

MINUTES OF THE PARISH COUNCILS' FORUM

Monday 18 November 2019

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CITY COUNCILLORS PRESENT: Councillors Brown (Chair), Haines and Roz Smith.

PARISH REPRESENTATIVES PRESENT: Tim Cann (Clerk, Old Marston Parish Council), Lynda Comber (Chair, Littlemore Parish Council), Patricia Hall (Old Marston Parish Council), Emma Kearney (Clerk Blackbird Leys Parish Council), Alistair Morris (Old Marston Parish Council), Derek Taylor (Risinghurst and Sandhills Parish Council) and Richard Wilkins (Clerk, Littlemore Parish Council)

OFFICERS PRESENT: John Mitchell (Committee and Member Services Officer) and Jo Colwell (Service Manager Environmental Sustainability)

47. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllrs Lygo and Adams (Risinghurst & Sandhills)

48. FEEDBACK FROM THE CITIZEN'S ASSEMBLY

Jo Colwell introduced herself and spoke about the work of her service area which spanned a wide range of energy and environmental matters. She reminded the Forum of the origins of the City's declaration of a climate emergency, the establishment of the Citizen's Assembly, and the decision to home in on 5 key topics: waste reduction; buildings; transport; biodiversity and offsetting; and renewable energy.

The first weekend of the Assembly focussed on the provision of information to its members who were fortunate to be briefed by some of world's experts in the field. In the second weekend of the Assembly, its members found their voice, expressing wide ranging views about the 5 key topics. In broad terms the conclusion of the Assembly was that the climate emergency should be addressed by more rather than less ambitious policies. This appeared to be driven, in part, by a view that responsibility for these important matters should not rest on the shoulders of individuals but shared by the wider community and institutions. A copy of the presentation to which Jo spoke is attached to these minutes.

The Chair said a report setting out the Council's initial response to the Assembly's findings was being prepared and would be considered by the following month's Cabinet meeting. While there was a limit to the capacity of the Council to have a direct impact on climate change in the City (estimated to be 1%) it was in a position to influence others directly or indirectly and, when appropriate, to lobby government. It was agreed that it was important for the Council should lead by example wherever possible and this should extend to treatment of its own housing stock.

Parish Councils had some opportunities to instigate small scale but significant initiatives for the benefit of their immediate communities. Councillor Morris gave the example of New Marston Parish Council, working with the Parks Department, to agreement to leaving an uncut border to the Marston Recreation Ground during the Spring and Summer months and to a tree planting scheme. The Chair noted that one of the emerging themes from Assembly, when considering what kind of a City its members would like to live in, was the importance of trees and biodiversity more generally and being able to hear birds singing rather than traffic.

The Local Government Association was thought to have provided advice about how councils might respond to climate change and this would be forwarded. The Chair drew attention to the Low Carbon Hub, a locally based social enterprise dedicated to encouraging and facilitating environmentally friendly energy usage and production.

Cllr Smith said that Risinghurst and Sandhills Parish Council had received a helpful presentation from the County Council's Emergency Planning Officer about how the Parish might prepare for such things as a major flooding incident and commended his support to others present.

Members of the Forum thanked Jo Colwell for what had been a useful and thought provoking discussion. It was agreed that this was a subject which warranted further discussion, perhaps in a workshop format for all Parish Councillors. Agreed that Jo would liaise with Lynda Comber and Alistair Morris to agree how best to take this forward with a view to a session which would probably take place before the next scheduled meeting of the Forum in March.

49. OUTCOME OF SURVEY ON FUTURE WORKING OF THE FORUM

JSM gave a brief introduction to the outcome of the recent survey about the Parish Council Forum and its operation in which views had been sought from Parish Council colleagues, City Councillors and officers.

The Chair went through the main outcomes of the survey taking comments as she did so. It was clear that there was no great appetite for significant change to the operation of the Forum, with continued support for the current frequency of meetings and a mix of Parish Council/City Council inspired items. It was good to see that the majority of respondents saw value in Forum meetings.

The list of potential items given in the Survey represented a useful selection of items which should be scheduled for future meetings as part of a forward plan for the Forum. She suggested that some items might be best discussed in a workshop format with relevant officers and or Councillors invited from the County Council if appropriate. The practice of presentations by officers was a good one which should continue.

The suggestion of provision to Parish Councils of a key contact list should be pursued. Having City Councillors attend Parish Council meetings was sensible and in some cases Parish Council membership already included City Councillors. Advice on complaints procedures was available on request from the Democratic Services team. The Chair was by no means averse to the idea of rotating the Chairing of Forum with a Parish Council representative but in the absence of anyone volunteering to take on the role (and no one came forward at the meeting) it was agreed that the role of Chair would remain with the Leader of the Council.

Inviting Parish Council representatives from neighbouring (non-City Parishes) might be misinterpreted if invitations came from the City Council. If such invitations were to be made they should come from the Parish Councils. Extending an invitation to the OALC could however be pursued.

The Chair agreed that there should be co-operative working and sharing of best practice in relation to such things as Community Wealth Building and the Climate Emergency. She was happy to remind relevant City Councillors of the desirability of attending Forum meetings. It was disappointing that one respondent had identified a need for “more warmth and positive support.”!

50. MINUTES

The Parish Council Forum APPROVED the minutes of the meeting held on 23 September 2019 as a true and accurate record.

51. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

The next meeting will be held on 23 March 2020.

The meeting started at 6.00 pm and ended at 7.15 pm

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Oxford Citizens Assembly on Climate Change



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1. What we did

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Our approach



Two weekends of discussion and deliberation

“The UK has legislation to reach ‘net zero’ by 2050. Should Oxford be more proactive and seek to achieve ‘net zero’ sooner than 2050?”

