

Minutes

of the annual meeting of the Council



held on Wednesday, 22 May 2024 at 7.00 pm
at The Ridgeway, The Beacon, Portway, Wantage, OX12 9BY

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: Kiera Bentley (Chair), Oliver Forder (Vice-Chair), Ron Batstone, Cheryl Briggs, Mark Coleman, Andy Cooke, Andy Crawford, Eric de la Harpe, Debra Dewhurst, Andy Foulsham, Katherine Foxhall, Hayleigh Gascoigne, Debby Hallett, Jenny Hannaby, Scott Houghton, Sarah James, Diana Lugova, Robert Maddison, Patrick O'Leary, Viral Patel, Helen Pighills, Mike Pighills, Sally Povolotsky, Jill Rayner, Judy Roberts, Val Shaw, Andrew Skinner, Emily Smith, Bethia Thomas and Max Thompson

Officers: Emily Barry, Democratic Services Officer, Steven Corrigan, Democratic Services Manager, Mark Stone, Chief Executive and Vivien Williams, Head of Legal and Democratic and Monitoring Officer (interim)

1. Election of Chair

Councillor Bentley invited nominations for Chair.

Councillor Bentley was nominated as chair for the 2024/25 municipal year. Councillor Thomas as proposer and Councillor Coleman as seconder spoke in support of the nomination.

RESOLVED: to elect Councillor Bentley as Chair of the council for the 2024/25 municipal year, until the next annual meeting of the Council in May 2025.

Councillor Bentley signed the declaration of acceptance of office and made an acceptance speech. She thanked Councillor Povolotsky, previous Chair of the council, for her support. She would be working with Councillor Povolotsky to distribute the charitable funds raised during the previous municipal year. The Chair advised that her husband would be acting as her escort.

2. Appointment of Vice-Chair

Councillor Forder was nominated as vice-chair for the 2024/25 municipal year. Councillor Thomas as proposer and Councillor Coleman as seconder spoke in support of the nomination.

RESOLVED: to elect Councillor Forder as vice-chair of the council for the 2024/25 municipal year, until the next annual meeting of the Council in May 2025.

Councillor Forder signed the declaration of acceptance of office and made an acceptance speech.

3. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Barrow, Caul, Clegg, Cox, Edwards and Farrell.

4. Minutes

In response to a question in respect of the detail included in the minutes, the democratic services manager advised that the minutes were a record of decisions made and, whilst they included a summary of discussions, it was not council practice to reference individual councillors unless referencing a recommendation to council, formally submitted question on notice, a specific question/statement or a specific ward related matter (eg Neighbourhood Development Plan).

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 22 February 2024 as a correct record and agree that the Chair sign them as such.

5. Declarations of interest

None.

6. Urgent business and chair's announcements

The Chair advised that there was no urgent business.

The Chair referred to the recent resignation of Richard Webber as the district ward councillor for Sutton Courtenay and, on behalf of Council, thanked him for his service to both the council and his constituents. Councillor James, a neighbouring ward councillor, made a statement in agreement with the Chair's words and thanking Richard Webber for his support when she was first elected as a district councillor.

The Chair advised that she would be raising funds for the following charities:

- Letcombe Brook Project
- Faringdon Folley Tower & Woodland Trust

7. Appointments to committees, panels and joint committees for 2024/25

Council considered the report of the head of legal and democratic on the appointment of those committees and joint committees which are required to be politically balanced; together with the Climate Emergency Advisory Committee, Licensing Acts Committee, and appointments to joint bodies.

The chair referred to the recommendations set out in the report, and circulated at the meeting, which covered the committee appointments for the 2024/25 municipal council year.

These recommendations were that Council:

1. appoints the committees and panels for the 2024/25 year and allocate seats to each political group as set out in the schedule circulated prior to the meeting;
2. appoints councillors and substitutes to sit on the committees and panels as set out in the schedule circulated prior to the meeting;
3. appoints councillors to the Licensing Acts Committee as set out in the schedule circulated prior to the meeting;

4. appoints councillors to the Climate Emergency Advisory Committee as set out in the schedule circulated prior to the meeting;
5. appoints chairs and vice-chairs as set out in the schedule circulated prior to the meeting;
6. appoints all local members representing the wards covered by the relevant area committees to those committees for the 2024/25 municipal year – Abingdon and North East, Faringdon and Wantage;
7. appoints Paul Barrow as the council’s representative and Ron Batstone as substitute on the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
8. appoints Neil Fawcett as the council’s representative and Helen Pighills as substitute on the Thames Valley Police and Crime Panel;
9. appoints Emily Smith, Debby Hallett and Andy Cooke to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Panel;
10. authorises the head of legal and democratic to make appointments to any vacant committee or panel seat and substitute positions in accordance with the wishes of the relevant group leader.

