

REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS NOVEMBER 2023 FROM CLLR NIGEL SIMPSON

GENERAL OCC REPORT

OCC IN STATE OF 'NO OVERALL CONTROL' (NOC)

As reported last month, the 'Fair Deal alliance' running OCC collapsed in acrimony at the end of September after Labour withdrew, and the LibDem/Green group is now attempting to run the council with a minority administration. The council make up is now:

LibDem/Green: 24
Conservative Independent Alliance: 21
Labour: 14
Independent: 3

NEW CABINET

Details of the new Cabinet can be found here:

<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/council/about-your-council/oxfordshire-councillors/oxfordshires-cabinet>

CONTROVERSIAL LOW TRAFFIC NEIGHBOURHOODS (LTNS) WILL REMAIN

The hugely controversial low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs) in east Oxford are to remain, following a decision by OCC's Cabinet at a packed meeting on Tuesday, 17 October. This is despite the fact that the 18-month trial has been lambasted by residents and businesses. Cabinet also approved the use of automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) cameras in place of existing physical barriers, which have been repeatedly vandalised.

HEAVY RAINFALL AND HIGH RIVER LEVELS IN OXFORDSHIRE

Consistent rainfall in recent weeks has led to higher than normal river levels on many watercourses in Oxfordshire with further wet and windy weather in the forecast linked to Storm Ciaran. Below is useful information for local people to monitor the situation in their part of the county – especially when the Environment Agency issues flood alerts or the more serious flood warnings. There are also links to the Met Office's weather warning bulletins.

- The Environment Agency's information relating to current flood alerts and flood warnings and the five-day flood risk for Oxfordshire can be found here: <https://check-for-flooding.service.gov.uk/location?q=Oxfordshire>. This page also captures flood alerts and warnings from areas immediately adjacent to the county.
- The Met Office issues weather warnings when severe weather is expected. These give an indication of problematic weather that may be on its way to Oxfordshire and could further influence river levels. Details here: <https://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/warnings-and-advice/uk-warnings>

- OCC has produced a ‘flooding toolkit’ which provides advice and support for residents and businesses. It can be found here:
<https://www.oxfordshirefloodtoolkit.com>

GOVERNMENT AWARDS £1.9 MILLION OF EXTRA BUS FUNDING FOR OXFORDSHIRE

Sunday single fares in December in the run-up to Christmas are set to be capped at £1 after Oxfordshire was awarded extra government funding to improve bus services. A countywide day bus ticket valid for all operators could also be created after Oxfordshire was promised an additional £1.9 million to improve bus services over the next two years. It comes on top of £12.7m from the government in August 2022 following the council’s successful Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP) application. The additional £1.9m of funding – known as BSIP+ – is for measures that will increase long-term patronage, help maintain service levels, ensure essential social and economic connectivity for local communities and promote innovation.

POLICE AND OCC REAFFIRM 20MPH SPEED LIMITS EFFECTIVELY ‘VOLUNTARY’

In response to parish council criticisms about the lack of effectiveness of OCC’s £8million 30mph to 20mph sign-changing exercise, the Oxford Mail has reported that a spokesperson for Thames Valley Police has said:

“We enforce speed limits based on evidence and threat and harm principles and officers will always deal with situations they encounter operationally. We also rely on the public to provide information and would encourage anyone with information about speeding or poor driving to please report it so that we can gather information about a particular area and take action where appropriate. We would ask people to report online on our website or by calling 101. While we share the council’s enthusiasm for road safety and making improvements for all road users, it is also important that the introduction of 20mph speed limits is done in conjunction with Department for Transport guidelines.”

OCC confirmed the voluntary nature of the 20mph in its reply:

“Although [OCC] is working alongside Thames Valley Police, who are responsible for legal enforcement of the speed limits, there is an emphasis on drivers adhering to the new limits through a change of mindset, rather than enforcement. It is hoped that as 20mph areas become more common, breaking the limit would become socially unacceptable for drivers.”

RESIDENTS WARNED AGAINST COLD CALLERS OFFERING PROPERTY REPAIRS

Residents are being warned to be wary of cold callers offering to do property repairs after the recent storms. OCC’s Trading Standards team is receiving an increased number of complaints about cold callers and leaflets for traders being put through the door, resulting in some reports of overcharging for work, charging for unnecessary work and completing work of poor quality.

Jody Kerman, Head of Trading Standards at Oxfordshire County Council says:
“Don’t agree to offers of building work, home repairs or maintenance that come from a cold call. Don’t be afraid to say no, don’t be pressured and check with others if the work is required and what is a fair price to pay. If it’s out of the blue, it’s not for you! I encourage people to ‘take five’ – stop and take a moment and think, do I really need this work done? Obtain other quotes and seek advice, and recommendations for trades people from friends and relatives. I would also encourage getting three quotes from different traders before you agree to any work being done.”

DAMNING OFSTED/CQC REPORT ON CHILDREN’S SEND SERVICES

Oxfordshire’s local area partnership (LAP) has apologised to families and committed to significant change to improve support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) following an inspection of services by Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission in July. Inspectors identified that there are widespread systemic failings across the local area partnership leading to significant concerns about the experiences and outcomes of children and young people with SEND, which must be urgently addressed. The LAP is made up of Oxfordshire County Council and NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West (BOB) Integrated Care Board (ICB) who are jointly responsible for the planning and commissioning of services (across education, health and social care) for children and young people with SEND in Oxfordshire. The partnership also includes Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust and Oxford University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust.

GOVERNMENT AWARDS OCC £250,000 FOR ‘SMART STREET POSTS’ SCHEME

The Government has awarded OCC £250,000 funding to test smart street posts that can house electric vehicle (EV) charging hubs, boost wireless coverage (including 5G), monitor air quality and display public information. The money is coming from the Government’s Smart Infrastructure Pilots Programme (SIPP) and the amount awarded will be matched by the authority itself to create a total investment of £500,000.

EXTENDED TIMETABLE FOR CLOSURE OF OXFORD'S BOTLEY ROAD

Network Rail has informed OCC that it will no longer be able to reopen Oxford’s Botley Road at the end of October 2023, as previously planned. Due to complications experienced during its £161 million redevelopment of Oxford Station, Network Rail has requested that Botley Road remain closed to through traffic until the project is completed in October 2024. The original plan was to reopen the road at the end of next month when utility diversion work was due to be completed, and then close it again to through traffic from March - October 2024 for highway work and the replacement of Botley railway bridge. However, Network Rail has not been able to keep to this schedule due to problems caused by the discovery of an inverted brick arch under the surface, which stretches beneath the railway bridge.

RELEASE OF £1.55M DEVELOPMENT FUNDS FOR EXPANDED ZERO EMISSION ZONE

At the Cabinet meeting on 19th September, Cabinet agreed to progress to the second phase of the expanded Oxford City Zero Emissions Zone Scheme project – detailed work needs to be undertaken to forecast the scheme's potential benefits, impacts and scheme design. The approved budget for the development work £1.55m. The actual implementation of the scheme has been delayed by the Botley Road closure referred to above and there are calls from the Conservative Opposition to scrap the scheme, or at least put it on hold.

East Cherwell Rural Community Liaison Group

Following the merger of the Kidlington District Community Forum and Bicester Rural Group the above new group was formed. They will meet twice a year and deal with ongoing law enforcement issues through collaboration with Thames Valley Police as well as having input from the Fire Service, Trading Standards and the Local Authority.

All Parishes are invited, and I will share the date of the next meeting in due course.