

To: Council

Date: 20 March 2023

Report of: Head of Law and Governance

Title of Report: Public addresses and questions that do not relate to matters for decision – as submitted by the speakers and with written responses from Cabinet Members

Introduction

1. Addresses made by members of the public to the Council, and questions put to the Cabinet members or Leader, registered by the deadline in the Constitution, are below. Any written responses available are also below.
2. The text reproduces that sent in the speakers and represents the views of the speakers. This is not to be taken as statements by or on behalf of the Council
3. This report will be republished after the Council meeting as part of the minutes pack. This will list the full text of speeches delivered as submitted, summaries of speeches delivered which differ significantly from those submitted, and any further responses.

Addresses and questions to be taken in Part 2 of the agenda

1. Address by Nicola Smith – Plant-based Food and Sustainable Farming
2. Address by Ian Middleton – Plant-based Food and Sustainable Farming
3. Address by Judith Harley - ODS Vandalism in Cowley Marsh Park
4. Address by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Oxford Flood and Environment Group – Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme
5. Question from Judith Harley – New Park Bench Installation in Cowley Marsh Park

Addresses and questions to be taken in Part 2 of the agenda

1. Address by Nicola Smith – Plant-based Food and Sustainable Farming

I am Dr Nicola Smith, I have been working as a Paediatrician in the NHS since 2013, and I would like to support the proposal on Plant-based Food and Sustainable Farming.

Animal agriculture is a major driver of the climate and ecological crises which are also directly impacting human health. It is clear that a global shift to plant-based diet is necessary to avert the looming catastrophe. The Eat Lancet Commission's Planetary

Health Plate, designed to keep the food system within planetary boundaries, is 87% plant-based, with animal-derived foods are being strictly optional.

But aside from the significant impact of diet on climate change, and the subsequent consequences of this for human health, there is also substantial evidence that a plant-based diet can benefit individual health.

Poor diet is now the number one cause of death and disability in the UK, resulting in a rising burden of obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer. A whole food plant-based diet has been shown to reduce the risk of these diseases, improving health and longevity, as well as reducing the burden on our health services.

A whole food plant-based diet is one consisting of fruits, vegetable, whole grains, legumes, nuts, and seeds, with few or no animal products. Following such a diet has been shown to lead to a 30% reduction in cardiovascular mortality, a 15% reduction in the incidence of cancer, and a 60% reduced risk of type 2 diabetes. The Eat Lancet Commission estimated that a whole food plant-based diet could prevent 11 million deaths annually.

Plant-based diets promote health via a number of mechanisms. These foods are mostly low calorie yet have a high nutrient content; including fibre, polyphenols, unsaturated fats, and anti-inflammatory and antioxidant compounds. Plant-based foods are often low in saturated fat and have a high fibre content, and plant-based diets are associated with healthier gut microbiome and lower levels of inflammation.

According to the British Dietetic Association, well-planned plant-based diets can support healthy living at every age and life-stage. If a wide variety of healthy whole foods are included, this diet can be both balanced and sustainable.

The Oxford City Council has the opportunity to model best-practice for the local population. By demonstrating that plant-based eating can be delicious, nutritious, and the new standard, there is the potential to improve the health of the community, move towards a more sustainable future, and inspire widespread change.

Verbal Response from Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for Health and Transport

Thank you very much Dr Smith for coming to address us at Council today. We are really grateful to you for highlighting the issues around poor diet and how this is directly linked to the increasing number of people who are in poor health. Later this month, the Director of Public Health for Oxfordshire will be publishing his latest snapshot of the health of the County and it is not good. It has got worse over the pandemic of course and it will show once again that there has been a big rise in the number of people who are an unhealthy weight. That starts with 1 in 5 children in a Reception class and it just gets worse after that until more than half of adults are an unhealthy weight. We know that translates into living shorter lives with multiple health problems. Changing our diet is vitally important to fixing this and cutting back on meat and dairy products and increasing our vegetable consumption, alongside reducing junk food, is going to be absolutely key to doing that I believe. This Council signed up to the Oxfordshire Food Strategy last year and we are currently drawing up an action plan which is specifically about not just reducing the carbon footprint of food in supply chains, but how we can make it healthier – and that of course is going to involve quite a shift to plant-based diet. I want to thank you again very much indeed for coming and highlighting the health benefits of it, because I think that is an angle that often gets lost in the carbon reduction debate about plant-based diets.