- Weekend one – listening to and questioning experts
- Weekend two – deliberation and discussion around what should happen next
- See handout for AM profiles over each weekend

2. Reporting

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In the middle of reporting...



Structure and timings agreed with OCC

- Background and method
- Five key themes, including scenario exercise
- Vision of net zero Oxford
- Should Oxford aim for sooner than 2050?
- Conclusions and recommendations
- 8th November: first draft of report; 12th November: feedback on report
- 5th November: second draft of report; w/c 18th November: sign off and publish report

3. Summary of key themes

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Waste reduction



- The importance of recycling, reducing, and re-using waste was felt to be an important goal
- Assembly Members felt that both individuals and organisations should be encouraged to consume and produce less.
- There was confusion around recycling in Oxford, with more education and information demanded so households can recycle correctly.
- There was a mixed response to some of the potential solutions discussed including reducing bin size, charging people for their waste collection, and freecycling and share/repair schemes.

To illustrate...



I don't think [reducing bin size] will solve the issue of waste. They just won't have anywhere to put it. They will fly tip.



I've read all the stuff, everything online, produced by the council and it's still unclear.



There has to be more requirement for businesses to change because without that you're reliant on the options businesses provide.

Buildings



- Assembly Members were surprised that the largest proportion of emissions came from buildings, rather than from transport or industry.
- A mix of developers, private landlords, individuals, Oxford City Council, and central Government were felt to be responsible for reducing carbon emissions in buildings.
- A strong sense that it would be more cost effective if all new builds were built to sufficiently high standards, rather than the prohibitively high cost of retrofitting.

To illustrate...



My husband and I bought our first house in Oxford. My husband is in energy fitting housing business. We can't afford it. It's very frustrating. You can have the best values, but you can't be able to do it.



The main reason why we're reluctant to do things about these problems is a lack of money. Maybe we need to think differently, how to give people more money or how to pay for it in a different way.



It seems a bit ridiculous, with the new builds, in the near future you'll have to go back and retrofit again so it seems absurd that you wouldn't start there.

Transport



- Encouraging behaviour change and modal shift away from private car use was seen as key to addressing this issue – people can feel reliant on their car.
- Implementing infrastructure changes (i.e. more and safer cycling infrastructure) and technological changes also important.
- There needs to be a unified strategy for transport planning between Oxford City, the County Council, and public transport providers.
- Important to incentivise public transport use, and consider how vulnerable groups (children, the elderly) can get about.

To illustrate...



Statistically we have the second highest use of bikes in the country, so how do we build on that success and make it a much better environment for cyclists?



We could ban cars in the city centre, like in Cambridge.



This seems like a more pleasant landscape for families and the city landscape. But the trade-offs seem quite onerous. Less personal freedom...it's what sparks rebellion.

Biodiversity & offsetting



- Assembly Members were very positive about creating more biodiversity and green space around Oxford,
- A sense that creating more green space and planting more trees could be an ‘easy win’ that would also be easily noticeable by the community.
- Questions about whether ‘offsetting’ could effectively address carbon neutrality, and if it allowed those who can afford it to continue polluting.
- A recognisable tension between setting aside land for green space as well as allowing for new housing.

To illustrate...



It [offsetting] is a way for rich people to travel.



“[Planting trees/plants outside retailers in the city centre] Immediately you have a visual difference and it's not much to maintain. That could be done tomorrow.



I think all new housing should be accompanied by some landscaping, so there are trees and greenery around. So many of the new blocks in Cowley are brick and concrete.

Renewable energy



- Assembly members were surprised to see how much Oxford has already done when it comes to renewable energy.
- Electricity viewed as more expensive than gas, and lower income households won't be able to afford the upfront costs of installing solar panels.
- The current situation relies too much on the individual to take the initiative. The Council and national government need to play a more direct role in helping households to make the transition.
- Compromise could be reached in deciding where renewable sources would be placed – neutralising climate change was seen as more important than aesthetics.

Multiple verbatims



I imagine there's a big upfront cost moving to electric, and it's about convincing people about the long-term benefits, which is that it might be cheaper when you get your energy bill but you've got to make the investment.



If the householder can't afford to pay for solar panels, who's going to pay for it?



The larger renewables are a red herring. In a place where we have very little land and we're trying to be more biodiverse, I don't think we can afford to put land into renewables.

Strong support for being ambitious, though with a sizeable cautious minority

	Waste reduction	Buildings	Transport	Biodiversity & offsetting	Renewable energy
Scenario A	2	3	2	2	6
Scenario B	9	7	12	8	7
Scenario C	29	31	26	30	27

4. The “exam question”

23

92%

“The UK has legislation to reach ‘net zero’ by 2050. Should Oxford be more proactive and seek to achieve ‘net zero’ sooner than 2050?”



To illustrate...



As a country or a planet, if our target is 2050, some of us are going to have to go quicker. If we're a prosperous, relatively erudite city then we have to do it.



Oxford has the research and intellectual and academics to help us, so if we can't use best evidence, who can? We need to be leaders.



I rejoice to see so much colour and variety compared to how Oxford used to be...it's a small piece of paradise.

5. Conclusions

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Conclusions

There's a strong desire for being ambitious...

- Assembly members very aware of the scale of the problem
- They will need help in enacting significant changes in behaviour
- A willingness to shoulder *some* of the burden

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...but...

- Beware caveats and misgivings – not *everyone* is onboard
- Be mindful of methodological challenges to the Assembly – large and complex topic, even for four days; who was missing from the room?
- Think about how you communicate what you *will* do, and what you are *already* doing

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