

COUNTY COUNCILLORS' NEWSLETTER

February/March 2018

from Nick Carter & Jeannette Matelot

CARILLION CRISIS

Last July, well before the Carillion crisis, the County Council agreed with the company to end the parts of its contract related to construction, asset and project management.

Subsequently, Carillion's responsibility for facilities management was also terminated, which ended all the remaining parts of the original Carillion contract signed in 2012.

What this means in practice is that from 31st March, cleaning and school lunches will be delivered by the County at those schools which previously used Carillion's services. 'Hard FM', building condition and maintenance, will come back into OCC by June 2018.

Around Carillion 500 staff in the FM service have or will become County Council employees, and no redundancy notices are being issued as a result of these changes. Since Carillion's fall into liquidation last month, the County has managed the transfer of staff from the construction and services company. A total of 261 people have now transferred, working in catering, cleaning and engineering.

An assessment of the status of building works previously undertaken by Carillion is currently under way.

2018/19 BUDGET

The County Council is planning a gross expenditure budget for the new financial year of £788.5 million (£790.8 million in 2017/18), and of this, about 60% has to come from Council tax.

Because of continuing funding cuts, this necessitates a tax rise for 2018/19 of 5.99%, and, as a reflection of the population's increasing age profile, a total of 3% of the 2018/19 increase must be spent on adult social care under national rules.

OCC is also proposing to prioritise children's social care with an additional influx of £1.9m and a further £1m contingency. Overall this means £8.5m is being added to the budget for children's social care in 2018/19.

Nick Carter writes: "This will be a noticeable tax hike for most people, and a painful one for many, and frankly I was not in favour of such an increase.

"However, since 2010, council tax bills have risen less than the rate of inflation and other key household bills, such as rent and utilities.

"To put it into context, local government in England faces a £5.8bn funding gap by 2020, as a result of Westminster's 'austerity agenda'. Even if councils stopped filling potholes, maintaining parks and open spaces, closed all children's centres, libraries, museums, leisure centres, turned off every street light and shut all discretionary bus routes, they still would not have enough money to plug this gap."

BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS

Next year's budget includes a provision for each County Councillor to spend £15,000 on local priorities in their area. These may range from community projects to highways issues, and the funding will remain in place for 2019/20. In some cases, matched funding may be sought from other organisations.

OCC was recently given the welcome boost of £916,500 from the Government's Pothole Action Fund, which has been set up because roads across England deteriorate rapidly during the cold and wet winter months. Any local spending from the councillors' funds will be on top of this additional budget.

This boost comes at a time when motorways and trunk roads are receiving 52 times more funding per mile for maintenance than local roads, according to the Local Government

Association. The Government plans to spend £1.1 million per mile on its strategic road network but will provide councils with £20,000 per mile to maintain local roads

The County's recent budget meeting also set aside £30,000 for commemorations to mark a century since the Armistice of 11th November 1918 ended World War 1, as well as £25,000 for engagement with town and parish councils. Please also see our brief item below.

ROUGH SLEEPING

An increase in rough sleeping in Oxford is a contributory factor in official figures which show there are currently 4,751 people sleeping rough in England – up 15% on a year ago and increasing year on year.

The figure is based on counts or estimates, made by local authorities on a single night in October or November last year. It is not 100% accurate, but this single-night snapshot demonstrates the severity of the problem.

Nearly half of the increase in rough sleepers outside London was due to rises reported by just eight councils – including Oxford City Council.

New legislation comes into force in April 2018, requiring councils in England to intervene sooner when a household is at risk of losing their home, and to offer more advice and support to individuals.

The Homelessness Reduction Act contains two main duties:

- A prevention duty requires housing authorities to take steps to prevent people from becoming homeless when they are threatened with losing their home.
- A relief duty requires them to support anyone who is already homeless and may involve offering accommodation.

This is an important subject for towns in the south of the County, because homeless people tend to gravitate towards the city from the more rural areas.

Although the County Council is not a housing authority, Nick Carter engineered an agreement at OCC to retain £500,000 in the budget for the next two years, aimed at measures which will help to combat the problem more effectively and humanely.

OXFORD-CAMBRIDGE EXPRESSWAY

This newsletter is an opportunity to assure all concerned local residents that the County has not formed a view about the potential route of the so-called Expressway from Oxford to Cambridge, the first section of which is proposed from Didcot to Milton Keynes.

The County's Cabinet – though by no means all of the elected Council members – support the idea of the Expressway in principle, because (a) it is viewed as catalyst for economic growth, and (b) it will be a solution to the inadequacy of the congested A34.

