

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Council



Listening Learning Leading

Held on Tuesday 14 March 2023 at 6.00 pm
Didcot Civic Hall, Britwell Road, Didcot, OX11 7JN

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: David Turner (Chair), Anna Badcock, David Bartholomew, Tim Bearder, Sam Casey-Rerhaye, Sue Cooper, Peter Dragonetti, Kate Gregory, Victoria Haval, Lorraine Hillier, Kellie Hinton, Mocky Khan, Lynn Lloyd, Caroline Newton, Andrea Powell, Leigh Rawlins, David Rouane, Anne-Marie Simpson, Ian Snowdon, Alan Thompson, Andrea Warren and Celia Wilson

Officers: Patrick Arran, Head of Legal & Democratic and Monitoring Officer, Steven Corrigan, Democratic Services Manager.

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors Ken Arlett, Pieter-Paul Barker, Robin Bennett, David Bretherton, Maggie Filipova-Rivers, Stefan Gawrysiak, Alexandrine Kantor, George Levy, Axel MacDonald, Jane Murphy, Jo Robb and Ian White

60 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meetings held on 8 December 2022 and 16 February 2023 as correct records and agree that the Chair sign them as such.

61 Declarations of interest

Councillor Rawlins declared an interest in agenda item 7 as a member of Sonning Common Parish Council. As the interest did not relate to the financial affairs or wellbeing of the parish council, he took part in the debate and vote on the item.

62 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The Chair of Council, Councillor Turner, advised that, in accordance with Section 100B (4) (b) of the Local Government Act 1972, he had agreed to take one item of urgent business at the meeting – the adoption of the Benson Neighbourhood Development Plan.

The reason for urgency being that the council received the planning examiner's report on the Benson Neighbourhood Development Plan last week and Regulations required Council to make a decision on whether to adopt the Plan by 14 April 2023, prior to the next scheduled Council meeting.

Councillor Turner advised that the item would be taken after agenda item 7.

63 Public participation

John Salmons asked the following question of Councillor Andrea Powell, Cabinet member for corporate services, policy and programmes.

Regarding the Council's proposal (P22/V2705/FUL) to develop land within Great Western Park, Didcot (GWP) from its approved use as a wildflower meadow into a council maintenance depot, considering the Council's stated aim to "celebrate, protect and enhance our natural assets", that the Council has previously acknowledged there is a deficit of public open space in Didcot, that residents purchased their homes on the basis of the approved plans for the wildflower meadow, that those same residents who paid a premium to overlook the wildflower meadow have since endured eight years of the site being used apparently without planning permission as a construction compound by the developers, that despite the Council's stated aims regarding openness and transparency it submitted its planning application without appearing to consult or notify any residents of its decision to pursue this scheme, that despite the Council's attempts to present the scheme as being somehow required in connection with maintaining open spaces within GWP itself the proposal was in fact for a central depot from which grounds maintenance would be performed across the South and Vale districts (an area of which GWP makes up only 0.1%), that the application submitted on behalf of the Council contained numerous false or misleading representations regarding material planning considerations, that even without proper engagement the proposal has been unanimously rejected by the community with over 80 formal objections, 390 petition signatures, objections from Harwell Parish Council, Didcot Town Council, and Oxfordshire County Council, and that the Council's response to resident's concerns thus far appear to have included attempts to dismiss their concerns as "misinformation", to pit GWP residents against each other, and suggestions that residents simply haven't understood the "very clear and positive rationale" for having their long awaited wildflower meadow replaced with a maintenance depot, what steps does the Councillor propose the Council take to regain the trust of the GWP community, which has been so badly damaged by this proposal, and does the Councillor agree a commitment to protect the community's wildflower meadow, in line with the Council's stated aims, would be a good place to start?

Councillor Powell responded as follows:

Thank you for your question.

My understanding is that this site forms part of the Didcot Garden Town masterplan, and that the application was submitted with a focus on the technical requirements for a new grounds maintenance facility to service the substantial amount of new public open green space being provided as part of this project.

