are extinguished during the period of the MTFS and revenue reserves ultimately underpin and fund both our revenue and capital expenditure. In addition, capital schemes invariably increase long term revenue costs eg through asset maintenance costs.

The capital programme currently assumes a large contribution from money we hold in our reserves. Depending on future financial settlements it is possible that members may wish to (or may have to) draw down on these

reserves to fund other priorities and support the revenue budget instead of continuing with currently planned capital expenditure.

It is not correct to assume that the currently proposed capital programme is separate from our revenue position and the primary financial duty of the council is to propose and deliver a balanced budget, which includes both revenue and capital. At this time, it is not possible for us to be sure that this will not require the use of reserves, which are currently allocated to potential capital schemes, for revenue purposes.

Vale remains financially healthy and solvent, and our current pause in expenditure on discretionary capital schemes will ensure we continue to be so in future years, whilst retaining maximum flexibility for members in setting the 2019/20 budget and beyond.

**Cllr Roger Cox - Leader of Vale of White Horse District Council**