

District Councillor Report – April-May 2023

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For this April issue, I have focused on climate, environment and planning updates:

Energy

Following the successful bid to the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme and the award of £376,000 for works to the Cornerstone arts centre in Didcot we have now started work looking at our other buildings, with a contract awarded for site decarbonisation assessments for the South Oxfordshire Leisure Centres and the Riverside Park and Pool. These assessments will determine what works are required to decarbonise the buildings and will inform the evidence required to make future funding bids to the Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme.

We have also appointed APSE Energy to undertake a feasibility study into investing in solar energy on council land, with an aim to offset the councils' unavoidable carbon emissions. The report will include a financial model as well as contractual, planning and grid supply issues and will feed into future decisions about investments in a solar farm.

Bid to Net Zero Fast Followers Fund

Officers submitted a funding application to the Net Zero Living, Fast Followers programme. If the bid is successful this project will fund an officer post and consultant support to develop an approach to investment in nature-based carbon offsetting in Oxfordshire, aiming to offer Oxfordshire's businesses and local authorities' opportunities to invest in nature-based carbon sequestration schemes within the county. South Oxfordshire are leading the bid, and Vale of White Horse District Council, Cherwell District Council, West Oxfordshire District Council and the Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership are project partners.

Local Electric Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) funding

The Office for Zero Emissions Vehicles has awarded £700k from the pilot LEVI scheme (we were previously unsuccessful with 'OZEV' wanting to "level up" other areas). The money will be used across the county to fund cable gullies enabling Oxfordshire residents with properties on the street without off street parking to run an Electric Vehicle charging cable under the pavement to charge their EVs.

Nature Recovery

Officers in the Climate and Biodiversity team worked with the Parks and Communications team to develop the '**Let it Bee**' project which aims to promote wildlife friendly management of council owned land. This follows on from the No-Mow May trials which ran across the last growing season and will involve a total of nine sites covering around 11,000m² where the grass will be left to grow for the benefit of wildlife. The sites are located in Berinsfield, Didcot, Wallingford and

Woodcote. In addition, we have also created a new wildflower meadow at Cronshaw Close in Didcot where the grass was scarified, and a wildflower mix was sown. All the sites will be monitored this summer to determine how successful the approach is both in terms of wildlife benefit, costs and public perception.

Bathing Water Application

In early March we were disappointed to learn from Defra that our joint application with Wallingford Town Council for Bathing Water Status had been unsuccessful. The letter from Defra did not go into the reasons that our application was unsuccessful however, following further enquiries we have now been told that the reason our application failed was that the site did not attract a large enough average number of users across the bathing season.

Defra have so far failed to answer our questions about how many users the site would need to have attracted to allow it to be designated, and we are currently following this up. We are also understand, that of 9 other applications for bathing water status submitted this year only one river-based application was successful, all the others have been given the same reason for refusal as we had in Wallingford.

Thames Water – sewage capacity and new developments

Planning department work is ongoing with Thames Water on approving planning applications and sewage capacity. We have started regular meetings to discuss modelling and sharing of information and we also challenge Thames Water where there are known issues in new application areas, including flooding. Grampian conditions (where infrastructure needs to be provided before houses) can be used but need to be reasonable from a planning inspector's point of view or they can be over-turned on appeal.

Planning and Enforcement

This has been another busy year for the Planning team, both in its day-to-day business of assessing and monitoring applications and in the work of the Planning Policy team to develop the new Joint Local Plan with Vale of White Horse Council. The results of the "issues consultation" means the new plan will focus more strongly on environmental factors, sustainability and green infrastructure than just on further housing growth. The current Local Plan (LP2035) remains in place and we await further news from Government about proposed planning reforms.

The new system to assess and take action on reported breaches of planning rules has been assessed by the cross-party Scrutiny Committee as being effective and proportionate; we cannot feasibly take action on every single planning breach, but the new system ensures that the most serious cases are acted upon the quickest.

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