

## Written Responses to questions

### **1. Question from Councillor Eric Batts to Councillor Catherine Webber, Cabinet member for Climate Emergency and Environment.**

Whilst I am sure the cabinet member for Climate Emergency and the Environment will agree with me that the suspension of the garden collection service beyond the usual Christmas period due to staff sickness has been very unfortunate, we wish all the Biffa staff a speedy recovery. However, this a significant inconvenience to the residents of the Vale who avail themselves and may I add, pay for this service. Could the Cabinet member please advise how many households pay for this service and are impacted by the suspension, and what the income from this service has been for the first three quarters of the current financial year?

#### **ANSWER**

25,050 Vale households are signed up for the garden waste service and the income for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 December 2020 equated to £1,153,406.

The decision to delay the restart of the garden waste collection service after the usual Christmas break was taken as a result of some staff sickness due to Covid-19 and others having to self-isolate. This allows the remaining staff to work on the core household waste services (food, recycling and rubbish).

Officers are working closely with Biffa and review the staffing levels weekly, last week there where 29 staff self-isolating and therefore they were not able to restart the service.

Households who choose to pay for the garden waste services are entitled to 20 collections a year. We are normally able to offer more collections than this with our extra-large garden waste collections in the Spring and Autumn, and don't envisage this year being any different, so nobody should be out of pocket.

I realise that this may cause inconvenience and we are genuinely sorry for this. However, the safety of our crews and residents must always be our number one priority.

### **2. Question from Councillor Nathan Boyd to Councillor Emily Smith, Leader of the council**

We note with interest the flurry of letter writing to government and various local bodies to try and influence policies and represent our residents. With the push for transparency and the Corporate Plan focus on this matter, could the Leader please check and confirm by listing out these letters over the last three months to ensure that we have been made aware of all letters of influence and requests that have been sent by this administration either as Leader, Deputy Leader or by our Chief Executive on behalf of the Council that we should be aware of, and any responses received?

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### ANSWER

We have created a [page](#) on the council's website for capturing official letters sent on behalf of the council and any subsequent responses received. This will be maintained on a rolling 12 month basis. The full url is

<https://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/vale-of-white-horse-district-council/about-the-council/official-correspondence/>

In the last three months, we have sent and received the correspondence below – the highlighted ones were either published in a councillor update or as a news item on our website, which councillors should have received a notification of.

2 February thank you letter from Matt Hancock and Robert Jenrick

1 February letter to DfT re: Local EV charging infrastructure from Mark Stone

29 January letter from Robert Jenrick about support for councils covid response to our letter on 3 November

27 January letter from Baroness Vere of Norbiton re Taxi and PHV licensing

20 January letter to Thames Water about sewerage overflows

22 January letter to Greencore construction re green business park letter 11/1

19 January letter from Housing minister re Local Plans

15 January letter to government from council in response to their Covid-19 consultation

11 January letter to Robert Jenrick re May elections

11 January letter from Greencore construction re green business park

7 January letter from Baroness Vere of Norbiton re Taxi and PHV licensing

4 Jan letter to Baroness Vere of Norbiton re Taxi and PHV licensing

31 December letter from Gavin Williamson to Cllr Emily Smith and Mark Stone re schools

30 December letter from Kelly Tolhurst MHCLG re rough sleeping

18 December letter from Robert Jenrick re LG finance settlement and covid-19 allocations

17 December Letter from Christopher Pincher re New Homes Bonus

16 December handwritten letter from Robert Jenrick thanking LAs

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15 December letter from Emily Smith to MHCLG about self and custom building

11 December letter from Baroness Vere of Norbiton regarding taxi licensing

8 December letter from Treasury in response to our letter on 5 Nov

7 December letter from Kelly Tolhurst MHCLG re caravan park closures this winter

2 December letter from MHCLG re extended retail opening hours

2 December letter from Councillor Emily Smith to OCCG re North Abingdon development

27 November letter from Robert Jenrick re local government spending review

20 November letter from Robert Jenrick re new enforcement powers

18 November letter from North Kesteven DC on 18 Nov re environment strategy

15 November letter from Friends of Abingdon in response to letter 29.10.2020

13 November letter from Thames Water with an update to council leaders

11 November letter from Unite regarding professional drivers concerns

5 November letter to Rishi Sunak about providing support for businesses

5 November letter from Kelly Tolhurst re rough sleeping

3 November joint letter to Robert Jenrick about support for financial help re covid support

3 November letter to Robert Jenrick from council as part of consultation response to object to proposed reforms to current planning system