A number of councillors expressed concern that the independent councillors had no representation on committees and spoke in support of the Council making such provision. Other councillors noted that, as set out in the report, non-group councillors were not automatically entitled to committee seats. Such provision required no councillor voting against such a proposal and this was not guaranteed.

RESOLVED: That for the 2024/25 municipal year to:

1. appoint the following committees and panels for the 2024/25 municipal year and to appoint the membership, substitutes and chairs and vice-chairs as indicated to sit on them (see table below);

Planning Committee, 9 Members	
Liberal Democrat (8)	Green (1)
Ron Batstone	Cheryl Briggs
Jenny Hannaby	
Scott Houghton	
Rob Maddison	
Mike Pighills	
Jill Rayner	
Val Shaw (Vice-Chair)	
Max Thompson (Chair)	
Preferred substitutes	
Liberal Democrat (8)	Green (3)
Paul Barrow	Katherine Foxhall
Robert Clegg	Sarah James
Andy Cooke	Viral Patel
Amos Duveen	
Oliver Forder	

Hayleigh Gascoigne	
Judy Roberts	
Emily Smith	

Scrutiny Committee, 9 Members	
Liberal Democrat (8)	Green (1)
Ron Batstone	Katherine Foxhall (Chair)
James Cox	
Eric de la Harpe	
Oliver Forder	
Hayleigh Gascoigne	
Debby Hallett	
Rob Maddison	
Judy Roberts (Vice-Chair)	
Preferred substitutes	
Liberal Democrat (8)	Green (3)
Paul Barrow	Viral Patel
Kiera Bentley	Sarah James
Robert Clegg	Cheryl Briggs
Andy Cooke	
Amos Duveen	
Jenny Hannaby	
Emily Smith	
Max Thompson	

Joint Scrutiny Committee, 5 Members	
Liberal Democrat (4)	Green (1)
Andy Cooke	Katherine Foxhall (Co-Chair)
Ron Batstone	
Judy Roberts	
Andrew Skinner	
Preferred substitutes	
Liberal Democrat (4)	Green (3)
Kiera Bentley	Sarah James
Mike Pighills	Viral Patel
Patrick O'Leary	Cheryl Briggs
Max Thompson	

Joint Audit and Governance Committee, 4 Members

Liberal Democrat (4)

Oliver Forder

Judy Roberts

Andrew Skinner

Emily Smith (Co-Chair)

Preferred substitutes

Liberal Democrat (4)

Andy Cooke

Eric de la Harpe

Jenny Hannaby

Mike Pighills

Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee, 6 Members

Liberal Democrat (5)

Ron Batstone

Oliver Forder

Diana Lugova

Rob Maddison (Chair)

Max Thompson (Vice-Chair)

Green (1)

Sarah James

Preferred substitutes

Liberal Democrat (5)

Eric de la Harpe

Neil Fawcett

Scott Houghton

Patrick O'Leary

Mike Pighills

Green (3)

Cheryl Briggs

Katherine Foxhall

Viral Patel

Joint Staff Committee, 5 Members

Liberal Democrat (4)

Mark Coleman

Neil Fawcett

Andy Foulsham

Bethia Thomas

Substitutes

Green (1)

Viral Patel

The Leader may be substituted by another Cabinet member.
Other members of the committee may be substituted by any other member of the council.

