

Written responses to questions – 15 February 2023 Council meeting

A. Question from Councillor Bob Johnston to Councillor Debby Hallett – Cabinet member for Corporate Services and Transformation

Now that work on OxPlan50 has ceased, what are the council's priorities for the new Joint Local Plan 2041?

Written answer

Now that work has ceased on the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, the Council is taking the 'Guiding Principles' for Good Growth from the Oxfordshire Strategic Vision to inspire and help shape the Joint Local Plan. Vale Council's priorities for the Joint Local Plan have been recently set out on the Council's website in a joint message from Cllrs Debby Hallett and Anne-Marie Simpson, Cabinet Members for Planning at the Vale and South Oxfordshire. This is available on the Vale of White Horse website (<https://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/vale-of-white-horse-district-council/planning-and-development/local-plan-and-planning-policies/local-plan-2041/>). The message sets out that the focus of the Joint Local Plan will be different from the last local plan and states that:

- Working to these Good Growth principles means thinking radically about how much development we plan, where it is located and how it is done.
- Rather than more of the same kind of development we've seen in recent years, we will focus on delivering homes to meet the actual local need.
- We will look at the number of and types of homes, their affordability and the energy efficiency standards they need to meet.
- We will use the opportunities we have through the planning system to protect nature and increase nature recovery.
- We will help tackle climate change by reducing carbon emissions, recognising this as an emergency and in line with our ambition to become zero carbon districts.
- We will focus on community health and wellbeing and locate new homes near to work places and community facilities.
- We will work hard to secure new and improved social and physical infrastructure to support development, ensuring that developers contribute a fair share of the cost.

B. Question from Councillor Emily Smith to Councillor Bethia Thomas - Council Leader and Cabinet Member for Community Engagement

Our district is home to so many inspirational individuals, charities and community groups. Over the past three years as we have lived through COVID-19 and now a national cost of living crisis, it's been incredible how Vale residents have stepped up to help each other.

During COVID-19 the Chair's Community Awards were not able to go ahead, but it would be wonderful to recognise the contribution of some of the volunteers we work with in our communities in some way. Are there any plans to hold the community awards again, or something similar?

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Written answer

I agree wholeheartedly with Councillor Smith that we are truly blessed in our district with so many individuals and organisations who show real community spirit.

Throughout the pandemic and subsequently, we have seen so many people stepping up to help people in their community and to offer support to people who are asylum seekers and refugees from countries around the world. This has built on the strong tradition we have in Vale of community resilience.

During the pandemic we could not bring people together physically to say 'thank you' to recognise and celebrate the true spirit of 'the Vale', but we would like to revive that tradition. The break has given us a good opportunity to have a fresh look at the format of the Chair's Community Awards to ensure they reflect the renewed focus on community since the pandemic, and so following the election, officers will work with the incumbent Chair to investigate creating a new, vibrant and fitting tribute to honour the Vale's community champions.

C. Question from Councillor Andy Cooke to Councillor Helen Pighills - Cabinet Member for Healthy Communities

I am aware that the Council has done much work to support refugees; I'm personally aware of support given to refugees from Ukraine and Afghanistan.

Residents of my ward have been very welcoming to refugees; it's something that gives me pride, so it does make the issue close to my heart. I'd like to take the opportunity to have the work done by officers behind the scenes highlighted, as it is something in which the entire Council can take pride.

Could you give Council an outline of the work done by the officers and the council to support refugees over the past year and more, and an overview of the schemes involved?

Written answer

We are immensely proud of the vital work this council has done alongside our partners, residents, community groups and voluntary sector organisations, to help provide safe shelter and support to refugees and asylum seekers. The council, as part of the Oxfordshire system which includes local authority, health and VCS partners working closely together, are supporting across a number of schemes. These are Homes for Ukraine, Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy scheme, Afghan Citizens Resettlement scheme, UK Resettlement Schemes, the Hong Kong British National (Overseas) visa scheme and unaccompanied asylum seeking children. In addition, the Oxfordshire system is also supporting a range of Home Office contingency and dispersed accommodation pathways.

The work our officers have undertaken and continue to provide, co-ordinated through our Community Hub, includes a wraparound support offer to settle guests in the district, distribution of government grants, providing housing and homeless advice

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and assistance, community integration support and supporting access to schooling, language lessons, access to medical services, benefits and support into employment. Cabinet is pleased that the proposed budget for 2023/24 includes the allocation of funds to continue our vital support by extending our Community Hub for two more years initially.

D. Question from Councillor Hayleigh Gascoigne to Councillor Judy Roberts – Cabinet Member for Development, Infrastructure and Development Management

People living in the Didcot area have seen a great deal of growth in housing numbers and population in their town and the surrounding area over recent years. Local residents expect the infrastructure to be provided to support this and any future growth. I understand that the S106 agreement for Great Western Park included money allocated for a much needed GP surgery.

