

# Minutes

## of a meeting of the

# Council



held on Wednesday 13 December 2023 at 7.00 pm  
at The Beacon, Portway, Wantage, OX12 9BY

### Open to the public, including the press

#### Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: Sally Povolotsky (Chair), Kiera Bentley (Vice-Chair), Ron Batstone, Cheryl Briggs, Sue Caul, Robert Clegg, Mark Coleman, Andy Cooke, Andy Crawford, Eric de la Harpe, Debra Dewhurst, Lucy Edwards, Neil Fawcett, Oliver Forder, Andy Foulsham, Katherine Foxhall, Hayleigh Gascoigne, Jenny Hannaby, Scott Houghton, Sarah James, Diana Lugova, Patrick O'Leary, Viral Patel, Helen Pighills, Mike Pighills, Jill Rayner, Judy Roberts, Andrew Skinner, Bethia Thomas, Max Thompson and Richard Webber

Officers: Steven Corrigan (Democratic Services Manager), Steve Culliford (Democratic Services Team Leader), Simon Hewings (Head of Finance) and Mark Stone (Chief Executive)

### 39. Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Paul Barrow, James Cox, Debby Hallett, Robert Maddison, Val Shaw and Emily Smith.

### 40. Minutes

**RESOLVED:** to adopt as a correct record the minutes of the Council meeting held on 11 October 2023 and agree that the Chair signs them as such.

### 41. Declarations of interest

Councillor Debra Dewhurst declared an interest in item 10, the request by Chilton Parish Council for Section 106 funds towards play area and recreation ground improvements. Councillor Dewhurst had been involved in the task group working on this project.

Councillor Sally Povolotsky declared an interest in the same item as in her capacity as an Oxfordshire County Councillor, she had allocated funds to the Chilton play area and recreation ground improvements project.

### 42. Urgent business and chair's announcements

The chair made some housekeeping announcements on the need to turn off mobile phones during the meeting and the emergency evacuation arrangements.

The chair also read a statement in memory of two members of staff, Patrick Arran and Louise Franklin, who had passed away recently. Council paused for a moment of silence.

### **43. Public participation**

Two members of the public had registered to speak at the meeting.

- (1) David Marsh, the secretary to the Vale branch of the CPRE, addressed Council on agenda item 16, motion no.1.

“The motion concerns SESRO, the South East Strategic Reservoir Option. I am sure you are all familiar with the Thames Water proposals and the wider Water Resource South East (WRSE) draft regional plan. The agenda item before you gives more background and highlights some of the issues on the table at the moment.

CPRE fully support this motion. The need for this reservoir is at best uncertain and at worst considerably exaggerated. There are uncertainties in all the supporting projections, which suggests, that any strategic project needs to be scalable and adaptable. We contend that the proposed reservoir is neither scalable nor adaptable. This contrasts with other alternative schemes, such the Severn-Thames Transfer, which could indeed be scaled. Also, these alternatives would do considerably less environmental and social damage than the proposed reservoir.

In addition, we are concerned that the plans for water in the South East region are fragmented and ignore the pressing need to invest to improve river water quality. What is needed is a more holistic analysis of all water resources across the region.

The national evaluation process (called RAPID) is supposed to produce a rational and transparent assessment of strategic water resource projects, but it is nothing of the sort. There’s nothing rational behind the sudden increase in the size of the reservoir from 100 to 150 million cubic metres.

So CPRE fully supports the calls in this motion for a pause of the SESRO planning, and the convening of multi-stakeholder talks to fully explore the uncertainties, the consequences and the risks in this plan.”

- (2) Chris Church, of the Oxford Friends of the Earth, had submitted a written statement as he was unable to attend the meeting. The statement, which had been circulated to all members, endorsed motion no. 2 in agenda item 16 on nature and climate issues.

“Oxford Friends of the Earth welcomes and endorses the Motion proposed by Councillor James on nature and climate change issues. We are a long-established environmental group with over 1700 supporters across the county. We are not linked or affiliated to any political party or grouping. Our focus is on promoting solutions to the nature and climate crises that we face.

We recognise that Biodiversity is in steep decline across the UK and in Oxfordshire, driven by land use change, over- development and climate change; this is undermining human health, wealth and wellbeing globally. The 2023 ‘State of Nature’ report shows how the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth. Continued rapid growth in Oxfordshire means that we are heavily involved with this problem.

We urge the council to recognise that traditional conservation is not enough. We need new approaches that integrate health, well-being and nature with socioeconomic goals.

