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Wolvercote Neighbourhood Forum – First AGM

Wednesday, 15th October, 2014, Wolvercote Village Hall.

1. Welcome and general introduction by John Bleach, chair.

Meeting commenced at 19.46 hrs.

John welcomed the company to the first AGM of the Forum.

Present:- Acting Steering Committee members: John Bleach (chair), Graham Jones (vice-chair), Sue Pfunder, Angie Goff, Kate Richenburg, David Stone, Cllr. Jean Fooks, Christopher Hardman, Alex Martyn, Cllr. Mike Gotch, plus Anne Charles (website manager) and members of the public – as listed separately.

Apologies:- Acting Steering Committee members - Richard Lawrence-Wilson (treasurer), Bridget Eley - and others including Ali Noel (former acting secretary), Steve Goddard, Harriet Milles.

John also welcomed the guest speaker, Geoff Botting, from the South Oxfordshire village of Woodcote.

2. Introduction – purpose of the WNF – presented by Sue Pfunder

For the benefit of newcomers, Sue summarized what a Neighbourhood Forum was and what it had been created to do. She explained that the 2011 Localism Act allowed for local people to influence developments in their area and to create a Neighbourhood Development Plan. A Steering Committee had been formed in mid-2012 and it had been working ever since. In July 2012 at a public meeting the geographical boundary of the Plan was defined. This boundary matches that of the Wolvercote voting ward.

The Act sets out a process which we were obliged to follow including making separate applications to the City Council to have our Area confirmed and then another application to apply for Forum status. In the case of the latter we needed a draft constitution and 21 signed up members. (We managed to find 60.) This status was eventually granted in February 2014.

Our primary aim was to create a Neighbourhood Plan. Sue explained what it does, namely that the written plan, as a document, would sit alongside the City's plans (strategic policies). The City would then be obliged to consider our Neighbourhood Plan in planning decisions affecting the Neighbourhood Area.

Sue outlined the process. Firstly the Plan had to be written, which entailed further consultation with local people, landowners, businesses etc. Secondly the content of the Plan would have to be justified by evidence for which research was needed. The policies would have to be written in a legalistic manner and we would need expert help with this. Next the Plan would be sent out for consultation to local people and all other interested parties and then presented to the City Council for them to do a final check. Then the Plan would be presented to an Independent Examiner who would decide if it should be presented in a referendum of all local voters in the Area (Ward).

The AGM proceedings were then outlined:-

- 1) To accept the Constitution,
- 2) To elect the Steering Committee, including officers namely: Chair, Vice-chair, Secretary and Treasurer.
- 3) To accept the Treasurer's report.

3. The experience of Woodcote – presentation by Geoff Botting.

John introduced the guest speaker, Geoff Botting as vice-chair of Woodcote Parish Council. Geoff had chaired the committee (aka 'Advisory Group') which prepared Woodcote's Neighbourhood Plan, adopted earlier in the year. Their committee (no longer active as such) had been a sub-group of the Parish Council. Because Woodcote was already a Parish it had not been necessary to form a Neighbourhood Forum.

Geoff stated that the April 2014 referendum result was: Yes 91% No 9%. 'After 2.5 years and the efforts of a team of 15 – starting with about zero knowledge we thought we'd done it – we could sit back and enjoy a job well done'. In fact this turned out not to be the case. On the contrary, work had continued ever since, starting in May with (1) creating a guide/handbook and (2) work on 'off-plan' issues. In July the first planning application had been made for a site in the plan followed by plans for another in August. Other recent activities had included a planning appeal, response to a consultation on the Government's latest Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) and various meetings with the district council (SODC) and developers.

Geoff stressed the importance of 'off-plan' issues, which he defined as those issues which are not about land use, and therefore had not formed part of Woodcote's Neighbourhood Plan, but nonetheless required action by the community. Accordingly the Parish Council was setting up working groups to deal with these issues. Such off-plan headings as Road safety, Traffic congestion and parking, Education and schooling and Bus services had been identified.

Geoff talked about the challenges and what had worked for Woodcote. Their approach had been to 'get stuck in', and not to over analyse everything at the outset. It had been necessary to learn as they went along. The process was a complicated and 'messy' one. Once they had formed their Advisory Group, they identified key questions and then organized themselves around these questions. For Woodcote a key question had been: what was the housing requirement and where should new housing be built? Early on they drafted an overall programme or timetable and set up sub-groups to work in parallel. Working out a budget had also focussed minds on what needed to be done. They had kept costs down as much as possible and in the end they had spent £10,000 on the process.

