

County report November 2018

from Nick Carter and Jeannette Matelot

EXPRESSWAY ANNOUNCEMENT

The County has welcomed the announcement of a preferred corridor for part of the Oxford- Cambridge Expressway as it offers a little more clarity on where the final scheme will go.

However, OCC is disappointed at the continuing lack of clarity about access to the M40 through Oxfordshire.

The County supports better transport links and accompanying infrastructure, but a project of this magnitude will inevitably have an impact on communities and the environment. The Council says it will work to ensure that those effects are mitigated and that benefits are spread.

Its main “transport test” is that the Expressway should provide relief to congestion on the A34. It should not put more pressure on existing overstretched roads, but function as a separate strategic route alongside other local schemes.

The County will continue to push Highways England for clarity on how the corridor choice is developed so that a decision can be made on the best route for the scheme.

SMARTER HOME CARE

OCC’s adult social care team is piloting the use of Amazon Echo to reduce loneliness and isolation, while offering access to low-level care via smart technology.

A £75,000 project has seen the County negotiate with Amazon to provide the kit required for free, install broadband in triallists’ homes, and deliver training for staff and users.

Aside from enhancing the quality of life for individuals the project also provides a smart way for carers to connect with their clients and for family and friends to be able to check on a loved one and physically see they are well.

The technology also allows some care resources to be freed up and directed to those in greatest need of personal visits. For instance, video calls can be used for reminders to take medication.

ILLEGAL TOBACCO

The County’s trading standards service is tackling the sale of illegal tobacco in Oxfordshire, and attempting to change the public perception of the harm that it poses. Illegal tobacco is a catch-all term for any cigarettes or hand-rolling tobacco that are either counterfeit or have been smuggled or bootlegged into the UK.

It is often sold at pocket-money prices and helps recruit the next generation of smokers. Since August 2017, OCC has undertaken a number of high-profile activities around the county. This has included community events, where the tobacco detection dogs are the stars of the show, as well as targeted enforcement.

In the last 12 months, 7 formal enforcement visits have been made to retail premises and warrants were executed at 3 residential premises, resulting in a total seizure of around 60,000 illegal cigarettes and 3.5 kg of illegal hand-rolling tobacco.

There are ongoing criminal investigations against a further 9 people, which are likely to result in further prosecutions. Three pub licences have been reviewed, resulting in a 3-month licence suspension in one case and additional conditions being added to the premises licences of the others. Further reviews are likely in the future.

The sale of illegal tobacco is a criminal offence that can result in imprisonment and unlimited fines. Anyone wishing to make a report can do so anonymously at www.stop-illegal-tobacco.co.uk or by calling the hotline on 0300 999 6999.

A short film is designed to help the public understand why illegal tobacco is a danger to local communities. You can watch it by pressing Ctrl and clicking the link below: <https://tinyurl.com/y9m3dl8f>

ROGUE TRADERS

Other rogue traders and aggressive doorstep sellers were also targeted in October by the County's trading standards service. Working in collaboration with Thames Valley Police, Operation Rogue Trader aims to stop rogue business practices and raise awareness of the dangers linked to hiring cold-callers.

- 14 Trading Standards staff and around 30 police travelled across the county during the week
- 67 traders were approached and checked
- 10 warning letters were issued for breaches of consumer protection regulations, and for Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellation and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013 offences
- Five waste offences were fined by district councils
- One overloaded vehicle is being investigated
- Seven doorstep crime offences are now under investigation.

Between April 2017 and March 2018, around £20,000 was returned to victims of rogue traders as a result of intervention by the trading standards team.

Trading Standards is part of the County's community safety directorate, which includes Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service, emergency planning and the gypsy & traveller service.

The service fulfils the County Council's responsibilities for the enforcement of a wide range of consumer protection legislation controlling the advertising, marketing, production, distribution and supply of goods and services throughout the manufacturing, importation, distribution and service delivery chain.

