

## ABINGDON TOWN COUNCIL

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| <b>Report to</b>     | <b>Town Council</b>        |
| <b>Meeting date</b>  | <b>30 March 2022</b>       |
| <b>Report author</b> | <b>Cllr Helen Pighills</b> |
| <b>Agenda item</b>   | <b>7</b>                   |

### VALE COUNCILLORS' REPORT TO ABINGDON TOWN COUNCIL 30/3/2022

This report includes items requested by Town Council members and other items hopefully of interest.

#### HOMES FOR UKRAINE

The Homes for Ukraine scheme will support the sponsorship of Ukrainian individuals and families coming to the UK in **two phases**.

**Phase one** is where individuals in the UK sponsor named guests to come and live with them in their home. Both the sponsor and guest can use a number of channels to find a match – direct relation, friend, friend of a friend or contact from an NGO, charity or other contact. This is the only official housing scheme currently operational. The only route for people to enter the UK is through a visa process administered by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Home Office. It is this system, and only this system, that will trigger requests to local authorities for support.

A wide range of services from local government will be required to provide wraparound to sponsors and their guests, including initial checks and visits to sponsor homes, enhanced DBS checks where needed, benefits advice and payment, and finding school and early years placements. Vale council officers are working with partners to mobilise a joint system wide team, based on the previous COVID model, that includes the county, other district and city councils and health partners. It is not clear exactly which councils will take on the various roles – but the scheme is likely to impose a significant workload on Vale officers.

The **second phase** is where the scheme will be expanded to enable organisations and community groups to sponsor multiple guests. This is still being developed by the government.

Many of you will have been contacted by local groups and communities wishing to develop plans and who are looking to the council for immediate answers on how they can do this.

While communities will be key in welcoming and supporting our Ukrainian friends, we don't have these answers yet.

The focus, for now, needs to be on phase one, setting up the systems and processes to respond to this part of the national scheme. We need to work as quickly and efficiently as we can to get Ukrainian refugees settled in Oxfordshire. As soon as we know more about phase two, we will be in a better position to answer questions from wider organisations and community groups then.

#### ABINGDON VALE PROPERTIES UPDATE

Upper Reaches – The Upper Reaches site is the responsibility of the long leaseholder Contemporary Hotels. Vale council officers have been exploring what we can do to ensure they address the recent incidents of vandalism and anti-social behaviour (ASB). Our community safety team is working with the neighbourhood policing team to see if other enforcement tools can be used to address the issues and help reassure local residents. This work also involves engaging with local youth service providers to see if they can help provide positive interventions to try and stop the ASB. We have also asked the leaseholder for a meeting to discuss these issues and their long-term plans for the site. Vale Cllrs Andy Crawford and Emily Smith met with Ambar Paul of Caparo (Contemporary Hotels) on 10 March. He indicated that his intention was to submit details of a planning proposal to the council for a pre-application view. It wasn't clear from that meeting whether that was a scheme that was positively different from a scheme proposed back in 2017. To that end we will have to wait and see what comes forward, but we made our position clear that we and the residents of Abingdon expect progress.

Abbey House – OCC remain in occupation.

The Charter - The lower levels of the Charter car park are open, but Levels 3 and upwards are closed until further notice due to concerns regarding structural issues and fire safety. We've carried out work on the lower levels to ensure they are safe, however further assessment work is required to review the upper levels. Whatever repairs are necessary, these are likely to be very expensive and investment will be informed by the outcome of the CARF.

While the lower levels remain open space is very limited, so motorists are encouraged to use the other car parks in Abingdon, where there is good capacity.

#### CENTRAL ABINGDON REGENERATION FRAMEWORK (CARF)

The Council is working with Carter Jonas and Glanville to produce a framework to steer future developments in the central area of Abingdon (wider than the planning policy definition of the town centre). This work will set a context for the Council's three main assets (Charter area, Abbey House and Upper Reaches). This work could potentially strengthen policy in the emerging Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) work and is seen as complimentary. Subject to understanding the outcomes of the NDP consultation and where any gaps may need to be filled, the CARF will be produced in late summer 2022 following significant public engagement.

The CARF will also have regard to the emerging Joint Local Plan work where the future viability and vitality of town centres will be a key consideration and to the Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) being produced for Abingdon by OCC.

## ABINGDON PUBLIC TOILETS UPDATE

Following concerns raised regarding public toilets in Abingdon, Vale councillors have held urgent discussions with officers in order to give Town councillors an update. We have also discussed ways of improving how information can be provided regarding ongoing issues with the toilets – if anyone has any suggestions, please email me.