The continued support of the local community had been essential. The Advisory Group had endeavoured to provide frequent opportunities for local people to contribute and comment, including setting up a surgery in the local library, use of email etc. It was important to have the agreement of the community and to have it making the key decisions. To achieve this, the group had worked to a 'communication programme', which was constantly updated along the way. The group had also kept in touch with other groups in the wider Neighbourhood Planning community.

Geoff stressed the need to maintain momentum in order to hold people's interest. Hence the sub-groups drafting policies had worked in parallel and there had been frequent formulation and testing of hypotheses.

The other challenge which faced Woodcote, which had been a fourth-wave front-runner in the then new neighbourhood planning process, had been finding out what would be needed for (1) the final Examination (by the independent inspector) and (2) if needed in their particular case the Sustainability Appraisal and the associated Scoping Report. For guidance and references, Geoff recommended studying the reports of the independent examiners of other neighbourhood plans.

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So was it all worth it? Woodcote felt it had been. Woodcote would have housing where it wanted it, developments of the size it wanted and a housing mix to fit their need; eyesores (and asbestos) would be cleaned up. The Parish Council had been reinvigorated. It now had a 'real role' to play in planning issues; its membership was now full; there was an 'on-going agenda'; three-way discussions were now taking place on planning applications. There had been improved responses from locals to planning applications and consultations. Ultimately the Parish Council had gained expertise which had given it greater credibility with the authorities. SODC were now on the telephone Woodcote first, rather than the other way around.

4. Chair's report - Text of report by John Bleach

How we arrived here.

Unlike Woodcote, Wolvercote does not have a parish council. Instead, since 1929, the Wolvercote Commoners' Committee (WCC) has been managing the common land and taking an interest in local issues. Amongst its many activities the WCC has been keeping an eye on local planning issues and commenting as necessary. Some years ago the WCC set up a 'Forward Planning' sub-committee to deal with some of the larger developments which were expected in our area. Then came the Localism Act and the WCC saw the opportunities it was offering - to be more effective in shaping where we live.

Thus the WCC called a public meeting in Wolvercote Village Hall (in January 2012) to introduce the idea of producing a Neighbourhood Plan and considerable interest and enthusiasm was shown, particularly with the idea that such a plan could give us, the local community, legal powers. Establishment of the boundaries to the Neighbourhood Plan area turned out to be controversial. Some argued that as Wolvercote village already had its own identity with an active community, so the area should not extend too far to the east, but a boundary line was hard to define without excluding those who might use the village's facilities, such as St Peter's church or Wolvercote Primary School. Others from other parts of the Ward, argued that they would like to replicate the Village's community spirit in their area. Yet more argued that, if the Ward boundary were to be followed, the Cutteslowe Park area would remain separated, by the A40 road, from its local primary school. Ultimately not everyone could be satisfied, and it took a second public meeting (also in Wolvercote Village Hall), followed by a third (in Cutteslowe Pavilion) in July 2012, to finally establish the Area, which was later confirmed by the Council.

Main Mission – Plan

Our main mission is to create a Neighbourhood Plan. By definition this is required to be related to building development and land use only. It will be used by the City Council and its officers when determining planning applications. Thus, the question that will be put to the community in the local referendum will be: *"Do you want Oxford City Council to use the Neighbourhood Plan for Wolvercote area to help it decide plans for the area?"* .

There are risks that, in any judgement of a planning application, the policies in our Plan will not be properly taken into consideration in the way they were intended (as happened in the case of the Roger Dudman Way flats where the Council appears to have ignored its own Core Strategy), or that they are challenged by the developer. However once the Neighbourhood Plan has been officially adopted (i.e. passed by referendum), we will have recourse to legal action, if we need it.

Policies on non-development ('off-plan') issues, although not legally binding, may still be relevant to the Plan and therefore can be included as supplementary information.

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Two strands of our work

There are two strands to the work of the Wolvercote Neighbourhood Forum (WNF):

- 1) Creating a Neighbourhood Development Plan – our main mission;
- 2) Playing a role in on-going planning consultations about major developments in our area, such as Cutteslowe and Wolvercote roundabouts, the Northern Gateway Area Action Plan, Chiltern Railways and planning applications such as Wolvercote Paper Mill site.

Last June, aware that we were making slow progress with the creation of the Plan, we considered either (a) withdrawing from active involvement in the major developments so as to concentrate on preparing the plan, or (b) putting the plan on hold and concentrating on influencing these developments.

