

1) Mobile libraries consultation

OCC has launched a consultation among users of mobile library vehicles. A recent review of the service found that many of the stops are not well used, and some hardly at all (73% of existing stops are used by fewer than five people).

There are five vehicles serving mainly rural communities, including stops at schools, nurseries, playgroups, sheltered housing and residential homes. The vehicles visit 463 locations in 289 communities, about 90 of which have more than one stop.

The review looked at how the service could be more effective with its resources. It looked at population data, service performance data and best practice from elsewhere. OCC also consulted with a steering group of stakeholders representing different customer groups.

As a result, OCC believes it can better serve the needs of people who find it difficult to get to library buildings, by providing (a) better-located stopping places with longer stops, and (b) an improved home library service for housebound people. The proposal does not include cutting the service budget.

The consultation runs until 31st December. Further information at <https://consultations.oxfordshire.gov.uk/consult.ti/mobilelibraryserviceconsultation/consultationHome>

2) Free school lunches

Despite a very short lead-time, OCC was able to ensure that 90% of primary schools were ready to provide free lunches to 4-7 yr olds at the start of the September term. There remained 15 primary schools which missed the deadline, including Barley Hill, but there was a Plan B for each, to tide them over for as long as needed.

Meanwhile OCC's partner, Carillion, has a fully functioning kitchen in Banbury which has been preparing food for those schools unable to cope.

The Govt is providing £1m funding towards this exercise, but the final cost will be nearly £2m. So, Oxfordshire's ratepayers will have to spend about £1m on free meals for children, most of whose families do not need this level of subsidy.

3) Fire Service ahead of target

OCC's Fire & Rescue Service was set a 10-year challenge in 2006 to reduce the number of deaths from fire and road accidents, cut the cost of accidents to society, and make people safer.

The service did this via educational programmes which were designed to create safer communities, and the task has been achieved two years ahead of schedule.

The "365 alive" promotion was launched in October 2006 with the aim of saving the economy £100,000,000 and ensuring 365 more people were alive in a ten-year period via awareness-raising initiatives.

More information at: www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/news/2014/sep/365alive-safety-targets-met-two-years-ahead-schedule

4) Child Sexual Exploitation

OCC and Thames Valley Police co-hosted a briefing event last month on the issue of child sexual exploitation, attended by representatives from district councils, health professionals, the voluntary sector, faith groups, neighbourhood action groups and schools.

The briefing provided an overview of Operation Bullfinch, with presentations from OCC, TVP and the Crown Prosecution Service on changes that have been made over the past few years to ensure that Oxfordshire's children are safer from sexual exploitation than ever before.

The Kingfisher Centre, a joint operation by OCC and TVP, is now viewed as an exemplar for other authorities to learn from. The Leader of OCC has recently met the Home Secretary to discuss the Kingfisher initiative and how the issue is being tackled in Oxfordshire.

5) The Care Act

OCC has taken part in a consultation on the draft regulations and guidance for implementation of Part 1 of the Care Act.

The Act's vision is a reformed care system characterised by integrated, person-centred care and support and a fairer approach to funding. OCC's response identified areas where the regulations and guidance could be strengthened to reflect this.

The County is also working with the Department of Health to test the eligibility criteria, and with the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services to model the likely costs of implementation.

However, OCC shares concerns that the Government has under-estimated the number of carers and self-funders who may come forward for an assessment and the cost of meeting their eligibility needs.

Even so, we are well placed to deliver the Care Act reforms in Oxfordshire. OCC already offers deferred payment agreements, has a high proportion of individuals choosing direct payments and provides a wide range of support to carers. Social care processes are being streamlined and 'supported self-led options' are being developed, creating an e-marketplace and a county-wide social care workforce.

Footnote:

Last summer, Sir Merrick Cockell, the outgoing chairman of the LGA, said that increasing demands from a growing elderly population and cuts in council grants would lead to a funding gap of £5.8 billion between March 2014 and March 2016 and a "catastrophe" in elderly care.

The LGA predicts that by 2020 local authorities will have to spend over 40% of their resources on elderly care. County Council budgets have been cut by more than 33% since 2010 as part of the austerity programme, including a £2.8bn reduction in social care funding.

6) Budget 2015/16

Work has been under way for some time on another difficult budget next year, after two years when the County Cabinet has had to find savings of £265. The County is still facing severe pressures in both Adult and Children's Services, so there are further tough decisions ahead to deliver a balanced budget in February. More on this as it progresses.

7) Broadband

Last month saw a milestone in OCC's 'better broadband' programme, with 10,000 premises enabled, and it is now approaching 20,000 across the county. The £25 million programme is on track to enable over 90% of premises to access superfast broadband by the end of 2015.

An additional £1m contribution by SODC, match-funded by BDUK, is intended to increase the programme's reach to 95% of premises in South Oxfordshire. BT is currently doing the necessary re-modelling work in order to maximise the effect of the additional funding, and this should be in place by the end of this year.

8) Top of the table

OCC has been named one of the best-performing county councils in the country for waste disposal and recycling, coming top in 3 of the 7 categories. Defra figures show that Oxfordshire was top for recycling and composting, and had the lowest amount of residual waste produced per household in the country.

Further information at: www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/news/2014/sep/oxfordshire-county-council-remains-one-best-counties-waste-disposal

9) Information for older people

Age UK has asked me to pass on a reminder of a free advice service, the Community Information Network, which is supported by OCC.

The Community Information Network aims to ensure that older people, particularly those who are most isolated and frail, have the information, opportunities and support to help them stay independent and feel life is worth living. The CIN also supports new and existing Good Neighbour Schemes and aims to build strong local partnerships.

Further information on 0345 450 1276 or at www.ageuk.org.uk/oxfordshire

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