

**To: Council**

**Date: 2 October 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. Question by Kate Robinson – City Wide Food Plan
2. Address by Jane Wilson – Court Place Farm Allotments in Marston
3. Address from Martin Hackett – Future of Bertie Park
4. Address by April Jones, Karl Wallendzus and Anne Machachlan – Oxford Climate Emergency Centre (support for Motion 20B from Green Group)

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

### **1. Question by Kate Robinson – City Wide Food Plan**

Currently in Oxford, there are a small group of allotment holders and community growing groups who are dedicated to growing and sharing local food with Food Banks and disadvantaged members of society. But this is all based on good will, huge commitment and non-paid volunteers. Do you plan to start seriously funding a City Wide Food Plan so that allotments and community growing groups are properly funded, resourced and supported by paid Oxford City Council staff and a clear and urgent Food Security Strategy?

## **Response from Councillor Chewe Munkonge, Cabinet Member for Leisure and Parks:**

Thank you for the address and we certainly appreciate the great work undertaken by allotment holders and local food growers and recognise the important role you play in the community food system to help those most in need within the city. The scale of the problem requires a whole community food system response. We have been working with Oxfordshire County Council, the other District Councils and Good Food Oxfordshire to develop an Oxfordshire Food Strategy that is now in place. In tandem with this we have been working with Good Food Oxfordshire and other stakeholders in the Community Food System to develop a City Food Action Plan that is due to come to cabinet this winter. These plans recognise the need for the system to work together on key areas such as these. The City Council in partnership with Good Food Oxfordshire developed a Community Food Network at the outset of the pandemic that brought together food banks, community food larders, community fridges, food kitchens, the local authority and many others to share good ideas, opportunities and work together on local issues. In addition to this the Council has its Community Impact Fund where community groups can apply for funding in relation to various project, further details are available on our website.

### **2. Address by Jane Wilson – Court Place Farm Allotments in Marston**

Is Council aware that Court Place Farm Allotments CIC in Marston struggles considerably more than other allotment sites in Oxford as the large site (16 acres) is entirely open to the public, with four rights of way entrances. It is effectively a public park – which benefits the wider community - but with none of the direct council support that a public park benefits from. There is no security, crops and tools are constantly stolen, trees need constant expensive management, the site suffers from fly tipping and ancient rubbish including bonded asbestos and the City Council sadly usually does its best to avoid giving any help.

Could Oxford City Council recognise that the point of allotments (growing crops for local consumption) cannot be successfully achieved when site maintenance in all its respects takes up so much time and energy of plot holder volunteers?

Instead of support, the City Council is moving to increase site rents - is this fair?

Could Oxford City Council make their extremely part-time allotments officer full time and with a budget and authority to properly support allotments?

## **Response from Councillor Chewe Munkonge, Cabinet Member for Leisure and Parks:**

Thank you for your address and we certainly recognise and value the work that the allotment association and allotment holders do. The council communicates regularly with the various allotment associations and supports where it can. As you have mentioned there is an officer whose remit includes supporting green spaces and the allotments. The Council also provides support through various other officers' time including those within property services who deal with leases, community safety, waste and recycling amongst others. We recently supported the association by removing an old shed that might have had asbestos but we do not seem to have been made aware of the additional bonded asbestos that you mention. Chris and Caroline within the Green and Blue Spaces team would be more than happy to have a follow up conversation in relation to this or some of the other issues that you mention.

### **3. Address from Martin Hackett – Future of Bertie Park**

Our campaign is fighting to protect the future of Bertie Park, a small recreation ground in South Oxford, which our community has used for 85 years.

On 21st September, you placed a notice in the Oxford times. This advertised your intention to appropriate 7777 square meters of open space land “for planning purposes in order to

deliver the regeneration of Bertie Place Recreation Ground,” and asked for objections to “this sale”. Could you clarify that this is an appropriation under s 122 of the 1972 local government act, and not a disposal under s 123.