Nature-based solutions to climate change are one such approach that involve working with nature to address societal goals, bringing benefits to people and biodiversity locally.

Such solutions can make an important contribution to reaching net-zero carbon emissions alongside cuts in GHG emissions across all sectors of the economy, and will also have a critical role in supporting adaptation to the climate-related changes that are coming.

We welcome Vale's action on Climate Change and urge the Council to support this motion and the measures within it that would integrate action to protect and improve our natural environment with climate action and also to commit to supporting local action by communities across the Vale who are looking to play their part in this work."

The chair thanked both members of the public for their statements.

#### **44. Petitions**

None

#### **45. Treasury Management Outturn 2022/23**

Council considered the head of finance's report on the treasury management outturn for 2022/23. The Cabinet member for finance reported that the outturn report had also been considered by the Joint Audit and Governance Committee and Cabinet, both of which were satisfied that the treasury activities during 2022/23 had been carried out in accordance with the treasury management strategy and policy. There had been an overachievement of treasury income during the year, largely due to high interest rates. Performance had exceeded expectations and there had been no breaches of the counterparty limits or the prudential indicators.

In answer to a question regarding the council's strategy on environmentally harmful investments, the Cabinet member reported that the report before Council looked back at performance over the last financial year, whereas the treasury management and investment strategy would be reviewed by the Joint Audit and Governance Committee in the new year.

**RESOLVED** to:

- (a) approve the treasury management outturn report 2022/23; and
- (b) approve the actual 2022/23 prudential indicators within the report.

#### **46. Council tax reduction scheme 2024/25**

Council considered the head of finance's report on the review of the council tax reduction scheme.

The Cabinet member for finance reported that the scheme was reviewed each year to ensure that any person in receipt of specific benefits was given a reduction in their council tax. These benefits included the Employment and Support Allowance, Income Support, Job Seekers' Allowance, and Universal Credit. A person in receipt of these benefits must notify the Department of Work and Pensions of any change in their circumstances.

Due to changes in operation of the Department of Work and Pensions whereby some of its local offices had been closed, it was proposed that a change should be made to the council's scheme to protect it from potential fraud. Cabinet had recommended Council to make the change.

**RESOLVED:**

- (a) that for the 2024/25 financial year onwards the council continues to adopt the previous 2023/24 Council Tax Reduction Scheme but with the following amendment:

“Where the council has identified that a taxpayer has failed to notify the Department of Work and Pensions of a relevant change in circumstances, affecting their legacy benefit or Universal Credit, then (where necessary) their entitlement to council tax reduction will be stopped, until that notification has taken place and revised Department of Work and Pensions benefit entitlement known.”

- (b) that the above change be incorporated into the Council Tax Reduction Scheme for the oncoming 2024/25 financial year onwards.

**47. Council tax base 2024/25**

Council considered the head of finance's report on setting the council tax base for 2024/25.

The Cabinet member for finance reported that each year the council was required to calculate its council tax base and pass this information on to Oxfordshire County Council, Thames Valley Police, and parish councils, to allow them to calculate their council tax element for the forthcoming year. The council tax base calculation was made up of the number of homes in the district, adjusted for discounts and exemptions. This produced a number, which was recorded as a council tax Band D equivalent.

The Cabinet member explained how the council tax base might differ to the actual number of homes in each parish due to the complexities of the regulations and that in some cases, newly built homes might not have been recorded by the Valuation Agency at the time of the evaluation exercise; there was always a slight time lag. He asked members to explain this to their parishes. He also reported that the calculations assumed a council tax collection rate of 98.5 per cent, which was high amongst tax collection local authorities.

**RESOLVED to:**

- (a) approve the report of the head of finance for the calculation of the council's tax base and the calculation of the tax base for each parish area for 2024/25;
- (b) agree that, in accordance with The Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012, the amount calculated by Vale of White Horse District Council as its council tax base for the year 2024/25 be 58,103.8; and

- (c) agree that, in accordance with The Local Authorities (Calculation of Council Tax Base) (England) Regulations 2012, the amount calculated by Vale of White Horse District Council as the council tax base for the year 2024/25 for each parish be the amount shown against the name of that parish in Appendix A of the report of the head of finance to Council on 13 December 2023.

#### **48. Section 106 (S106) Request - Chilton Parish Council - Play area / Recreation ground improvements**

Councillors Debra Dewhurst and Sally Povolotsky both declared interests in this item and left the meeting room during its consideration.