Hayes Meadow toilet: There has been an ongoing electrical fault meaning no lights or water is activated. It has been found that this is due to a faulty door opening/closure mechanism. The supplier has been unable to source replacement parts over a number of months. Council officers are now investigating the option and cost of replacing the whole sliding door.

Abbey Meadow: The vandalised circular windows have now been replaced by painted wooden panels, and all cubicles are now operational

Charter: There has been a long-standing problem caused by blockages to the gents toilet. All attempts to clear and prevent the blockages by rodding and jetting have failed as they block up again. CCTV shows narrowing and irregularities in the waste pipe, possibly caused by partial collapse. It is possible that the drains will need to be dug up and replaced. A sign has now been put up advising the public to use the unisex/disabled toilet and the radar key has been removed.

## COUNCIL TAX FUEL REBATE

The government has announced that most households in council tax bands A-D will receive a £150 'rebate' to help with rising energy prices.

Contrary to some reports, the 'rebate' will not be taken off people's council tax bills when they are issued. Arrangements are being put in place to make a separate payment to households and Vale officers are working with Capita to ensure this happens as soon as possible.

Here's how the payments will be made:

If a household pays their council tax by direct debit - we should be able to pay the £150 directly into their bank account. We're hoping to start making these payments by the end of April. More than 82 per cent of our council taxpayers are on direct debit, so most people should receive this money fairly soon.

If a household is not on direct debit - it will take longer to make these payments as we will need to write to them to confirm their bank details.

The council recently sent more than 7,400 texts and emails to people across the two districts to encourage them to sign up to direct debit (3,720 in South and 3,686 in Vale). People can still do this via their online account or by going to the Vale council website. Please note – the council will not cold call anyone to request their bank details.

To ensure Capita can carry out this work as quickly as possible, the council is asking people not to contact them to chase the 'rebate' payment.

Further information about the council tax 'rebate' can be found on the Vale council website.

## CLIMATE ACTION FUND GRANTS

Communities are invited to apply for a share of the Vale's new £50,000 Climate Action Fund, which is open to all town and parish councils and local not-for-profit groups. The Vale Climate Action Fund has grants from £250 to £5,000 on offer per project to help tackle climate change, with a total of £50,000 available.

The funding is aimed at projects that help to tackle climate change and increase people's awareness and knowledge of the climate emergency. The work could focus on areas such as the natural environment, energy, waste and consumption, or transport and travel. Organisations that receive funding will also have the opportunity to network with other grant recipients to share experiences and potentially collaborate on future projects.

The scheme is open to non-profit community organisations whose primary purpose is to benefit the residents of Vale of White Horse. Town and parish councils may apply themselves or can collaborate with local unconstituted groups to apply on their behalf. You don't have to be a climate expert or established group to apply. The Vale council is just as keen to hear from communities who are starting their journey to take action to address the climate emergency. More details are on the Vale council website.

## PROPOSED ABINGDON RESERVOIR

The Vale of White Horse District Council agreed a motion at its December meeting - raising climate concerns about the revived plans for a large reservoir south of Abingdon to serve London and the south-east.

A press release was subsequently issued in which Vale councillors demanded that Thames Water provide more evidence on the need for a reservoir at the site. They also requested that a carbon calculation on the proposal is carried out to assess the environmental impact. A letter sent to Thames Water from Emily which followed up on the demand for more information on the environmental impact and a request that TW commission an assessment of all potential solutions to the issue of water scarcity in SE England. The leader also wrote to OFWAT recommending a carbon calculation to assess the environmental impact of the project.

Thames Water replied in January that they would be carrying out detailed assessment of environmental impact. The firm iterated that the reservoir offered an opportunity to provide new habitats for wildlife and support for ecologically vulnerable chalk streams. Thames Water also added that the reservoir would provide 1,000s of jobs in the area.

In her January Leader's statement, Cllr Smith explained that several Vale council members had attended a briefing session with Water Resources South-East. "Sadly, this briefing did little to reassure many of the councillors present, but it is important that we all keep engaged as this proposal progresses and that we respond to the various consultations about the plans in line with our corporate objectives and the best interest of our residents." The Vale council has responded to Thames Water's public consultation saying that plans for the reservoir should be halted due to significant environmental concerns, including the size of the carbon footprint of the construction project and the significant impact the reservoir would have on the landscape and local communities.

Report compiled by Helen Pighills 28/3/22