WINTER GRITTING

The road-gritting season began at the beginning of November for all of Oxfordshire's A roads, B roads and some C roads. This amounts to 1,200 miles per gritting run, or the equivalent of travelling from London to Iceland.

There has been no change to OCC's winter maintenance budget in recent years. The money spent relates directly to the conditions on Oxfordshire's roads. Last year the expenditure amounted to more than £1.8m, as the winter was the worst in recent years in terms of conditions and length.

Paul Wilson, the manager of the Council's winter operation, explained how he decides whether the gritters should swing in to action.

"The crucial thing is whether the road surface temperature will be at 0.5 degrees or below," he said. "That's the temperature at which frost will form and surfaces will become slippery. Many other factors are also taken into consideration by the decision officers.

"Right the way through from November to spring, we take this daily decision. Often it is straightforward but occasionally there are complications. For instance, the forecast might be telling us that the night will start very cold and frost will form, but it will later warm up with rain coming in.

“On other occasions there might be snow in the forecast, and we will want to time the gritting run just right and perhaps fit the snowploughs to the front of the gritters. On such occasions there’s every chance we would send the gritters out more than once.

“We know it’s a difficult job for a driver of one of the gritters. Driving down a country road in freezing conditions at 2am in dark depths of winter is no picnic.

“The aim is to have the main roads in as safe a condition as possible. It should however be pointed out that gritting is not a magic elixir that prevents the driving hazards that winter brings. It lessens them – it does not eliminate them.

“Our advice is always that people should drive to the conditions. Don’t drive in December like you would in June or July.”

FOOTNOTE:

A few facts about gritting:

- It’s not grit – it’s salt.
- The salt is corrosive and the gritters must be steam-cleaned and wax-oiled regularly. Even so, parts have to be replaced due to rust.
- Normally the spinners at the back spread the salt across the full width of the road. But snow on the ground means that the salt particles don’t bounce and so more work is needed to get it where it’s needed.
- The wheels drive the spinners that spread the salt – if the gritter isn’t moving it’s not spreading grit, so try not to hold them up!
- Salt needs traffic to help make it work – driving over it mixes it with any ice on the road surface and makes sure it gets spread around properly
- Salt only works down to about -6°C and care is always needed when you are driving in freezing temperatures, even if you can see a road has been salted
- When it snows, many roads are also ploughed, but the ploughs don’t make contact with the road surface so that things like cats eyes are not damaged.
- The gritting season in Oxfordshire runs from November to April.

Live updates can be found here: <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/roads-and-transport/street-maintenance-z/salting-and-snow-clearance>

Details for community groups to request salt bins can be found here:

<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/roads-and-transport/street-maintenance-z/salt-and-grit-bins>

SPATIAL PLAN UNDER WAY

Oxfordshire’s councils are working jointly on a countywide strategic plan which integrates planning for growth and infrastructure, with a focus on quality of life and health & wellbeing. The County’s Cabinet has approved a scoping document for the creation of a joint strategic spatial plan (JSSP), which will now be considered by the 5 districts councils.

The JSSP will address the strategic and cumulative implications of growth and set out a long-term framework covering the whole of Oxfordshire up to 2050. It will be a genuinely strategic plan, which will set out future housing requirements and identify strategic locations or broad areas for future growth.

The JSSP will not allocate specific sites for development (any such decision to do this would require the agreement of all the local authorities). Detailed local policies will be covered by future Local Plan reviews as necessary.

The County’s role as highways and education authority, and as a provider of most essential services to communities and businesses, makes it particularly relevant as a key player in the JSSP preparation process. Sustainable transport that creates places

where people can walk and cycle will underpin the JSSP, and it will apply learning from “healthy town” initiatives in Barton and Bicester.

The six Oxfordshire councils and the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OXLEP) under the Oxfordshire Growth Board agreed the Oxfordshire Housing & Growth Deal with the Government in March 2018.

Under the terms of the deal, the local authorities have committed to producing a Spatial Plan for submission to the Planning Inspectorate for independent examination by 31 March 2020 and adoption by 31 March 2021, subject to the examination process.