2. Address by Ian Middleton – Plant-based Food and Sustainable Farming

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to speak on Cllr Dunne's motion.

The motion references the County Council's adoption of a similar policy and as the proposer of the motion that led to that, I've since been contacted by other local authorities and organisations asking for help and advice on how to do the same. So I hope it may be useful for me to offer some insights here.

Avoiding meat and dairy is the single biggest way to reduce your personal environmental impact and could cut individual carbon output by as much as 50%. That was the conclusion of a comprehensive analysis of the global impact of farming recently published in the journal 'Science', which assessed the full effects of meat and dairy production on land use, climate change emissions and water and air pollution.

According to the United Nations Environment Programme, meat production alone accounts for 18-25 per cent of the world's Greenhouse Gas emissions. If left unchecked, animal agriculture is predicted to account for 70 per cent of all global emissions by 2050.

Analysis shows that while meat and dairy provide just 18% of calories and 37% of protein, it uses 83% of farmland and produces 60% of agriculture's greenhouse gas emissions. Even the very lowest impact meat and dairy products still cause much more environmental harm than the least sustainable vegetable and cereal alternatives.

There have been suggestions that encouraging a plant-based diet is anti-farmer, but that's very far from the truth with both my motion and Cllr Dunne's including specific references to supporting local farmers and food producers.

The vast majority of the meat and dairy consumed in the UK is not locally produced, often not even UK produced. Instead it comes from intensive factory farms, both in terms of the livestock itself and the growing of feedstock, often in areas that have been cleared in some of the most environmentally sensitive regions on the planet. Cheap imported meat and dairy products from countries with far worse human and animal welfare standards than the UK also make up a considerable proportion of our average daily diet.

Whilst intensive farming can have damaging environmental consequences, smaller local farms can be part of the solution. Not only as a vital link in a more sustainable food chain, but also as stewards of the rural landscape we all need and love.

In Oxfordshire we already have roughly twice as much farmland devoted to arable compared to livestock, and growing fruit and vegetables is by far the most efficient use of land. But whilst market gardens are one of the fastest growing and profitable forms of agriculture, fruit growers are struggling to survive and need support.

I have no doubt that local farmers will continue to produce meat and dairy for the foreseeable future and no one is seeking to change that in the short term. But to make small scale farming a commercial proposition, consumers have to be prepared to pay a fair price for their produce.

By reducing our consumption of cheap, intensively farmed foods and eating less but better quality, locally produced alternatives, we can support farmers and ensure they can continue to make a living.

There have also been claims that adopting a plant-based only policy is an assault on freedom of choice. But again this is a mischaracterisation.

Neither the county council policy nor Cllr Dunne's motion seeks to restrict what people eat in their daily lives - that will always remain their personal choice. Equally it's every

councillor's choice to eat what they want. The only difference is that the councils will not be actively offering non-plant-based options.

Instead they will be setting an example by showing that even a small reduction in the consumption of meat and dairy can have a big impact on climate change public health without sacrificing our enjoyment of food.

Most of us will eat roughly 21 main meals a week. If every member of this council removed meat and dairy from just one of those meals that would be the equivalent of 16 people going fully plant-based.

Some may find they prefer to do more than that, or already do. But the aim is not to force people to make drastic changes to their diet. The point is that, in demonstrating and highlighting alternative dietary options that are already widely available, we start a conversation with people and help promote a positive behavioural shift that will have significant impacts on both health and climate change, not to mention animal welfare. A plant-based diet is also cheaper than one that has meat in every meal, something that is now hugely important for everyone, especially local authorities.

So I hope members will agree that such a lot of benefit for such a small change has to be worth doing and will support Cllr Dunne's motion, fully adopt its recommendations, and join the many other authorities who have already enacted similar policies or are likely to do so in the near future.