Council considered the head of finance's report on a request by Chilton Parish Council for section 106 funds towards play area and recreation ground improvements. The Cabinet member for affordable housing, infrastructure, development and governance reported that by awarding funding towards this scheme, the council would be supporting improved facilities in Chilton village. These facilities would be up to date and had an inclusive design, being accessible to all.

In answer to a question from a member, the Cabinet member agreed to respond in writing on the provision of public transport to Chilton, thereby making the facilities accessible to other communities.

#### **RESOLVED to:**

- (a) create a budget for £116,000 towards new play area equipment and recreation ground improvement at Chilton parish village play area project, to be funded by the S106 contributions set out in the head of finance's report to Council on 13 December 2023;
- (b) authorise the head of finance to approve the award to Chilton Parish Council of £116,000 in S106 funding towards the play area / recreation ground improvement project at Chilton parish active play area, subject to and in accordance with the funding agreement; and
- (c) agree and enter into a funding agreement with Chilton Parish Council regarding the terms of use of the S106 funding, and to protect the interests of Vale of White Horse District Council as the provider of the funding by undertaking legal and financial due diligence, including being satisfied that the funding is lawful and compliant with subsidy control provision.

#### **49. Local Authorities (Members' Allowances) (England) Regulations 2003 - proposal to re-appoint a joint Independent Remuneration Panel**

Council considered the head of legal and democratic's report, which sought authority to appoint a joint Independent Remuneration Panel for the purpose of reviewing members' allowances. Council noted that the current panel members were appointed until May 2024, after which a new panel would carry out the next review.

**RESOLVED to:**

- (a) appoint a joint independent remuneration panel with South Oxfordshire District Council to carry out reviews of the members' allowances schemes at both councils and make recommendations on any changes to the schemes to the relevant Council;
- (b) make the appointment of the Joint Independent Remuneration Panel effective until May 2028, one year after the 2027 district council elections; and
- (c) authorise the head of legal and democratic to make appointments to the Joint Independent Remuneration Panel.

## **50. Review of the council's Constitution**

Council considered the head of legal and democratic's report on the review of the council's constitution.

Councillor Oliver Forder, co-chair of the Joint Constitution Review Task Group and a member of the Joint Audit and Governance Committee, addressed Council on the recommendations set out in the report. Firstly, he reported that the task group had recommended that requests for a scrutiny call-in of executive decisions should be accompanied by reasons for the request. The task group had recommended a new paragraph for inclusion in the Scrutiny Procedure Rules. Secondly, he reported that the Joint Audit and Governance Committee had recommended a change to its terms of reference to allow the committee to remove its independent person, should that person not make a meaningful contribution to the committee's work. The committee had asked that the independent person should have a right of reply.

Council supported these changes.

**RESOLVED to:**

- (a) adopt the following sections of the Constitution with immediate effect:
  - (i) the revised Scrutiny Procedure Rules regarding scrutiny call-in, as set out in paragraph 9 of the head of legal and democratic's report to Council on 13 December 2023;
  - (ii) the revised Joint Audit and Governance Committee Procedure Rules regarding the terms of reference for the appointment of the independent person, as set out in paragraph 13 of the report; and
- (b) authorise the head of legal and democratic to make these changes and any further minor or consequential amendments to the Constitution.

## **51. Appointment of interim monitoring officer**

Council considered the report of the deputy chief executive – transformation and operations. Following the passing of Patrick Arran, the council's monitoring officer, Council was asked to appoint Vivien Williams as the interim monitoring officer. Council agreed.

**RESOLVED:** to appoint Vivien Williams, interim Head of Legal and Democratic, as the council's monitoring officer with immediate effect, this appointment to run until Council appoints a permanent monitoring officer at a later date.

## **52. Report of the leader of the council**

Councillor Thomas, Leader of the council, provided an update on a number of matters, including welcoming the draft Joint Local Plan. The text of her address is [available on the council's website by clicking here](#). Councillor Thomas thanked all staff and members for their work over the year and wished everyone a merry Christmas.

## **53. Questions on notice**

### **1. Question from Councillor Gascoigne to Councillor Thomas, Leader of the council**

The government recently announced its plan for a 'smoke free generation' and its desire to stop children starting young and becoming addicted for life. Regulations around vapes are not up to the same standard as tobacco products. This can mean the marketing and the flavours make them particularly appealing for children. The government released a consultation on the matter.

Can the leader confirm whether she responded to this consultation?