We also faced a choice between a plan offering a general approach excluding reference to specific current developments, and a more complex plan including them. Because of our limited resources, we decided to avoid the complex approach. Therefore we have resolved to move the plan on by creating a small number of simple, general policies that will apply to all developments in the area, whilst at the same time maintaining a watch on the major developments and actively using the Forum's influence.

The policies and views of the WNF have no formal weight until the plan has been completed and has passed a referendum, however through our involvement to date in local planning issues we are already building credibility for our views amongst the authorities, landowners and developers.

Plan Strategy

We were very much feeling our way when we started. We have held a number of public meetings where we have asked people to help create a vision for the area and to set up principles and objectives. Our last such 'workshop' meeting on 16th October 2013 set out what we had already established were the key issues and asked people to prioritize between them. We also recorded where the voters at the meeting were living. Our analysis showed both the geographical make-up of the meeting and that the list of priorities varied slightly from locality to locality within the Ward. The results of that meeting are summarized here.

Number of people attending: more than 60, representing the following localities:-

Cutteslowe Park (east of Banbury Road & north of A40)	9%
Upper Wolvercote (east of Birmingham railway & west of Bicester railway)	15%
Lower Wolvercote (west of Birmingham railway)	28%
Woodstock Road (south of A40 & east of Bicester railway)	13%
Five Mile Drive (north of A40, east of Bicester railway & west of Banbury Rd.)	31%
Other (locality undefined)	4%

15 key issues were presented, which the meeting ranked as follows:-

1=	Traffic and parking	/ Risk of flooding	/Drains and infrastructure
4	Noise and air pollution		
5	Schooling		
6=	Green spaces and biodiversity	/Building Scale density and design	
8	Principle of community		
9	Mix of housing		
10	Local employment		
11	Local retail		
12=	Heritage	/Energy and resource conservation	

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14= Renewable energy /Sustainability and building standards

The Steering Committee then re-analysed the key issues to decide which issues we should address to make most impact through our Plan. We had been advised that there was no need to duplicate the policies existing in the City's strategic planning documents, so we aimed to avoid this. We also identified those issues that we felt would be less likely to influence, no matter how important they might have seemed to local people. (Geoff Botting had already referred to these as 'off-plan' issues.)

To help us decide which issues to address, we set up a chart to see which issues fell within the influence of which stakeholders. Our list of stakeholders included European and central government, Local authority, Agency (e.g. Environment Agency, Natural England, etc.), Land or property owner, Developer, Other stakeholders (e.g. bus and train companies, BBOWT, OPT, etc.) and Community. From this we could see by comparison that the community was least likely to have an influence on, amongst others, the top issues (traffic/parking, flooding, drains, noise/air pollution and schooling).

Therefore, on the basis of our limited resources, we have selected the remaining issues, on which to focus our efforts. These are:-

- Green spaces and biodiversity
- Building Scale density and design
- Principle of community
- Mix of housing
- Heritage
- Energy and resource conservation
- Renewable energy
- Sustainability and building standards.

We have divided the work up between members of the Committee, who have made a start. We are already beginning to see that we will need more helpers.

Specific proposed developments

Elsfield Hall. In consideration of the access proposals (directly from Harefields), the Forum's steering committee coordinated help from the local community to do a traffic survey and report in May 2013, which was submitted to the City and County Councils. We also held meetings with the City Council staff and their architects to discuss options and details. On a separate occasion we involved them in a public meeting. The planning application was submitted and subsequently amended twice and the City demonstrated publicly the height and location of the proposed buildings using lightweight poles, a new method introduced from Switzerland. We found the City staff to be most cooperative and our experience was a positive one. Planning permission was eventually granted in July 2014 for 17 dwellings on this site. We believe that we did influence several aspects of the design, particularly the height of the buildings and their distance from the northern boundary.

Wolvercote Mill site. The Forum's steering committee commented on the University's outline planning application in September 2013, with a significant number of contributions from local people (about 90). The University withdrew its application, partly, we were told, due to the number of objections and in particular the Forum's comments. The University is now revising its application with a view to re-submission soon. Matters under review include the Environment Agency requirements concerning flood risk, minor adjustment of part of the development boundary (originally encroaching on Green Belt land

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in the south-west corner of the site) and the detailed design of the access to the site from Mill Road. Another public exhibition has been promised with the opportunity for further comment.

