

Written responses to questions – 12 July 2023

Council meeting

A. Question from Councillor Emily Smith to Councillor Sue Caul, Cabinet member for affordable housing, development and infrastructure

Oxfordshire Community Land Trust (CLT) have worked with our council for around 15 years to bring forward Oxfordshire's first CLT housing scheme in Dean Court, Cumnor. Councillor Roberts, who worked for many years to push this scheme forward, and I were at the groundbreaking and in June at the opening. It is incredibly exciting to see the building almost finished and people from the Vale's housing register able to move into this truly affordable and low carbon housing. But it took such a long time to get to this point.

The Local Government Association is working with the national Community Land Trust and Localis on some research on how we can speed up the process and make it easier for CLT schemes, like the one in Dean Court easier to achieve, but local action and commitment is also required.

Could the Cabinet member confirm that Community Land Trust schemes will be supported by this administration, and what is being done locally to ensure more schemes like the wonderful Crofts Court can come forward more quickly in the Vale?

Response

I am delighted that the Vale was able to bring forward Oxfordshire's first CLT project. It is a fantastic project and will serve as a great exemplar for other community led schemes across the district.

On 11 November 2022, the Cabinet approved a new Housing Delivery Strategy and Action Plan (<https://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/vale-of-white-horse-district-council/housing/housing-delivery-strategy/>) which outlines the approach to how new affordable housing will be delivered within the District.

One of the four priorities in the action plan is "valuing and supporting council and community led housing initiatives". This includes a number of actions to support and accelerate community led housing schemes. Specific actions in the plan include addressing the need for enhancing staff resources to ensure we have the specialist skills to support community led schemes, and also looking at community led housing policies as part of the development of our Joint Local Plan with South Oxfordshire District Council.

Alongside this the council is currently looking to improve its policy and process for awarding grant funding, made available by Section 106 monies, toward affordable housing. By having a better and clearer process we will encourage more bids from CLTs for funding that can support the delivery of new affordable homes.

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B. Question from Councillor Debby Hallett to Councillor Neil Fawcett, Cabinet member for strategic partnerships and place

This council became a partner to the Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme in 2014, under a different administration, when it was just an idea. Now, 8+ years later, when the details are clear, affected parishes in Vale have formally objected to the current plan. Thousands of objectors have signed a local petition (Save Hinksey Meadows) calling for a public inquiry on the scheme. Now that much more is known about the costs/benefits, environmental damage and transport disruption, what is council actively doing to protect our district's irreplaceable habitats in Hinksey Meadow and the quality of life of our residents?

Response

This council quite rightly agreed to become a partner in the Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme in 2014, seven years after the devastating floods in 2007 which saw hundreds of homes flooded in the Vale and in Oxford and caused major disruption.

My own family was one of those affected by the flooding in Abingdon, resulting in us having to move into temporary accommodation for 11 months, disruption to work and our children's education and the loss of a number of irreplaceable items of sentimental value.

Reducing the likelihood of flooding, and its impact on local house and businesses, creates a long term improvement to our residents' quality of life. Based on my own experience, it is difficult to put a price on that.

But, as your question suggests, we have to balance those important benefits of any flood alleviation scheme, with any environmental disbenefits that arise from a scheme.

I am therefore glad to see that there is to be a public inquiry which will be run by Defra. This is not related to the local petition and is specifically in relation to the Compulsory Purchase Orders that are needed for the Environment Agency to secure access to the land for the flood scheme.

The public inquiry is standard procedure when objections are received, and this allows an independent inspector to hear the cases for and against the scheme before making a recommendation to the Secretary of State on whether or not the CPO should be confirmed.

The CPO inquiry has been expected for a long time and has been built into the project plans, so it is not a surprise. Indeed, I understand that the Environment Agency is confident in the scheme and welcomes the opportunity for a public discussion chaired by an independent inspector. The inquiry is expected to be held this autumn.

The decision on whether to grant planning permission is to be made by Oxfordshire County Council. In our representations we have explicitly asked for appropriate measures to be taken in regard to environmental matters including biodiversity net gain and protection of trees. We have also requested a construction management

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plan and we have sought to minimise the visual impact of the scheme upon the landscape.

