

Written responses to questions – 16 February 2022 Council meeting

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.

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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

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.

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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

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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.