

# **REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS February 2024 FROM CLLR Nigel Simpson**

## **OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

### **COUNCILS SECURE £600M ADDITIONAL FUNDING PACKAGE**

Communities Secretary Michael Gove last month announced a total of £600m of additional funding for local authorities in England – including a £500m addition to the social care grant, and a £100m increase in core spending power. OCC is expected to benefit to the tune of approximately £5m.

### **BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2024/25**

This unexpected development noted above means that the Liberal Democrat/Green administration and opposition groups are having to rework their Budget proposals. As previously reported, the minority administration cannot pass a Budget without support of the opposition parties. A meeting of Full Council on Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> February will vote on the options, however intense negotiations between the parties are expected in advance of this once the proposals have been published.

### **JUMP IN PROFITS MADE KEEPING CHILDREN IN CARE**

*The Times* reported last month that Children's groups have accused private sector-backed firms of making "obscene" profits, charging councils up to £280,000 per year to care for young people. An investigation reveals the average cost of residential care for a child is £5,400 per week, exceeding £10,000 in some cases. Councils pay 25% more than two years ago, and the income of the top 20 independent care operators reached £1.63bn last year, with 19% as profit - up six points from the year before. The House Magazine survey shows the average annual cost of residential placement is £281,000, six times the cost of keeping an adult in prison. The highest annual average was £373,000 in the London borough of Sutton. The Children's Home Association argued: "There is a huge difference between 'profit' and 'profiteering'. The cost increase between public and private provision has been comparable for several years."

### **FIXMYSTREET APP IMPROVEMENTS FOR QUICKER AND MORE EFFICIENT RESPONSE**

Oxfordshire's FixMyStreet app, which allows residents to report potholes, faulty streetlights and a host of other street defects and queries, has been updated. The number of categories has been streamlined but they have now been split up into sub-categories to make it easier for people to find the section they are looking for. In some cases, more information and illustrations have been provided to help users choose the most appropriate category. The changes are aimed at reducing the number of reports sent to the wrong department or council, which can delay the problem being resolved. The updated version also includes an aerial map of the county, as well as a regular map, to help people pinpoint the location of the problem. The changes will be monitored over the next three months to see what impact they have, and the views of users will be sought. More than 1,000 reports are regularly made to Fix My Street every week, with users encouraged to include photographs of the defect to help the inspectors. Where the issue is Oxfordshire County Council's responsibility, an inspector will prioritise it depending on how dangerous it is and the person making the report will be kept up to date on its progress.

## **LAUNCH OF ALL-ELECTRIC BUS FLEET TO SERVICE OXFORD PASSENGERS**

A partnership between OCC and bus operators has launched what will be one of the biggest UK fleets of electric buses outside London. The £82.5 million project will deliver 159 new battery buses on to the roads of Oxford – the first of which have already gone into service. It has also funded two associated electric charging hubs at the city's bus depots. The bus fleet has been funded through a collaboration between the county council and Oxford Bus Company, owned by The Go-Ahead Group, and Stagecoach. The council was awarded £32.8m from the government's Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) scheme and contributed £6m directly, while bus operators invested £45m. The Conservative Opposition welcomes this development but continues to lament the focus on Oxford at the expense of rural areas.

## **DISPOSE OF LIMITED QUANTITIES OF DIY WASTE FREE – BUT BOOK FIRST**

A new system is in place at recycling centres following change in legislation. Oxfordshire residents can now dispose of limited amounts of DIY waste free at the county's household waste recycling centres (HWRCs) by using an online booking system. The booking system, which was launched by OCC last month, means householders wanting to use their free DIY waste allocation will need to book in advance through the [website](#). The move follows a change in government legislation which now permits small amounts of household DIY waste to be disposed of free. The legislation came into force at the beginning of January. Online bookings for free DIY waste only are for a single visit. Oxfordshire residents will need to register their address, vehicle registration number, email address, and the date they wish to visit, along with the site they want to use. They will then receive an immediate email confirmation of their booking, which must be shown to site team on arrival. It is important residents stick to their booked date otherwise they may be charged, and only authorised bookings will be accepted. Free allocations are limited to five standard DIY items for free, or one plasterboard sheet, once every seven days. Where more than the allocated free allowance is presented, the cheapest items will be treated as free. Any DIY waste above this level or deposited more frequently than every seven days will remain fully chargeable at the advertised rates. Full details and examples of charging scenarios are available on the [Oxfordshire County Council website](#) and will be available on site. Examples of DIY waste include baths, sinks, toilets, cisterns, and a 20-litre bag of rubble or tiles. Five of these items would make up a household's free seven-day allocation. The booking system for free DIY waste will only permit residents to make one visit every seven days. For example, if a free booking is made for a Tuesday, the next free allocation will not be permitted until the following Tuesday. However, all residents can visit more often than every seven days, but the DIY waste brought on those visits will then be fully chargeable at the advertised rates. The booking system and free DIY allowance is only for Oxfordshire residents. Non-Oxfordshire residents can still use the county's sites for DIY waste without booking but will be charged in full at the advertised rates.

## **PROPOSAL TO MOVE COUNTY COUNCIL OFFICES TO NEW OFFICES TO PROGRESS**

After extensive and independent evaluation, and consideration by a cross-party cabinet advisory group on city centre accommodation, it's proposed that the council moves its Oxford headquarters from County Hall to a reimagined Speedwell House campus. The sale or lease of County Hall is expected to meet the refurbishment costs of Speedwell House, which is already owned by OCC. The old part of County Hall, which includes the council chamber and coroner's court, would be included in engagement with the market to inform a final decision on its future. The report to Cabinet was clear that doing nothing is not an option – there would be significant investment required in County Hall to bring up to appropriate standards. It adds that by proposing to proceed with relocation to Speedwell House, not only would the council regenerate that part of Oxford but the release of County Hall would allow for better strategic planning in the West End of Oxford. The report was approved by Cabinet on Tuesday, 23 January.