As the national organisation responsible for the strategic road network, Highways England is leading the work on an Oxford-Cambridge Expressway. The consultants Jacobs have been appointed to examine potential *corridors* and, subsequently, to investigate potential *routes* within those corridors.

No decision has been taken on a preferred route, and this decision is not expected until summer 2019. The County will be working with Highways England and Jacobs to understand the pros and cons of different options and how they would meet the project's aims and objectives.

Highways England is planning a programme of 'stakeholder' engagement as part of this next stage of work, beginning with a recent meeting at which OCC was represented. As the work progresses, the County will consider all proposals carefully, along with the views of local communities and other stakeholders, such as district councils.

Council members have been assured that OCC will not adopt a position on this project without their input. This could be, for example, in the form of an advisory group followed by a decision by the full Council.

A34 IMPROVEMENTS

The Ox-Cam Expressway proposal (see above) does not remove the need for short-term safety measures and capacity improvement on the A34, for which funding has now been agreed. The County is pressing for these to be introduced as soon as possible.

More than £9 million of government funding will provide major improvements to the A34 at Abingdon. The money will enable two new south-facing slip roads to be built at the Lodge Hill Interchange.

This is intended to end years of congestion at that point on the dual carriageway and also provide road infrastructure for around 1,700 new homes in Abingdon.

The long-awaited scheme, which will receive £9.45 million over 4 years, will also boost growth in the wider Science Vale area, where up to 20,000 new homes will be created by 2031.

FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE

The Policing & Crime Act came into effect last year, effectively allowing Thames Valley Police to take over the running of Oxfordshire's Fire & Rescue Service.

The Act stipulates that this radical change in governance can only happen "where a local case is made".

In Oxfordshire, the Fire & Rescue Service (FRS) has long been an integral part of the County Council. Following representations from OCC, the local Police Commissioner has agreed not to pursue any governance changes "in the foreseeable future", recognising there is already a high level of collaboration between Oxfordshire's FRS, the other two Fire Services in Bucks and Berks, the police and other public sector partners.

This collaboration by the FRS is seen in a number of areas, such as various joint hubs being established in towns across the Thames Valley which will operate as bases for firefighters, police and ambulance staff.

The County Council intends to develop further collaboration opportunities that deliver benefits to local communities. For example, a number of new fire engines have recently been jointly procured and equipped with the other fire services, and Oxfordshire's FRS is now responding to police calls to effect entry into homes where the ambulance service need assistance.

It is a relief that the Police Commissioner has been persuaded to make the right decision, as Oxfordshire would be worse off without local control of the fire brigade. The FRS runs the local trading standards service, assists the Coroner's service, controls flooding emergencies, removes fallen trees from roads, and provides many other services. The Chief Fire Officer, Simon Furlong, is also the County's Director of Community Safety.

FRS TACKLES YOUNG DRIVERS

Youngsters aged 17-24 make up about 1 in 4 road deaths, although fewer than 1 in 8 drivers overall are in that age range. They are also the largest group to suffer severe injury in road accidents.

To address these statistics, Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service works with partners across the Thames Valley to provide a unique educational experience.

Safe Drive Stay Alive (SDSA) uses a mix of film and real people telling their personal stories: young people who have life-altering injuries, bereaved parents and emergency personnel, who explain to young audiences how poor choices as a driver can have terrible consequences.

The session ends on a positive note, reminding young people that they have the power to reduce risk to themselves and others.

The SDSA initiative is now in its 12th year, and its events are offered at no cost to schools, pupils or council tax payers. The events are funded from an admin charge added to the driver awareness courses that are co-ordinated by the police.

Further information at: www.safedrive.org.uk

POPULATION GROWTH

Between 2000-2015, the population of Oxfordshire increased by 12% (70,700 people), compared with 11% across England.

Plans for a significant expansion in new housing, following the recent 'Strategic Housing Market Assessment' (100,000 new homes need to be built in the county by 2031), imply a growth in the population of Oxfordshire over the next 15 years of more than double that of the previous 15-year period.

The County Council's population forecasts, based on expected housing growth, predict an increase in the number of Oxfordshire residents of 183,900 people (+27%) between 2015-2030.

This is a massive increase by any standards and will put a huge strain on our already stretched infrastructure such as roads and schools.

One of the key figures at OCC, who plays a major role in influencing and determining policy, is the County's Director of Public Health, Jonathan McWilliam.

He comments: "Will the Government's funding of statutory services keep pace? No one knows the answer, but we do know that health and social services are already stretched to breaking point.

"We also know that the old ways of doing things are not likely to cope with such an increase. Our planning systems need to work far more slickly and intelligently if we are to have the transport systems which people will demand.

