

# **Report from Abingdon Vale Councillors to Abingdon Town Council, 15 January 2025**

From **Cllr Rob Maddison**

## **Berry Croft & Crosslands Drive playparks**

The playparks in north Abingdon at Berry Croft and Crosslands Drive will remain open all week and going forward the entrances will not be locked on Sundays, as was the case previously. As mentioned in other updates earlier this year, the Vale has carried out a consultation on the question of keeping the parks open. The decision to keep the parks open has been made based on the response to the consultation. This question was first raised by a local resident who questioned why the parks were closed on Sundays and contacted our MP Layla Moran to ask about it. Layla passed this query onto Eric de la Harpe and myself as the relevant district councillors. If the resident hadn't reached out, then it is likely that the parks would have remained in their routine being locked up every Sunday. Small as it may be, I believe that this is an excellent example of local democratic action. The parks will stay open seven days a week to be enjoyed by families in the area.

## **Vale Letters on Flooding to Secretary of State and Environment Agency**

You will all be aware of the problems of flooding that have occurred in Abingdon this year. Flooding has occurred in January, September, and November, causing disruptions to both residents and businesses. At the time of the most recent floods in November, I went to see the water level and speak to residents around Chaunterell Way, Nash Drive and Orpwood Way, parts of the Fitzharris ward which I represent that have suffered from flooding due to rising water from the Ock. Following this, I have with the support of colleagues proposed a motion that the Vale send letters to the Secretary of State to ask whether the level of resources spent on flood mitigation is high enough and to the Environment Agency to call for the implementation of schemes to reduce the risk of flooding from the Ock. The motion was passed at the most recent meeting of the Council. As flood protection is not within the Vale's remit, this seemed the best way to use the Vale to exert an influence on this worsening problem.

From **Cllr Andy Foulsham**

## **Joint Local Plan**

The Joint Local Plan 2041 for the Vale of White Horse & South Oxfordshire District Councils was submitted to the Secretary of State for Examination exactly on time on 9th December 2024, and we've heard this week that we have been allocated two very well qualified inspectors, Rachael Bust BSc (Hons) MA MSc LLM PhD MInstLM MCMI MIEnvSci MRTPI & Caroline Mulloy BSc (Hons) DipTP MRTPI who will conduct the Examination in Public later this year. We don't have an exact date yet, but I hope that it will be in the first half of 2025.

This is a huge step forward, as it means we are so much closer to bringing in a Local Plan that reflects our residents' priorities about genuinely affordable homes, combatting climate change through our Net Zero building policy and fostering nature recovery (amongst other ground-breaking policies) as well as ensuring that housing and employment sites are in the most sustainable locations possible.

Whilst on that vein, I want to quash some of the rumours that I hear about the size of development on the Dalton Barracks site – I know there has been a lot of talk of “10,000 new homes”. This is the figure that the site promoter (the landowner, part of the MoD) has included in some of their publicity. The site is in the Joint Local Plan – but only allocated for c.2,750 homes. Of course, it suits the developer to talk up the number of houses, as that would mean there's more profit for them! There has also been a lot of effort expended to make sure that there is a green barrier of land to protect the nearby Cothill Fen – in other words, the housebuilding will not go near it.

### **Council Plan – “At the Heart of the Vale”**

We're also at the stage of finalising the new Council Plan, which we consulted residents on early in 2024 and will be taken to the District Council's Scrutiny Committee at the end of January and then on to Cabinet and Full Council for adoption. It will set the pattern of our work for the next 4 years, and is likely to have 4 key themes around:

1. Providing the homes and infrastructure people need
2. Action on climate health change and nature recovery
3. Creating healthy, sustainable, and inclusive communities
4. Financial stability and innovative Transformation

From **Cllr Oliver Forder**

In my capacity as Chair of Vale LibDem Group, the major issues with which I have been involved since the last Council meeting have been: -

### **Local Government Reorganisation**

I don't believe that anybody in the group is happy with the government's proposals or how they are being implemented, but they are what they are. Personally, I think the policy has been driven by urban politicians with little understanding or experience of more rural areas. Oxfordshire County Council, with the Vale's support has indicated that it wishes to be in the first wave, but the geographical basis has yet to be agreed. The consensus seems to be that the new strategic authority should be based on an existing partnership geography such as the Thames Valley Police or the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board. At a more local level, the government has indicated that it wishes exiting district councils to be merged into bodies with a minimum size of 500,000 residents – Vale is currently about 170,000. The Vale view is that integration with similar rural authorities would be more appropriate than integration with Oxford. Additionally, I am very concerned that an effect of reorganisation may be a substantial reduction in the number of councillors

and a concomitant reduction in the level of service offered to residents. I shall continue to raise this issue to ensure it is not lost amongst the details of reorganisation.

### **Councillor Allowances**

Members will have seen the controversy that followed the publication of the periodic report of the independent panel on Vale councillor allowances. There were many different views in the Vale about the correct strategy to adopt, and I spent much time with colleagues to achieve a consensus. The result was to adopt the report, but with a restitution of the 40% public service discount, rather than the 33% that the panel had proposed. This had the effect of substantially reducing the recommended increases in the allowances.

### **Abbey Building Project**

I have been lobbying hard to persuade the Vale to make a small grant to the Abbey Buildings project, which is desirable to demonstrate to charitable funds that the project has local support. As I write this, I am still waiting to hear if my efforts have been successful. Apart from the self-evident worth of the project itself, I am continually making the point that a fairly small grant from the Vale could help unlock around £2,000,000 of investment in central Abingdon.

Oliver Forder  
January 2025