Can we have an update on progress of the healthcare facility? Additionally, can the role of the council in provision of healthcare services be explained?

Written answer

Councillors will be aware that the council has no statutory role in provision of healthcare services. It is the responsibility of the Integrated Care Board (ICB) to determine need to meet any growth in population as part of the planning consultation process.

It is the case that the S106 agreement for Great Western Park secured a part contribution towards the total cost of delivery by health partners of the healthcare facilities. It also directs that the land be transferred via the council for this purpose.

As part of this land ownership provision the council is positively supporting the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board and related stakeholders to procure the provision of the healthcare facilities on the site. Regular meetings are taking place between the various parties to move the project forward and the ICB/council is looking to share a joint update with local residents shortly.

E. Question from Councillor Nathan Boyd to Councillor Helen Pighills – Cabinet Member for Healthy Communities

We know that Vale of White Horse District Council has played an important role in the relocation and housing of refugees from Afghanistan and the upsurge in those arriving in the UK via small boats, and thanks should go to our officers who have played a significant role on this. Is the Cabinet Member for Healthy Communities able to say how many refugees and asylum seekers this council has assisted since 2019 and what ongoing support is available to those seeking safety and asylum in our district?

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Written answer

We are immensely proud of the vital work this council has done alongside our partners, residents, community groups and voluntary sector organisations, to help provide safe shelter and support to refugees and asylum seekers. Our officer teams, co-ordinated through our Community Hub, continue to provide a wraparound support offer to settle guests in the district, distribute government grants, provide housing and homeless advice and assistance, offer community integration support and support access to schooling, language lessons, access to medical services, benefits and support into employment.

Some specific examples of work undertaken to support the Homes for Ukraine scheme, where we currently have approximately 400 Ukrainian guests living with 230 different hosts within our district includes:

- Setting up the relevant processes to enable the necessary safeguarding and accommodation checks to be completed for hosts that have generously opened up their homes to guest.
- Ensuring that appropriate guest, host and community communication and support arrangements are in place.
- Establishing a local rematching approach.
- Developing and delivering a discretionary guest payment scheme.
- Providing housing and homeless advice and assistance.
- Developing approaches to support 'Moving On' options into independent accommodation for guests.

Under the Afghan Relocation and Assistance Policy (ARAP) scheme, Vale of White Horse District Council has successfully resettled four Afghan families. Under the United Kingdom Resettlement Scheme (UKRS), one refugee family has settled within the district and two further UKRS families are due to arrive in February.

All of the families receive two-weeks intensive support on arrival to help them settle into our district, and they continue to receive structured support for the first year and ongoing access to help thereafter.

Cabinet is pleased that the proposed budget for 2023/24 includes the allocation of funds to continue our vital support by extending our Community Hub for two more years initially.

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F. Question from Councillor Ben Mabbett to Councillor Andy Crawford – Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Assets

The Beacon in Wantage is a vital hub for both the surrounding community and our wider District and an excellent events facility, providing a great location for public arts performances and as an excellent meeting venue. There have long been rumours of a possible closure and development of the site stretching back over several administrations.

Can the Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Assets confirm that The Beacon is remaining open for the foreseeable future as a vital community asset?

Written answer

Can I thank Councillor Mabbett for his question as it allows me to put the right the rumours, which have also been brought to my attention, he refers to.

This administration has no plans to close The Beacon. In this evening's budget papers the revenue budget includes income and expenditure for The Beacon for the coming year and a revenue projection for the full five-year term of the Medium Term Financial Plan. He will also see that in the capital section of the budget we have committed to capital expenditure on The Beacon to make vital improvements to the structure of the building so as to improve the experience for users and enhance its viability.

The COVID 19 pandemic presented a major challenge to venues such as The Beacon, closed as it was for very many months, although Councillors will recall the vital role that The Beacon served at that time where it operated as a Covid testing centre and hub. Last year, officers arranged a highly popular, well attended open day at The Beacon to promote and reinvigorate its usage to both existing and new users. We also continue to arrange and promote a schedule of events.

His question refers to "rumours over several administrations". I cannot comment on any plans of the two previous Conservative administrations may have had. Moreover, given that his party has not presented a budget tonight were his party again in administration can I assume that his party do not have plans to close The Beacon or redevelop it for other purposes?

In summary, no, this Liberal Democrat administration have no plans to close The Beacon but rather continue to invest in it and develop plans to further increase its popularity and long-term viability. If Councillor Mabbett knows the source of these rumours I would love to know.