#### **Response**

Yes, the District Council has responded to this consultation to say we support proposals to reduce local smoking prevalence to 5 per cent by 2030. We welcome the initiative of ring-fenced funding to support local authority stop smoking services (Note – these services are commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council). We particularly support the call for evidence-based measures to tighten the promotion, packaging, branding and pricing of vapes to reduce their appeal to children and young people while ensuring vapes continue to be available for adult smokers who would benefit from using them to quit smoking.

### **2. Question from Councillor Thompson to Councillor Coleman, Cabinet member for environmental services and waste**

Residents across the Vale and in my ward in Abingdon Peachcroft have pride in the community and are concerned about the upkeep of their streets. Street cleaning is a statutory function of Council and residents are keen to aid in this process by moving cars and ensuring vans have access to all parts of the road.

To enable this and meet our corporate plan objective of working in an open and inclusive way, would Council be able to publish its rota for street cleaning so residents can be made aware of schedules so they can plan accordingly?

#### **Response**

It is great to hear that councillors, and communities, want to do all they can to help their local environment, and the service, to be successful, and we are mindful of maximising that support.

The key issue to publishing a rota would be how accurately the council can predict, when a street cleanse may occur, and then communicate to residents. It would not

be desirable for residents to move vehicles only for the street cleanse not to occur at the previously communicated time!

Currently we do not communicate locally on how street cleansing happens in any given specific area.

The forthcoming waste and street cleansing strategy will need to consider the most effective and efficient way to clean the streets. This could be done through an input-based service (where each road gets a set frequency of cleanse, regardless of how clean or dirty the road actually is). Alternatively, we could have an output-based service where streets are cleansed when needed to maintain a clean output.

Providing residents with a detailed schedule of road cleaning could only meaningfully happen under an input-based service, and this does come with two major drawbacks:

- (i) An input-based expectation of service would not be mindful of the need to change the date/time depending on a large number of factors (for example weather, road closures, staff shortages, emergency requests). This could then lead to a perception of a failed service when this may not be the case.
- (ii) The inefficiency of cleaning roads that do not need cleansing, whilst not cleaning those roads that need a clean, quickly enough.

What makes this trickier is that the predictability of when a street cleanse happens on any given road can vary. For example, town centres and their off-shoots are very predictable as they have a high degree of footfall and therefore usually require a daily presence. However, for medium and lower intensity areas they generally work to an 8-week schedule but this is less predictable due to the factors mentioned above, and due to the lean nature of the current contract and its resources. There is not always the capacity to catch up, so some of these planned sweepings then get missed. However, if there is a significant issue in one of these areas, then as part of managing the resources, the contractor, Biffa, can send a team to respond. Operationally, officers are working with Biffa to provide more data when cleanses are missed so we can understand the reasons for this in more detail.

How can we resolve this?

Providing accurate dates and times may be difficult to achieve under the current arrangements, but officers will consider whether providing the week, or ideally day, that a cleanse is due to occur may be possible. Finding suitable ways to communicate this also need to be considered.

The team are planning more communication around fast road (A34, etc) cleansing for when and where it happens.

The new waste and street cleansing strategy will guide on what the service could look like following the end of the current contract. Things that will be considered will include:

- How we balance community engagement to direct the requirements against set schedules
- Better use of technology around street sweeping, such as in-cab technology
- Better data recording
- Better benchmarking against other councils.



In summary, it would not provide meaningful information for residents to publish street cleansing schedules under the current service set up, but the service is not complacent about street cleansing, and changes will certainly be coming in the next few months and years as we move out of the current contractual situation and into one where we can better understand what is happening and direct information at a local level.

**Supplementary question** from Councillor Thompson to Councillor Coleman

Thank you for your response. I am glad to hear that Council is reviewing arrangements and look forward to engaging in the forthcoming waste and street cleaning strategy and will be calling for an enhanced level of communication therein. When will the waste and street cleaning strategy be implemented and how can councillors and residents get involved in the process? Could you please advise on why Council cannot have a hybrid system where there is a general rota with inputs of dates and capacity left over for specific incidents? Furthermore, you mention that some areas of the Vale are more predictable; could a rota not be organised and published now for town centres and off-shoots? When will the further communications you mention on the A34 be available?

I understand you may not be able to answer this entire supplementary now. In the interim how do we ensure that the roads are being cleansed when they require it?