## OCC SPENDS £10,000 ON COLOURING-IN BOOKS PROMOTING 20MPH SCHEME

OCC has come under criticism for spending £10,000 on colouring-in books for schoolchildren promoting its 30mph to 20mph sign-changing exercise. Opponents say that not only is it a waste of money that could be spent repairing potholes, but it also fails to provide children with a balanced view of the controversial scheme.



## PRIORITY ACTION PLAN PUBLISHED TO IMPROVE SEND SERVICES

On 18 December) OCC published [the local area partnership priority action plan](#) to improve services and support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). The plan responds to [Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission's inspection](#) report of SEND partnership services in July. A draft plan was submitted to the Department for Education (DfE) on 24 October and was approved by Ofsted on 12 December. The plan sets out what will be achieved across five priority action areas.

1. Gathering and acting on the views of children and young with SEND and their families.
2. Developing effective communications systems across the partnership to ensure coordinated approaches.
3. Improved timeliness and quality assurance of education, health and care plans.
4. Commissioning of services to meet the needs of children and young people and their families.
5. Producing plans that are coproduced with children and young people and their families, which are rigorously monitored.

The local area partnership includes Oxfordshire County Council, NHS Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West Integrated Care Board and the parent carer forum (PCF), the official body for the voice of parent carers. The PCF will be directly involved in activities in the priority action plan that lead to improving services and outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

## £425,000 of grants awarded to improve community transport in Oxfordshire

Read the story on the [Oxfordshire County Council website](#) or below:

Twelve organisations are to share nearly £425,000 to help improve community transport in Oxfordshire.

Oxfordshire County Council is awarding the grants, ranging from £700 to £135,000, to fund new vehicles, expand schemes, provide new services, offer administrative support and carry out surveys of potential passengers.

## CHERWELL DISTRICT COUNCIL

### **New Chief Executive confirmed**

Cherwell District Council is preparing to bid farewell to Yvonne Rees and welcome Gordon Stewart as its new Chief Executive.

Following a rigorous and robust recruitment process, Full Council approved Gordon's appointment at its meeting on 18 December 2023.

Gordon has extensive experience in senior leadership roles in complex delivery environments across industry, the public sector, and the higher education and charity sectors. His most recent role is the Chief Operating Officer at the Institute of Cancer Research.

Gordon will start on 8 January 2024 with current chief executive Yvonne Rees, ensuring a seamless transition and induction before she moves on to pursue new opportunities.

**Councillor Barry Wood, Leader of Cherwell District Council, said:** "I sincerely thank Yvonne Rees for her inspirational leadership and dedicated service to our council and residents. Her unwavering commitment has been pivotal in steering us through some significant moments in recent times, and her guidance has been truly invaluable in achieving numerous successes.

"As we bid farewell to Yvonne, I am thrilled to welcome Gordon Stewart to lead us into the next phase of our journey. Gordon's extensive experience and steadfast leadership across multiple sectors are precisely what we need to navigate the exciting opportunities and challenges that lie ahead. His enthusiasm for our vibrant communities and his vision for the council's future resonate deeply with our goals.

"I have full confidence that under Gordon's stewardship, we will continue to thrive and evolve, building upon the solid foundation laid by Yvonne. Together, with Gordon at the helm, we look forward to charting a course of growth, innovation, and prosperity for Cherwell, our communities and our residents."

**Gordon Stewart, the impending new Chief Executive, said:** " I am honoured to be stepping into the role of the next Chief Executive of Cherwell District Council and have the opportunity to continue to build on its many strengths and successes in the future.

"We have many exciting developments underway, including our new Local Plan 2040 and the Banbury Vision 2050. I want to get out into our communities as much as possible over the coming months to understand the district.

"There will be challenges over the coming years but many more exciting opportunities to grasp. It will be a privilege to work for such an ambitious and forward-thinking council to help Cherwell and all our local communities and residents."

Gordon Stewart is pictured below.



## **New strategy will coordinate plans for Kidlington area**

Housing growth in the Kidlington area will be supported by a new programme to oversee the delivery of infrastructure.

A meeting of Cherwell District Council's executive on Monday 5 February gave the go-ahead to the new programme, which will be called the Kidlington Infrastructure and Community Asset Strategy.

**Councillor Donna Ford, Portfolio Holder for Regeneration, said:** "The Kidlington area is set to experience considerable growth in the coming years, as we deliver on our commitment to help address Oxford's housing need.

"We have ambitious policies for Kidlington, including in areas such as affordable housing, reducing carbon emissions; and protecting and enhancing green spaces. We are also very clear that new homes must be supported by early delivery of infrastructure such as highways and active travel.

"This important new programme puts us on the front foot when it comes to coordinating delivery of these policies and engaging with the community to help support our healthy place shaping ambitions too."

The programme will complete a trio of place-based programmes for the district, following the example of Banbury Vision 2050 and the Reimaging Bicester work being done in connection with the Garden Town programme.

Work to drive forward the Kidlington project will be funded from the council's own budget, but in future years will increasingly make use of developer contributions. These are funds provided by housing developers under legal agreements linked to planning permissions to build new homes, places of work, and other infrastructure.

The programme will have full time officer support, with a new role being created to manage a strategic oversight board including the town, district and county councils; and co-ordinate with the community, developers, and other stakeholders.