

COUNTY COUNCILLORS' NEWSLETTER

August/September 2017

by Nick Carter & Jeannette Matelot

NEW COUNTY COUNCIL

The electoral map of Oxfordshire is split into 61 'divisions' represented by 63 elected County Councillors, and, like a national government, the County is politically driven. The 31 Conservatives have now concluded an alliance agreement with two Independent members in order to continue the administration, while the 14-strong Labour group provides the official 'opposition'.

In terms of population, the Thame & Chinnor division is the largest of Oxfordshire's 61 electorates and, as a result, is represented by two members. The division includes the villages of Aston Rowant, Kingston Blount, Sydenham, Tetsworth and Towersey.

JEANNETTE MATELOT

The County provides more than 80% of local services for residents and businesses in Oxfordshire, so it can be daunting and time-consuming for a newly elected councillor to navigate through the Council's labyrinthine structures.

Jeannette's networking skills and experience of local government have enabled her swiftly to get to grips with OCC's considerable range of services and responsibilities. She has been appointed vice-chairman of the Council's planning & regulation committee and is also a member of the committee which scrutinises education services.

At the County elections, she was elected to succeed David Wilmshurst who retired after serving for 12 years as one of the two County Councillors for the Thame & Chinnor area. She and Nick Carter are working as a team to represent their large electorate, but in the main, Jeannette's focus is the Chinnor area and nearby villages, while Nick concentrates on the Thame area.

NICK CARTER

Following the May election, Nick has stepped down from his full-time role in the County Cabinet, where for 5 years he was responsible for the Council's 'backroom' activities, such as communications, ICT, business liaison, property & assets, the broadband programme, and the large customer services operation.

Latterly, this Cabinet role also included overseeing preparation for radical changes in Oxfordshire's local government structures, which resulted in a plan for a single unitary authority being submitted to the Government in March. The DCLG is expected to respond to this, and to a similar plan from Buckinghamshire, by the end of the year.

Nick is now chairman of the committee which oversees the auditing and governance of the County's services and the smooth running of the Council's management. He also chairs the 'locality group' of County Councillors who represent many of the divisions in the south of the county, and he sits on the Council's main performance scrutiny committee.

OX-CAM EXPRESSWAY

The Government published its transport investment strategy in early July, setting out transport objectives, priorities and delivery proposals.

The strategy restates its commitment to an 'Oxford-to-Cambridge Expressway', and this is expected to be included in the Government's new 'Roads Investment Strategy'. But the lack of detail is causing concern.

The latest situation is:

- Highways England has set up a team to oversee the next stage of work, which is expected to be finalised during August.
- Consultants are being appointed to undertake the next phase of more detailed work that will take the project through to March 2019.
- They will produce the programme and milestones and set out what is expected overall.

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This will then give the County Council a clearer indication of the likely timeline and decision points. At that stage, OCC will push for further discussions with Highways England and the project managers.

Our concern is that Highways England has already mapped out an indicative route for the expressway, but is deliberately keeping it under wraps. If the route from the Didcot area is taken north-east across the South Oxfordshire countryside, and northwards past the Thame area, then it will rightly generate enormous controversy.

EAST-WEST RAIL

East-West Rail is a strategic national rail infrastructure proposal to reopen and upgrade the rail corridor connecting Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge, extending on to Ipswich and Norwich. It is split into three sections, covering: Oxford to Bedford and Milton Keynes to Princes Risborough (western section); Bedford to Cambridge (central); and Cambridge to Norwich and Ipswich (eastern).

The first phase of the western section, connecting Oxford to Bicester via Oxford Parkway, with services extending to London Marylebone, is already up and running. Network Rail now wants to construct phase 2 of the western section, which in Oxfordshire runs from east of Bicester town centre to the county boundary.

The route of the western section has been refined over many years by OCC and its partners. The section was approved in principle by the Government in 2012, and further design and development work was put to a public consultation in 2015.

Network Rail is now seeking powers under the Transport & Works Act to construct the railway. This process involves producing an Environmental Statement for the scheme, for consultation with the public and stakeholders. This consultation runs until mid-August.

THAME-HADDENHAM CYCLE PATH

Sustrans has completed an initial report into the potential for a roadside cycle route from Thame to Haddenham (as an alternative to the Scotsgrove Mill route).

It now has to establish land ownerships and understand the landowners' likely degree of cooperation if the roadside route were selected as the preferred option for a new cycle path.