Early stakeholder engagement started this Autumn, and a public consultation is due in 2019 first on preferred options and then a proposed draft of the joint plan.

HOME SCHOOLING

OCC’s education scrutiny committee recently investigated the reasons for an increase in “elective home education” across the county. Although still a very small percentage of overall numbers, there were 557 pupils being home education in 2016/17 compared with 379 in 2011/12.

Councillors have recommended further analysis of the figures locally. There should also be a two-week cooling-off period before any discussion about taking pupils off the roll at a school. The Council should advocate that school leaders include information about numbers of home-educated children in their termly reports to governors/directors or other reporting mechanism that may exist.

The chairman of the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board expressed the following concerns about home education.

“A number of parents elect to home educate their children, and the Board recognises their right to do so. However, in common with a number of other safeguarding boards, we have significant concern about the limited powers that local authorities have in evaluating and monitoring the appropriateness of these arrangements and assuring ourselves that the children are safe from harm.

“We welcome the consultation currently being undertaken by the Department for Education that is intended to support work to revise current guidance in this area and hope that this will result in a more robust and rigorous framework to ensure the safeguarding of children that are home educated.”

PARTNERSHIP WITH CHERWELL DISTRICT COUNCIL

A long-term partnership between the County and Cherwell District Council launched at the start of October. The arrangement will offer long-term opportunities to join up services for residents, reduce the costs of providing services, and secure investment to support the projected growth in homes and jobs.

The partnership follows the financial problems in Northamptonshire County Council, which ultimately blew a hole in Cherwell District Council’s partnership with South Northamptonshire District Council.

The County’s new chief executive, Yvonne Rees, holds the same role at Cherwell District Council. Partnership arrangements under one chief executive will make joint working more effective and deepen the partnership arrangements.

Spatial and transport planners are already working closely together on schemes related to housing and infrastructure. A pilot project involves the County’s head of trading standards working supporting Cherwell’s environmental health and licensing functions. Other services are expected to join up where there are benefits to residents, including improving efficiency and customer service.

Nick Carter comments:

The County's position is one of strength. Its Children's Services are rated good, there is real momentum towards health and social care integration, and its delayed discharge of care has been more than halved.

The Government has shown significant confidence in OCC by granting a housing & growth deal providing more than £215 million worth of investment. The County's Fire & Rescue Service is rated as one of the best in the country. And the list goes on.

If everything is so good, why is the County Council planning to change?

The option of standing still is not possible and, as there is unlikely to be additional Government money, the County has to make sure that it continues to provide value for money in all areas and is organised in the best way possible.

Is this a step towards becoming a unitary council? No one can answer that question with any degree of confidence.

Some believe it is a step towards unitary because it brings local services together in a coherent manner. But ultimately, it is for the Secretary of State to determine the unitary proposal that was submitted some time ago.

I have long been an advocate of replacing our confusing and expensive two-tier structure of local government with a single unitary council for the whole of Oxfordshire. The new arrangement between the County Council and one of Oxfordshire's five district councils will inevitably be viewed as a first step in this direction.

In the north of the county, it will now be possible to bring together strategic, spatial and transport planning (OCC) with local planning (CDC); trading standards (OCC) with local licensing (CDC); public health (OCC) with environmental health (CDC); waste management (OCC) with bin collection (CDC), and so on.

Our own district council in South Oxfordshire will be watching this development closely, and seeing how this kind of operating efficiency equates to saving money.

THREAT TO BLEDLOW DUMP

Bucks County Council is likely to close its household waste recycling centre (HWRC) at Bledlow. This would have an impact for residents in the Thame & Chinnor area for whom the Bledlow site is nearer than the nearest alternative Oxfordshire site at Oakley Wood (see below).

Technically, HWRCs are provided by councils for residents of that county. However, it has long been accepted that residents are not aware of county boundaries nor of this restriction, and will simply go to the nearest site.