The recent consultation showed general satisfaction with our current playground. We have the best basket swing in Oxford; the climbing frame is heavily used; the tunnel is very popular, but we could do with a few more swings. The safety surface is, however, disintegrating, and the equipment could do with a lick of paint.

“Regeneration” is a term chosen to persuade our community that any refurbishment of our recreation ground is conditional on the development going ahead.

Your Parks Department say that “there is a rolling play area refurbishment programme to try to keep all the facilities and equipment up to standard, including complete replacement of items as and when they wear out. Occasionally, new additional equipment is installed at a particular location if external funds are available.” The condition of equipment in any play area can therefore be seen as a “red herring” in relation to any decision to develop Bertie Park.

It was recently possible to refurbish the safety surface at Hinksey Park without building any houses at all.

“Regeneration” is an Alice in Wonderland term you use to describe shrinking the recreation ground to 1/5th its current size. OX Place figures show the safety surface will be 68% smaller. There will be less equipment; most of it designed for toddlers.

Yet you say that you do not consider our current recreation ground to be surplus to requirements.

This contradiction has led to you to make a series of claims which are at best irrational and at worst dishonest.

Tom Bridgman, Executive Director – Development, says that although the site has been allocated for strategic planning considerations, it is not dishonest to say that the proposals will modernise the play space and that “the re-provision of the play space is conditional on the development taking place.”

This is silly. If the development doesn’t take place there will be no need to re-provide the play space. Or regenerate the recreation ground.

Comments like this form the basis of a complaint currently being considered by the Local Government Ombudsman.

One of our campaign members has said they feel “patronised, misled, marginalised, undermined, disrespected and insulted by the people paid to serve us.”

Given that you intend to down-size our recreation ground, we are also concerned about the Environment Agency Report

The 2011-26 Sites and Housing plan stated that the stream that runs alongside the site should be “protected by a 10-metre buffer and enhanced where possible.” The 2036 Local Plan Policy gives the area for development on Bertie Park as only 0.66 hectares. Yet you intend to appropriate 0.78 hectares of land. That extra land comes from the riverbank.

The Environment Agency recommend that the planning application is refused. One of their reasons is that the proposals require development on the river bank which will result in “significant of loss of riparian semi-natural habitat within or on the banks of the river,” and could impact the hydromorphology of Redbridge Stream. They therefore say that the activity will require a flood risk activity permit which is unlikely to be granted for the current proposal.

The riverbank forms part of the new recreation area. According to the architect, “The play area and MUGA are designed to occasionally flood.” They are “water compatible”. You plan to sow this area with “wetland mix”. The artists impression shows children running around and people picnicking on the river bank. This will not be possible. Even if the artist’s impression is only meant to be “indicative”, it should in some way relate to reality.

In order to meet the requirements of the Environment Agency, how much smaller still will you have to make the new recreation area?

And if your aim really is to regenerate our park, you don’t need to appropriate it.

### **Response from Councillor Louise Upton, Cabinet Member for Planning and Healthier Communities:**

The Bertie Place Recreation Ground has been identified for development in successive Local Plan documents for over 18 years, all of which have followed a process of consultation and public engagement prior to them being adopted.

Any planning application that comes forward for redevelopment of this allocated site will need to set out how it accords with the policies within the Local Plan, and full consideration will be given to this through the planning process.

As noted, the Council has placed a notice advertising the proposal for the appropriation of the land to a planning purpose under s.122 of the Local Government Act 1972. Section 123 does not apply as the Council is not proposing to dispose of the land. The period to comment on this notice is still open (to 6<sup>th</sup> October 2023).

Oxford is desperately short of affordable housing and needs more homes. This site, along with a number of others, forms part of the Council’s ambition to build more homes for households in housing need. On this site, it proposes to do so through a modest development of 31 new affordable homes, alongside the re-provision of the play area and multi-use games area.

