

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group



Comments on the six priority themes and illustrative projects in the Vale of the White Horse Corporate Plan 2020 - 2024

August 2020

This is our submission to the consultation on the six priority themes and illustrative projects in the Corporate Plan 2020 – 2024.

Introduction

This submission covers the following points:

- a) Information about the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group.
- b) Our response on the questions included in the consultation.

Information about the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group

We are the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group, a non-party-political group of over 1000 individuals who live in and around Wantage and Grove (mainly in the OX12 postcode area) in Oxfordshire. We are not against any development in Wantage and Grove but:

- a) Developments should be proportionate and sustainable; and
- b) The infrastructure should enhance and improve quality of life for its residents.

Despite many promises from Councillors over the years, we have no improvements to the infrastructure in OX12 and have already seen more than 1000 homes built with a further 6000 planned in the current local plan.

Our feedback on the six priority themes and illustrative projects in the Corporate Plan 2020-2024.

Introduction

Our response to the questions raised in the consultation are included below. We are very aware of the financial circumstances that the Council finds itself in at the current time and the areas of responsibility that it covers.

We understood that within the 4 years which this Corporate Plan will cover, the Council was planning to revise the Local Plan yet no mention of this significant piece of work is included in the consultation. We have to assume therefore that this ambition has been dropped.

Questions and our response

- 1) How much do you agree or disagree with the vision for Vale of White Horse District Council's Corporate plan?

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group Comments - continued

'Vale of White Horse District Council aims to help build and support thriving local communities, where everyone can enjoy the opportunity to live a happy and fulfilling life. We will do all we can to contribute to making that a reality in the Vale within the ecological constraints of our physical environment on planet earth, and we will ensure that our council and our district play their part in tackling the Climate Emergency.'

Our response:

The District Council has a limited range of responsibilities for services provided to the communities in the Vale of the White Horse and this vision makes little if any mention of those services.

The Council has responsibility for:

- Planning policy
- Planning approvals
- Recycling and waste collection
- Local environmental issues
- Community advice and support
- Council car parks and bus passes
- Social housing
- Collecting council tax and business rates
- Licencing of premises, traders and taxis
- Leisure and arts facilities
- Allocating funding from developers for local infrastructure
- Representing the community at the Oxfordshire Growth Board

Surely the vision should refer to planning and building communities and ensuring the health and wellbeing of the residents of the area.

2) Do you have any comments on Vale of White Horse District Council's vision?

The Council can do little to tackle the climate emergency itself and at the current time has little discretionary funding to support activities in the district but this seems to be a very large part of the vision – is this true?

We would like your feedback on the draft Vale of White Horse Corporate Plan themes, programmes and example projects.

The proposed themes are:

Theme 1: Providing the homes people need

Theme 2: Tackling the Climate Emergency

Theme 3: Building Healthy Communities

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group Comments - continued

Theme 4: Building Stable Finances

Theme 5: Working in Partnership

Theme 6: Working in an Open and Inclusive Way

3) For each of the proposed six themes in the Corporate Plan, please tell us how important you consider each one to be.

Our response:

Given the financial circumstances that the Council finds itself in at the current time and the areas of responsibility that it covers we would see themes 1 (Providing the homes people need) and 3 (Building Healthy Communities) as being the most important, themes 4, 5 and 6 (Building Stable Finances, Working in Partnership and Working in an Open and Inclusive Way) as being a given, and theme 2 (Tackling the Climate Emergency) as being important but supporting the normal work of the Council.

Theme 1: Providing the homes people need

How will we achieve this theme?

We will find ways to provide more genuinely affordable housing, including housing for social rent, to better provide for the needs of Vale residents. We will aim to provide a mix of tenures in each development to build sustainable homes in balanced and sustainable communities. We will use our influence on decision makers, where the responsibility lies outside of Vale.

Proposed Programmes

- 1.1 Explore and consider opportunities to bring forward the delivery of homes people can afford
- 1.2 Adopt a policy framework that ensures those homes could be delivered in a way that supports the environment and people living healthy lives

Example Projects

- Develop an affordable homes Supplementary Planning Document
- Strengthen work with developers to ensure they meet their obligations to deliver affordable homes

4) Do you have any other suggestions of programmes and projects we could include to help achieve this theme?

Our response:

We understood that within the 4 years which this Corporate Plan will cover, the Council was planning to revise the Local Plan yet no mention of this significant piece of work is included relation to this theme. We have to assume therefore that this ambition has been dropped.

