

Minutes

of a meeting of the

General Licensing Committee

held on Thursday 8 February 2024 at
2.00 pm in Meeting Room 1, Abbey
House, Abbey Close, Abingdon,
OX14 3JE

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: Leigh Rawlins, Ali Gordon-Creed, Georgina Heritage and Sam James-Lawrie
Officers: Emily Barry (Democratic Services Officer), Sarah Commins (Litigation and Planning Lawyer), Carmen Cubillas-Martinez (Air Quality Officer) and Simon Hill (Team Leader (Environmental Protection))

Remote attendance:

Officers: Paul Fielding (Head of Housing and Environment), Bertie Smith (Broadcasting Officer) and Scott Williams (Environmental Services Manager)

8 Election of a chair for this meeting

In the absence of the committee's chair and vice-chair, the meeting was asked to elect a chair for this meeting.

RESOLVED: to elect Councillor Ali Gordon-Creed as the chair for this meeting.

9 Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Peter Dragonetti, Katharine Keats-Rohan, Axel Macdonald, Ben Manning and Jo Robb.

10 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 18 May 2023 as a correct record and agree that the Chair sign these as such.

11 Declarations of interest

There were none.

12 Urgent business and chair's announcements

None.

13 Public participation

Gill Bindoff, Chair of the Watlington Neighbourhood Plan Advisory Board, addressed the committee regarding the Joint Air Quality Action Plan. Her statement focused specifically on the revocation of the Watlington Air Quality Management Area.

14 Adoption of the council's new joint Air Quality Action Plan

The Environmental Services Manager introduced the report to the committee. He advised that the Joint Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP) represented a significant step forward for communities and included a number of measures to improve air quality. The plan was the result of successful engagement with air quality partners (Oxfordshire County Council and Highways England) and encompassed a wide range of key areas including the promotion of public transport, the review of options to reduce freight emissions, the promotion of cycling, and the development of options to reduce traffic emissions within specific Air Quality Management Areas (AQMA). The Environmental Services Manager advised that the plan had been compiled in line with strict technical guidance from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and sought to reduce nitrogen dioxide levels in only the council's declared AQMAs, those being Henley-on-Thames, Wallingford and Watlington.

The Head of Housing and Environment clarified a point in relation to the engagement which had been carried out in advance of the plan being finalised and confirmed that all ward members for Air Quality Management Areas had attended briefings in March 2023. The committee asked for clarification on this point as the public speaker believed that there had been insufficient engagement with Watlington in relation to the plan. The Head of Housing and Environment advised that initial contact would have been made with the relevant ward members. The agreement was that they would then disseminate the information to their town and parish councils. He went on to advise that through the six-week public consultation, all members of the public, including the Parish Council had an opportunity to respond (and did so).

The committee asked officers to clarify when the data was collected, specifically in Watlington. The Team Leader (Environmental Protection) advised that there was a continuous analyser running 24 hours a day, seven days a week and that there were diffuser tubes on lampposts which were changed monthly and both had been in place for over 10 years. He went on to clarify that in order for the revocation of an AQMA to be considered there must be 5 consecutive years of annual mean NO₂ concentrations being lower than 36µg/m³. The Team Leader (Environmental Protection) confirmed that DEFRA had instructed the council not to count the Covid years of 2020 and 2021 in the analysis due to the natural effects of the lockdowns on levels of NO₂ and therefore it would be three more years before revocation of the AQMA in Watlington could be considered. He informed the committee that after five continuous years of reduction, the revocation process could begin but Air Quality (AQ) monitoring would still continue after this point.

The committee suggested that the years where data was impacted by Covid should be highlighted more clearly in the report, specifically the graphs. The Team Leader (Environmental Protection) agreed this could be considered in our Annual Status Reports but advised the committee, that the template in the report was prescribed and set out by DEFRA.

The committee reflected that it was clear from the data that there were increased numbers of commercial vehicles in the AQMAs and that there were times when they became very congested. The Team Leader (Environmental Protection) advised that the AQ data was based on an annual average due to the impacts of long-term exposure on health and that this measurement method was prescribed by DEFRA. The Air Quality Officer further clarified that there was an hourly national air quality objective in addition to the annual national air quality objective and measurements were taken every ten minutes to assess this. She confirmed that if levels had been found to exceed this hourly objective, this would have been targeted in the AQAP but that exceedances had not been found in Watlington or any of the other AQMA's in the district.

The committee raised concerns that should Watlington be removed from an AQMA the planned edge road would not be constructed. The Team Leader (Environmental Protection) confirmed that the Edge Road was an OCC project and one of the benefits was improving local air quality, not the reason for it. Even where an AQMA was revoked, AQ measurements would still continue and that in Watlington this would be done. This continuing AQ monitoring would allow the impacts on local air quality of the introduction of the edge road to be assessed. He also advised that any revocation of an AQMA would come before the Licensing Committee for approval.

The committee reflected to officers that it would like comments around the exclusion of 2020 and 2021 to be clearer in both the report and the graphs within it. The Air Quality Officer advised that this was something which would need to be taken to DEFRA as the report format was prescribed by them. The Team Leader (Environmental Protection) suggested that the annual status report which is submitted to DEFRA which did not have to follow the same prescriptive format should have the greater degree of clarity regarding the exclusion of the 2020 and 2021 years.

The link to the 2023 Annual Status Report is here:
<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/09/SODC-VOWH-ASR-2023.pdf>

The committee noted that they had been comforted by the level of data which had been included in the report. The committee put forward the suggestion to officers that a finalised version of the AQAP was circulated to all relevant parishes. The Team Leader (Environmental Protection) agreed to take forward this suggestion.

RESOLVED: to formally adopt the council's new joint Air Quality Action Plan (AQAP).

The meeting closed at 2.26 pm