General Licensing Committee, 12 Members

Liberal Democrat (11)	Green (1)
Paul Barrow	Cheryl Briggs
Ron Batstone (Chair)	
Kiera Bentley	
Lucy Edwards	
Neil Fawcett	
Oliver Forder	
Diana Lugova	
Patrick O'Leary (Vice-Chair)	
Val Shaw	
Andrew Skinner	
Bethia Thomas	
NO SUBSTITUTES	

Licensing Acts Committee, 12 Members

Liberal Democrat (11)	Green (1)
Paul Barrow	Cheryl Briggs
Ron Batstone (Chair)	
Kiera Bentley	
Lucy Edwards	
Neil Fawcett	
Oliver Forder	
Diana Lugova	
Patrick O'Leary (Vice-Chair)	
Val Shaw	
Andrew Skinner	
Bethia Thomas	
NO SUBSTITUTES	

Appeals Panel, 3 Members

Liberal Democrat (3)

Paul Barrow

Rob Clegg (Chair)

Jill Rayner

PREFERRED SUBSTITUTES

Liberal Democrat (3)

Mark Coleman

Debby Hallett

Val Shaw

Climate Emergency Advisory Committee, 7 Members

Liberal Democrat (6)

Kiera Bentley

Robert Clegg

Eric de la Harpe (Vice Chair)

Hayleigh Gascoigne (Chair)

Scott Houghton

Max Thompson

Green (1)

Sarah James

Preferred substitutes

Liberal Democrat (6)

Ron Batstone

Amos Duveen

Rob Maddison

Mike Pighills

Jill Rayner

Val Shaw

Green (3)

Viral Patel

Katherine Foxhall

Cheryl Briggs

2. appoints all local members representing the wards covered by the relevant area committees to those committees for the 2024/25 municipal year – Abingdon and North East, Faringdon and Wantage;
3. appoints Paul Barrow as the council's representative and Ron Batstone as substitute on the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee;
4. appoints Neil Fawcett as the council's representative and Helen Pighills as substitute on the Thames Valley Police and Crime Panel;
5. appoints Emily Smith, Debby Hallett and Andy Cooke to the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Panel;
6. authorises the head of legal and democratic to make appointments to any vacant committee or panel seat and substitute positions in accordance with the wishes of the relevant group leader.

8. Making the East Hanney Neighborhood Plan

Council considered the recommendation of Councillor Foulsham, Cabinet member for corporate services, policy and programmes, made on 7 May 2024, to make the East Hanney Neighbourhood Development Plan part of the development plan for Vale of White Horse.

Councillor Povolotsky, the local ward member, made a statement in support of the adoption of the Plan.

RESOLVED: to

1. make the East Hanney Neighbourhood Development Plan, so that it becomes part of the council's development plan.
2. authorise the head of policy and programmes, in consultation with the Cabinet member for corporate services, policy and programmes in agreement with the Qualifying Body – East Hanney Parish Council, to correct any spelling, grammatical, typographical or factual errors together with any improvements from a presentational perspective.

9. Making the Sutton Courtenay Neighbourhood Plan

Council considered the recommendation of Councillor Foulsham, Cabinet member for corporate services, policy and programmes, made on 7 May 2024, to make the Sutton Courtenay Neighbourhood Development Plan part of the development plan for Vale of White Horse.

RESOLVED: to

1. make the Sutton Courtenay Neighbourhood Development Plan, so that it becomes part of the council's development plan.
2. authorise the head of policy and programmes, in consultation with the Cabinet member for corporate services, policy and programmes in agreement with the Qualifying Body – Sutton Courtenay Parish Council, to correct any spelling, grammatical, typographical or factual errors together with any improvements from a presentational perspective.

10. Code of Corporate Governance

Council considered the report of the head of legal and democratic on the revised local Code of Corporate Governance, which had been recommended for adoption by the Joint Audit and Governance Committee at their meeting on the 15 April 2024.

Council was satisfied with the revised code of corporate governance and agreed that it should be included in the council's constitution.

RESOLVED: to adopt the revised local code of corporate governance attached to the report of the head of finance to the Joint Audit and Governance Committee on 15 April 2024 and include it in the council's constitution.

11. Report of the leader of the council

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

Council noted the details of the special urgency decision taken by the Cabinet member for Finance and Property to participate in the government funded scheme to provide financial compensation to households and businesses adversely affected by the flooding impacts from Storm Henk.

12. Questions on notice

A. Question from Councillor Katherine Foxhall to Councillor Bethia Thomas, Cabinet member for Climate Action and the Environment.