"During the last year, local NHS organisations proposed to radically change the way in which hospitals and community services might cope with this pressure. The response was mixed. The NHS proposed to increase ambulatory care, for people coming to hospital just for a day, but this would increase journeys, traffic and parking, and so another problem would be created.

"This all means that the problem of population growth is too big for one organisation to cope with alone – we need to harness plans for housing, transport, the NHS and social care to the same yoke so that we can plough a single furrow.

"We haven't solved this yet but the problem is staring County executives and Councillors in the face. Necessity will, as always, drive the solution, and the solution we need is to craft a unified planning system."

PUBLIC HEALTH

The annual report by OCC's Director of Public Health, Dr Jonathan McWilliam, describes the health of Oxfordshire's population and makes recommendations for the future, in order to help shape the County's services.

His latest report contains chapters on the demographic challenge, building healthy communities, breaking the cycle of disadvantage, healthy lifestyles and preventing disease, mental health, and fighting killer diseases.

Dr McWilliam comments:

"There are two major challenges facing Oxfordshire:

- How do we cope with the increasing stresses and strains that a growing population brings?
- And how do we keep children and adults of all ages healthy so that disease is minimised as the population grows?

"Of course there are many other problems and issues, but these two are the overwhelming ones, and this report looks at these two issues from many different angles.

"The demographic challenge consists of five interlocking factors:

1. The population is growing
2. The population is ageing
3. The proportion of older people is increasing
4. Public expectations are high
5. Money is tight.

"Another problem is rapidly approaching which will further complicate matters – being overweight is the new norm in adults and is increasingly prevalent in younger people, and this will inevitably lead to higher levels of disease.

"Disadvantage also acts as a brake to stop people achieving their full potential and this is another confounding factor.

"Population growth means we have to plan our communities better, and poor air quality - generated by more people and more activity – is an important issue.

"All of these changes put stresses and strains on the mental wellbeing of young people. And of course, let's never forget the shadow cast by infectious disease – for example, pandemic flu, ebola, etc, are sleeping, but not defeated."

The current Public Health Report for Oxfordshire is available at:
<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/content/oxfordshire-public-health>

COMMENTARY

Nick Carter writes:

Last year I sat through several meetings about Oxfordshire health service's transformation plans, including a session in the autumn when the Clinical Commissioning Group presented the final draft of its plans to the County's health scrutiny committee.

The nub of this plan was to downgrade the status of the Horton general hospital in Banbury, and remove services from it such as A&E and obstetrics in order to save money. OCC's health scrutiny committee, which has a range of statutory powers, decided not to support the plan but to refer it to the Secretary of State for further scrutiny.

The reason why this is important for the Thame & Chinnor area is the potential domino effect. If the Horton Hospital is downgraded, then its main services will be centralised in Oxford and there will be significantly more pressure on the JR Hospital. That, in turn, will mean that residents of this area will have less chance of being referred to the JR and, as a result, there will be more pressure on health services in Bucks, particularly Stoke Mandeville.

The outcome, of course, will be fewer services available to this area and less choice for patients.

If the Oxfordshire health service is anything to go by, it is apparent that the NHS is beyond the point of being fixable in its present form.

The sector's jargon now includes the phrase "accountable care services", which is the NHS's way of trying to ensure that patients leave hospital in good enough shape for OCC's social services to take over.

Another phrase, "delayed transfers of care" (DToC), is the way of describing the political football that exists between the NHS and the County Council. The NHS is quick to blame the County for any rise in DToC levels, which means that beds can be 'blocked' by people who don't need to be in hospital.

But the problem lies in the under-staffing and under-resourcing of what the NHS refers to as its 're-ablement' services. After operations or serious illnesses, patients have to be 're-abled' before being handed over to the County's social services and home care, but this cannot happen efficiently while the NHS keeps its re-ablement staff at only 60% of what's needed.

In my view, there is an increasingly urgent need for the health and social care sectors to become much more closely aligned, to the extent that they should be integrated within one system.

HAPPY VILLAGERS

After recovering the No.40 Carousel service from Towersey to Thame for the school run, Jeannette Matelot received a request from two elderly residents to do something for them as the school service from Towersey in the morning was too early.

Jeannette organised a meeting at the village's Coffee Morning Club and brought two of OCC's officers with her: Sandra Pearce, the Supported Transport Manager, and Shirley McAneny, the Co-ordinator for Community Transport.

A good turnout included many elderly residents, and the meeting elected Rachel Britwell as the Towersey representative to work with Shirley. There was a possibility of one pick-up later in the morning for at least one day a week, and the group agreed to go for the 10.11am service.

Carousel then agreed to implement this as a daily service every weekday, with a new timetable beginning on 19th February.

So the company has moved from no service to providing four services a day, and this mid-morning service has been introduced specifically to help Towersey's elderly community.

IN BRIEF

MENTAL WELLBEING

'Tea and Talk Days' are continuing at the County's libraries to connect people and promote discussion about mental wellbeing.

Public health experts, libraries and mental health charity Oxfordshire Mind are joining forces to get the message across that mental wellbeing encourages adoption of healthy lifestyles, is associated with better physical health and improves management of long-term illness.

Poor mental health also has extreme cost implications, not only to individuals and families, but to society as a whole, costing the NHS £70 billion pounds per year.

The event will be at Thame Library on 12th April at 11am. For more information please contact Jackie Wilderspin, Public Health Specialist, on 01865 328661 or at jackie.wilderspin@oxfordshire.gov.uk

NEXT CENSUS

The Office of National Statistics will use new powers to gather more information on people than ever before as part of the next census, due to take place in 2021.

Data will be collected from tax and social security records to compile details of people's salaries, benefits and investments, while officials will also use material supplied by Vodafone to monitor people's daily commute.

Additionally, people will be asked to disclose not only their ethnicity and religious allegiance but also their sexual preferences.

Any views about "bureaucracy gone mad" should be directed to your MP, and not to your County Councillors!

SCHOOL MEALS

A Bill is due to be presented to Parliament that will help provide free meals for impoverished children during the school holidays.

The scheme would rely on volunteers and donations from local supermarkets and other businesses. It could be funded using money raised by a sugar tax on fizzy drinks.

RADICAL TRAFFIC MEASURES

Radical new measures are being considered to control traffic in Oxford. They include a workplace parking levy, congestion charging and access restrictions, along with ambitious proposals for 'rapid transit' and more cycling facilities.

The County says these measures will also bring benefits to the rest of Oxfordshire, by reducing delays and congestion on local and strategic routes and by producing additional funding for infrastructure.

The measures will also improve air quality in the city and lead to the introduction of the country's first 'zero emissions zone'.

AIR QUALITY

Thirty-three local authorities including Oxford City Council have been summoned to meet with the Government to discuss their plans for reducing pollution levels in their areas, after a High Court judge ruled its air quality plan is “unlawful”, according to a report in the Local Government Chronicle.

ARMISTICE CENTENARY

As the WW1 centenary commemoration enters its final year, local organisations and parish councils may be interested in the 'Battle's Over' guide at the following link:

<http://www.brunopeek.co.uk/Battles-Over-Guide.pdf>

As one small initiative, Jeannette and Nick are hoping that all the parish churches in the Thame & Chinnor area will join in 'ringing out for peace' at exactly 7.05pm on 11th November.

Churches wishing to participate are asked to complete the form found at www.brunopeek.co.uk no later than 31st July 2018, to ensure the Battle's Over organisers can list their involvement and send them further information.

The sound of church bells ringing is deeply rooted in British culture. You can read more about its history and its pertinence to the First World War in the fascinating 'Battle's Over' guide.

ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN

OCC has won extra funding to support unaccompanied asylum-seeking children living in Oxfordshire. A Government grant worth £335,000 will help strengthen the support services available to these children over the next two years.

The County Council has the same responsibility to look after asylum-seeking children arriving in the county as it does other children and young people in care. Vulnerable young asylum-seekers often have no connections or family in the UK, little spoken English and have made long and traumatic journeys.

The new grant is not for covering the cost of care placements, but for additional support to help these youngsters adjust to living in the county and integrate with local communities. The County currently looks after 52 young asylum-seekers, who have predominantly travelled from Afghanistan, Albania and Eritrea.

AND FINALLY

Following the inability of two of the major political parties to field a candidate for a recent by-election, we would suggest they have a look at the 'Be A Councillor' campaign run by the Local Government Association (LGA).

The campaign has two elements: a cross-party strand which is run by LGA officers, and a party political strand which is run individually by the LGA's four political groups. It may provide some useful pointers for struggling parties and for aspiring candidates. The link is: <https://beacouncillor.co.uk>

The SODC by-election was due to be held at the end of last year in the district's ward next-door to the Thame & Chinnor area, which includes Lewknor, Great Haseley and the Miltons.

The only candidate to be registered by the deadline was the Conservatives' former county councillor, Caroline Newton. She was therefore appointed unopposed, and the District Council by-election was cancelled.

For reference, a useful map of the District Council's wards is at:

<http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/sites/default/files/South%20Ward%20Map%202015.pdf>