**Response to the supplementary question**

Councillor Coleman undertook to provide a full written response to the supplementary question. However, he reminded Council that any actions arising must be achievable within the council's existing waste management contract. He also welcomed residents reporting streets that had not been cleaned; there was an online form to do this on the council's website.

**3. Question from Councillor Houghton to Councillor Thomas, Leader of the council**

Many residents in my ward are extremely concerned about the potential impact of the proposed Botley West Solar Farm. Can the Leader set out the council's current position on the proposal, outline any representations the Vale has made so far on the proposals, and outline what further actions the council intends to take going forwards?

**Response**

Thank you for your question. For almost five years, our council has prioritised taking action on the climate declaring a climate emergency in February 2019 and setting a target to be a carbon neutral district by 2045, with an aim for a 75 per cent reduction in carbon emissions in the district by 2030.

Solar development can assist in achieving this target. The council's current position on solar development, as set out in the Vale Local Plan Part 1 Core Policy 41 is supportive, unless a proposal causes a significantly adverse effect to landscape, biodiversity, the historic environment, the visual amenity and openness of the Green Belt, local residential amenity, the safe movement of traffic and pedestrians, and the cumulative impacts of these combined.

The Botley West Solar Farm Proposal is currently at the pre-application stage in the National Strategic Infrastructure Project process, which is administered by The Planning Inspectorate. To date, officers and councillors have engaged with the developer team to discuss technical matters to be assessed and as part of the process have formally responded to:

- The Environmental Impact Assessment Scoping Opinion consultation from the Planning Inspectorate in July 2023; and
- The developer's draft statement of community involvement in August 2023.

Our responses are online (<https://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/vale-of-white-horse-district-council/planning-and-development/botley-west-solar-farm/>).

The council will be responding in the new year to the statutory pre-application consultation currently underway as a consultee identified under Section 42 of the Planning Act 2008. Council officers will also continue to proactively engage with the developer leading up to the submission of an application to the Planning Inspectorate, in summer 2024. The council will act on its statutory duties as part of that process once an application has been formally accepted by the Planning Inspectorate.

#### **4. Question from Councillor Smith to Councillor Thomas, Leader of the council**

Residents in Cumnor, Botley and beyond have had to endure significant and ongoing disruption to transport in caused by the Network Rail closure of Botley Road, National Highways works to the A34, Thames Water, SGN, and other agencies closing the roads in this area. The accumulative impact of all these works on local businesses, bus services, taxis, and residents reliant on private cars to access Oxford City centre and Oxford train station is causing huge concern and confusion. The communication from National Highways in particular about works on the Botley interchange have been, in my view, inadequate.

While I am aware of an officer group convened by the county council to coordinate roadworks, I am concerned that they may not have adequate powers to direct national agencies.

Please can the leader explain who is accountable for timetabling and communication about A34 works, National Rail and Thames Water projects, and if there is anything more this council can do to support the county council with, to ensure that national agencies and private companies work together to avoid projects clashing over the coming years?

#### **Response**

Thank you for your question; I completely agree with you that the communication from National Highways about works on the Botley Interchange has been awful, as has their management of the works on the ground.

I recognise that the bridge maintenance work is necessary and that some delays were to be expected, but what has happened in practice has often not matched the advance communications. Residents are entitled to expect better. Our own communications team has worked very hard to engage with National Highways, but in practice they seem reluctant to work with us in any meaningful way.

Unfortunately, as the question suggests, the county council has no powers to direct national agencies. The A34 is a trunk road under the responsibility of National Highways, and the work at Oxford station which has closed Botley Road is the responsibility of National Rail. Although the Botley Road closure has naturally been disruptive and there is always room for improvement, Network Rail have engaged positively and communicated widely throughout the project. They have been holding monthly briefing sessions for key stakeholders, which I attend, and they send weekly news bulletins to anybody who wants to subscribe.

Utility companies such as Thames Water are expected to liaise with the county council's network management team, which has a role in coordinating all roadworks. We now know that Thames Water is planning work to make a permanent replacement for the temporary water main on Botley Road, and that this is expected to mean single lane closures at Osney Bridge until March 2025. This project has been frustratingly slow to get started, although it is a complex repair involving the footbridge as well as the water main, and the river must be kept open for navigation. Thames Water have recently been liaising with the county council's network management team as expected.

There is an officer group which aims to coordinate communications on major works with the other agencies, and which has been attended by a Vale officer. The effectiveness of such a group depends upon the good will of the agencies taking part. I am happy that this council should continue to support it, but sadly there is a limit to our influence especially on works taking place outside our district.