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group Comments - continued

If a new Local Plan is to be produced we would have assumed that that programmes to ensure the development of balanced and sustainable communities for all Vale residents with appropriate infrastructure (schools, health facilities, leisure facilities, transport and open spaces) as well as new homes with carbon reduction technology, grey water recycling, sustainable recyclable drainage and the biodiversity required to provide carbon reduction would all be programmes within “Providing the homes people need”.

5) Please use the space below to tell us if you have any other comments on this theme. Is there anything missing from this theme or does it need to be expanded on?

The Vision states that the Council aims to help build and support thriving local communities, where everyone can enjoy the opportunity to live a happy and fulfilling life yet there is no mention of the proposed plans for improvements to the leisure facilities in OX12 using the £6m promised and in some cases delivered as part of S106 funding, CIL funding or the New Homes Bonus.

There could be a project to make better use of the lands owned by the Vale to improve biodiversity or building thriving local communities not just homes.

We know that many of the local developments in OX12 have not met their planning conditions and that the District Council enforcement team seem to be incapable of encouraging this so a project to enhance to capabilities of the enforcement team would be very useful to ensure that the thriving communities included in the vision actually exist.

If a new Local Plan is produced then projects to ensure that land allocated for development links to existing communities providing and sharing enhanced infrastructure which creates thriving local communities, minimises the need for travel (recognised as one of the biggest generators of emissions), and where everyone can enjoy the opportunity to live a happy and fulfilling life.

Theme 2: Tackling the Climate Emergency

How will we achieve this theme?

We will do everything we can to help tackle the Climate Emergency. We will:

- **reduce council emissions by 75% by 2025**
- **become a carbon neutral council by 2030**
- **reduce all emissions across the Vale district by 75% by 2030**
- **aspire to be a carbon neutral Vale district by 2045**

Proposed Programmes

2.1 A climate emergency programme, focussed on what the council has control over, working towards our targets for our own buildings, vehicles, leisure and arts centres

2.2 A programme around exercising our influence with partners on wider policy, lobbying Government and identifying environmental policy gaps

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group Comments - continued

Example Projects

- Explore green investment offering within the Treasury Management strategy
- Develop new policies to tackle Climate Change in the new Local Plan

6) Do you have any other suggestions of programmes and projects we could include to help achieve this theme?

Our response:

Any new Local Plan should provide a holistic approach to the development of the district including appropriate carbon reduction technology, grey water recycling, sustainable recyclable drainage and the biodiversity required to provide carbon reduction on all new developments, not simply separate climate change policies.

Programmes to protect the natural assets of the Vale and to influence developers and other partners (such as Thames Water) to manage our resources effectively.

Saving water is one example: The Vale is becoming one of the drier counties in the country with rainfall coming in short heavy bursts. The availability of fresh water is crucial to life.

It is very difficult and costly to retrofit old buildings with grey water recycling so much of the focus needs to be on the main infrastructure and new buildings. Grey water recycling, rainwater harvesting and other water efficiency measures should be mandatory for all new-builds as soon as possible. New commercial premises and housing developments should be required to incorporate recycling of water and where possible a significant part of water needs should be met with recycled water.

All hard standings must be either capable of capturing runoff and recycling it, or be permeable to ensure that it can feed nearby green infrastructure. SUDS should be used to provide water to the local community.

As the population of the district increases it is essential that the main water pipes for both clean and waste water are well maintained. Putting increasing pressure on old cracked pipes just increases leakage and the frequency of burst pipes.

7) Please use the space below to tell us if you have any other comments on this theme. Is there anything missing from this theme or does it need to be expanded on?

Our response:

The Vale owns a significant number of small green spaces around the area, many of which could be used to improve biodiversity and create a green infrastructure network across the Vale. The aesthetic value of well-designed natural spaces and greater closeness to nature have proven benefits to people's health and mental wellbeing. Well-designed green infrastructure requires carefully designing new green spaces and enhancing existing roadside verges, cycle ways, bridleways, footpaths and canals. This should be a Vale programme.

