

Written responses to questions – 14 July 2021

Council meeting

1. Question from Councillor Amos Duveen, to Councillor Catherine Webber, Cabinet member for climate emergency and environment

The Arc Leaders' Environmental Principles, endorsed by Cabinet in April, includes the aim of doubling tree and woodland cover over the Ox-Cam Arc region. This ambition is echoed by Oxfordshire Friends of the Earth in their 'In case of emergency' report calling for councils to double tree cover across the county by 2045. What is this council doing to increase tree cover?

Answer

The Council is clear that tackling the climate and ecological emergency is a core focus of our work. This is why we made tackling the climate emergency a central theme of our Corporate Plan and have embedded an environmentally focused approach across everything we do.

The Vale is incredibly lucky to already have over 5000 hectares of high-quality woodland across our district.

Increasing tree cover across the Vale is an important part of our work. Wherever opportunities exist to directly and sustainably increase tree cover on Council land either by ourselves or working with partners, or by making land available to residents and community groups, to facilitate tree planting on Council land is something that we are keen to encourage and facilitate. To that end we are currently developing a new policy for planting trees on Council land. This policy will clearly set out how residents, community groups or other interested parties can work with the Council to plant the right trees, in the right places as easily and as quickly possible.

As well as encouraging and enabling others to plant on our land, the council is always looking for impactful new initiatives we can undertake to increase tree cover. As part of our work on the Strategic Property Review, we are looking to identify sites for a pilot of a new 'Tiny Forest' scheme in the Vale. These 'Tiny Forests' were developed by Dr Akira Miyawaki in Japan and focus on maximising the benefits of tree planting per square meter of land. Comprised of over 600 trees per site, it is estimated that they attract over 500 animal and plant species within the first three years and provide a nature-rich accessible green space for people to reconnect with nature.

Not only do we want to encourage new tree planting, but we want to ensure that existing tree cover across the district is protected through the utilisation of appropriate legislation and powers, such as Tree Protection Orders.

As part of our Climate Action Plan, we will seek to advise, influence and encourage residents and landowners to plant trees on land which we do not own across the district. As Oxfordshire Friends of the Earth identify, this activity will be a marathon, not a sprint, and we will seek to ensure that wherever possible, the right types of trees are planted in the right places, thereby ensuring their longevity and supporting a sustainable, biodiverse environment for generations to come.

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2. Question from Councillor Eric de la Harpe to Councillor Andy Crawford, Cabinet member for finance and corporate assets

In early May Abingdon residents reported on social media that evidence of weed-killer was seen on Vale owned land. Thanks to these posts, councillors were able to alert senior officers who then stopped the weedkiller being used with immediate effect. Can the Cabinet member inform residents what was learned from the incident and give assurances that it will not happen again?

Answer

This was a regrettable incident for which we immediately apologised, and I am happy to repeat that apology this evening. The spraying which caused concern, for example around mature trees is not usual practice and was carried out incorrectly both in Abingdon and elsewhere in the District and should like to thank those residents who brought it to our attention. We will continue to endeavour to keep the use of herbicide to an absolute minimum on land the council maintains. In some instances, for example on paved areas, in car parks and in some play areas where a strimmer is likely to damage equipment, there is currently no practicable alternative to spraying. All members of the team have been reminded as to where and when they are permitted to use spray,

The grounds maintenance team has been in house since November 2020 and during the first 8 months we have concentrated on settling the team in and we are now planning phase two of the project. This will include mapping the wild flower areas which we currently manage, reviewing the number for grass cuts per season which have already been reduced, and considering how each area of land is best managed taking into consideration ecological and health and safety needs. We will also be investigating environmentally safer alternatives to the herbicide currently used.

3. Question from Councillor Elaine Ware to Councillor Emily Smith, Leader of the council

At the 24 March 2021 meeting Council agreed the amended motion on health provision and for officers to contact Clinical Commissioning Group's to arrange meetings and for the Leader to write to the Ministers for Health and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Has this been done and If so when was contact made and what meetings have or are due to take place? What responses have been received from Ministers and MHCLG?

Answer

Following the motion on health provision agreed by Council at the meeting on 24 March 2021, I, as council leader, supported by officers, met with Directors for the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group (OCCG) on 24 May 2021. A meeting is still in the process of being arranged with Swindon Clinical Commissioning Group.

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The discussion with OCCG included discussion of how population forecasts are used to plan healthcare requirements in the district and how the council can improve working with the CCG to ensure healthcare needs are included in S106 agreements and ensuring the associated monies are spent in a timely manner.