Verbal Response from Councillor Anna Railton, Cabinet Member for Zero Carbon Oxford and Climate Justice

Thank you Cllr Middleton for coming to address us this evening. I believe when we met previously we talked about your equivalent motion at County and how pleased I was that you had done so. I fully endorse the points you have made around the impact of intensive farming and particularly livestock farming in terms of carbon emissions. Of course, as a tier two authority we have very limited interactions with farmers relative to you at the County Council and our District neighbours. As you may have also heard in terms of our own food consumption on the City Council, much of the catering for Oxford City Councillors was removed as a budget saving measure a few years ago and all Council-run events where food is served does already have plant-based food alternatives which I have been enjoying. The Climate Action Oxfordshire Campaign, which we jointly run, is urging people to reduce their personal carbon footprint and help their wallets by cutting back on meat, if not removing it completely from their diets. Where I think we can make a real difference is continuing to encourage our residents to look at their own diets and reduce their meat and dairy consumption. After all, we don't need a handful of people like ourselves being vegan, we need millions of people doing it imperfectly.

3. Address by Judith Harley - ODS Vandalism in Cowley Marsh Park

Lord Mayor, Councillors,

Some four weeks ago Oxford Direct Services (ODS) began constructing a new cycle route through Cowley Marsh Park. In addition to “upgrading” footpaths, forcing pedestrians to share their paths with more cyclists, which is always bad for pedestrians, the new route includes the creation of two new cycle access points within the designated Nature Park section at the rear of Cowley Marsh Park. Both of these access points are completely un-necessary as they are each just feet away from existing cycle paths and accesses.

An online consultation was held on these cycleway proposals by ODS last December, which stated that ODS did not require planning permission for this, but could essentially do what they liked under permitted development. It seems that this, like many Council consultations, was a token “tick-box” gesture only. I completed the consultation and objected to these plans on the grounds that not only were these cycle routes a danger for pedestrians, but the new access points were quite un-necessary and would damage and harm the flora and fauna in the Nature Park. There was no feedback and no response to my comments, which were clearly ignored.

The construction of the new access points has damaged tree roots and branches in both sections and obliterated wild crocus plants which are found only in this area of the Nature Park. I had understood that it was contrary to the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to damage wild crocus plants – and they have been destroyed to create a cycle access through a hole in the boundary fence used by pedestrians. ODS should just repair the hole as it is merely a few feet from this to the existing main cycle access point from the Park onto the adjoining Bridle path and cycleway which runs alongside the ODS depot.

For the past four weeks, since work on these cycleways began, I have been in e-mail correspondence about this with ODS Highways, Cllr Chewe Munkonge as Cabinet member for Parks, and my ward councillors. I have sent them photos of the damage and destruction and tried to get this un-necessary work halted. I have asked each of them to meet me in the Park to see how un-necessary are these additional cycle access points. To no avail. ODS claim that they will dig up the crocus bulbs to plant elsewhere. As this is the only spot where they flourish I doubt if they will survive elsewhere. I have asked ODS if they have a licence to do this, but have received no reply. Tree roots have been damaged and broken. Some tree branches have been cut, and I expect that more will be deemed to be in the way of cyclists. I regard this as vandalism by ODS as in my opinion there is no justification for any part of this work, and I would like to hear the Council’s justification for this.

I am inviting each and any of you City councillors to meet me in Cowley Marsh Park to see for yourselves how un-necessary are these access points. The damaging construction has continued despite my requests to ODS and councillors to halt this until I could address Full Council on this matter. Who on the Council authorised this work in the first place, and did they understand the area that was being proposed for damage and destruction?

I am asking the Council to halt this work and get ODS to undo the damage they have done already, which is to restore the Nature Park to its previous state, to repair the hole in the boundary fence on the Bridle path, and to return the wild crocus bulbs to their original habitat.

Written Response from Councillor Chewe Munkonge, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Leisure and Parks

This track is designed to provide an important off-road, all weather surface link between Cowley/Oxford Road and the Barracks Lane cycle route network - it does not run parallel with another cycle route. Questions were raised about ecology issues and potential impacts on tree roots, planning officers contacted ODS to clarify the specifications for the works, once they were satisfied the works continued and the project will shortly be completed.

