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WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of the **Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

Held in the Council Chamber, Council Offices, Woodgreen, Witney, Oxfordshire OX28 1NB
at 5.30 pm on **Wednesday, 7 February 2024**

PRESENT

Councillors: Andrew Beaney (Chair), Rizvana Poole (Vice-Chair), Thomas Ashby, Nick Leverton, Andrew Lyon, Michele Mead, Carl Rylett, Sandra Simpson, Ruth Smith, Alistair Wray, Liam Walker and Alex Wilson

Officers: Phil Martin (Assistant Director for Business Support), Emmylou Brossard (Safer Communities Officer), Hannah Kenyon (Climate Change Manager), Rachel Crookes (Biodiversity & Countryside Land Management Officer), Andrew Thomson (Lead Planning Policy & Implementation), Andrew Brown (Democratic Services Business Manager) and Max Thompson (Senior Democratic Services Officer)

Other Councillors in attendance: Charlie Maynard, Andrew Prosser, Geoff Saul and Duncan Enright

36 Apologies for Absence and Temporary Appointments

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ashton, Doughty, Godfrey, Goodwin, King and Melvin.

37 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

38 Minutes of Previous Meetings

The minutes of the meetings held on 18 December 2023 and 10 January 2024 were approved by the Committee.

39 Participation of the Public

Catriona Bass of the Long Mead Foundation addressed the Committee and suggested that the Council adopts a more flexible approach to identifying who is involved in what nature recovery projects at a grassroots level, rather than a top-down approach.

Catriona Bass highlighted the Nature Recovery Network in Eynsham and the surrounding villages and the Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project as being examples of bottom-up networks that have received national recognition.

Catriona Bass's written submission is attached to these minutes.

40 Community Safety Partnership

The Safer Communities Officer provided a presentation on the Community Safety Partnership which is attached to these minutes. The Council had a statutory duty to have a crime reduction strategy in place which included addressing anti-social behaviour, the misuse of drugs and reoffending. The duty had in January 2024 been extended to include combatting serious violence.

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The Community Safety Plan (CSP) had recently been reviewed and there was a requirement for it to take account of the Police and Crime Commissioner's Criminal Justice Plan. The CSP was an Oxfordshire-wide plan which included a local focus. Lots of good work was taking place alongside partner organisations including the police, fire service, integrated care board and the probation service. Within the Council the communities, environmental health and licensing teams were all involved. Some key highlights included:

- An anti-slavery co-ordinator post had been funded by the partnership for 2 years. This had increased understanding and provided support to victims.
- A care agency operating in the district had lost key contracts and the right to employ workers from outside of the UK.
- Increased support for victims of domestic abuse, including awareness training for hair and beauty professionals and students.
- There was a commitment to focus on youth in the CSP following on from the recent Youth Needs Assessment which the partnership had continued to. 454 young people felt that they needed to carry a weapon.
- Youth focused interventions centred on drug exploitation, aiming to reduce the number of people at risk.
- Safer Streets funding had been used to improve lighting and remove foliage from alleyways in Witney to make people feel safer at night and improve CCTV visibility.

The Committee asked a number of questions and noted that:

- Funding for Safer Streets projects had to be bid for from the Home Office and given the very low crime rates in the district it would be difficult to roll out the project in Witney more widely across the district.
- There was a need for universal youth services but patchwork funding. The partnership couldn't provide youth-work provision long term.
- Cyber-crime was increasing significantly and was difficult to tackle. Fraud is covered within the CSP and there was close working with trading standards and specific interventions to combat fraud.
- The Youth Needs Assessment was a one-off piece of work and there was no identified funding to repeat that exercise. All mainstream schools apart from one had taken part and the partnership was looking at opportunities to support youth further.
- While the crime rates in the district were low there had been a 13% increase in violence against the person offences against an average increase of 5%. The 33% increase in the number of victims of rape was also a serious concern.
- Many hidden harms were not reflected in the crime figures as victims don't all come forwards. The partnership was focused on raising awareness of issues and how to seek help.
- 77% of modern slavery victims were from Zambia. The Modern Slavery Co-Ordinator was ensuring that leaflets and posters were available in different languages.
- The high number of young people not feeling safe in schools (20%) was of concern.

