

Minutes

OF A MEETING OF THE

Council



Listening Learning Leading

Held on Thursday 13 July 2023 at 6.00 pm
Didcot Civic Hall, Britwell Road, Didcot, OX11 7JN

Present:

Councillors: David Turner (Chair), Kellie Hinton (Vice-Chair), Ken Arlett, Pieter-Paul Barker, Robin Bennett, David Bretherton, Sam Casey-Rerhaye, Mike Giles, Ali Gordon-Creed, Georgina Heritage, Sam James-Lawrie, Katharine Keats-Rohan, Mocky Khan, Axel Macdonald, Denise Macdonald, Ben Manning, Zia Mohammed, James Norman, Andrea Powell, Leigh Rawlins, David Rouane, Ed Sadler, Ian Snowdon, Andrew Tinsley, Freddie Van Mierlo and Tony Worgan

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors James Barlow, Tim Bearder, Sue Cooper, Perter Dragonetti, Maggie Filipova-Rivers, Stefan Gawrysiak, Kate Gregory, Alexandrine Kantor, Jo Robb and Anne-Marie Simpson

Officers: Steven Corrigan, Democratic Services Manager, Simon Hewings, Head of Finance and Section 151 Officer, Janet Kealey, Solicitor - Governance and Deputy Monitoring Officer and Mark Stone, Chief Executive

14 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the annual meeting of Council held on 18 May 2023 and the special meeting of Council held on 12 June 2023 as correct records and agree that the Chair sign them as such.

15 Declarations of interest

Councillor Arlett declared an interest in respect of agenda items 8 and 9 as Chair of the Henley and District Housing Trust. The nature of the interest did not prevent him from taking part in the debate or voting on both items.

16 Urgent business and chair's announcements

The Chair and Vice-Chair provided details of the engagements they had attended since the last Council meeting.

17 Public participation

Two members of the public had registered to ask a question as set out below.

- A. Mr Curtis had submitted the following question to the Leader of the council but was unable to attend the meeting.

“This Council is currently contributing to the £120,000 cost of the review and update of the Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan, which is being led by the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP).

In the past, the Strategic Economic Plan has been largely developed in a silo and signed off behind closed doors but has gone on to have significant impacts including influencing housing targets and the contents of Local Plans, as well as broader strategies such as transport.

In the light of our climate and biodiversity emergencies, we know a step-change is required in how we consider these issues. For example:

- The House of Lords Environment and Climate Change Committee states that behavioural change is essential for achieving climate and environment goals, and for delivering wider benefits;
- The BEIS Independent Net Zero Review, published on 13th January states, ‘None of this will happen without a step change in the government’s approach to delivering net zero’; and the
- Oxfordshire Net Zero Route Map & Action Plan Final Report.

The size of the challenge to achieve net zero carbon by 2050 at latest will require a considerable step change in activity. We need to embed climate change into decision making across Oxfordshire’s local authorities.

But indications from the series of workshops led by OxLEP suggest that:

- The primary aim remains economic growth, with the environment, net zero and wellbeing featuring as issues to be managed rather than front and centre.
- The timetable appears to be focused on speed (getting it done and dusted by June initially, but now the autumn) which apparently does not allow time for public consultation.
- Overall, the level of engagement has been low and primarily focused on members of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, including the universities and OxLEP. There has been very little representation from the diverse Oxfordshire population, including those economic and socially disadvantaged communities that might be viewed as having the most to gain from a robust Strategic Economic Plan.

Given the above, can the Leader:

- a) Explain why the SEP review is being pushed through at such speed and without meaningful engagement with relevant communities?

b) Provide reassurance that the draft new Strategic Economic Plan will at the very least go through a full Scrutiny process and be brought to a full Council meeting for approval, prior to the Leader voting on it at an OxLEP Board Meeting?"

Councillor Bennett, Cabinet member for economic development and regeneration, responded as follows:

"I am answering this question as the cabinet member for economic development and regeneration in recognition that the Leader has a personal responsibility as an OxLEP Director and therefore does not represent the council at OxLEP Board.

- a) The Strategic Economic Plan is a document wholly owned and developed by OxLEP and South Oxfordshire District Council has no remit in the development of the SEP, other than through the various workshops attended by officers and members. The question of engagement is one for OxLEP to respond to as the owner of the SEP and clearly South Oxfordshire would support the need for wide engagement with our communities in development of any strategy.
- b) This Council has not financially contributed to the SEP, nor will not be seeking to formally review or adopt the document. I understand OxLEP will not be providing the Council with an opportunity to review or comment on the document prior to it being presented to FOP in July. The Future Oxfordshire Partnership has its own scrutiny panel and I hope that this document will be examined through that process".

B. Mr Salmons asked the following question:

"Many Councillors will by now be familiar with the Great Western Park depot scandal — the shameful scheme advanced by this Council to tarmac over land designated for a wildflower meadow in Didcot and convert it into a permanent grounds maintenance depot for South and Vale.

The public outcry generated by this proposal when it came to light earlier this year made it crystal clear the public are opposed in principle to this scheme, but by all accounts the Council is pressing ahead regardless.

When the original planning application was withdrawn, the planning agent acting on behalf of the Council stated: "It is our clients intention to resubmit the application in due course following a period of engagement with local residents [...]"