Amendments to the current planning application are currently being considered to respond to the concerns expressed by the Environment Agency. Any such amended plans will be re-consulted on by the Local Planning Authority ahead of any report into Planning Committee, which is expected within the next few months.

#### **4. Address by April Jones, Karl Wallendszus and Anne Machachlan – Oxford Climate Emergency Centre (support for Motion 20B from Green Group)**

1. Oxford City is in the vanguard of climate action in many ways, and I think we can all be proud of that. From being one of the first councils to declare a Climate Emergency in 2019, to current projects on EV infrastructure and greener homes, and grassroots groups working to reduce their communities’ environmental impact, Oxford is home to an impressive wealth of environmental activity.

But, to many residents, a lot of that work remains unseen, or peripherally visible at best. At Climate Collective Oxford, on whose behalf I speak today, we passionately believe that a physical climate action hub, in a central location, would provide a highly visible place for the general public to find and use, making climate action accessible to communities outside the green 'bubble', and enriching the city's offer to its residents.

We know that the majority of people in Britain count climate breakdown among their major concerns, and are anxious to do their bit. Indeed, a headline finding of the 2019 Oxford Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change was 'a demand for more education and information provided for the wider public in Oxford to help them understand what they can personally do to help'. A Climate Emergency Centre would be a one-stop-shop to provide clarity on the myriad ways to engage with this overwhelming challenge, and it would support and develop a sense of community in doing so.

Any support the council could give this project would, I believe, be amply repaid in the practical action and community wealth and empowerment it would generate.

2. My name is Karl Wallendszus. I'm a campaigner with Oxford Friends of the Earth, and I'm here to express our support for an Oxford Climate Emergency Centre as called for in the motion proposed by Councillors Muddiman and Kerr.

Over the last year or two, Oxford Friends of the Earth has run a number of events on various aspects of climate change, such as energy and the cost of living and nature-based solutions in Oxfordshire, and more are planned. They include public meetings and workshops, and have been well attended in quite sizable venues. This has shown us there is a considerable appetite for information about climate change, practical advice about solutions and ways that people can get involved. A Climate Emergency Centre could act as a hub for this kind of information.

We are not the only people doing this – there are a lot of organisations in Oxford and the wider county working in climate change. Sometimes that can seem bewildering to people who are new to the area or are starting to get involved. A really useful function of a Climate Emergency Centre would be as a central repository of details of all the relevant organisations and what they do, so that people can easily work out which ones would be most useful for them.

In Oxford Friends of the Earth we like to collaborate with other groups with similar or complementary interests – we have done this for many of the events I mentioned earlier and in several of our campaigns, including collaborating with the City Council on idling and wood burning initiatives. We hope a Climate Emergency Centre would foster more such collaborations. The resulting exchange of ideas and perspectives might lead to projects and outcomes that none of us have yet imagined.

We also hope that such a Centre, if it is located somewhere accessible and convenient, would help all of us to reach people and communities that have so far been less engaged in climate change issues. This is something that Oxford Friends of the Earth and many other voluntary groups aspire to do, but it is challenging for any individual group.

All of this should be seen as complementary to the City Council's own work on climate change. By facilitating a Climate Emergency Centre and bringing together community organisations, the City would be catalysing action that it does not have capacity to do itself. So we think that any resources – which we know are extremely tight – that the

Council is able to devote to this project should be seen as an investment in Oxford's response to the climate emergency – an investment in our collective future.

I encourage you to support the motion later this evening, and thank you for your attention.

3. I am reading a statement from Katherine Chesson, Director of Community Action Groups Oxfordshire:

Community Action Groups Oxfordshire is a network support organisation that enables more than 100 community-led groups across the county to deliver climate action solutions that are relevant and specific to local needs. Oxford-based groups represent nearly a third of our network and there is a need for a community-run space such as the Climate Emergency Centre to allow groups to share information and engage with residents and visitors alike in order to increase engagement on the defining issue of our time. A commitment from the Council for this space would be a commitment to local ideas as one lever in solving the structural issues of the climate emergency.