Councils have accepted that this cross-boundary movement probably evens itself out with movement in both directions depending on site and population locations. However, as budgets are increasingly stretched, some local authorities have begun to prevent non-residents from accessing their sites, or to seek a contribution to costs.

Oxfordshire's view is that this gives a poor level of service to residents of all counties and wastes funds on administering the restriction. However, evidence suggests that Oxfordshire is a net exporter of residents to neighbouring authorities' HWRCs.

Oxfordshire agreed with Bucks that if they felt it necessary to charge residents from outside their county for use of their HWRCs, it would be preferable to charge at the entrance to the HWRC. This would give residents a choice of the shorter travel time but paying to use Bucks sites, or a slightly longer journey to use Oxfordshire sites without charge.

Bucks CC will also introduce a charging scheme for DIY waste, similar to the one already in place in Oxfordshire. Some residents may have travelled to Bucks sites to avoid the DIY charges and so may naturally divert back to Oxfordshire sites.

The approximate impact on travel distances and time from Thame is as follows:

Thame to Bledlow Ridge – 9 miles / 20 mins

Thame to Redbridge, Oxfordshire – 17 miles / 29 mins

Thame to Oakley Wood, Oxfordshire – 14 miles / 30 mins.

There are 7 HWRCs in Oxfordshire which are provided and funded by OCC for local residents. National guidance advises that the maximum driving time for the majority of residents in rural areas is 30 minutes, and 95% of Oxfordshire's residents have access to one of the HWRCs within this time, and 100% within 35 minutes.

National guidance is also for one site per 143,750 residents, and Oxfordshire exceeds this with one site per 93,429 residents. With the introduction of comprehensive kerbside collection services, the need to visit a HWRC has reduced with around half of visitors going to site every 2-3 months or less.

Some residents may be concerned about a potential increase in fly-tipping. However, evidence from HWRC closures does not bear this out. Fly-tipping is an environmental crime mainly carried out by traders who do not wish to pay to dispose of their waste legally.

FOOTNOTE:

The Government's forthcoming waste strategy is expected to include plans to increase contributions from retailers and producers towards the cost of recycling their used packaging.

These contributions are likely to rise from an average of about £70m a year, across the country, to more than £500m a year. The National Audit Office says that in 2017 local authorities spent £700m on collecting and sorting recycling, compared with £73m from major businesses.

COST OF CARILLION'S COLLAPSE

The County is carrying out a detailed review of the costs and liabilities related to its properties following the collapse of Carillion, the major construction company.

When this lengthy process has been completed, a robust financial plan will be considered by councillors and included in the Council's budget.

Carillion provided services for OCC including maintenance of council buildings, property services, and building work such as school extensions. OCC made a net payment of £10.6m at the end of December 2017 to Carillion to cover work already completed as part of the final settlement to end the contract with the company, limiting any future financial liability.

However, the costs of dealing with ongoing construction and property maintenance problems following Carillion's collapse are expected to be "very significant". Surveys to assess defects in buildings including schools are continuing across the Council's properties. Compliance with health and safety requirements is also being considered, with any safety issues that emerge being dealt with quickly.

ACTIVE AND HEALTHY TRAVEL

OCC is encouraging commuters to walk or cycle, for all or part of their journey. The County is championing healthy alternatives to the car, which will also help to reduce congestion and pollution on the county's roads.

As part of its public health responsibilities, the Council has appointed an “active & healthy travel officer”, with Government funding, to assess existing walking and cycling routes. Priority will be given to improvements and maintenance schemes designed to encourage active travel and to reduce pollution.

Over 85,000 new jobs and 100,000 new homes are planned in Oxfordshire by 2031. The Council is committed to ensuring that as the population grows, infrastructure is in place to encourage healthy travel options.

Further information: www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/whycycle

CHILDREN'S CYCLING SAFETY

Almost every primary school child in the county will now be able to get free cycle safety training after the award of an £84,500 Bikeability grant which will pay for an additional 2000 places.