The latest SODC Climate Action Plan performance report gave a hint as to what that engagement might look like. It stated: "Due to the high profile and sensitive nature of the site, it was agreed to withdraw the planning application and look at a more thorough comms campaign post elections [...]"

Could the Cabinet Member for Finance and Property Assets explain to the residents of Didcot how the Council is able to find millions upon millions of pounds to build itself a plush new office on the most valuable land in their town, but is apparently no longer able to afford rent on an industrial unit for their grounds maintenance service, and must therefore deprive the town's residents of the wildflower meadow they were promised when they purchased their homes?"

Councillor Barker undertook to provide a written response to the question.

18 Petitions

None.

19 Update on the council's Information Technology infrastructure

Council considered Cabinet's recommendations, made at its meeting on 3 July 2023, on the current discussions relating to the council's Information Technology Infrastructure.

Councillor Powell, Cabinet member responsible, advised that Cabinet had agreed to move forward with the segregation of the council's Microsoft 365 tenancy and create a stand-alone environment for South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils in advance of the end of the Capita contract in 2025. She undertook to provide a response on whether this course of action could bring forward the termination of the contract.

RESOLVED: that a supplementary estimate of £326,000 be added to the 2023/24 revenue budget, funded as set out in the head of corporate services' report to Cabinet on 3 July 2023.

20 Delivery and management arrangements for council-provided Local Authority Housing Fund

Council considered Cabinet's recommendations, made at its meeting on 3 July 2023, on the work being undertaken in relation to providing homes under Government schemes.

In the absence of the Cabinet member, Councillor Filipova-Rivers, Councillor Bennett, Cabinet member for economic development and regeneration introduced this item. He reported that the government scheme offered grants to councils to provide housing for Afghans and Ukrainians in the district that were at risk of homelessness. Approximately 40 per cent of the cost of purchasing the properties would be grant funded with the council funding the remainder. The scheme supported the council's housing strategy and would provide secure accommodation at lower revenue costs than alternative housing provision. Thereafter the homes would belong to the council.

The council would need to temporarily outsource repairs and maintenance of these homes before a resource was available in-house.

RESOLVED: To proceed the allocation of a capital budget envelope of £4.6 million, being the council's share of the purchase costs of properties bought under the Local Authority Housing Fund scheme.

21 Local Authority Housing Fund 2

Council considered Cabinet's recommendations, made at its meeting on 3 July 2023, on additional grant funding to support the council's refugee and general homelessness accommodation programme.

In the absence of the Cabinet member, Councillor Filipova-Rivers, Councillor Bennett, Cabinet member for economic development and regeneration introduced this item. The additional scheme would further support the provision of housing for the council's refugee

accommodation programme. However, unlike the first phase, the Local Authority Housing Fund 2 also allowed the council to utilise the accommodation for general homelessness use and would deliver a further four homes.

RESOLVED: to add £1.92 million to the approved capital programme, part funded by Local Authority Housing Fund 2 funding of £768,000 to purchase four homes under this scheme.

22 Appointment to vacant Planning Committee position

Council was invited to appoint a member to fill the vacant position on the Planning Committee.

RESOLVED:

1. To allocate the seat to the Green Group.
2. To appoint Councillor Casey-Rerhaye to the seat.
3. To authorise the head of legal and democratic to make the appointment to the vacant substitute place in accordance with the wishes of the Green Group leader.

23 Report of the leader of the council

Councillor Rouane, Leader of the council made a statement on the proposed closure of railway station ticket offices – available [here](#). He would write to Great Western Railway to raise concerns that the proposed closure of ticket offices at railway stations in South Oxfordshire would affect vulnerable passengers and put people off using public transport. He urged others to respond to the consultation.

24 Questions on notice

No questions had been submitted by members.

25 Motions on notice

In the absence of Councillor Robb, Councillor Powell moved, and Councillor Van Mierlo seconded, the motion as set out on the agenda at item 13.

After debate, and being put to the vote, the motion was declared carried.

RESOLVED:

That Council notes that the Environment Agency, as the navigation authority, has responsibility for the maintenance of its assets along the length of the River Thames, including pump-out stations and footbridges. The River Thames and the Thames Path National Trail are key contributors to the visitor economy of South Oxfordshire and are beloved by residents.

Council also notes that:

1. Two major footbridges along the Thames Path National Trail in South Oxfordshire (Benson Weir and Marsh Lock) will be closed for some years for important safety repairs;

2. Residents and river users report that pump-out stations, used by boats to legally discharge their waste, including at Shiplake Lock, have been periodically out of order such that some boaters have been forced to discharge their waste directly into the river;
3. The Environment Agency has seen its funding slashed in real-terms by around one-third since 2010.

Council asks the leader to write to the Environment Agency to:

1. Seek information and assurances regarding the safety of footbridges along the Thames in South Oxfordshire and assurances that the bridges that are closed will be repaired and reopened as a matter of utmost urgency recognising the importance of a safe and accessible Thames Path to our residents and visitors;
2. Find out about the state of pump-out stations along the length of the River Thames in South Oxfordshire and what contingencies are in place for when a pump-out station is out of repair;
3. Ask the EA for assurances regarding the maintenance of pump-out stations to ensure our river is not further degraded with untreated sewage and boat waste.

Council also asks the leader to write to the Secretary of State to raise the above concerns and ask that funding for the Environment Agency is increased to allow it to properly perform its functions and maintain its assets appropriately.

The meeting closed at 7.02pm

Chair

Date

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