2 November letter to Cllr Emily Smith from Layla Moran MP re in support of our covid response

November (no date given) open letter to Vale councillors about Old Abbey House

### **3. Question from Councillor Matthew Barber to Councillor Emily Smith, Leader of the council**

Given the recent press coverage of the proposed merger of the Vale of White Horse with South Oxfordshire district councils, can the Leader confirm whether she supports such a move and if so how she considers such a merger would improve the financial position of the councils in Southern Oxfordshire?"

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### ANSWER

I am not aware of the press coverage Councillor Barber refers to, so cannot comment on the specific reports. Merging the councils has been suggested by officers as a possible way to reduce duplication of officer tasks to improve delivery to residents even further. I am open to exploring any ideas that will improve this council's financial situation and officer capacity. However, before supporting or opposing any merger I, and all councillors, would need more information about the cost savings, service improvements and other implications for this Council and Vale residents. Previously, officials from the MHCLG have indicated that any request to seek a merger with another district or wider structural change would not be supported until the Recovery and Devolution white paper is published. Without confirmation of Government support, this issue is not a priority for the administration at this time. Given the uncertainty regarding the timing of the white paper, our chief executive has made enquires of MHCLG officials as to what their current views would be on a potential merger of Vale with another district council but is yet to receive a reply.

#### **4. Question from Councillor Andy Foulsham, to Councillor Helen Pighills, Cabinet member for Healthy Communities**

Following the governments' mishandling of Free School Meals for children over Christmas, and then the national coverage of poor-quality Free Schools Meals being provided during lockdown, our communities, town and parish councils have responded generously. But what is being done by this council to ensure children and their families in the Vale of White Horse have enough food as the Covid pandemic continues?

### ANSWER

The council continues its own work to ensure that all residents and businesses are supported through the pandemic. Our community hub, working closely with Oxfordshire County Council and the other district councils, takes a system wide approach to ensure that all residents, particularly households with children, are fed and warm over this winter period by making the best use of government funds available.

The assistance made available by the council at present is as follows:

- A. The Winter Support Grant which launched in early January assists families to buy food and stay warm. Funds are being distributed through Citizens Advice and Wantage Independent Advice Centre who are offering a package of advice and support alongside the provision of supermarket vouchers, top up fuel vouchers or direct payment of fuel bills up to the value of £350 for families. Up to £73,430 is available between now and the end of March. We expect funds to be fully allocated and continue to encourage families to get in touch with our advice centres as soon as possible.
- B. As part of a system wide approach, the county council allocated a significant portion of the winter support grant to ensure that free school meals provision

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continues over the school holidays. We pushed for the county to ensure that this would be administered by the schools, who know the families best and that vouchers rather than food parcels would be distributed. Any child eligible for free school meals is entitled to a £15 voucher per week of the Christmas break, February half term and the Easter holidays. This is being administered by the county council through our schools and we remain in close contact with our schools.

- C. We continue to work closely with our community groups, food banks and larders to understand the overall picture of food poverty across our district and to support their work directly.
- D. Our community connectors and logistics team continue to be available from 8.30am to 5pm Monday to Friday to support any resident who is struggling due to the pandemic. They can assist by listening and then connecting the resident with the best form of help available, whether that's a food bank, advice agency or local support group. In circumstances where no other help is available, our community hub can arrange for the delivery of an emergency food parcel.

### **5. Question from Councillor David Grant to Councillor Judy Roberts, Cabinet member for Development and Infrastructure**

As a councillor in the Western Vale, I am aware of the consequences of the promises made by the previous administration to allocate S106 monies to the now defunct Wessex Leisure Centre Scheme. Funds that were generated from major developments in Faringdon, Great Coxwell, and other areas close by, were directed to help construct a facility in Grove that our residents would never realistically use.