4. Address by Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Oxford Flood and Environment Group – Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme

Councillors and Officers, thank you for the opportunity to address you about the re-application by the Environment Agency for its Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme.

I'm Professor Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, an Oxford resident badly flooded in 2007, and I speak for a residents' forum, the Oxford Flood and Environment Group.

We share the consensus that Oxford needs a flood scheme, and, like 91% of local residents who responded to the first consultation, we accept around 85% of the proposed measures such as embankments, bunds and new flood gates, but, like that 91% of residents, we object to serious problems remaining with the scheme's most expensive and destructive element. This is the proposed 5-kilometre channel (up to 250 yards wide) from Seacourt to the Old Abingdon Road will destroy Oxford's wildlife corridor in the green belt, devastate habitat for protected species, give poor and uncertain value for money, and cause loss of the nationally rare MG4a grassland in Hinkley Meadows: all this without fully addressing flood risks. The channel has been strongly criticized by independent expert hydrologists, botanists, environmental specialists and planners, and is intensely opposed by residents.

The EA's re-application has not adequately addressed the key issues: examples are:

1. Major flaws in the hydrological modelling. This would undermine the basis for the scheme at a planning inquiry.
2. Failure to heed advice from both the City and County council's ecologists (and wildlife groups and independent experts) that Hinkley Meadows' MG4a grassland is irreplaceable (more so than Port Meadow's). Thanks to earlier objections the EA now admits to a -1% biodiversity loss (not the legally required 10% net gain on-site that it previously claimed for substituting flood meadows with a smaller area of wetlands). It now offers no mitigation for MG4a, because there is none.
3. Failure to consider alternatives to the 5km channel, and therefore to comply with the mitigation hierarchy for endangered exceptional sites. The scheme can avoid destroying Hinkley Meadows by the alternative of having a shorter channel or even no channel. Both alternatives are shown by the EA's own figures as securing very nearly equivalent flood-risk alleviation as having the 'conceptually flawed' full channel would – but without the destruction. The other 85% of the scheme does the work.
4. Failure to comply with ten current National Planning Policy Framework directives.
5. Failure to consider the council's local plan directives about green infrastructure, and natural methods of flood prevention (OxLEP 2040 Preferred Options, ch. 4, G1,4, 5, 6; ch. 5, Set R2, for instance).

We contend that the failures in the EA's re-application will lead to

- A damaging flood alleviation scheme built on flawed hydrological modelling at enormous expense and bio-diversity cost, without being future proof, and with no fully defined or secured plan for maintenance.
- Potential reputational damage for all involved, including Oxford City Council, especially through the destruction of the irreplaceable one thousand-year-old Hinkley Meadows (a loss already internationally protested). Reputational damage will increase as recent NPPF revisions designed to lower pressure on the green belt and emphasise the priority of placemaking and beauty go forward, and as the EA pursues its twenty-first-century campaigns for flood meadow and whole-catchment solutions without channels in areas other than Oxford.

- There will also be much anger when residents who have not had time to read the application's 450 documents realize that they are losing access and amenity for up to 5 years across a vast area of greenfield and greenbelt (Schoolchildren and workers already, for instance, have to go round congested Botley Rd during Willow Walk's temporary closure- but – for years?). Already worried about bio-diversity loss across the city, residents will see 5 kilometres of hedgerows and 2,000+ mature trees destroyed along with the meadows, the collapse of the West Oxford wildlife corridor, the loss of iconic riverine Oxfordshire landscapes, and the removal of 700,000 tons of embodied carbon as the scheme area is dug up for the channel. They will suffer a permanent reduction to their greenfield space. For mitigation, they will have some partly fenced wetland (a bio-diversity loss compared with flood meadow), and – if they wait a couple of decades- some offsite saplings on land the EA has not yet secured, under a maintenance plan not yet detailed or clearly funded.
- Residents will also get some 240 HGV summer movements per day over 3-5 years carrying spoil onto the A34, entailing speed restrictions there.
- This is a poor use of £174 million of public funds, but the most destructive effects can be avoided and costs lowered with a no-channel scheme.