The bulk of cycling training in the county is carried out by a 700-strong army of volunteer instructors under the Oxfordshire Cycle Training Scheme, which has been running for more than 40 years. Training is offered to children aged 9 and up, and is a mixture of learning about the Highways Code and practical ‘on the road’ tuition. Parents and carers who want their children to take part in training should contact their school’s head teacher.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION CRACKDOWN

The Electoral Commission has called for urgent reforms to electoral law following a series of online political campaign scandals, acknowledging concerns that British democracy may be under threat.

It aims to stamp out anonymous "dark advertising" and the misuse of personal data, and to introduce tougher laws to prevent campaigners breaching spending limits.

The watchdog has also called for much bigger fines to punish offenders and make political campaigning "fit for purpose in a digital age".

Meanwhile, Treasury select committee chairwoman Nicky Morgan says hedge funds should be banned from commissioning private polling and subsequently making money from the stock market reactions.

Her comments came as it was reported that hedge funds hired polling companies in the run-up to the EU referendum to provide private exit polls and other data on voter behaviour.

A report from Bloomberg News said: "These hedge funds were in the perfect position to earn fortunes by short selling the British pound. Others learnt the likely outcome of public, potentially market-moving polls before they were published, offering sure-fire trades."

Electoral law currently bars polling companies from publishing data gathered while the polling booths are open, but there is nothing stopping them passing on the information directly to city institutions for trading purposes.

YOUNG ENGINEER AWARDS

Since 2009, the High Sheriff’s Young Engineer Awards have celebrated the engineering talent of Oxfordshire’s young people by encouraging and recognising technical skills at schools, colleges and workplaces.

Originally introduced by then-High Sheriff Richard Dick, Chairman of the Lucy Group, the awards are designed to inspire and reward the next generation of creative thinkers and problem-solvers, encouraging them to consider a career in engineering.

Entries are judged by an experienced engineer, and the finalists and runners-up are invited to an awards ceremony hosted at the Lucy Electric offices in Thame.

The categories for this year's awards are:

- 'Best Student' and 'Most Improved Student', aged 14-16 and 16-18 years;
- 'Best Apprentice' aged 16-18 years.

Lucy Electric is a leader in power distribution solutions with over 100 years' industry experience. Headquartered in Thame, it is a subsidiary of W.Lucy & Co Ltd, a private organisation founded in 1897 which employs more than 1,000 people and has a turnover of around £150m.

DELAYED TRANSFERS OF CARE

Delayed transfer of care (DToC) cases are now at the lowest level for many years in Oxfordshire.

The latest national figures published by the Department of Health show that the average number of people delayed fell from 168 in April 2017 to 117 this April. Since April 2018, the number of delays has fallen further and is currently only 78 – more than halving in just over a year.

Effective joint working by OCC and the NHS across Oxfordshire has seen consistent reductions in the number of people delayed in hospital. Department of Health figures showed a 44% decrease in the number of social care delays, and a drop in the overall number of days delayed in a hospital. Only 13% of delays were attributable to social care, which is down from 15% in March 2017.

HIGHWAYS UPDATE

Oxfordshire's highways maintenance budget has been doubled for this year (2018/19) — and a further £120m may be borrowed to continue the investment over the next ten years.

This year's increased spend of £10m will be put into road repairs and other highway maintenance work to tackle the winter backlog of potholes.

Meanwhile, Cabinet members have also given 'in principle' agreement to borrowing £120m for investment, and approved the development of a full business case.

The investment proposal will be included in next year's budget and capital programme, which will be agreed by the Council in February 2019.

This would be the biggest ever Council-funded investment in highways and infrastructure in Oxfordshire, and would address the long-term decline in road condition, which is happening across the country.

The county's extensive network of rural minor roads suffered badly during the freeze-thaw cycle of last winter.

The borrowing would be funded from a potential £6m-a-year increase in council tax income as the result of expected growth in homes in Oxfordshire.