Bucks and Oxfordshire have agreed to fund this work jointly in order to take the proposal to a similar stage as the Scotsgrove Mill route.

Sustrans is currently progressing this stage. Once the details of the roadside option are understood, including the views of relevant landowners, a comparison can be made with the alternative Scotsgrove Mill route.

Further funding and work will then be required to select the preferred route and progress it to a stage where it is ready to implement, including full consultation and land acquisition.

To give readers an idea of the finances, OCC currently holds £195,500 from S.106 contributions for the scheme, with a further £56,500 secured (totalling £252,000). However, a roadside scheme is likely to cost in the region of £2m (note, this is an extremely rough estimate).

OCC's response to Aylesbury Vale District Council's recent consultation on housing sites included the point that a significant contribution should be made to the cycling scheme, if housing is allocated in the vicinity of Haddenham.

Please see the next item...

AYLESBURY VALE GROWTH PLANS

Earlier this year, the County was consulted on a draft of Aylesbury Vale DC's 'New Settlement Study' which looks at different options for a new settlement near Thame and the infrastructure that would be needed to support it.

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The draft plan examines the infrastructure that may be needed if a large new settlement at Haddenham or Aston Sandford is included in the Vale of Aylesbury local plan.

The proposals include a number of measures around Thame, such as:

- A 'hamburger' roundabout to replace the five-arm roundabout at the Thame ring road;
- A southern link road connecting the B4012 and A418 (completing the ring road);
- A northern bypass from the A418, east and west around Thame roundabout;
- Corridor improvements along the B4009.

With regard to the possible Haddenham site, OCC has asked for a cycle path to be included in the plan, alongside the A418 and Thame Road. If the Thame roundabout is to have a new hamburger design, it would also need to accommodate the cycle path to Haddenham.

Given the potential size of the proposed site, other pedestrian/cycle connections to Thame would also be needed, such as via Scotsgrove Mill. This was the original route of the proposed Thame-Haddenham cycle path but was ruled out due to landowner and flooding issues. These issues may be solved at least in part by the proposed development.

Aylesbury Vale District Council's draft local plan will be considered by the district council's executive on 10th October and by the district council itself on 18th October. It will then be published for public comment, before being submitted for examination in January 2018.

CALL FOR FUNDING APPLICATIONS

Please would town and parish councils consider adding the following notice to their websites and to any other appropriate publicity?

A £250k fund has been set up to provide small grants for community schemes. Bids can be made for projects which will supplement services following changes or reductions, and any bid should benefit a wide community.

Proposals need to be discussed at an early stage with the local County Councillor in order to gain support. Each County Councillor has access to a £5k fund but, if a project impacts a wider area, a joint bid might be supported by a pool of up to five councillors representing the locality group of Thame & Chinnor, Watlington, Wheatley and Berinsfield divisions.

A proposal will need to demonstrate sustainability and the ability to self-fund in the long term if it is an ongoing project. This will be a key criterion for assessing applications, and matched funding is also strongly encouraged.

Eligible bodies can apply at any point during the financial year 2017/18, and applications will be assessed at one of the quarterly locality group meetings of the 5 councillors. Funding will only be awarded on a one-off basis, and should be spent by the end of the financial year.

OCC's guidance says a qualifying project should be "properly connected locally, responds to recognised need and does not duplicate other provision".

For further details, see: <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/communities-fund>

HOSPITAL FIRE SAFETY

Following the closure of the Trauma Unit at the JR Hospital, OCC's Adult Social Care service has put in place the same incident response process that it would use if a care home floods or if a home care provider suddenly closes. This involves a single point of coordination, and the mobilisation of additional resources.

Extra social care staff are collaborating with the hospital trust, and in the meantime, some patients who are fit enough are being relocated in order to free up beds across the hospital.

The unit was closed when a fire safety review highlighted concerns about the building's cladding, its fire compartmentalisation and the ability to evacuate vulnerable patients.

BUSES TO TOWERSEY

Thames Travel announced on 5th July that it was changing the timetable and route for its No.40 bus service and pulling out of Towersey from 2nd September.

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The 40 service runs from Thame-Chinnor-High Wycombe, and the buses will follow a standard route along East Street, Kings Street, Queens Road and Towersey Road in Thame, to the B4012 eastern bypass and then along the B4445 to Chinnor and beyond.

The 40 route became the only bus to Towersey a few years ago after the withdrawal of the 123 service. One of its roles was to take pupils to Lord Williams's, but the company says it gets negligible patronage nowadays from the village.