The Safer Communities Officer agreed to share further information with the Committee about the crime figures for the district and what action was being taken to address the increases in violence against the person offences and rape.

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a) Safer Streets

The Safer Communities Officer provided an update on the Safer Streets project which was focused on rural acquisitive crime. £202k had been provided across the whole project but £45k had to be lost from the year 2 budget. A Rural Crime Advisor was being recruited by Thames Valley Police and would be working across the district to engage with communities and victims and understand the issues. An administrative officer was also being recruited to deliver the project implementation.

The Committee asked questions and noted that:

- While equipment could be tagged, much of the equipment that is stolen goes abroad immediately.
- There was a need for the Rural Crime Advisor to engage with local farmers, young farmers and parish councils.

41 **Nature Recovery Plan and Nature Recovery Officer**

The Biodiversity & Countryside Land Management Officer introduced the report to the Executive on the Nature Recovery Plan and Nature Recovery Officer. The plan had three main strands, to look at scope for improving biodiversity on the Council's own land, to safeguard and enhance biodiversity through policies and development and to facilitate communities and partnerships for landscape-scale recovery. There had been 177 responses to the consultation and people had generally agreed with the Council's ambitions. An officer post was requested for which some funding was available for 15 months. The intention was to provide a top up to have a two-year post. This would increase capacity to engage with grassroots organisations.

The Executive Member for Climate Change thanked the public speaker for their points. The approach was not intended to be a top-down one although some funding was top-down. The Council wanted to facilitate nature recovery at all levels and there was lots going on. 50 coronation orchards were due to be delivered across the district.

The Committee asked a number of questions and noted that:

- The Council's own land was primarily concentrated in Witney and there was a need to ensure the approach was not too town-centric.
- Town and parish summits would be useful for sharing information and good practice.
- The Climate Change Officer had successfully pulled in funding and the hope was that a Nature Recovery Officer would do likewise. There was 24 months to demonstrate the role which if successful could later be made permanent, subject to approvals.
- There was concern that rural areas would struggle to raise funds for nature recovery projects.
- 10% biodiversity net gain was seen as a blunt instrument which would be difficult to enforce. The Planning Service was recruiting for an Ecologist and the Council may decide to go beyond 10% in its new local plan. Environmental issues were due to be scoped as part of the local plan process.

The Committee resolved to submit four recommendations to the Executive meeting on 14 February 2024:

- I. That engagement with towns and parish councils is more frequent than suggested in the report (i.e., events should be held at least annually).

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2. That the Council takes a network approach to the facilitation of grassroots projects and getting people involved in nature recovery activities.
3. That consideration is given to the need for an additional financial pot for funding nature recovery projects in rural areas that would struggle to provide match funding through WestHive.
4. That consideration is given to mitigating risks around the future funding for the new post and the reliance on external funding for projects, given that no capital allocation has been made for 2024/25.

42 Annual Monitoring Report (2021 – 2023)

The Lead Planning Policy & Implementation Officer introduced the report and stated that it was an annual requirement to track progress and implementation of the Local Plan. This report covered a two-year period from 1 April 2021 to 31 March 2023. The Council was considered to have been largely successful in meeting its core objectives over the period, particularly housing delivery and supporting sustainable economic growth. There were some areas for improvement around infrastructure delivery and impact on natural resources. The officer highlighted the following information:

- The majority of planning applications received by the Council had been approved in accordance with the Local Plan.
- The majority of appeals made against Council decisions were dismissed although some residential developments, including a major development at the Moors in Ducklington, had been allowed on appeal.
- New infrastructure funding totalling over £2.3m had been agreed during the period to support the delivery of new development. There remained a significant gap between the cost of infrastructure and the funding available to deliver infrastructure.
- A total of 1,731 residential dwellings had been completed of which 687 were affordable. Planning permission had been granted for a further 802 dwellings.
- There had been delays to the delivery at a number of allocated housing sites. Officers were working with developers and site promoters to address these delays.
- There had been a rebasing of the housing land supply figures and the Council was currently able to demonstrate a 5-year land supply.
- A significant area of new employment floor space had been approved, with the majority of this in the West Witney area. Approvals for new employment floor space in rural areas were more limited in number and scale although the Local Plan policies did support this.
- The most significant deprivation domain related to barriers to housing and services. This was a reflection on housing affordability and the rural nature of the district.
- The majority of approved developments had been located in the most accessible areas of the district which provided residents with a choice of transport options.
- A number of highways improvement schemes had been identified in the Local Plan. Approval had been granted to the west facing A40 slip road at Shores Green which should improve access to Witney. Development had commenced at the park and ride facility at Eynsham.