Wolvercote and Banbury Road roundabouts. The Forum's steering committee has produced a report on local transport issues, which it has circulated to our MP and City and County Councils. We also arranged a small public meeting with a senior officer from the County Council (Service Manager – Planning, Environment & Transport Policy) to discuss their ideas which were introduced in the first public meeting held in the Oxford Hotel in November 2013. The Forum participated in the consultation related to the public exhibition organized by the County Council. It has been suggested that we have had an influence in preventing the closing of the Godstow Road exit on the Wolvercote roundabout.

Northern Gateway Area Action Plan (AAP). Apart from helping the Councils to organise the first Oxford Hotel meeting, we participated in both of this year's public consultations, firstly concerning options for the site and secondly concerning the proposals. It is possible that we have managed to influence the amount of green space to be provided – now 15% of development area, rather than 10% required for Oxford City developments generally. We objected to the proposed amendment of the Green Belt boundaries as well as the increase in office and housing provision.

Elsfield Way. Planning permission was submitted for about 30 dwellings on this site, situated next to Elsfield Hall, but accessed from the A40. We objected to the application on the basis (i) the access from a busy major road, modifications for which are still in the planning stage and (ii) the developer's argument that affordable housing would not be viable. The application was refused by the City Council, but the developer has launched an appeal against this decision.

Chiltern Evergreen 3 railway. Construction is now underway of the new Oxford Parkway station at Water Eaton (situated just outside our area) and associated engineering works to increase capacity of rail traffic. However the local community is objecting to the inadequacy of the measures suggested by Chiltern Railways to mitigate noise and vibration on the length of track where it passes through residential areas. Ultimately Chiltern will have to satisfy the City Council on these issues, by conforming to planning conditions. The Forum has been following the discussion, which is largely being handled by local residents.

Other Activities

In 2013 we applied to Locality (Planning Aid England) for direct technical support with creating our Plan. This we were granted and continue to use. On one Saturday morning in January 2014 we arranged for Locality to run a neighbourhood planning workshop for local people and we hope that this added to everybody's knowledge about the complex process in which we are engaged.

We now have a new website: www.wolvercotenf.org.uk which Anne Charles, who created it, is continuing to manage.

We regularly publish a newsletter in the parish magazine, The Flying Goose, issued quarterly and from time to time issue notices by email to those who have signed up to our mailing list.

Conclusion

What we are doing is not only for us, but for future generations. We need to look ahead. Planning decisions taken today will have lasting consequences. Some decisions have already been taken, e.g. Oxford Core Strategy, Sites and Housing Plan, etc. and they will be very difficult to reverse or modify. The idea behind Neighbourhood Planning is that the needs of local people come first. Localism encourages people to participate in a positive way. In practise however, we do not always find

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ourselves on the side of the Town Hall and it is necessary to campaign against development at the same time. Therefore we all, campaigners both for and against, must try to work together in taking whatever stance is appropriate to the issue at hand.

Please support our work.

John Bleach
Acting Chair

5. Treasurer's Report - Text of report by Richard Lawrence-Wilson, presented by Sue Pfunder. (Paper copies of this report were handed out at the meeting.)

TREASURER'S REPORT AND ACCOUNTS TO 15 OCTOBER 2014

The accounts of the Forum have not previously been presented at a public meeting, although regular reports have been made to the Steering Committee. I have therefore taken the opportunity of this first AGM to place on record the accounts from 1 July 2012 to date. In future years conventional annual accounts will be appropriate.

INCOME

The Steering Group began work early in 2012. A modest amount was donated at its inaugural public meetings. Accounting records were kept from 1 July 2012 onwards.

During 2013 the Forum was awarded two grants of £500 each, one from Oxford City Council as part of City Councillor Mike Gotch's ward budget and the other from the Wolvercote Commoners Committee.

EXPENDITURE

Expenditure has been incurred on hiring local venues for public meetings, printing and photocopying, and on fees for the web domain and website development.

The Steering Committee has always met in the private homes of its members and no expenditure has been incurred on its meetings. No members of the Committee have been paid any fees or expenses.

BALANCE SHEET

The Forum's assets consist of the balance in its current account at NatWest, Kidlington Branch.