**5. Question from Councillor Clegg to Councillor Lugova, Cabinet member for planning and development control**

At the full Council meeting in July this year, we debated and agreed a motion supporting the view that we should all available steps to prevent or reduce sewage spills across the Vale.

Among other statements, we agreed that we believe "The planning system should ensure that new houses can only be occupied once sufficient capacity in the local sewerage network is in place."

Outline approval for a new housing estate to the south-east of Marcham was granted in 2022, and an application for Reserved Matters is currently being assessed. To their credit, during the consultation period for the Outline Application, Thames Water "identified an inability of the foul water network infrastructure to accommodate the needs of this development proposal". As a consequence of this, a condition was attached to the decision approving the Outline Application (condition 11) preventing occupation until suitable steps to address the foul water capacity had been taken.

Recognising that each enforcement matter must be assessed on its individual circumstances, could the Cabinet member please outline the general powers that the Vale has to enforce pre-occupation planning conditions and our approach to enforcement of these?

**Response**

Thank you for your question. As you say we recognise that each enforcement matter must be assessed on its individual circumstances. To enforce preoccupation

planning conditions, we would follow our normal procedures set out in the Planning Enforcement Statement.

Following government guidance, if there is a breach of a condition to a planning permission, we would give the developer the opportunity to remedy the breach.

Developers/landowners have a statutory right to connect to the surface water and foul sewage network. The planning system can only therefore manage development where it has the control.

Depending on the level of planning harm and circumstances of each case we could take the following actions:

- **Serve a Breach of Condition Notice.**  
This requires the developer/landowner to follow the steps set out in the condition. There is no right of appeal to this type of notice. If they do not comply the matter becomes a criminal offence, and the council can prosecute for non-compliance. The maximum fine is currently £2,500. This is due to change to an unlimited fine once the relevant section in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 comes into force.
- **Serve an Enforcement Notice, and if required, a Stop Notice.**  
To stop the further occupation of any houses. These formal notices are revealed in any land charge search undertaken during the process of buying a property. A stop notice can only be served accompanying an enforcement notice. Only in exceptional circumstances can the development be stopped immediately. A stop notice usually stipulates a stop of work within 3 days. There is a right of appeal to an enforcement notice which could take many months to resolve. There are implications on human rights from stopping someone occupying their primary residence. This is carefully considered prior to any formal action.
- **Serve an injunction.**  
To stop any further occupation of the houses. This is possible but this would again have implications on human rights as mentioned above.

If there is a known issue with drainage or this becomes apparent during the processing of a planning application, then planning permission would only be granted where the details to mitigate impacts can be secured, either through the permission or through a planning condition. Best practice is to use a condition precedent. This means a prohibitive condition that stipulates that 'no development can commence on site (or off site) until...'. In such circumstances the drainage details will have been agreed in writing by the planning authority and implemented before a trigger. There may also be an option of including the drainage construction timing and implementation monitoring within a legal agreement if there are particularly difficult circumstances.

## **6. Question from Councillor Foxhall to Councillor Thomas, Leader of the council and Cabinet member for Climate Action and the Environment**

In the recent Council Climate Action Scorecards, released in October, Vale of White Horse gained a score of 42%. While this compares favourably with a district council average of 39%, there are some notably weak areas identified, including in biodiversity and transport, which seems surprising given the work that our officers are doing. The Local Government Association has stated that it "does not support league tables as they often paint a two-dimensional picture of the context that councils are

working within, and unfairly compare councils with different challenges”, whereas some other councils say they find them a useful tool to help us identify areas where we can improve”.

What is the Leader’s view of the Scorecards and our council’s results, and does she believe they are a useful tool for improvement?

### **Response**

Climate Emergency UK are a pressure group formed to hold UK local authorities to account on climate action and are responsible for publishing Climate Action Scorecards. Since the scorecards were first launched in 2022, when Vale failed to register a score, the council has made significant progress - scoring 42 per cent against a district council average of just 29 per cent. This puts the Vale 17<sup>th</sup> out of 153 district councils in England, which is a significant achievement.

However, officers have concerns about the robustness of the process that Climate Emergency UK use to compile the Scorecards which has led to anomalies in reported scores; even Vale and South differ when they clearly have a similar offer. Other local authorities share these concerns and the way these scores are calculated with data collected from website searches and Freedom of Information requests, without direct communication with officers.

That said, I believe the Scorecards are of some value in benchmarking our progress nationally and we are planning to use them to help identify new actions and areas of further work when developing our new Climate and Nature Recovery Action Plan in the coming year.