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- The Local Plan had been largely successful in steering development away from environmentally sensitive areas. There had been no significant changes to areas of protected habitats and numbers of protected species.
- The latest Environment Agency data for the Evenlode and Windrush catchments indicated that all water bodies had failed their chemical status. Discharges from storm overflows into water courses were recognised as contributing significantly to this issue.

The Committee asked a number of questions and noted that:

- Most employers in the district had less than 5 employees.
- The mix of 1 bed and 2 bed dwellings delivered was skewed towards flats and apartments rather than houses and this was to some extent driven by the market. The Council would review the targets going forwards based on what had been delivered.
- The Executive Member for Planning and Sustainable Development agreed that the water quality issue was deeply concerning and confirmed that it was something the Executive had been working hard on addressing with Thames Water.
- Grampian conditions meant that any new houses could not be occupied until the relevant sewage treatment works had sufficient capacity.
- There was a need to consider the cumulative impact of development on fluvial flood risk in the lowlands area as this appeared to be a growing issue. There was a need to be careful about housing locations.
- Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans were important and there was a need for a cycle route between Carterton and Witney due to the size of the workforce going both ways.
- The Council should be more proactive in seeking bespoke advice on active travel from the County Council when it responds to development applications as a consultee. The facilitation of health impact assessments on major assessments would be key to this.

The Lead Planning Policy & Implementation Officer agreed to follow up on a question about whether the Council needed to have a 5-year land supply for gypsy and traveller sites and the status of this.

43 Report back on recommendations

The response to the recommendation on lobbying for multi-year finance settlements was noted.

44 Committee Work Programme

The Democratic Services Business Manager introduced the work plan and said that the Executive report on CCTV had slipped from the 29 February meeting to the 10 April meeting.

The Business Manager also drew the Committee's attention to the draft terms of reference for the Leisure and Wellbeing Strategy Task and Finish Group, which had been circulated in a supplementary agenda pack with three recommendations.

The Committee resolved to:

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1. Appoint Councillors Julian Cooper, Phil Godfrey and Sandra Simpson to the Leisure and Wellbeing Strategy Task and Finish Group (joining Councillors Andrew Beaney, Rizvana Poole and Alex Wilson who were appointed on 6 December 2023).
2. Agree the terms of reference for the Leisure Strategy Task and Finish Group, with flexibility for the Group to set its own meeting dates.
3. Appoint Councillor Wilson as Chair of the Task and Finish Group.

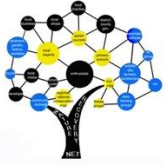
45 Executive Forward Plan

The Committee noted regret that the Waste Fleet Purchase Strategy had been added to the Executive Forward Plan for the 14 February Executive meeting at relatively late notice as this is something that the Committee would have wished to have scrutinised. It was also suggested that it would be useful if the Executive Forward Plan included dates for when items had been added.

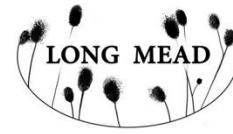
The Committee questioned whether certain items on the Executive Forward Plan should be marked as key decisions, such as Improving Youth Participation and Development and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Draft Charging Schedule. The Business Manager agreed to look into whether the latter item would be a key decision.

The Meeting closed at 7.58 pm

CHAIR



Nature Recovery Network



Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project

We hugely welcome the report for its foresight and ambition! Well done Rachel!