Following the announcement, Cllr Matelot attended a meeting with parents of children affected. With the County's subsequent support, the bus company had a change of heart and confirmed that the 40 route would continue to serve Towersey, with one morning journey towards Thame and two afternoon journeys from Thame at school time.

The service to south-east Thame (Howland Road) will improve as a result of Thames Travel's changes. There will be regular hourly buses to a pair of new stops, and longer-distance passengers will benefit from shorter journey times.

BUSES FROM CHINNOR

Parents of next year's intake at Icknield School were told by the County that no seats were available on the school bus between Chinnor and Icknield.

Cllr Matelot discussed the problem with OCC's Admissions & Transport Service, and as a result Vale Travel has agreed to run a bigger bus from Chinnor to Icknield. There are now 74 seats, which will enable 18 additional pupils to be accommodated.

However, this arrangement will only last for one year, and in the longer term the school or parents will be responsible for transport. Eventually no pupils from Chinnor will be eligible for free travel – at which point OCC will cease to provide a vehicle.

There were rumours that OCC had withdrawn its school crossing patrol from Mill Lane Primary School, Chinnor. In fact, the lollipop lady resigned in July and the school is looking for a replacement for September.

CHILDREN'S TRANSITION HOME

A roadside hedge had to be removed during construction of the County's new children's home at the Chinnor Road roundabout on the Thame ring road.

Following the building's completion, we continued to chase the contractor, Carillion, for news of the hedge's reinstatement.

The update is that saplings have now been planted, 600mm apart in a zig-zag arrangement. Passing motorists may be forgiven for not spotting the saplings, which will no doubt be more visible after the next growing season.

CHILDREN'S READING CHALLENGE

The County's libraries are inviting youngsters to take part in a detective-themed reading challenge this summer. Children aged 4-11 can join the Animal Agents investigative team and solve a mystery by reading six library books and collecting special stickers.

Participants need to sign up at their local library and receive a collector's folder. As they read their books during the summer, they will receive stickers to help them crack the clues and help the Animal Agents find out what's really been going on behind the scenes. When they have completed the challenge, they can claim their medal and certificate.

Young volunteers aged 13-24 are also needed to help library staff promote the challenge, talk to children about the books they have read and help them to choose others. More information and application forms for volunteers can be found at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/libraries

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SUPPORTING YOUNG CARERS

Eight Oxfordshire schools have received awards as part of a County Council support scheme for pupils who have to care for family members at home. The Young Carers Standard recognises schools' efforts to identify young carers and support them to reach their potential. Since its launch in 2013 more than 60 schools have received training and support to deliver the scheme and earn an accreditation. Any school can sign up to the programme run by the County's Young Carers Team.

The team offers free support and guidance for schools to identify and support young carers, and schools can then work towards the bronze, silver and gold award level. Schools interested in taking part should email the Young Carers team at: young.carers@oxfordshire.gov.uk

TACKLING ANTI-LGBT BULLYING

The County has developed nationally recognised strategies to combat anti-LGBT bullying, providing both resources and guidance to school staff.

Sarah Rose, of Stonewall, said: "Oxfordshire County Council has once again made huge progress. It has a fantastic array of online resources available, providing vital support and guidance to schools and young people across the area."

The County Council has been named as one of the best in the country for tackling anti-gay bullying in schools. Stonewall, Britain's LGBT equality charity, listed the council in third place in its Education Equality index 2017, which rates local areas for combating this form of bullying in schools.

DEBATES & QUESTIONS

As part of each County Council meeting, members have an opportunity to table formal, written questions to the Cabinet. These questions are posed in advance of the meeting, so that officers with the relevant expertise are able to formulate written answers which are published as part of the Council papers.

Written questions have a distinct function, separate from the ad-hoc questions that arise as part of the various debates at Council meetings.

A written question tends to be about a subject which deserves wider public consideration. Its publication forms part of the longer-term public record, and the accompanying detailed answer enables councillors to hold the Cabinet to account. It enables local media to engage with the subject and, importantly, may help the relevant County Councillor to represent the interests of specific residents or businesses.

The following were a couple of the written questions which Jeannette and Nick tabled at the last Council meeting in July.

1: ST ANDREW'S PRIMARY SCHOOL, CHINNOR

Q: Ten years ago St Andrew's primary school was scheduled to be rebuilt under the 'Building Schools for the Future' programme. Then, in 2010, the new coalition government realised the devastating scale of the UK's deficit, and the BSF programme had to be halted as a result.