The actual intention is to remove the existing builders depot, which is certainly a blot on the landscape, to create a much smaller depot for the Councils' grounds maintenance service and to landscape the rest of the site, including the planting of a wildflower meadow.

As part of the planning application, all of the standard consultees were informed and, as has been pointed out, many comments and objections were received. The application has been withdrawn to take on board the feedback received.

It is clear that the communication in this instance was not as good as it should have been, particularly taking into account the high-profile nature of this site and its importance to the local community. While technically accurate, the application did not give a true sense of what is being proposed, and better engagement with the public would have helped to alleviate their perfectly reasonable concerns. I am confident that we can do better and will ensure the points raised are addressed fully when the revised application is ready for submission.

64 Petitions

None.

65 Making the Sonning Common Development Plan

Council considered the recommendation of Councillor Simpson, Cabinet member for planning, made on 2 March 2023, to make the Sonning Common Neighbourhood Development Plan part of the development plan for South Oxfordshire.

RESOLVED: to

1. make the Sonning Common Parish Neighbourhood Development Plan Review, so that it continues to be part of the council's development plan;
2. authorise the head of policy and programmes, in consultation with the Cabinet member for planning, and in agreement with the Qualifying Body, Sonning Common Parish Council, to correct any spelling, grammatical, typographical or factual errors together with any improvements from a presentational perspective.

66 Benson Neighbourhood Development Plan Review - urgent item

Council considered the recommendation of Councillor Simpson, Cabinet member for planning, made on 13 March 2023, to make the Benson Neighbourhood Development Plan part of the development plan for South Oxfordshire.

RESOLVED: to

1. make the Benson Neighbourhood Development Plan Review with the modifications specified in the Examiner's report;
2. authorise the head of policy and programmes, in consultation with the Cabinet member for planning, and in agreement with the Qualifying Body, Benson Parish Council, to correct any spelling, grammatical, typographical or factual errors together with any improvements from a presentational perspective.

67 Progress on approved Council motions

Council noted the schedule showing the progress on approved motions.

68 Report of the leader of the council

Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council, provided an update on a number of matters.

69 Questions on notice

A. Question from Councillor Snowdon to Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council.

Can the leader explain how South Oxfordshire District Council's own planning application P22/V2705/FUL, which proposes to tarmac over open green spaces earmarked as a wildflower meadow next to a proposed allotment, which will destroy a huge amount of biodiversity, whilst also being overshadowed by brownfield industrial land, meets with the alleged priorities of this council to tackle the climate emergency?

Written Response

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils will take over responsibility for the maintenance and management of large areas of open space at Great Western Park once the land is handed over from the developers in an adoptable condition.

Our application proposed to make best use of a small area of the land in the Vale of White Horse that is currently being intensively used by the developers as a storage compound for materials (whilst they build homes) to establish a grounds maintenance hub for both this council and the Vale of White Horse District Council. This will help our grounds maintenance teams to respond quicker to service requests in the area, reduce travel time and carbon emissions, and ultimately serve the community more efficiently.

The proposed grounds maintenance hub does not impact on the developer's ability to deliver its requirements, including allotments, and clearly the responsible Councils will have the ability to choose how to manage the whole Great Western Park area in the years ahead. We are increasingly taking a biodiversity focussed approach to offset environmental impacts. This will include planting additional areas as wildflower meadows, to reflect the fact that a small area that had been proposed to be planted in this way (after the developer eventually vacated their compound) would instead have been used for the grounds maintenance hub and we will look to include enhancements such as screening and tree planting as part of any provision.

Following our engagement with the local community, the Councils will be working with our planning agent to determine next steps in relation to a planning application that better demonstrates what is proposed and the very clear and positive rationale for this. Our proposals are about serving the whole resident population of the Great Western Park community, who we expect will want to benefit from beautiful public spaces, carefully managed in the most efficient and climate responsible way that we can, whilst also meeting the needs of residents across South Oxfordshire.