Around £80m would be spent on highway improvements, with the remainder invested in other county council-owned assets, especially schools.

DOMESTIC ABUSE SERVICE

A new domestic abuse service for Oxfordshire has been set up by OCC in partnership with district councils and the Police & Crime Commissioner.

The service is designed to address emotional and practical support needs for any victim suffering or fleeing domestic abuse in Oxfordshire. It incorporates a single access point for victims and professionals, community-based Outreach Workers and Independent

Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVA) and includes specialist workers to support young people and Black Asian Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BAMER) communities. There is also a programme to support victims with complex needs.

Victims fleeing abuse will be able to access refuges in Banbury and one other location, located in either Didcot or Oxford. In addition, the service launches a new model of refuge, delivered from dispersed locations across Oxfordshire, benefiting those unable to access conventional refuge services including male victims, victims with live-in carers and families with older male sons.

To report concerns, please use the helpline (0800 731 0055) or oxfordshiredomestic@a2dominion.org.uk

NHS HEALTH CHECKS

OCC-funded NHS Health Checks are designed to spot early warnings of stroke, kidney and heart disease, Type 2 diabetes and dementia. They are available to anyone aged 40-74 who has not already been diagnosed with a cardiovascular condition.

They are free, and applicants will be invited to have one every five years. GP surgeries will automatically send out invitations, but if one is not received, residents should contact their surgery and make an appointment. The check take 20-30 minutes.

Further information: www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/nhshealthcheck

FIGHTING THE SCAMMERS

OCC is a supporter of Friends Against Scams, a national scheme run by the national trading standards services, which aims to:

- Highlight the scale of the problem by getting communities and the nation talking about scams.
- Change the perceptions of why people become scam victims.
- Prevent people from becoming or continuing to be a scam victim by providing more adequate support.
- Recruit people to join the fight against scams to make this a scam-free nation.

Friends Against Scams works on several levels. It has a website which gives detailed information on the huge variety of scams as well as encouraging visitors to take a more active role.

Residents can become a 'friend' by completing an online course or build up to become a SCAMBassador – giving talks to local groups and organisations – after receiving further face-to-face training by OCC's own Trading Standards Service. Further information from the Friends Against Scams website, and on 03454 04 05 06.

REDUCED RECYCLING RATES

In line with national trends, the County has seen a drop-in recycling rates although Oxfordshire continues to out-perform most other counties.

Analysis of bin contents showed that around half of what householders put in the general waste bin could instead be recycled using existing facilities and arrangements. The largest portion of this recyclable material is food waste. The Council is working in a directive way with 'Love Food Hate Waste' to encourage food waste reduction and collection.

If all of this recycling was put in the correct bin, the County could save around £3 million annually and the countywide recycling rate could rise to around 80% (it is currently 58%).

The County is working with the 5 district councils to increase public awareness and to harmonise recycling regimes across the county. Other measures that OCC has introduced include:

- Working with districts to make it cheaper and easier for residents to use their food waste caddies following feedback from residents, aiming to increase the amount of food waste going to anaerobic digestion to be recycled. Stickers, leaflets and liners were provided for distribution to residents. Cooking oil is also now sent to anaerobic digestion
- Reprocurring the Household Waste Recycling Centre contract, keeping all seven sites open seven days a week
- Introducing hard plastics recycling at the HWRCs
- Supporting promotions on real nappies, junk mail, textile reuse and refill.

The County is focusing on explaining the cost advantages of recycling to residents; improving support for “re-use, recycle” to avoid materials getting into the waste chain in the first place; working with local collection authorities to create greater synergy in waste collection services and creating a strategy for effectively communicating with residents and manufacturers about what they can recycle and how, particularly food waste.

NEW EQUALITIES POLICY

The County Cabinet has approved a new equality policy covering the period 2018 - 2022. It sets out the Council’s responsibilities for ensuring that equality, diversity, fairness and inclusion are applied to the services it commissions and delivers to residents.