We ask: Does the council really want to support an expensive, flawed scheme based on faulty modelling and data that will only marginally reduce the flood risk for a tiny minority of homes at the expense of some of Oxford's greatest biodiversity treasures?

We ask you to say 'YES to the flood scheme, NO to the channel'.

Written Response from Councillor Alex Hollingsworth, Cabinet Member for Planning and Housing Delivery

Oxford has a long history of flooding. Significant floods in recent decades have caused damage to homes and businesses and closed the railway and major roads into the city. With the effects of climate change, this is only expected to get worse, with thousands more properties potentially at risk within 50 years. Oxford City Council believes therefore that a flood alleviation scheme is urgently required.

The Environment Agency (EA) and their designers have considered more than 100 combinations of options to reduce flood risk from the River Thames in Oxford. Extensive consultation has been undertaken by the EA to ensure that the proposed scheme acknowledges and addresses concerns raised by the public. The EA have considered the alternative ideas being put forward by both individuals and groups in the community, and they are confident that the design and consultation process has resulted in the best scheme for Oxford; as a partner the City Council supports this approach.

Full environmental assessment has been undertaken by the EA, and will be subject to scrutiny from consultees and regulatory bodies through the formal planning process. The City Council will provide a response to the consultation as a Local Planning Authority, but it will be the responsibility of Oxfordshire County Council as the determining body to decide whether or not the proposals are acceptable in planning terms.

As with all development proposals there will be impacts; and mitigation, compensation, and enhancement measures to address those impacts are proposed. With regards to grassland habitat, the EA recognises the importance and scarcity of the floodplain meadow habitat present in Hinksey Meadow. The impact to the existing meadow will be

minimised, with the scheme resulting in the loss of 1.33ha, with 17.8ha of lowland meadow habitat creation proposed in the surrounding landscape as compensation.

Impacts on biodiversity are being taken very seriously by the EA. Detailed surveys have been undertaken for protected species and habitats in the scheme area, and impacts of biodiversity are also being assessed through use of a DEFRA metric. OFAS will be delivering a minimum of 10% net gain, and aiming for further enhancements beyond this. The biodiversity net gain will be secured by Oxfordshire County Council as part of any planning permission granted. This approach is proposed in order to avoid loss of biodiversity, and provide betterment as a result of the scheme.

The construction process has also been considered by the EA, and measures taken to reduce disruption where possible. A haul road will be built specifically for construction traffic within the scheme area to reduce the need for lorries to drive on local roads to access different areas of the site, and a second planning application will be submitted to run alongside the main scheme application to transport excavated material from the construction site by rail.

5. Question from Judith Harley – New Park Bench Installation in Cowley Marsh Park

Earlier this year a table, benches, and shelter were installed in Cowley Marsh Park. A press release described this as “pastel-coloured covered seating ... designed by ... teenage girls ... to understand their experiences of green spaces”. This is a tacky, garish, brightly-coloured intrusion which shows no respect for the green space whatsoever. I, and other walkers, regard this installation as an eyesore. There appears to have been no consultation amongst other park users over this design, location, or construction.

This covered installation – near the children’s play area – is a magnet for drinkers, smokers, and drug users. It provides a sheltered area with a table for their goods and benches for them to sit. There is no litter bin, so the ground by the installation is often strewn with unsightly rubbish – drinks cans, food packaging, and other items. Mud is often smeared over furniture and shelter. I have yet to see any girls use this space.

My question: Will the Council remove this unsightly drug / drink / smokers shelter, close to the children’s play area; or, if not, explain how they will monitor and restrict the misuse of this shelter and keep the area clean and litter-free?

Written Response from Councillor Chewe Munkonge, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Leisure and Parks

The bench was designed by local young women as part of a project to better understand and overcome barriers stopping girls and young women using public green spaces. They feel that much of the current teen provision is designed for boys and want more of an input into design of facilities for themselves. It was always understood the bench would be a prototype and sadly we have had some vandalism, but we have not received complaints about any other anti-social behaviour. The parks team are though visiting the site this week and will monitor and take action as needed.