We would like to suggest a mechanism for delivery that we have been pioneering in Eynsham and surrounding villages for the last 5 years, which addresses the challenges of the resource-restricted environment that we are operating in today. The mechanism that we have developed ensures that local nature recovery in W Oxon is scaleable, sustainable and inclusive. This is a bottom-up network that starts with the people on the land (communities and larger landowners) connecting up, **in the place where they all live,** the local environmental experts with local enthusiasts and councillors, and then extending outwards to form partnerships with district and county councils and regional eNgos. This contrasts with the largely supra-district mechanism of delivery outlined in the document. This mechanism goes the other way (ie top-down, outside-in) and is constrained by the capacity of the supra-district organisations eg Wild Oxfordshire, to identify land across the whole County and then to forge links with the landowners and communities restore it. The last 30 years has shown how difficult it is to get this model to work. This top-down model also creates many links in a chain that unnecessarily depletes resource-poor, often volunteer, groups doing the work on the ground.

We would suggest, from our experience (including as one of the current WODC case-studies) that a more efficient and faster route for WODC to facilitate the protection our local nature, and get spades, in the ground is to adopt a more flexible network approach that involves identifying the actual people on the ground in the district doing the work (it may be a parish council, it may be an eNgo or it may be a skilled community group) and facilitate their work directly through the district councillors.

We speak both as initiators of the [Nature Recovery Network](#) in Eynsham and surrounding villages and initiators of the [Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project](#) (TVWMP). Both projects have adopted the same approach and both have received national recognition. (Chair of EA and of Natural England visited in 2021. Natural England's nature recovery network advisors from every NE region, visited in 2023 to understand the model; we received numerous awards).

Over the past 5 years, TVWMP has developed Oxfordshire's first nature recovery network of the UK's rarest floodplain meadow, along the Thames and Cherwell. Only 4 square miles of this habitat survives in the UK - a large proportion of which is in West Oxfordshire (25% of these surviving wildflower meadows are upstream of Oxford), including the largest contiguous areas of this habitat in country: Pixie/Yarnton/Oxey Mead SSSIs.

In the Eynsham area, TVWMP has already developed a nature recovery network of floodplain meadows and associated habitats of over 250ha, in collaboration with neighbouring landowners (including OCC, local companies and farmers) to recreate meadows, to join up the surviving rare

ancient meadows. We are in discussion with our neighbours to extend it upstream as far as Stanton Harcourt. We are also in dialogue with the landowners downstream, which include OCC's Wharf Farm (50ha), Smiths land (50ha) and Blenheim (100ha). Blenheim and Smiths are already engaged in nature recovery plans on some of this land. The Wharf Farm is currently earmarked for mineral development by OCC. If this last piece of land (50ha) could be brought into the project, we would join up with the SSSI meadows at Port Meadow. This would be the first and largest newly connected nature recovery network in Oxfordshire.

The local community (inc scouts, beavers, schools, vulnerable adults) has been integral to this landscape-scale restoration project from the outset, through our *Nature Recovery Network*, carrying a range of monthly/annual environmental surveys led by our local experts and coming together to propagate the rarer wildflower plants and trees to plant out as part of the landscape-scale restoration. Over the last 3 years we have been surveying: terrestrial and water invertebrates, water quality at 10 sites around Eynsham and 2 in South Leigh, plants, birds, reptiles, water voles, otters and bats. All these surveys are led by local experts with the participation of the community and the data is fed into TVERC. The plant propagation group, which includes participants of Long Mead's carefarming programme (adults with learning disabilities and autism, students with special needs, people with mental and physical health challenges) propagate up to 10,000 rare wildflower plants per year. Partners include FarmAbility, Bridewell, Bartholomew School, primary schools etc. Our experts are also carrying research (funded by NE) into the propagation characteristics of floodplain meadow species and on invertebrates in floodplain meadows. Our nature recovery network of schools (funded by Natural England) has engaged the schools and communities in 8 villages, and produced Phase 1 Habitat Surveys of all the schools with recommendations for biodiversity gain, while bringing together key teachers and community members for a range of workshops. Our ambitious Hedge in Time Project aims to connect up the villages engaged in our *Nature Recovery Network* by hedgerow as part of the landscape scale restoration project.

We would encourage WODC to consider the flat network model, which we have pioneered so successfully, that has brought together communities in 8 villages around Eynsham and 2 on the outside of the river in a number of projects over the past 4 years. The *Nature Recovery Network* in Eynsham and surrounding villages has over 550 members and now includes more, and more highly qualified ecology experts, than any of the County's eNgos.

Catriona Bass and Prof Kevan Martin
Long Mead Foundation