Supplementary question and response

Councillor Snowdon asked if the withdrawal of the planning application was to allow for better engagement with the public, as stated in Councillor Powell's response to the public question, or the result of or misinformation in the media as communicated to members of Vale of White Horse District Council

Councillor Rouane responded that both reasons were consistent. The council had listened to the consultation responses and there was a clear misunderstanding regarding the scope of the planning application.

B. Question from Councillor Snowdon to Councillor Bennett, Cabinet member for economic development and regeneration

Will the Cabinet member responsible for delivering infrastructure on housing developments explain in his almost four years in that role, what he has delivered for the residents of Great Western Park, Didcot now that the final houses have been completed? In particular, the GP surgery, allotments, youth shelter, orchard, playparks and so on, which are all part of the masterplan?

Written Response

We are all keen to see valued infrastructure delivered, but the question infers that it is the Council that are responsible for delivering these facilities, which is simply not correct, although statements made by previous administrations may well, perhaps, have implied this was the case.

The facilities referred to in this question are, and always have been, identified to be delivered by either the developer, or by other partners, as part of the completion of the development, not by the Council. Even so, we have voluntarily committed significant senior officer time to holding developers and others to account regarding their commitments, which has led to significant progress.

I hope Councillor Snowdon, as an experienced councillor, will be supportive in accurately communicating to residents what are, and are not, the responsibilities of the council in these matters, because part of our role as ward members is to explain accurately how these planning processes work.

In addition to over 2,600 homes that have been delivered the site has already delivered schooling, a nursery, a community centre, retail, an extra care facility and sports provision as well as supporting the creation of a vibrant and positive sense of community.

Whilst there is no statutory role for the council in the provision of healthcare facilities, I understand the Vale of White Horse District Council is positively supporting the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board and related stakeholders to procure the provision of the healthcare facilities on GWP. I believe regular meetings are taking place between the various parties to move the project forward and the ICB/Vale of White Horse District Council is looking to share a joint update with local residents shortly.

Supplementary question and answer

Councillor Snowdon asked why neither the allotments nor play facilities, a condition of the planning permission, had been provided.

In the absence of Councillor Bennett, Councillor Rouane responded that the council only accepted the handover of facilities from developers once it was satisfied that they were fit for purpose.

C. Question from Councillor Bartholomew to Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council

The bulky waste collection service was suspended at the beginning of the year, so when residents tried to book collection, they were advised they should take bulky items to Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) themselves. This suggestion was not helpful, as residents that use the collection service are generally ones that are unable to take bulky items to HWRCs themselves! Furthermore, any suspension is likely result in an increase in fly-tipping.

Why was so little advance publicity given to this matter and why was proper advance planning not in place to avoid any suspension of the service in the first place?

Written Response

The bulky waste collection service is suspended every year in January while the waste contractor catches up on normal collection because of the Christmas bank holidays. It also helps them to collect all the extra Christmas waste presented at this time. This suspension is planned well in advance and residents wishing to make a booking are made aware through the booking system on the councils' website.

The suspension period was different this year as we needed to use it to carry out work on IT systems and collection processes to ensure we met our legal requirements for the collection and disposal of upholstered domestic seating, such as sofas, armchairs and home office chairs. How we collect and dispose of these items changed from the start of 2023, and we needed to ensure we were able to provide the service whilst protecting the environment and meeting legislative requirements.

Officers had anticipated that the service would reopen again, as normal, at the start of February, but this was delayed due to some technical issues in changing the booking system. Because the delay in reopening the service was anticipated to be relatively short, we communicated this to customers through the booking website, and this would have affected the approximately 40 households per week who use the service. This was as opposed to communicating to the wider 55,000+ households that have the regular household waste collection service.

I can confirm that the service fully reopened on 22 February.

During the suspension of the service, residents enquiring about a collection were reminded that, if they did not wish to keep hold of the items until the service restarted, there remained the option to take the items to their local Household Waste Recycling Centre (HWRC). We also reminded residents that they could consider donating items that are suitable for reuse to a number of charities.

It is acknowledged that the suspension may have impacted on the ability of some residents to book a bulky waste collection, but it was necessary to enable us to do the work that was required to continue to handle waste compliantly. I am pleased that the service has now fully reopened and will continue to operate as normal.