The Environment Agency (EA) is currently developing the Thames Valley Flood Scheme, identifying places that could be used to store floodwater to reduce flood risk across the non-tidal Thames Valley. From an initial list of over 700 potential locations, 17 potential locations remain (according to the EA) “that might be suitable to store flood water on some of the rivers that feed into the river Thames”. Two of these remaining sites are in the Vale – although the exact locations are vague, one is on the National Trust estate at Buscot and Coleshill, and the other appears to be southwest of Abingdon, just south of the River Ock, a site many of our members are of course familiar with as the proposed site of Thames Water’s massive reservoir.

Given the EA’s stated aims of working “in partnership to deliver a wide range of environmental and other benefits” can the Cabinet member please advise what contact have officers had with the Environment Agency during the planning process for this scheme, and are we confident that we are being fully informed of the implications of any finalised locations for example in allocating land within our new local plan?

Written response

Thank you for your question about the Thames Valley Flood Scheme. As you say, this scheme is currently in the process of identifying potential sites for storage of flood water in the upstream parts of the Thames catchment area, and there are two possible locations in the Vale which will be subject to further consideration.

Our officers have been in regular contact with the Environment Agency about this project, with their most recent meeting having taken place on 11 April this year.

At this stage the EA has confirmed that they are a long way from any decisions on specific locations and from entering into planning processes, so we should not expect any request for the safeguarding of land in our local plan as yet. The EA team has committed to carrying out consultation with all relevant parties as the project progresses.

When we make decisions about whether to support these types of schemes, we will seek to ensure that we strike the right balance between protecting existing green space, or agricultural land, both of which have their own intrinsic value, and the need to protect homes and businesses from flooding. It was only a few months ago that we saw families threatened by rising water levels, including those in Buscot, a village in your ward, and very close to one of the possible sites in the flood scheme.

I know that our officers are already working closely with the EA on other projects and I’m sure they will continue to keep a close eye on this one as well.

B. Question from Councillor Viral Patel to Councillor Bethia Thomas as Cabinet member for Leisure Centres and Community Buildings.

Over the last decade we have seen a growth in population of 14% across the Vale, with a further growth of 25% expected in the next 15 years. A significant proportion of this growth has been in Wantage, Faringdon, Stanford and Shrivenham, with the arrival of so many more residents it is good to see the focus on expanding our capacity at leisure facilities. For my ward I am particularly pleased to see the addition

of a learner pool at Faringdon, and at Wantage, with both facilities in proximity for residents of my ward.

In the Vale Leisure Facilities Assessment and Strategy Report the lack of capacity at Wantage and its low quality were highlighted, along with the need to increase capacity at Faringdon. Further, in assessing the future needs for the Vale, Shrivenham was highlighted for pool facilities as where “the most unmet demand can be met”, however at present that was deemed not enough to validate the consideration for a new pool facility in the locality.

Does the Cabinet member agree with me that, while we expect to see continued growth in our population, we should be looking to support our residents, including those on the outskirts of the county, with facilities we have assessed to be vital for their wellbeing and without expecting them to travel to neighbouring districts to meet those needs? Further, can I ask the Cabinet member if we could undertake a more detailed viability assessment for providing for the highlighted deficit in swimming facilities in the western Vale, to support those residents and provide a better distribution of leisure facilities across the district?

Written response

Thank you for your kind words about the draft leisure and playing pitch strategies. Our consultation on these draft documents ended on 24th April 2024, and we are now reviewing the comments we received and considering what changes we need to make with our consultants, Stuart Todd Associates. It would not be appropriate for me to comment in detail on your questions at this time while we review the consultation comments.

I would like to emphasise that the strategies' role is to identify the need for new facilities, and they are not a definitive list of facilities for the council to deliver."

On the subject of the availability of swimming facilities, I am aware that there might be some concern among residents in the east of the district following the announcement from Oxford Brookes University that it intends to close its pool at Harcourt Hill later this year. While this pool was coming toward the end of its life, I think the university's decision to close it earlier than we were expecting highlights the significant financial challenges being faced by all types of organisations running swimming pools, not just local authorities.