### **7. Question from Councillor Foxhall to Councillor Crawford, Cabinet member for Finance**

In response to the Chancellor’s autumn statement of 22 November, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has warned that a £19.1 billion erosion in the real value of departmental spending in 2027-8, is a “significant and growing risk” to their economic forecast. Given the relative protection for areas such as defence and the NHS, the Resolution Foundation has described the plans as “completely implausible” and “similar in scale to the peak years of austerity” but without the scope to cut spending further.

Does the Cabinet Member share this concern about the implications of the Autumn Statement for local authority finances, and if so, what does he anticipate can be done to mitigate its effects on our council colleagues, our residents, and our council’s priorities for our district?

### **Response**

Thank you for the question. Yes, I absolutely share the concerns regarding the future of local government financing. Inflation has been over ten per cent for much of this year, leading to increased costs in providing services, yet last week’s Local Government Finance Policy Statement outlined an intention from government that means some councils will only see an increase in core revenue spending power of three per cent in 2024/25, whilst this council will likely only be able to increase council tax by 3.3 per cent without requiring a referendum.

In 2015/16 government grant funding included in the settlement, which includes New Homes Bonus, was £6.9 million. In 2023/24 it was £7.2 million. It was therefore only five per cent, or £300,000, more than the support we received eight years before, clearly significant real terms cut in actual spending power. Moreover, for many of the services which this council is required to deliver we are restricted in the level of fees we are permitted to charge which can mean that such services must be supported by council tax payers.

I am also worried about the future, and the potential for future funding cuts that may mean that we have to prioritise the valuable services we provide.

Councillor Foxhall will have no doubt read the dire predictions of the possible implications of the Chancellor's disastrous mini-budget on local government finance on councils of all political hues across the country. I can put it no better than the chair of the Local Government Association who said "it is hugely disappointing that today's Autumn Statement has failed to provide funding needed to protect the services the people in our communities rely on every day."

We will continue to lobby for an increased level of funding for district councils that reflects the increasing costs of providing the key services that we provide and for more flexibility in the fees we can charge for services provided. Compared to the national average cost per resident for district councils, and that of our statistical near neighbours, our costs are already below average, and we will strive to maintain that through ongoing review of our budgets, and also our transformation work. We will also continue to seek external funding opportunities, which has already brought in significant extra funding so that we can deliver on our priorities.

## **54. Motions on notice**

### **(1) Councillor Clegg moved and Councillor Cooke seconded the motion set out on the agenda at item 16(1).**

Following debate and being put to the vote the motion was declared carried.

#### **RESOLVED:**

Over the last two years, the South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO) has been placed by Thames Water into the Water Resource South East (WRSE) draft regional plan, the revised Water Resources Management Plan (WRMP24), and is also entered into an National Infrastructure evaluation named Regulators' Alliance for Progressing Infrastructure Development (RAPID) consisting of Ofwat, the Environment Agency, and the Drinking Water Inspectorate.

This Council, under both the previous Conservative and the current Liberal Democrat administrations, has consistently stood with local residents in expressing our concern and publicly stating our position against the SESRO scheme presented for consultation.

This council notes that

1. The multiple consultations carried out with the public in the last 18 months were for a design 50% smaller than that now being taken to the Secretary of State for approval.
2. Vale of White Horse District Council also stands against the proposed designs for SESRO.
3. Despite many Oxfordshire residents responding on SESRO, none of the issues presented has been addressed comprehensively. Many key assessments have not been submitted through RAPID to stakeholders, so external validation or even confirmation of existence is not possible.
4. Among the key concerns are: absence of assessment regarding the extra flooding risk associated with the proposed reservoir design; absence of assessment regarding the microclimate changes that would result from this large body of water being situated so close to the A34 road; absence of assessment of the potential subsidence that may be caused to other buildings in the surrounding area.
5. The current fragmented model of privatised water supply companies inhibits the development of national approaches to water resilience.

This council resolves to

1. Request a meeting with the current Secretary of State on a non-partisan basis, with invitations to: the Members of Parliament for Oxford West and Abingdon and for Wantage and Didcot; the Group Against Reservoir Development (GARD); the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE); the leaders of the groups represented in this chamber; and the County Councillors in the proposed zone of development and fall out. Said meeting to discuss the existing concerns that have not yet been addressed and the overall options for governance of the system.
2. Firmly request and campaign for the RAPID evaluation of SESRO to be paused until the flaws in the underlying data already highlighted by this council to OFWAT and Thames Water are resolved.
3. Request the Chief Executive to establish a Water Resource Officer-Member Liaison Group.
4. Call for the creation of a single, publicly owned national water supply provider.