Following that meeting, officers have put in place regular meetings with the OCCG to maintain these discussions and to provide an opportunity to discuss particular site issues.

Also, at my meeting OCCG agreed to make a presentation for all councillors to explain how they operate and propose future reforms to help us in our work on behalf of communities.

In relation to the letters to the Ministers for Health and MHCLG, these have been drafted but not yet sent pending further discussions with the CCGs.

4. Question from Councillor Eric Batts to Councillor Helen Pighills, Cabinet member for healthy communities

In the recent press release with a big splash of opening the Abbey Meadow pool, and stating that:

“We promised we would do everything we could to get the pool opened as soon as possible, as we know how popular it is with families, particularly over the summer. I’m so pleased that we’ve been able to pull out all the stops to achieve this”

Would Councillor Pighills please advise what this entailed and why it was the last pool in the area to open?

Answer

The agreement to open the outdoor pool has been reached through ongoing negotiation of the Council’s Covid-19 Leisure Support Package, as approved by the Vale of White Horse District Council on 24 March 2021. Member colleagues will appreciate that I am not in a position to cover this detail here as these negotiations are commercially confidential, however according to the minutes, Councillor Batts participated in that March Council meeting when this support package was agreed by members.

It is not the case that the Abbey Meadow outdoor pool is the last to open in the area. For example, another GLL operated open air pool at Woodstock (West Oxfordshire) is not yet open and no opening date has been published.

5. Question from Councillor Nathan Boyd to Councillor Catherine Webber, Cabinet member for climate emergency and environment

Would the Cabinet member provide an update on the garden waste service in respect of a) the number of weeks the non-provision of service was experienced, b)

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the number of weeks lost not being able to take on new customers and the reason for this, and c) what is the estimated loss of income from the inability to take on new customers and the current waiting list?

Answer

The Garden Waste Service has been impacted by two key issues this year 1) the impact of the Covid pandemic and 2) the complexity of insourcing the exchequer service and finance systems from Capita from 1 April 2021.

From the start of the pandemic, our key focus was to prioritise the most critical elements of the waste service: Food, Residual, Recycling. During the first wave, we kept the garden waste service running and worked positively with our contractor Biffa to ensure they understood our priorities and in turn we were appraised of the issues they were facing.

During the second wave of the pandemic, at one point Biffa had 28 staff members who are not able to work due to Covid. We agreed to suspend the garden waste service after Christmas and reviewed the decision weekly. The service recommenced on 15 February 2021 in Vale, as expected increased volumes were collected by the crew which caused some delays, all collections were completed within the first week. This resulted in the majority of residents having two weeks of non-service provision on top of the usual Christmas suspension. (Friday collection properties missed three weeks).

More recently, we have suspended the service to new Garden Waste (GW) customers for seven weeks as part of upgrading the finance systems and establishing the new in-house exchequer team, part of which involved learning how the garden waste back office system worked. This has meant that overall we have not been able to manage new customers in the normal way for 23 weeks. This led to a backlog of approximately 2,500 customers for South and Vale and therefore we had income of £128,750 pending across both councils.

The new in-house exchequer team inherited a backlog of finance and garden waste queries and as part of the process they agreed with the waste team that core finance processing (including paying suppliers) would be prioritised and set up first. In response to the delay the exchequer, waste and customer services teams agreed a plan to clear the backlog which was estimated to take approximately six to eight weeks to complete, commencing on 17 May. It is only fair to clarify that this backlog has not been caused by Biffa and they are lined up to deliver the new bins as soon as we are ready. We have also not paid Biffa to collect from customers who are not set up on the system. To date 1,017 new customers have now been set up and we have emailed all customers on the backlog inviting them to register for the service.

Anyone who wishes to register their interest in joining the garden waste service may do so on the website, without joining a waiting list.

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6. Question from Councillor Simon Howell to Councillor Bethia Thomas, Cabinet member for community engagement

Following the launch of the White Horse Community Lottery on 14 June would the Cabinet Member provide an update on the success of the launch and how many organisations expressed an interest and signed up?

Answer

Of the 32 organisations that attended our lottery launch event, we are pleased that 26 have already registered to join it. The launch is just one part of our plans to get as many good causes registered as possible. We're still on track for tickets to go on sale from end of July, and the first draw is scheduled for 18 of September. Players and good causes can still continue to sign up at any point thereafter.