For several years our officers, supported by successive leaders of the council and by other senior members, have been working closely with the Environment Agency on plans to mitigate the impacts of the scheme, both in its design and in the construction.

The Environment Agency has adjusted the scheme design to minimise the impact on MG4 grassland, and to keep construction noise and dust as far as possible away from existing settlements such as South Hinksey.

It will be for the inspector and the County Council in turn to decide whether the balance between the benefits of the future reduction in flooding outweighs any environmental disbenefits from the scheme.

Inevitably a major scheme such as this will be disruptive during the build period, and we will continue to lobby for the minimisation of disruption to local residents, particularly those in South Hinksey.

Once completed the scheme will provide greatly enhanced flood protection for hundreds of our residents and local businesses for many years to come. Furthermore, the scheme will create over 20 hectares of new wetland, linking to existing wildlife sites and helping to reverse the national decline in wetland habitats. Over time there will be new hedgerows and native deciduous woodland.

By working with the EA we have been able to influence the design and construction of the scheme and I look forward to continuing the positive partnership approach.

C. Question from Councillor Hayleigh Gascoigne to Councillor Andy Crawford, Cabinet member for finance and property

I note that on 23 June, there was an agenda item on the Great Western Park GP surgery at the meeting of Vale's Cabinet. I'm glad the item was brought to Cabinet, but it was made confidential. This topic is important to the local public. What updates can be shared publicly as to the progress on the plans to provide a GP surgery on Great Western Park?

Response

I recognise the provision of the new GP surgery for Great Western Park is very important to local residents and as a council we endeavour to be as open and transparent about all our activities as we are able to. I am disappointed we were not able to make the report of 23 June public due to it being subject to the finalisation of commercially sensitive transactions, involving other parties. The decision by members to consider the report in private session was based on the advice of the council's Monitoring Officer.

A Communication and Engagement Plan has been prepared with input from all parties to establish a joint approach to proactive communications at the achievement

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of project milestones. This Plan has been shared with the ward councillors for Great Western Park.

The plan identifies stages and methods for updates to relevant stakeholders and members of the public, which includes the publication of updates to a joint webpage created by the Vale and Integrated Care Board

(<https://express.adobe.com/page/TgSquyAwwwuCp/>). This webpage contains the latest updates on the project and is continually reviewed to ensure the latest available information is made public.

D. Question from Councillor Mark Coleman to Councillor Helen Pighills, Cabinet member for community health and wellbeing

I was recently invited to a meeting which was focused on housing and the military; what the military provided, and what the district council's responsibilities were to families of serving personnel and those who have left the service at the end of their enlistment.

I would like to understand our responsibilities as a district council to residents, including their families, who have served in the armed forces and are leaving for other reasons, for example medical, administrative and disciplinary discharge. At the meeting, a spouse described her distress when her then husband was subject to disciplinary action, which resulted in his discharge from the service. She did not know where to turn for advice, or support, to find housing for her young family. Can you explain our position in these circumstances?

Response

The council is a signatory to the Armed Forces Covenant (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1116148/Armed_Forces_Covenant_Duty_Statutory_Guidance.pdf) and the council recognises the principle that Armed Forces personnel and Veterans should not face disadvantages as a consequence of their service when applying to the Local Authority for housing.

The council's Housing Allocations Policy (HAP) contains several provisions that apply to Armed Forces households. For example, the HAP provides that the rules around "Local Connection" which can exclude applicants from the housing register are not applied to Armed Forces households in the districts. The council is able to award enhanced priority for housing to serving or former Armed Forces personnel who have suffered injury attributable to their service, as well as to bereaved spouses. In addition, the council awards priority to households being told to leave Service Families' Accommodation (SFA) at an earlier point than would be the case in a civilian private tenancy. In cases of relationship breakdown within Armed Forces households (in which the serving household member often returns to reside in camp and the remaining household members receive a notice to leave their SFA) the council can work with the household under homelessness legislation to prevent their homelessness by assisting them into social or private rented accommodation and can provide emergency accommodation where this is unsuccessful.

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The council's Housing Needs team are therefore fully willing to offer support and advice for cases such as the one you have highlighted in your question.

E. Question from Councillor Katherine Foxhall to the Councillor Bethia Thomas, Leader of the council

In December 2022, Oxfordshire County Council paused the HIF2 road scheme between Witney and Oxford in response to escalating costs. Since then, inflation has remained high, and interest rates have risen five times, from 3% to 5%, with 6% an increasingly likely scenario. Moreover, in its report released on 28 June 2023 the government's Climate Change Committee urged a systematic review of all current and future road-building projects, and to allow only schemes that "meaningfully support cost-effective delivery of Net Zero and climate adaptation to go ahead."

Does the Leader believe that the HIF1 scheme around Didcot meets these criteria, and can she confirm that our District Council is being kept informed of any proposed major changes or re-scoping related to the delivery of the HIF1 roads scheme?

Given current financial pressures has she sought – or will she seek – assurances from OCC that elements of the plans to deliver active travel, public transport and environmental mitigation will be prioritised and their delivery guaranteed, and that serious contingency plans are being developed, and independent advice sought, in the best short and long-term interests of Vale's residents and businesses?

Response

The government's Climate Change Committee has recently made a recommendation that the Department for Transport conducts a systematic review of current and future road-building projects to assess their consistency with the Government's environmental goals. We wait to see whether the DfT will decide to undertake this review nationally, and it would be premature for me as District Council Leader to make a comment on how the HIF1 scheme would be evaluated against the criteria.

The HIF1 scheme is being led by Oxfordshire County Council and being funded by Homes England, the Oxfordshire Local Economic Partnership and Oxfordshire County Council. According to OCC, the four separate elements that make up the HIF1 Didcot and surrounding areas project will provide more sustainable travel options in and around Didcot, as well as reducing a legacy of congestion in the surrounding villages and improving air quality and noise levels. The proposals include the A4130 widening, the Didcot Science Bridge, Didcot to Culham River crossing and the Clifton Hampden bypass. The scheme will provide 19.2 km of high-quality walking and cycling infrastructure and connect employment sites with Didcot, surrounding villages, existing walking, and cycling routes. Opportunities for more direct, faster and more reliable bus routes will also be provided by the scheme. Eighteen new bus stops will increase the accessibility and catchment of the existing bus services in the area, whilst also helping to cater for new or improved services in the future. The additional bridge over the Thames will help cater for future

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north-south bus routes, which are currently impacted by congestion at the existing river crossings. It is also our understanding that the funding provided by Homes England can only be used on the specific scheme agreed with Homes England, that formed part of the initial OCC submission to Government.

HIF1 remains a vital and significant package of infrastructure needed to address pressures arising from the housing and jobs growth in the Science Vale area already allocated in existing local plans. The planning application was submitted in November 2021 and Vale Council responded with a letter of support in June 2023. The County Council has experienced delays in taking the application to County's planning committee for a decision. The County Council's transport planners are keeping our officers informed on progress with the scheme.

F. Question from Councillor Cheryl Briggs to Councillor Bethia Thomas, Leader of the council

As the Bank of England raised interest rates again, widespread concerns have been aired about the "mortgage time bomb" which is anticipated as homeowners and landlords face very significant increases in their mortgage costs as fixed rate mortgage deals come to an end. How is the council planning ahead for the expected increased housing need from district residents struggling with big rises in mortgage or private rental costs over the next couple of years?

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Response

The council has concern about the potential impacts that rising interest rates will have on both homeowners, and on landlords who have mortgages. There is concern that some will not be able to continue to meet their mortgage repayments and this may lead to the use of savings, downsizing or in the most extreme circumstances, repossession by mortgage lenders. This could result in owners or tenants being threatened with homelessness.

The council support those who are homeless or threatened with homeless through its Housing Needs team. Anyone who is in this position is urged to approach the council as soon as possible, and they will be assigned a housing needs officer who will assess their situation under the relevant legislation and housing allocations policy. The aim is to support those who cannot support themselves to find alternative housing, either as an owner or in the private rental sector.

To bolster the formal level of resources, officers have allocated a proportion of the Homelessness Prevention Grant, provided by the Government's Department for

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Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to employ extra resources to handle the anticipated rise in approaches. The council can also use grant funding to provide support for qualifying homeless household to help get into the private rental sector. This includes rent in advance and/or deposits.

On 11 November 2022, the Cabinet approved a new Housing Delivery Strategy and Action Plan (<https://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/vale-of-white-horse-district-council/housing/housing-delivery-strategy/>) which outlines a number of ways that we are looking to increase the amount of affordable housing. This includes looking to support those who own empty properties to bring them back into use, and to provide easier-to-access financial support for new affordable housing.

Officers are also considering effective ways to monitor rents in the private rental sector. Whilst the council do not have any powers to control rent levels in the private rental sector; by monitoring market rent levels, as well as continuing to licence Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), we continue to work closely with the sector to understand changes.

In March 2023, the Government's Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities announced a capital fund – the Local Authority Housing Fund, to enable local authorities in England to acquire and/or refurbish property in order to provide sustainable housing for families with housing needs who have arrived in the UK via the Ukrainian and Afghan resettlement and relocation schemes only. Round 2 of the fund was announced in June, with the stated aim of providing sustainable housing to those on the Afghan resettlement schemes and also to provide temporary accommodation to all those owed a homelessness duty by local authorities. The long term aim of the fund is to create a lasting supply of affordable housing for the general population, and Cabinet is seeking a decision from Wednesday's Council meeting to agree the required capital commitment from this council to deliver the much needed housing which will help reduce local housing pressures and aligns with the council's housing delivery strategy.

The council has also approved a new five year partnership grant policy in June 2023 to ensure we support our residents with locally based assured, supported advice services, particularly important for those who are most in need due to inequalities from the cost of living crisis or other national issues.

Any residents who are worried about money and would like advice can also contact the council's Community Hub (01235 422600 option 1) who can talk residents through a range of options for support and advice.

G. Question from Councillor Sarah James to Councillor Bethia Thomas, Leader of the council

Our Corporate Plan and our Climate Action Plan quite rightly commit us to strong and rapid action to tackle Climate Change and I know that this is an important priority for the administration. They include a target to reduce the council's own carbon emissions by 75% by 2025.

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Can you update us please on what percentage of carbon emissions reductions have been achieved to date, and on the plans in place to achieve the targeted 75% reduction?

Response

In 2019, Vale of White Horse declared a Climate Emergency and set an ambition to reduce the council carbon emissions by 75 per cent by 2025 and become a carbon neutral local authority by 2030. We are tracking progress against this and making progress. We have a webpage titled '[Cutting emissions from our own operations](#)' which contains more information on what we are doing and links to the annual Greenhouse Gas Emissions report that we publish. The latest published report is for 2021/22. Since the base year of 2009/10, when we produced our First Carbon Management Plan, we have achieved a 43 per cent reduction in our total emissions. The next Greenhouse Gas report which is for 2022/23 is currently under preparation and will be published later this summer.

Our leisure centres and waste collection service are our most significant emissions sources. Earlier this year we had the good news that our application to the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme had been successful. This means we have secured major government funding worth £5.99 million for decarbonising Wantage Leisure Centre and White Horse Leisure & Tennis Centre. This will involve replacing the gas-fired boilers with air source heat pumps, installing energy efficiency measures and installing solar PV panels. This, together with previously completed projects such as at Faringdon Leisure Centre for example and other planned projects, we anticipate will reduce the Council's carbon emissions by over 25%. We will present a trajectory showing expected emissions reductions from our current planned projects in an emissions forecast which we hope to release the results of later this summer.

Progress on decarbonising our waste emissions has been impacted by delays in the government publishing details of how the Environment Act 2021 is to be implemented, however reducing these emissions will be a key focus for delivery of our waste services going forward.

Further details of the range of plans in place to reduce the remainder of our emissions are contained in the [Climate Action Plan](#), which is available on our website.