The policy demonstrates how the Council is meeting the requirements placed on public bodies under the Equality Act 2010, including setting eight objectives for the next four years.

A draft of the policy went out for public consultation between January - March 2018 and the policy was amended following feedback. An annual action plan has been developed, which will be monitored and reported quarterly.

FIT FOR THE FUTURE

The County will get a complete overhaul to ensure it is ‘fit for the future’ and continues to meet rising demand for services. The changes are crucial to enabling OCC to deliver its vision of ‘thriving communities for everyone’.

The transformation plan will protect and improve frontline services for residents, while cutting red tape and reducing the costs of ‘back office’ administration. The proposed redesign of the Council aims to save between £34m-58m a year and ensure a continued balanced budget, with the possibility of reinvesting in services in the future.

The business case for implementing a new operating model estimates a reduction of around 600-890 full-time posts over two to three years. The Council’s annual staff turnover is about 650 posts, so the number of compulsory redundancies is likely to be fewer.

Customer service, supported by new technology, will be at the heart of the proposed new operating model, to make the Council more efficient. Residents contacting the Council will see improved customer service, with use of digital technology freeing up time for specialist staff to provide personalised services where needed.

Councillors will oversee the process to ensure that the promised improvements and financial savings happen, and risks are properly managed.

The latest stage in the process was to agree an investment of £18m to support the transformation. The one-off investment will cover three areas:

- Technology – improve customer service, automate administration and improve data management
- Staff – training and skills development to take on new and changing roles
- Project management and specialist support – specialist skills and extra capacity needed from project partners to transform the Council.

IN BRIEF

The Commons Public Accounts Committee warned this summer that first-tier authorities, such as the County Council, face an “unsustainable” £5bn funding gap by 2020 unless the Government takes action.

It said the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has yet to develop a plan despite increasing numbers of councils suffering severe financial stress after seven years of cuts.

Church of England proposals could be “the death knell for small village schools,” according to recent media reports.

The CofE – which runs more than 70% of rural schools with fewer than 110 pupils – is calling for a change in the law that would make it easier to close such schools due to dwindling pupil numbers.

The Local Government Association says county councils are fixing a pothole every 20 seconds, but it would still take more than £9 billion to tackle the local roads repair backlog.

It is calling for 2 pence per litre of existing fuel duty a year to be reinvested in local roads maintenance.

The new Health & Social Care Secretary, Matt Hancock, has pledged to spend £487 million to transform technology in the NHS and social care.

The aim is to drive culture change within the NHS and social care sector, working with staff to embrace the latest technology, to improve their workload and patient care.

This would have a direct bearing on OCC, which is integrating many of its social care services with the local NHS.

Liz Truss, the chief secretary to the Treasury, has urged the Government to enable more houses to be built in the countryside and make it easier for people to extend their homes.

She said: "I do think we need to open up more land for building, a lot more. There are a lot of nimbys in Britain."

She called for a change to planning rules, observing: "I quite like the Japanese system where you can build up on top of your house without having to get planning permission."

Meanwhile, the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) says moving Green Belt boundaries when reviewing local plans makes it easier for local authorities to release land for housing, but is only supposed to take place under ‘exceptional circumstances’.

The CPRE’s recent report argues that building on the Green Belt is not solving the affordable housing crisis, and will not do so.

Last year, 72% of homes built on greenfield land within the Green Belt were ‘unaffordable’ by the Government’s definition.

Four in five people have lost at least one of their local pubs in the last five years, a study has found.

A total of 476 pubs closed in the first six months of this year – up 13 on the previous six months, according to the Campaign for Real Ale.

It means 18 pubs are lost every week across the country, with the North West and South East worst hit, each losing over 60 since January.

Camra says landlords are struggling under a triple whammy of beer duty, business rates and VAT, and it is urging the Government to relieve the tax burden on publicans.

The County is upgrading street lights with LED bulbs. The work is being funded by borrowing £40.8m, which will be paid back within nine years from the cheaper energy bills that result from modern lighting (£39m saving), and lower maintenance costs (£1.8m saving).