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group Comments - continued

Increasing biodiversity also has benefits to people and communities, including noise reduction, improvements in air and water quality, sustainable drainage and future resilience to climate change. Features such as hedgerows, ponds, patches of woodland, meadows and marshes and routes for wildlife from one area to another, need to be treasured, retained and increased. Making Public Rights of Way (PRoWs), minor rural roads, unsurfaced roads, canal towpaths, disused railway lines, cycle paths, parkland and areas of open countryside into high-quality dedicated cycling and walking corridors will also create bio-diversity corridors and should be a key part of connecting new developments to town centres, parks, schools, transport interchanges, leisure facilities etc.. Adding green lungs (trees) to existing smaller green spaces would increase biodiversity, reduce the amount of maintenance required and assist in reducing carbon. Adding bulbs (plant once and let them multiply) and trees to create miniature wild life areas which can be connected by a network of pathways and cycleways is a great way of adding biodiversity to our towns and villages. Adding seating areas so that communities can sit and enjoy them will encourage communal responsibility and ownership.

Theme 3: Building Healthy Communities

How will we achieve this theme?

We will contribute to making people's lives healthier by encouraging the switch to more active travel, improving air quality where people work and live, and providing active opportunities.

Proposed Programmes

- 3.1 Building strong communities and connections, with a sense of place and strong community identity
- 3.2 Promoting healthy place shaping and active communities, for everyone
- 3.3 Safeguarding and supporting our vulnerable residents

Example Projects

- Develop an Active Communities Strategy
- Provide and promote opportunities for residents to increase their level of activity

8) Do you have any other suggestions of programmes and projects we could include to help achieve this theme?

Our response:

Active Communities require a number of actions to be taken and much of the funding and activity over the last 20 years has been heavily focused on Abingdon. It must include improvement to the leisure facilities in OX12 but should also include improvements to the travel network to encourage cycling and walking as part of everyday life

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group Comments - continued

Wantage was promised a new leisure centre based on recommendations from studies performed in the previous Liberal Democratic Council but nothing has yet materialised the Active Communities Strategy must include plans for improvements to the leisure facilities in OX12 using the £6m promised and in some cases delivered as part of S106 funding, CIL funding or the New Homes Bonus.

Many of the smaller green spaces owned by the Vale throughout local communities could be turned into pocket activity parks with outdoor gym equipment location in strategic locations around towns and villages as part of an activity route (walking, running or cycling route)

Encouraging the switch to more active travel requires infrastructure to make it safe and viable. For example, the idea of streets with priority for cyclists as proposed in the topic papers for the Oxfordshire Transport strategy Consultation could be very good at slowing traffic and encouraging more cycling on residential streets in many of our towns and villages but simply using cycle logos doesn't work (it may be a much cheaper solution but it doesn't have enough emphasis). Colour surfacing seems to be a much better way of showing that this is different to other residential streets.

Once the Wantage Eastern Link Road has been completed, Harcourt Road/Charlton Village Road in Wantage would be a good place to use this approach.

This approach could also be used in town centres like Wantage, where Wallingford Street (from the roundabout), Newbury Street (from the traffic lights to the Market Place), Grove Street, Mill Street and the Market Place could all be made Cycle streets.

Making Public Rights of Way (PRoWs), minor rural roads, unsurfaced roads, canal towpaths, disused railway lines, cycle paths, parkland and areas of open countryside into high-quality dedicated cycling and walking corridors is very attractive idea but it must be clear that these are not for use by motor bikes or any four wheeled vehicles other than mobility scooters suitable for pavement use.

We believe that these would be well used but must be open and designed to give good visibility to ensure that people can use them with confidence.

To help mitigate the effects of private car ownership they must have clear destinations such as town centres, parks, schools, transport interchanges, leisure facilities etc.. This could then encourage users to walk or cycle safely to these destinations.

Every planning decision must have active travel and leisure at the forefront of decision making. This should be built into the Local Plan and as the District is responsible for approving every planning application this should be borne in mind.

9) Please use the space below to tell us if you have any other comments on this theme. Is there anything missing from this theme or does it need to be expanded on?

Our response:

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group Comments - continued

Active Communities also means linking all ages through activities in communities to reduce loneliness and encourage connectivity of people as well as places. Promoting sports and social activities such as walking groups, exercise classes, dancing, tennis and team sports for all age groups are also important.

Theme 4: Building Stable Finances

How will we achieve this theme?

We will manage the council's resources responsibly and make effective use of the council's assets. We will do our best to build financial resilience to protect the council against future uncertainties. We will work across the public sector to influence and maximise funding for local government, in order to continue to invest and provide the services residents and businesses need.

