

Vale of White Horse

District Councillors' Report

Watchfield and Shrivenham Ward

Cllr Katherine Foxhall katherine.foxhall@whitehorsedc.gov.uk
Cllr Viral Patel viral.patel@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

October 2024

Ward Overview

Wicklesham and Coxwell Pits application for commercial development

OCC Application MW.0151/23

We reported last month that a further consultation was opened following changes and updated documentation by the applicant. There appears to be little new and the updates reflect largely changes made to the application earlier.

The main area we felt needed focus this time was the biodiversity net-gain report included by the applicant, we have noted previously that the BNG assessment submitted is problematic and does not account for the existing biodiversity on site following restoration after quarrying. This view was reflected by other consultees, and we have submitted further comments along with the Vale's response.

Highways engagement

Viral was pleased to join Watchfield parish councillors on a walk about with a highways engagement officer this month. ***This is not a district council responsibility*** but given the wide impact highways have on our ward it was a useful meeting.

The newly formed highways engagement team are proactively reaching out to parishes to arrange similar walk-about's and provide additional information to parishes, allowing them to have more direct contact and input to highways.

If any parish councils or parish meetings have not been contacted by the engagement team, please contact them through the contact details we will send separately.

In addition to reviewing potholes, traffic and other highways matters on the walkabout, the highways team forwarded several useful links which can be used by both residents and parishes.

- **Direct Email** for use by public: highwayenquiries@oxfordshire.gov.uk
- **One network** - open to any member of the public, shows all currently known utility and council works on highways: <https://one.network/public>
- **FixMyStreet** - the primary way for public to report highways matters: <https://www.fixmystreet.com/>
- **FixMyStreet SuperUsers** – local “superusers” are provided with training and equipment by the Highways department to mark out potholes and other areas of concern. Volunteers can

contact the engagement team or e-mail volunteercoordinationteam@Oxfordshire.gov.uk. There can be multiple volunteers in a parish, so it doesn't need to fall on one person.

Blocked Culvert in Ashbury

On the way to join the walkabout in Watchfield, Viral attended a report of a blocked culvert with a potential for flooding in Ashbury. Having seen the issue, Viral discussed it with the highways officer, and they were both able to return to the site that day.

We commend the highways engagement team for going out of their way to review the situation on the day. Viral sent on an annotated map and details of the problems to the engagement team who were able to engage their colleagues to assess the problem. Although the culvert was found to have collapsed requiring extensive work, the landowner was able to get a short-term solution agreed with Thames Water and highways while the work to fix the culvert is put in place.

Supporting residents in social housing

Over the last year several tenants have contacted Kat and Viral for help in addressing problems with their properties, particularly where they have struggled to get matters addressed through other means.

We were happy to see that a family we were supporting in Watchfield were able to be temporarily relocated while work was carried out to make repairs and improvements on the property. It is not easy living with repair work, particularly with young children, and this was creating a great deal of anxiety for the residents.

So, we are pleased that with help from the Vale housing team we were able to reduce the impact on the family while their home is brought up to spec.

Coleshill Solar Farm Proposal

A solar farm proposal is expected to be submitted in December. The developer website information is here: <https://abeienergyprojects.co.uk/projects/#old-hayes>. Kat attended Buscot and Coleshill parish meetings this month, both of which included lively discussion about the proposals. At this point we have shared information with Coleshill and Buscot PCs particularly around industry best practice and policies in the new Joint Local Plan documents.

West Vale Mobility Transport Launch

Kat was delighted to attend the launch event for the West Vale Mobility Transport scheme this month. Funded by OCC and the parishes involved, this is a wonderful scheme which will have a real impact supporting residents to attend medical appointments. Congratulations to all involved!

The scheme is a single wheelchair accessible vehicle (WAV) and will be entirely provided by volunteer drivers, leaders and administrators. More information here:

<https://www.elmtreesurgery.co.uk/west-vale-mobility/>

Climate action fund awards in our ward

We noted the climate action fund by the Vale in earlier reports, and are pleased to see two projects were accepted in our ward:

- **Shrivenham Memorial Hall** - funds to replace lighting at the hall to reduce energy usage.
- **West Vale Canal Group** - funds towards solar & battery as well as replacement of aging petrol equipment with battery operated machinery.

Oxfordshire Local Nature Partnership

Kat attended the OLNP forum at FarmED this month as the draft Local Nature Partnership Strategy was published for consultation. Please do consider responding to the strategy, and I particularly recommend zooming into the map to see how the priorities feature locally, and whether there are areas that need more focus. More information is here: <https://www.olnp.org.uk/news/oxfordshires-local-nature-recovery-strategy-lnrs-draft-is-now-open-for-consultation>

Council News

October Vale Council Meeting

The October Vale Council meeting was held on 23rd October and addressed several items that may be of interest. Full details can be found here:

<https://democratic.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=108&MId=3298>

The Green group leader Cllr Sarah James proposed a motion seconded by Viral to ensure the executive address contract renewals with the necessary lead-time rather than at the last minute.

Specifically, this was to allow enough time to fully assess whether savings could be achieved in the long term by directly providing a service instead of outsourcing it to a third party. In some cases, a third party is far better suited where they can gain from economies of scale, however that is not always the case, and often outsourcing comes at the cost of reduced democratic control over a service. We are pleased that our motion passed unanimously.

The other motion at the October council asked the Leader to write to the Secretary of State that a Development Consent Order for SESRO should not be granted until a full open assessment of the risks involved around embankment failure is carried out, and further ask for a meeting with the secretary on the matter. The motion was seconded by Green group leader Cllr Sarah James and passed unanimously.

Consultations

Street trading policy review

Street trading has thrived in recent years and, with the current policy dating back to 2011, the councils are proposing updates to help resolve issues and provide more clarity on street trading in the District.

The changes aim to tackle the environmental impact of single-use plastics and also provide clearer guidance and greater flexibility for multi-site trading, short-term trading, markets and charity events.

This survey runs until Tuesday 26 November 2024.

<https://theconversation.southandvale.gov.uk/legal-and-democratic/review-of-street-trading-policy-consultation-2024/>

Council tax premium on long-term empty properties

Currently, Vale allows a maximum duration of up to two years for a domestic property to remain unoccupied and substantially unfurnished before an additional, long-term empty council tax 'premium' charge is incurred, on top of the normal full 100 per cent charge.

Recent changes in council tax legislation now allow councils to reduce this minimum timeframe to one year. If this change is adopted, a new policy on long-term empty properties would come into effect from 1 April 2026 – to allow sufficient time for empty property owners to plan or adjust their plans accordingly.

The long-term aim of the proposal is to see as many homes brought back into use as soon as possible.

A survey asking for residents' views is open until Tuesday 26 November 2024.

<https://theconversation.southandvale.gov.uk/finance/vowh-council-tax-premium-on-lte-properties>