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Income and Expenditure Account: 1 July 2012 to 15 October 2014					
Calendar year	Income	£	Calendar year	Expenditure	£
2012	Donations	424.32	2012	Room hire (1 meeting)	20.00
				Printing	49.66
2013	Donations	96.11	2013	Room hire (4 meetings)	90.00
	Grants	1,000.00		Printing	166.35
2014	Donations	8.00	2014	Room hire (3 meetings)	65.00
				Printing	21.60
				Website setup and fees	134.72
				Surplus for the period	981.10
		1,528.43			1,528.43
Balance sheet					
	Accumulated fund = surplus for the period	981.10		Bank balance at 15 October 2014	981.10

Richard Lawrence-Wilson
Acting Treasurer

The report was accepted by a show of hands.

Geoff Botting, remarked that a useful additional source of funding could be found at 'Locality', the Government's agency, aka Planning Aid England. John remarked that the Forum already received direct expert support from Locality, but would also be applying to them for financial support.

6. Agreement of the Constitution

Copies of the proposed Constitution were handed to all those present at the meeting. This version of the Constitution had already been publicized on the Forum's website. Comments and questions were received from the floor as follows:

The following amendments were proposed:

Clause 5.6 Omit last sentence: "An EGM will be called not more than 1 week after the request is submitted, with 2 weeks' notice." Add: "***Not more than one week after the request is submitted an EGM will be called giving two weeks' notice.***"

Clause 8.8 Add the word "majority" before "vote" to read: "***The SC has the power to expel a Committee member after a majority vote of no confidence by a simple vote of all SC members.***"

It was proposed and agreed that the constitution amendments be accepted leaving the Steering Committee to finalise text.

*(Alterations shown in bold italic type)

The Steering Committee was authorised to review and clarify the provisions of clause 12.1 and concluded at its meeting on 24th November 2014 that the word 'seconded' should be replaced by

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‘supported’ to read ***“Changes to this constitution may be proposed by any Member of the Forum and should be supported by 5 further Members and submitted in writing to the Forum Chair or Secretary 3 weeks before being considered at an AGM or EGM.”***

7. Election of officers and steering committee

Angie Goff informed the meeting that all members of the Steering Committee needed to stand down as an election had not been held before. Therefore 11 members, including 4 officers were to be elected.

Chair: **Christopher Hardman** had agreed to stand as Chair replacing John Bleach, who had chosen not to seek election. Christopher introduced himself briefly saying that it was no good being concerned about issues and not trying to do something about them. He mentioned that he had been involved in writing documents for the Forum, had chaired university committees and had long associations with Wolvercote. He thanked John Bleach. (Resounding applause was given at the meeting in recognition of John Bleach’s sterling contribution as chairman). Christopher’s nomination was proposed by Christopher Gowers and seconded by Mike Gotch.

Vice-chair: Graham Jones was not seeking election. However **Angie Goff** agreed to stand in his place. She was nominated by Robert de Newtown.

Secretary: this post, which had been vacant for over a year, was filled by **Arjun Sinsinwar**, who introduced himself as a lifelong resident of Lower Wolvercote.

Treasurer: **Richard Lawrence–Wilson** (not present) had expressed his willingness to continue in this role.

Other members willing to stand for the Steering Committee were: **John Bleach, Graham Jones, David Stone, Mary Brown, Bridget Eley, Cllr. Jean Fooks and Cllr. Steve Goddard**. Robert de Newtown, proposed the above members to be voted in en bloc. This was unanimously accepted by the membership at the meeting.

Special thanks were recorded at the meeting for the valued contributions to date by the acting Steering Committee members, in particular to Allie Noel (not present) for her exceptional hard work in the role as Secretary, Sue Pfunder, Kate Richenburg, Mike Gotch, Alex Martyn, and Jonathan Gittos (who had since relocated) and Anne Charles for work with the website. It was pointed out that options may still existed for volunteers to be co-opted where support in assisting the Committee is needed.

8. Any Other Business - updates

Paper Mill Site: Mike Gotch, informed the meeting that the University who presently own the land, were going to build in a package of measures, contingent on any development, to prevent surface/rainwater flooding and to ensure that such water will drain into the river (rather than towards existing residential properties). He reported that the active operation by the Environment Agency of the Wolvercote weir gates (situated beside the Mill site) had prevented flooding during the period of high water levels occurring earlier in the year when other parts of Oxford had been severely affected.

Railway and roads: Jean Fooks, informed the meeting that she had been involved in discussions about the railway and trackside noise for neighbouring residents. Robin Gasso was reported to be looking at measures to reduce this problem. She said that additional funds are also being made available for roads to help with the Northern Gateway.

9. Next AGM: Wednesday, 14th October 2015.

The meeting closed at 21:45 hrs.