Proposed Programmes

4.1 We will explore and actively consider all avenues to deliver financial stability, including maximising income available to the council

4.2 We will make effective use of the council's assets acting in a manner that ensures the long-term financial viability for the benefit of our residents and the environment

Example Projects

- Undertake a strategic property review to inform which assets to hold on to, make better use of, or dispose of
- Adoption of the CIPFA financial management code of practice

10) Do you have any other suggestions of programmes and projects we could include to help achieve this theme?

Our response:

A strategic property review can only be performed when an overall strategy for the Vale has been agreed with full consultation from the residents. Councillors were not elected to dispose of assets owned by the residents of the Vale but to manage the assets of the Vale for the residents. Bad management in the past is not an excuse.

11) Please use the space below to tell us if you have any other comments on this theme. Is there anything missing from this theme or does it need to be expanded on?

Our response:

Improving the management of the District Council should be a priority to ensure that best use is made of all available assets include staff. Sharing staff across two authorities may appear to be cost efficient but if staff cannot be managed effectively then resources may be wasted.

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group Comments - continued

Theme 5: Working in Partnership

How will we achieve this theme?

To help us achieve our aims and objectives effectively, efficiently and fairly, we will work in partnership with other councils, authorities and businesses, non-profit organisations, community and residents' groups. We will provide support to residents and organisations to effect and drive change in the community and we will provide all the support we can to businesses in the Vale to help them succeed.

Proposed Programmes

5.1 We will work in partnership to influence and shape regional and national agendas to maximise opportunities for our communities and businesses

5.2 We will work with and support our residents, businesses and communities to effect and enable change

Example Projects

- We recognise the importance of partnership working and its strength and value in delivering our priorities and will undertake a partnership mapping and review project to ensure that the partnerships we are in deliver improved outcomes to residents
- Undertake an economic development review to ensure that the council is providing support to SMEs, homebased businesses, supporting skills development

12. Do you have any other suggestions of programmes and projects we could include to help achieve this theme?

Our response:

We have seen little benefit in OX12 from any District Council projects or programmes to effect and drive change in our community since the Town centre programme in 2014. We would be interested in understanding how the council can provide support to SME's, home based businesses and support skills development when it has managed its own finances so abysmally.

Given the lack of financial resources available to the Council we support the initiation of a partnership mapping and review project to ensure that the partnerships we are in deliver improved outcomes to residents but would urge the Council to ensure that the project is managed effectively as we have recent experience of the OX12 Health Project managed by the Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning group which took a year to produce a report which was not fit for purpose. Professional project management skills are crucial to the process.

13. Please use the space below to tell us if you have any other comments on this theme. Is there anything missing from this theme or does it need to be expanded on?

Our response:

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group Comments - continued

We support the role of the District Council within the Growth Board simply because it is the only way local residents can influence decisions made by unelected quangos which make strategic decisions on our behalf. We would however like to see more involvement by Councillors and consultation with local residents in these decision making processes.

Theme 6: Working in an Open and Inclusive Way

How will we achieve this theme?

We will work openly and transparently, promoting a world in which all can participate equally. We will listen to feedback from local residents, communities, businesses, partners and our own officers. Our work will particularly aim to include those groups that have historically been marginalised or those that have been hard to reach. We will ensure we are accountable and that our decisions are open to appropriate scrutiny, and we will admit when we get things wrong.

Proposed Programmes

6.1 We will improve our use of technology to increase understanding and access to what we do, how we work and the decisions we make

6.2 We will increase meaningful engagement and communication with everyone

6.3 We will strengthen our governance framework and address our policy gaps, improving transparency

Example Projects

- Create a Youth Council, tying in with climate emergency activity to increase engagement with young people and local democratic decision making
- Undertake a policy review to identify policy gaps and look to consolidate policies with linked outcomes and create a publically accessible policy library

14. Do you have any other suggestions of programmes and projects we could include to help achieve this theme?

Our response:

We support the programme to improve use of technology as we have been very frustrated by the lack of access to staff and meetings during the lock down. When Parish Councils (And even Parliament) can manage to provide open access via Zoom it is frustrating that this District Council can't.

Consultations like this one – which are only accessible via the internet, limit the opportunity to participate by those with poor connections, no internet access or poor computing skills. This is not fair to those residents.

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group Comments - continued

15. Please use the space below to tell us if you have any other comments on this theme. Is there anything missing from this theme or does it need to be expanded on?

Our response:

While we support the creation of a Youth Council, our recent experience of the Youth Council in Wantage was abysmally managed and undemocratic. Any youth involvement needs to be well managed, inclusive and be provided with strong support from experienced staff with relevant skills.