There are almost 60,000 streetlights in Oxfordshire – around 9,000 of these have already been upgraded to modern LED lighting in recent years. In addition to the saving and energy efficiency, residents will notice higher quality streetlighting that is less likely to fail.

County councillors have decided to phase out single-use plastic cups, stirrers and straws from all of OCC's premises.

A recent public consultation highlighted the confusion among residents about which types of plastics can be recycled and that residents would like more information on this topic. As a result, the County is considering plans for an information campaign.

A group of Conservative MPs, led by Mark Francois and John Baron, have written to PM Theresa May and Communities Secretary James Brokenshire asking them to make trespassing a criminal offence in order to stop Travellers moving on to private land. The move is part of a submission to a Government consultation on Travellers.

A new schools inspection framework is expected to be introduced by Ofsted next year. It will see exams downgraded as a measure of school quality, replacing exam results with a measure called “quality of education”.

Inspectors will mark down “exam factory” schools that “teach to the test” while failing to offer a broader education including art, music, sport and drama.

Mark Littlewood, director-general of the Institute of Economic Affairs, argues that further devolution of tax powers after Brexit is required to counter “simmering resentment with the power of Whitehall”.

He notes that: “100 years ago, local government raised about three-quarters of its own funding — a figure that has been whittled down to only about a fifth today”.

As well as taxes, Mr Littlewood argues that substantial regulatory control needs to be handed over to local government, covering areas such as planning, to allow a more bespoke control over regions.

Grants to help small businesses to start or grow have been awarded to eight Oxfordshire companies by OxLEP.

The Elevate grants were awarded to a range of projects to secure jobs and business growth as part of the OxLEP Business-run programme.

Helen Brind - who manages the Growth Hub at OxLEP Business - said: "We received strong applications for grant support for projects which will create jobs - or secure them - amongst our county's small business community.

"With a vibrant SME economy, we have been able to make awards to enterprises in training, health, recruitment, services, manufacturing and support.

"Our grants will be enabling projects to be delivered which might otherwise not happen at all - or take longer to deliver - so they will make a real difference to these SMEs."

The feedback service run by Healthwatch Oxfordshire allows you to review a wide range of the health and social care services that you use.

See <https://healthwatchoxfordshire.co.uk/services>

The Department for Transport is due to announce new powers to enable county councils to make gas, electricity and water firms pay for digging up roads.

Lane rental schemes will let councils charge a levy if roadworks are carried out on main roads at busy times.

The DfT has estimated that the 2.5m roadworks carried out annually cost the national economy around £4bn.

A new boxing club in the Thame area would give youngsters an opportunity to get fit, make new friends, and provide anti-bullying skills.

That's the view of Mark Collins, a Thame resident who is involved nationally as a boxing coach and wants to establish an ambitious new club locally.

His plan revolves around finding a permanent home for the club, either in existing premises or as a renovation project, where one or more fixed boxing rings could be established.

Any suggestions about premises or possible sponsorship should be directed to Mark on 07834 015646 or via mark@pivotalpeople.co.uk

It's best to get the flu vaccine as early in the season as possible to avoid getting poorly when the virus starts circulating as temperatures drop.

Many people are eligible for a free flu vaccine from GPs or local chemists, such as:

- Anyone aged 65 or over
- All children aged 2-3 years old
- People aged under 65 with certain health conditions
- Pregnant women.

The army of front-line carers across Oxfordshire are being urged to make a free jab a priority. More than 8,500 staff employed in residential care, nursing homes or with registered domiciliary care providers, who are directly involved in the care of vulnerable people, are entitled to a free flu jab.

Keeping this valuable workforce fit and well is essential to easing winter pressures across the County's health and social care system.

As well as workers in social care settings, anyone who receives a carers allowance, or is the main carer for an elderly or disabled person, is eligible for a free vaccination. All they have to do is present their ID badge to a chemist or GP surgery.