Supplementary question and answer

Councillor Bartholomew asked why residents were not informed in advance of the suspension rather than once they sought a booking.

Councillor Rouane responded that the number of residents using the scheme was relatively low and therefore marketing the issue wider would have been a waste of resources and unnecessary.

70 Motions on notice

- (1) Councillor Newton moved and Councillor Badcock seconded, in the absence of Councillor Murphy, the motion as set out on the agenda at agenda item 11 (1):

Whilst a number of members spoke in support of the motion, other members expressed the view that the motion did not acknowledge the Climate Emergency, the commitment to be Zero Carbon by 2050 or the need for alternative sources of electricity. The view was also expressed that the council already had policies in place that require that schemes should not cause a significant adverse effect on the landscape and that such issues were considered in the determination of planning applications.

In accordance with Council Procedure Rule 68, which provides for a recorded vote if three members request one, the chair called for a recorded vote on the motion which was declared carried with the voting as follows:

For	Against	Abstain
Councillors	Councillors	Councillors
Anna Badcock	Kellie Hinton	Tim Bearder
David Bartholomew	Mocky Khan	Sam Casey-Rerhaye
Peter Dragonetti	Celia Wilson	Sue Cooper
Lorraine Hillier		Kate Gregory
Lynn Lloyd		Victoria Haval
Caroline Newton		Andrea Powell
Ian Snowdon		Leigh Rawlins
Alan Thompson		David Rouane
Andrea Warren		Anne-Marie Simpson
		David Turner
9	3	10

RESOLVED:

That this Council acknowledges the need for renewable energy to be generated here in this district to help meet demand for power and accepts that solar power will be a part of this mix until other technologies come forward.

However, this Council is concerned that some villages and valued landscapes in the district could be disproportionately affected by the cumulative impact of solar farms; and that valuable agricultural land is at risk of being taken out of production.

In this regard, this Council welcomes the emphasis in the draft National Planning Policy Framework to considering the availability of agricultural land for food production when deciding which sites are most appropriate for solar farm development.

Council therefore asks officers to fully consider the cumulative impact of solar farm development during the planning process now; and urgently to progress work on policies relating to solar energy generation, to include:

- Developing planning policies that balance the benefits of local power generation with the loss of productive agricultural land and valuable landscape;
- Ensuring that the cumulative impacts of large solar arrays in open countryside and in the vicinity of settlements are fully assessed in the development management process;
- Limiting excessive massing of solar farms in any area of the district; and
- Encouraging the deployment of rooftop solar and exploring approaches for heritage assets.

(2) Councillor Khan moved and Councillor Wilson seconded the motion as set out on the agenda at agenda item 11(2):

Whilst supporting the motion to seek to address a need in Didcot resulting from the growth in population, a number of members highlighted the shortage of NHS facilities in other parts of the district. Whilst the council had no statutory role in the provision of healthcare services, it is positively engaging with the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board and Partnership in relation to the provision of the healthcare facilities across the district and is a participating member in many of the groups named in the motion.

On being put to the vote the motion was declared carried.

RESOLVED:

That South Oxfordshire District Council believe there is a clear need for:

- a health centre and GP hub for Great Western Park in Didcot
- a well-resourced Minor Injuries Unit or similar (which could be based at Didcot Community Hospital)
- more NHS dental facilities for Didcot and the villages
- increased resources to support mental health

Council resolves:

1. As a first step, to share its concerns with the following bodies by writing to and engaging with:

- a) Didcot Primary Care Network
- b) Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board
- c) Healthwatch Oxfordshire
- d) Oxfordshire Joint Health Oversight and Scrutiny Committee
- e) The Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire West (BOB) Integrated Care Board
- f) The BOB Integrated Care Partnership

2.To call on all those responsible for health decisions that affect the wellbeing of South Oxfordshire District Council residents, to work together to ensure these needs are urgently addressed. We look particularly to the newly established Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire & West Berkshire Integrated Care Board for a response to these serious concerns.

The meeting closed at 7:35pm

Chair

Date

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