**(2) Councillor James moved and Councillor Foxhall seconded the motion set out on the agenda at item 16(2)**

Following debate and being put to the vote the motion was declared carried.

**RESOLVED:**

This Council has already made action on Climate Change a priority, in the 2020-2024 Corporate Plan and with the declaration of a Climate Emergency in February 2019. As many other local councils have recognised, the climate emergency is intertwined with a crisis in nature and this council has shown a strong commitment already to Nature Recovery in existing planning policy on Biodiversity Net Gain, and in motions passed by the council, for example the recent motion on the treatment of sewage in the district.

Council acknowledges that:

- Our societies and economies are intimately linked with and depend on biodiversity and nature. The natural world is essential for the provision of

nutritious food (with soil and pollinators having a vital role), clean water, clean air, medicines, and protection from extreme weather, as well as being our source of energy and raw materials.

- The State of Nature 2023 report<sup>1</sup> shows a continuing decline in the UK's wildlife. The UK, like most other countries worldwide, has seen significant loss of its plants, animals and fungi. The UK is now one of the most nature-depleted countries on Earth.
- In June 2023, a Thames Valley Environmental Record Centre Study commissioned by our Council reported that more grassland had been lost in Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire than across other parts of Oxfordshire and England.
- Actions to restore nature and biodiversity, as well as being vital for their own sake, often have an important co-benefit of storing carbon, so help to address climate change.
- The Environment Act (2021) puts the onus on local authorities to take responsibility for nature through Local Nature Recovery Strategies and the Biodiversity Duty
- Our residents have made it clear through their responses to the May 2022 Joint Local Plan Issues Consultation that they believe protecting and restoring our natural environment should be a very high priority.
- A 2020 review from Public Health England<sup>2</sup> found that improving access to green space has health and well-being benefits and can help local authorities to address health and well-being issues, climate change and inequalities in their local area.

Council resolves to:

1. Ask Cabinet to ensure that addressing the climate and ecological emergencies and nature recovery remain strategic priorities for planning policies and design guides for new development through proposals in the Joint Local Plan (JLP), whilst seeking to support the principle of increasing equality of access for people to natural, green spaces.
2. Ask Cabinet to consider proposing that nature recovery has equal priority with climate change as headline themes for the Vale of White Horse District Council Corporate Plan, 2024 – 2028.
3. Ask Cabinet to consider extending the remit of CEAC to support Cabinet in addressing the twin priorities of Climate Change and Nature Recovery.
4. Ask Cabinet to consider support for a higher than nationally set level of Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) through the JLP and work with partners to support effective local use of any BNG offsetting arising from development in the Vale of White Horse.
5. Ask cabinet to consider and propose measurable targets and standards for biodiversity increase within our own Council's operations and land holdings, in the area managed for nature and in species diversity, seeking also to increase community engagement.
6. Support the work of the Cabinet Member for Climate Action and the Environment in engaging with partners and local charities and environmental organisations in supporting nature recovery and in opposing damage, such as that caused by sewage spills and other pollution incidents that damage nature in our district.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://stateofnature.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TP25999-State-of-Nature-main-report\\_2023\\_FULL-DOC-v12.pdf](https://stateofnature.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/TP25999-State-of-Nature-main-report_2023_FULL-DOC-v12.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/904439/Improving\\_access\\_to\\_greenpace\\_2020\\_review.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/904439/Improving_access_to_greenpace_2020_review.pdf)



7. Work pro-actively with partners to develop and to support the production of a Local Nature Recovery Strategy for Oxfordshire.
8. Look for opportunities to extend partnership with local charities and environmental organisations to deliver nature recovery in Vale of White Horse.
9. Seek to identify further habitat bank sites to build on the success of the Duxford Old River project and support new opportunities for landowners to diversify their income streams and deliver nature recovery.
10. Ask Cabinet to consider the Council becoming a responsible body for Conservation Covenants as a possible route to securing biodiversity net gain.
11. Where relevant, continue to include advocating for nature and ecological diversity in our responses as consultee to major infrastructure projects.
12. Ask officers to continue to ensure that climate action and ecological initiatives are embedded within all council work areas.

The meeting closed at 8.23 pm

Chair:

Date: