

Written responses to questions – 22 May 2024

Council meeting

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

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

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

Written response

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Written response

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

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

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

This announcement came after we had closed the consultation on our leisure and playing pitch strategy, so while we review and analyse the responses to the consultation, we will also review what implications - if any - that the university's decision could have on the draft strategy, taking external expert advice as and where

necessary. The outcomes of the consultation and our review of the impact of the university closing its pool will be reported on later in the year.

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

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

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

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

Written response

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

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

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

A report will be coming forward later this year setting out the approach that officers will take should Cabinet decide to proceed with a revised Leisure Procurement. However I can confirm that I, and the Leader, have emphasised to officers that should they recommend it,

the insourcing of the service is something the Cabinet would consider very seriously indeed. Key elements of our consideration will, of course, be value for money, the likely quality of service and the wider financial and risk factors of any change to our existing model of delivery.

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

I trust that this answers your question.