This was just as the work was due to start at St Andrew's.

It is now a decade since the County Council agreed that St Andrew's was in a delapidated state and supported the school's bid for BSF funding. Does the Cabinet member for Property agree that further patching and mending are a false economy, and it's time to take radical measures for the sake of this outstanding school's future?

A: The local member is right that in 2009/10 the replacement of the school buildings was identified as a priority by the Council, and that we worked with St Andrew's School to submit a bid for inclusion in the Government's Primary Capital Programme, a national programme intended to rebuild or refurbish at least half of all primary schools over a 15-year period.

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As part of the deficit-reduction measures implemented by the coalition government in 2010, the Primary Capital Programme was cancelled and the scheme at St Andrew's School was therefore unable to be taken forward. This meant that we had instead to focus on how we could use the grants we get for maintenance and basic need to improve the school site.

The County Council has worked closely with the Headteacher and governors to invest around £1.7m in the existing buildings both to address the priority repair and maintenance needs and to plan for future growth in pupil numbers.

The Council would have much preferred to construct a new school rather than patch and repair old buildings. However, I hope the member can see that we have worked hard with St Andrew's to use the funds we do have in the most effective way we can, and that whilst this is not what either we or the school would have wanted, it is the best use of the money in circumstances that were not of our making.

Finally it is worth celebrating that despite the difficulties of their building, St Andrew's gained an 'Outstanding' rating by Ofsted following inspection in May 2013. We do hope that the further investment planned will help to maintain this outstanding standard.

2: BUSINESS RATES FOR LOCAL PUBS

Q: In the light of the Government's business rates review, residents in the Thame & Chinnor area are asking how the new rates have been assessed for local pubs.

Their interest stems from recent reports by the pub industry that 1 in every 5 of recent pub closures that have occurred nationwide was directly attributable to high business rates. There is, therefore, a need for clarity about what discounts and relief are available to pubs in Oxfordshire, even successful ones, under the new scheme and what the 'local discretionary fund' consists of.

Can the Cabinet member for Finance reassure pubs such as the multi-award-winning 'Cross Keys' in Thame that the business rates review will not merely penalise successful pubs for their success?

A: In accordance with the changes announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the budget in March this year, from April 2017, all pubs are eligible for a £1,000 discount on their rates bill. Furthermore, where a pub is the only one in a village and the rateable value is less than £12,000, they are entitled to rural rate relief.

The new local discretionary fund is targeted at those businesses that, as a result of the revaluation which took effect this April, saw the most significant increases in their bills. The details of the scheme are determined locally by district councils and consultation is required with businesses and the relevant precepting authority (the County Council).

The funding has been allocated to district councils based on the number of properties with rateable values of under £200,000 and experiencing an increase in rates from the previous year before other reliefs of more than 12.5%. The city and district councils are proposing a standard scheme for Oxfordshire, but allowing for local discretion. It is expected that details of the scheme will be agreed by each of the authorities by the end of August.

LIVE WELL WEBSITE IS BEST PRACTICE

Live Well Oxfordshire is a new website advising adults, families and professionals about services which enable people to continue living independently, such as home care agencies or organisations that can help with everyday tasks such as shopping and gardening.

People can also use it to find a new hobby, obtain information about benefits, or look for support groups for people with specific health conditions.

The Society for IT practitioners in the public sector (SOCITM) has now awarded the County Council website its maximum grading of four stars.

SOCITM said: "Oxfordshire County Council has proven that it is indeed possible to provide good quality information and clear 'customer journeys' for social care tasks.

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"A worried person looking for help would feel enlightened, well-resourced and a lot less confused after this experience. This model should be used by other local authorities."

See <https://livewell.oxfordshire.gov.uk>

ADULT SOCIAL CARE OUT-PERFORMS

Older people and those with learning disabilities in Oxfordshire receive better services from their providers than the national average across England.

Oxfordshire's has 231 residential care homes, community social care providers, domiciliary care agencies and nursing homes. And 84% (189) of these care-providers are rated either outstanding or good by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) compared with 76% nationally.

One example of how Oxfordshire is improving can be found at Stowford House care home near Abingdon, which had previously been rated inadequate by CQC and is now rated good.

The home's MD acknowledged that "the support and guidance provided by the County Council's adult social care team, specifically the safeguarding team, has helped the home improve its CQC rating this year."

SURVEY OF CARE WORKERS

Thousands of people who work in the adult social care sector across Oxfordshire are being urged to share their knowledge and views on how they can be better supported in their work, travel and access to affordable housing.

Nearly all of the social care workforce (94%) in Oxfordshire are in the private, voluntary and independent sector (for 250 different employers), with only 500 of the 13,500 staff working directly for the County Council.

Now the Oxfordshire Adult Social Care Working and Living survey is asking them what they think about their work, whether they feel supported to learn and develop, and whether they plan to stay in their line of work longer term.

The survey also covers housing needs and seeks to gather information that will help the Council to work in partnership with others to actively manage the care worker market and make it easier for staff to stay in the care sector.

The survey can be found at this link:

https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/Oxfordshire_Social_Care_Working_and_Living_Survey

SUCCESSSES IN SMART TRANSPORT

The County is working at the cutting edge of transport innovation and is helping to get a range of 'smart' solutions off the ground. Recent successes include:

*** Connected and Autonomous vehicles**

The DRIVEN consortium, of which the County is a key member, has been awarded £8.6m by Innovate UK, with £450k of that earmarked for the County Council. The project will see a fleet of autonomous vehicles being deployed in urban areas and on motorways, culminating in a journey from Oxford to London in the next 30 months.

Key challenges that the consortium will address include: communication and data sharing between connected vehicles; insurance modelling for connected and autonomous vehicles; risk profiling and the new cyber security challenges that this amount of data sharing will bring.

*** Cities 4 People**

Recently awarded €4m by the EU's Horizon 2020 programme (for smart, green and integrated transport), the three-year 'Cities 4 People' project will implement pilots in five areas across Europe where citizens, local authorities and innovation experts will collaborate to define the transport mobility challenges and priorities.

Oxfordshire's pilot project will focus on Barton, Littlemore and Black Bird Leys in the city, and will receive £350k of the funding. A key concept in this project is 'People-Orientated

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Transport and Mobility', which provides "new ways to deliver novel, sustainable, targeted solutions that address the needs of the public".

*** Oxfordshire Zip2 journey-planner**

Zipabout (a local data science and transport business) has developed OCC's new journey-planner and transport app. This project is part of the County's collaboration and partnership work with local businesses, in which OCC provides access to data sets that help them develop new technologies and testing opportunities in the real world, at no cost to the Council.

The app 'understands' the transport network in Oxfordshire and how each individual user of the app moves around the area by bike, bus, train or car. It will also learn about a user's preferences to optimise journeys, an approach which has not been done before.

The app is currently being put through rigorous testing before it is released.

MAJOR TRANSPORT SCHEMES

Phase 3 of a major road project in Headington has been pushed back to the New Year to account for works by Thames Water in St Clement's. The programme is being staggered to manage the traffic impact further afield.

Regular updates on all of OCC's road schemes can be found on the Travel Choices website, including progress, road closures and diversions and expected completion dates:

<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/public-site/travelchoice>

THAME REMEMBERS

As the final commemorative year of the 1914-18 war approaches, the organisers of the 'Thame Remembers' project can be proud of what this ambitious and nationally recognised community scheme has achieved.

It was, and continues to be, an inspiring initiative which was set up three years ago with one straightforward, but very bold, mission:

"To commemorate the centenary of World War One by researching all the names on Thame war memorials, for all conflicts, to discover more about their lives. To identify the location of their graves or memorials, and to place a 'Thame Remembers' cross on each resting place - wherever in the world that may be."

The last part of that mission statement is what makes the project such a bold one. Dozens of residents have risen to the challenge and have travelled far and wide to commemorate local fallen heroes whose names appear on distant memorials. Their efforts have been recorded in detailed accounts which make the 'Thame Remembers' website a fascinating resource.

As the project nears its final year, there are still opportunities for local residents to be involved. These may simply consist of taking a commemorative cross on holiday or a business trip to a region where a grave is located. Some people may also wish to make a special journey, such as at the following link.

This August marks the one-year anniversary of Nick Carter's trip to commemorate the memory of Sgt Harry Shrimpton MM. Harry was one of many local heroes whose names appear on memorials in Thame, and a brief account of Nick's personal odyssey is at:

http://thameremembers.org/app/uploads/2016/09/22_Aug2016.pdf

Meanwhile, this is the time of year when town and parish councils start making plans for their Remembrance services on 12th November. As they do so, the 100th anniversary of Passchendaele, the 3rd Battle of Ypres, which ended on 10th November 1917, will be much on their minds.