Now we know there was never enough money to build the grandiose £18.8 million Wessex Leisure Centre at Grove proposed by the previous administration, what reassurance can the Cabinet member give to the town and parish councils in the Faringdon area that appropriate funds previously earmarked for the Wessex project will now be used for community infrastructure in the Faringdon area? And will ward members and key local stakeholders be consulted about what projects would benefit local communities best, giving them the facilities that they deserve?

#### **ANSWER**

I appreciate the frustration of residents in your area that funds generated by developments in your community were allocated to a large and undeliverable project many miles away. I am very pleased that the S106 funds currently allocated to the Wessex Leisure Centre Scheme are now being reviewed to determine how they can be reallocated to alternative projects that will better serve the areas that generated them.

An independent review of leisure needs across the Wantage, Grove and Faringdon areas is underway to identify exactly what these alternative projects could be and the level of funding required to bring them forward.

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To accelerate this process, engagement will be held with a variety of stakeholders and ward members, to inform the review, which is due to be completed by the end of March 2021. I can assure you that we want to see these funds spent in the areas that generated them and on facilities that the local communities want.

### **6. Question from Councillor Bob Johnston to Councillor Catherine Webber, Cabinet Member for Climate Emergency and the Environment**

The Climate and Ecological Emergency (CEE) Bill being proposed by cross Party Members of Parliament and supported by many Vale residents reminds us that as well as a climate crisis we also face an ecological crisis. Could the Cabinet member explain what action this council is taking to protect our local wildlife and increase biodiversity around the Vale? And how can we work with our neighbouring authorities and MPs to make sure that CEE Bill is supported and results in more urgent action at every level of government?

## Answer

### **1) What action is being taken to protect our local wildlife and increase biodiversity around the Vale?**

- A draft Nature Recovery Network map has been produced for Oxfordshire by a partnership of organisations including Officers from all Oxfordshire Local Authorities, wildlife charities and statutory bodies.
- A feasibility study into the potential for the Vale to get involved in Habitat Banking is underway.
- Officers are actively involved in ongoing work to re-establish a Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire.
- A Tree Opportunities Map is being prepared (joint funded by Vale and all Oxfordshire LPA's). This will be a resource available to all to help identify suitable tree planting opportunities. The project will develop maps showing not only where trees might be established but also where they would have the highest impact. They will cover the placement of trees in both rural and urban areas and in the widest variety of forms - as trees in or outside of woodlands; hedgerows; orchards; agroforestry; parks; and gardens.
- The Vale is delivering biodiversity net gain for all major developments. Each application is assessed for its impacts on biodiversity which are measured using a metric. All development proposals are then required to deliver more biodiversity than is lost when planning permission is granted.
- Work is underway to develop projects to be funded from s.106 money from the Grove Airfield development. This is being developed in partnership with the Freshwater Habitats Trust.
- *A Guide to Planting Trees for Community Groups* has been produced and is available on the Council's web site.

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- The Council has a District Licence for Great Crested Newts which has delivered 14 new ponds and 74 Ha of high-quality terrestrial habitats in the last year.
- The Vale works in partnership with other Oxfordshire Councils on the Local Wildlife Sites project. The project aims to protect and enhance our most important wildlife habitats by working with the landowners, providing advice and practical help.
- The Council is working with the Letcombe Brook Project and the Environment Agency to deliver biodiversity enhancements at Willow Walk in Wantage.

### **2) In addition, over the next 5 years the Council is planning to:**

- The Strategic Property Review will consider all the Vale's landholdings and will link in with the production of an Open Spaces Strategy to determine where there are opportunities for biodiversity enhancements and tree planting.
- The Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership will be formally established. The LNP will seek to:
  - Develop a Nature Recovery Strategy for Oxfordshire
  - Develop a biodiversity net gain targeting strategy.
- Develop and deliver a Tree Planting Programme on Council owned land to enhance biodiversity and sequester carbon

### **3) And how can we work with our neighbouring authorities and MPs to make sure that CEE Bill is supported and results in more urgent action at every level of government?**

If the Council was to formally confirm its support for the CEE Bill it could undertake the following steps:

The Council could lobby HM Government and its local representatives to support the CEE Bill when it comes before Parliament. To this end, a letter could be sent by the leader of the Council to the following (requesting that they vote for this measure):

- The Rt Hon. George Eustice, M.P. – Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.
- Layla Moran, M.P. – Member of Parliament for Oxford West and Abingdon (please note that Ms Moran is already a declared supporter of this Bill)
- David Johnston OBE, M.P. – Member of Parliament for Wantage

In addition, the leader of Vale of White Horse District Council could write, on behalf of the Council, to the leaders (and climate leads) of neighbouring local authorities (Cherwell District Council, West Oxfordshire District Council, Oxford City Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Oxfordshire County Council, West Berkshire Council, Swindon Borough Council and Cotswold District Council) to suggest that they contact the Secretary of State and their Members of Parliament to support this Bill.

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### 7. Question from Councillor Richard Webber to Councillor Andy Crawford, Cabinet Member for Finance and Corporate Assets

The budget before us tonight shows a further reduction in projected government financial support to this council accumulating to more than £14.5 million over the five years of our Medium Term Financial Plan, a fall of 62%. The Council is only allowed by Government to increase Council Tax by 2% per annum which if taken in full will see council tax revenue increase by only approximately £400,000 per annum over the five years.

Vale of White Horse District Council is clearly far from unique in finding itself in this financial quandary. What steps is this Council taking to explain to Government the consequences of their policy decisions and persuade them to both adequately and fairly fund local councils who not only deliver vital services all year round but which have played a major part in assisting the Government in dealing with the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic?

#### ANSWER

Councillor Webber is right to raise this issue. Firstly, he identifies the reduction in government funding shown in the MTFP. These are estimates. And they are estimates because government has still not given any clarity over future local government funding. That means we have no clarity on:

- How the business rates retention scheme will work
- How we will be affected by the fair funding review
- What new homes bonus will look like going forward

Whilst we hope that government funding will be more generous than the numbers shown here, it may be less generous, not forgetting that this year we will be receiving less in core government funding than last year.

We continue to lobby via many routes. For example, through responding to government consultations on government funding, via letters from the Leader to Government Ministers and through on ongoing support and membership of the LGA, for clarity on future funding levels, and for those funding levels to be sufficient, not just for our council, but for all councils, so that they can continue to provide their key services and to support residents and businesses through the pandemic and beyond.

We also lobby for the freedom to set our own council tax levels. Government assumes that we will set our council tax at the maximum increase allowed. For Vale or 2021/22 this amounts to a £5 increase. But Vale, with the 15th lowest Band D council tax of all English shire districts in 2020/21, is subject to the same rules on council tax increases as all other shire districts. In 2020/21 the average Band D council tax for a shire district was over £190. More freedom to set a higher council tax would be fairer, and would allow us to provide even better services for our residents, and is something we will continue to lobby for as we do not believe it is in our residents interests that it is effectively determined for us in London.



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It is particularly ironic that, whilst we battle to finance the delivery of our statutory services, constrained as we are by Government rules and their total absence of future clarity, Thames Valley Police are, by contrast, given carte blanche to increase their charge by an inflation busting 7% with scant regard to any local democratic input. We have amongst our members the unelected Conservative Deputy Police and Crime Commissioner, the District Councillor for Steventon and the Hanneys. Perhaps he should like to explain why he and his political masters treat the undoubtedly vital services of the Police so differently to those of this Authority.

### **8. Question from Jenny Hannaby to Councillor Emily Smith, Leader of the council**

In July 2020, after the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, this council resolved to “ask the Chair of the Joint Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee of Oxfordshire County Council to convene a meeting with the aim of setting up a rapid and transparent Task Force to analyse and ascertain the reasons for the observed excess deaths and infection rates in Oxfordshire’s care homes during the previous three months”. What was the response to the Leader’s letter on our behalf and what action has been taken in response to our request?

### **ANSWER**

In accordance with the motion agreed by Full Council in July 2020, I did write a letter to the Chair of the Joint Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee on 5 August 2020. A follow up letter was sent on 19 October 2020 asking for a response, and to date I am still waiting for a response.