This announcement came after we had closed the consultation on our leisure and playing pitch strategy, so while we review and analyse the responses to the consultation, we will also review what implications - if any - that the university's decision could have on the draft strategy, taking external expert advice as and where necessary. The outcomes of the consultation and our review of the impact of the university closing its pool will be reported on later in the year.

Supplementary question

I thank the cabinet member for their response, and the details around the closure of Oxford Brookes' facility to the east of the Vale, and how that may change the way we view our strategy going forward. I am sure some of my ward residents may have made use of the facility at Harcourt Hill, likely their route to the Brookes facility would have taken them past either the Wantage or Faringdon Vale facilities, as such I suspect that specific change in circumstances will have limited impact on them and they would be far more interested in addressing the needs in the west of the Vale.

In your reply you refer to the “strategies’ role is to identify the need for new facilities”, the Leisure Facilities Assessment 2024 (carried out by Stuart Todd Associates) had identified 7 large pools in the district, with only 4 being open to the public (which now

reduces to 3), Abingdon, Wantage and Faringdon. In addition to the assessment highlighting the largest deficit being in Shrivenham (in my ward), it also highlighted almost all (unmet demand) is from residents located too far from a facility.

Is the cabinet member able to outline what weight will be given to the needs of those furthest from an existing facility when making any decision on provisioning leisure facilities?’

Written response

Councillor Thomas undertook to provide a written response.

C. Question from Councillor Viral Patel to Councillor Andrew Crawford as Cabinet member for Finance and Property.

Over the last few years local authorities of varying sizes have chosen to bring leisure facilities back in house. In North Yorkshire, a Conservative led upper tier authority, the cabinet member expressed one of the reasons as “All outsourcing does is encourage very good local government officers to move to the private sector to manage services they were managing in the first place”. North Yorkshire joins Stroud (a Green-LibDem-Independent led council), Haringey and Wiltshire (who started in-housing in 2020). Each of these authorities have chosen to in-source leisure facilities for reasons based on the needs of the local population, the position of the council and other local conditions.

In our own council, we have chosen to bring many services in house following poor service and excessive contract costs of outsourcing over recent decades. As we look to renegotiate contracts with our leisure facilities suppliers in the near future, I would expect the process to be far more challenging than it has been in past years, largely down to the financial burdens faced in all sectors of the economy, not least in council finances and especially given the high inflationary pressures felt over recent years. An example of this can be seen with the bidding process carried out by Rutland County Council, where no supplier was willing to take on the full running costs resulting in Rutland needing to restart the process in a weaker position.

Can the Cabinet member update us on what work is taking place to assess the viability of bringing our leisure services in-house, in order to put us in the strongest possible position in renegotiating contracts?

Written response

The requirement to achieve best value, and consider all options including in house provision, is a legislative one, but even if it were not, it is certainly an option that I would want to ensure was fully considered.

I can confirm, as I have previously committed to full council, that any decision regarding our long-term model for future Leisure provision will consider all options. Should we proceed with an external tender, the existing provider GLL would of course, alongside other potential operators, be able to engage with any procurement process.

During the last five years this council has successfully brought several services in house such as Property Management, Grounds Maintenance, and our Human Resources provision. Officers within our Development and Corporate Landlord service area have already engaged specialist support for the assessment of leisure options, our prudent budgeting over the past five years means that we can secure dedicated officer support for this key area of work.

A report will be coming forward later this year setting out the approach that officers will take should Cabinet decide to proceed with a revised Leisure Procurement. However, I can confirm that I, and the Leader, have emphasised to officers that should they recommend it, the insourcing of the service is something the Cabinet would consider very seriously indeed. Key elements of our consideration will, of course, be value for money, the likely quality of service and the wider financial and risk factors of any change to our existing model of delivery.

There will also be the Scrutiny process to ensure any decision-making processes are clear and accessible to the public.

I trust that this answers your question.

Supplementary question

Councillor Patel thanked the Cabinet member for his thorough and detailed response and commended him and officers on their prudent budgeting which had left the council with head room to consider wider options.

In addition to the financial aspects, he asked if the Cabinet member would identify which other criteria the Cabinet would consider when deciding how leisure procurement was to proceed and what relative priorities they would be given?

Response

Councillor Crawford referred to his written response which set out the areas for consideration but added that it was too early to confirm priorities.

The meeting closed at 7.50pm

Chair:

Date: