

# Written responses to questions – 7 December 2022 Council meeting

## **1. Question from Councillor Hayleigh Gascoigne to Councillor Judy Roberts, Cabinet member for development and infrastructure**

Great Western Park has been almost complete for a few years now, and community assets, such as community centres, parks and green space have over this time been gradually transferred from the developer, Taylor Wimpey to the Council.

There has been some frustration from the community at not being able to use some of these facilities until this happens. Can you give an update on the handover of the parks and land to the Vale?

### **Written answer**

The council has continued to engage proactively with the developer Taylor Wimpey to press for the transfer and adoption of various assets at Great Western Park. Officers also send a regular update to local ward members to advise on progress, aware that this remains an issue of local concern. Members will recognise that there are processes to be followed and these are reliant on the provision of compliant information by the developer.

The latest position is that Taylor Wimpey have identified that some areas practically completed over 5 years ago have now fallen below transferable standards, in their words these are “no longer in a condition for handover”. Officers have made it clear to Taylor Wimpey that they expect the developer to transfer at completion standard and that the council will not take transfer until the standard is as required by the S106 agreement.

To support the officers’ position, I intend as cabinet member to write to the Managing Director of Taylor Wimpey to seek an update and clear timescale for ensuring these transfers can happen.

## **2. Question from Councillor Bob Johnston to Councillor Emily Smith, Leader of the Council**

Given that consultation is now underway on the proposed Botley West Solar Farm spanning ours and two other districts, would the Leader agree with me that to deprive local councils of the power to determine the outcome would be an egregious example of centralised decision making?

### **Written answer**

In 2008 the Government introduced a process to streamline decision making for major infrastructure projects, a Development Consent Order (DCO). They say this is fairer and faster for communities and applicants. Such infrastructure projects often cover several administrative areas and a national, regional or sub regional planning assessment is required.

# Written responses to questions – 7 December 2022 Council meeting

The Planning Inspectorate is responsible for management of the (DCO) process and there are six stages: Pre-application, Acceptance, Pre-examination, Examination, Recommendation and Decision, and Post-decision.

Regarding the Botley West Solar Farm proposal, the promoter of the solar farm is carrying out informal local consultation. Formal pre-application has not started. If an application for development consent is submitted, the Planning Inspectorate has 28 days to consider whether it meets the standards required to be accepted for examination and as a scheme under the National Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs).

While a DCO is a planning process, similar to that which we oversee at council level, I share Councillor Johnston's concerns about ensuring the voices of local residents, businesses and members are taken into account. While this council has little say over the process and how the developer chooses to engage with local communities, I think it is very important that our council responds to any consultations about the Botley West plan and that local members encourage our residents respond directly to the informal and formal consultations to ensure their views are heard at every opportunity.

### **3. Question from Councillor Alison Jenner to Councillor Debby Hallett, Cabinet member for Corporate Services and Transformation**

New regulations on Voter ID include a limited list of acceptable documents for citizens wishing to exercise their right to vote. The Act they refer to addresses a problem which does not exist and the list to which it refers is very restricted. Most documents are ones for older people; very little provision is made for the sort of documents young people are likely to have; as not every young adult has a passport or a driving licence, each of which cost money to obtain.

I would like to ask the Cabinet member responsible for electoral issues what we, as a council, can do to enable voting by young people in good time to ensure their documentation is suitable for consideration at the polling station?

#### **Written answer**

The elections team have been reaching out to young people as part of the annual canvass to encourage registration and have offered to visit schools to give a short presentation (to year groups 11 and above) covering registering to vote and (as more information becomes available) the Voter ID requirements.

Building on that work, they are also working with the councils comms team and in the new year will tie in with the launch of the Electoral Commissions national campaign on voter ID and also “Welcome to your vote week 2023” aimed specifically at schools and youth groups.

Should any person not already possess acceptable ID, then they can apply for a free ‘Voter Authority Certificate’ (a document containing the person’s name and their photograph) and the Returning Officer/Electoral Registration Officer will be taking

# Written responses to questions – 7 December 2022 Council meeting

steps to ensure that there are sufficient resources to process these applications in a timely manner.

To apply for a Voter Authority Certificate, a registered elector will be able to apply online via an application portal hosted on gov.uk and will be required to provide their name, the address at which they are registered to vote, date of birth, National Insurance Number, a suitable photograph, and a declaration that the contents are true.

If a person does not have online access, then they can submit a paper application which can be returned by post, delivered by hand or sent in electronically by email. The provision of in-person applications (except for those persons requiring assistance under the Equality Act 2010 for which it must be provided) is at the discretion of the Electoral Registration Officer who will be reviewing whether the facility can be made available at the council offices at Abbey House.

Many students (including for example those attending Abingdon & Witney College) will have access to PASS accredited student cards such as TOTUM which are also acceptable documents and are likely to be held by young persons as proof of age. It should also be noted that expired photographic identification documents can be used in a polling station so long as it is still a good likeness.

An elector can opt to apply for a postal vote if they do not want to vote in person at a polling station for a particular election, a set period of time or for all future polls. The Returning Officer will be reviewing the volume of uptake of Postal Votes in order to ensure sufficient resources are available for processing applications, despatch of Postal Votes packs and processing returned packs, should volumes rise significantly.

#### **4. Question from Councillor Val Shaw, to Councillor Emily Smith, Leader of the Council**

Several months ago, we voted on a Food and Farming motion, part of which specified the appointment of a Food and Farming Champion. Would you give us an update on this and what the council is considering in support for this sector? What contact has there been so far with this sector, and have we had any feedback from them?

#### **Written answer**

The Vale's Food and Farming Motion was passed unanimously at full council earlier in the year and since then Councillor Paul Barrow has been appointed as the Council's Food & Farming Champion. A council champion plays an important part in promoting their field of special interest and Councillor Barrow has already been on visits to listen and learn how we, as a council, may be able to support this sector through our existing services, and we are currently reviewing the remit of this role and those of other champions to see how they may be of best service to our communities.

# Written responses to questions – 7 December 2022 Council meeting

Since we passed the Food and Farming Motion, officers have engaged with a number of stakeholders within the farming community and rural organisations, through a series of meetings both virtual and in person. This has included:

- National Trust – Buscot and Coleshill Estate
- National Farmers Union representative (NFU)
- Countyside Landowners Association (CLA)
- Oxfordshire Community Foundation (OCF)
- Pennyhooks Farm near Shrivenham
- Earth Trust
- Local Nature Partnerships officer
- Co-op Futures
- BBOWT

Where possible, the key issues raised by these organisations have been incorporated in our proposal to unlock the Council's conditional allocation through the Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF). We will be engaging further with the agricultural community over the coming months and, if our REPF proposal meets approval of the Department for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), then we anticipate that we will be able to support rural enterprises such as farming and rural food production businesses with a range of capital funding opportunities from 2023 to 2025.

We have also just endorsed the Oxfordshire Food Strategy which has key aims on food justice, sustainable food economy, good food movement, food for the planet and sustainable supply chains. We are about to commence development of a detailed local food action plan, working with a wide range of stakeholders under a local steering group to guide the development of this action plan and ensure it represents local views, priorities and needs. We will ensure representatives from the food and farming community are part of the steering group and are excited about how our work on this plan can help shape our relationship with the rural sector and local food industries.