

County Council newsletter February/March 2020

From Nick Carter & Jeannette Matelot

COUNTY SETS 2020/21 BUDGET

The County Council's annual budget-setting meeting in February was the shortest and most harmonious political debate in recent years, with all parties in broad agreement!

OCC provides about 80% of local government services to Oxfordshire residents and businesses, and in 2020/21 it is due to spend just over £600m on these services.

Nowadays most of this money (60%) comes from council tax, and the remainder from Government grants and from charging for services.

So OCC calculates it will need to raise £391,445,480 from council tax during the next financial year. This means that the average Band D council tax will amount to £1527.44.

The main areas of expenditure continue to be adult social care (36%) and children's social care (17%), with nearly 10% being spent on highways and transport. In addition, about £200m will be spent on maintained schools, which comes directly from the Government.

Separately, OCC's capital programme will continue to fund investment in infrastructure such as roads and school. This programme looks ahead 10 years and is mainly financed by Government funding, developer contributions, and other funding bids.

The revenue budget includes £5m of 'invest to save' proposals across the Council's services, many of which are intended to pay back within a year and then lead to £5m of further savings in the next four years. Another £9m is being spent on measures which will help to reduce demand for services in future.

The backdrop to the budget is that the County continues to face long-term financial pressures, because Government funding has been radically reduced since 2010, at a time when more and more people are needing support from social services (*see item below*).

Funding for social services, both children's and adults', is set to increase by £30m, including an extra £8m from the Government. Demand for these services continues to grow, due to an ageing population, an increasing number of child protection cases, and to a rising need working age adults.

In this respect, the main changes to next year's spending include:

An extra £600,000 to cover increased support for foster carers. By increasing the number of foster carers, OCC hopes to reduce the cost of keeping children in care.

Investing £2.3m in a new family safeguarding model, to support families in difficulties with mental health, domestic violence, substance abuse and other issues.

Spending £1.2m more on support for children with special educational needs or disabilities, by increasing the number of case workers and expanding the educational psychologist service. A further £3.8m is also being added to the budget for home-to-school transport.

In adult social services, an extra £7.4m will go into supporting the growing number of people with learning disabilities, mental health issues and autism. An additional one-year investment of £2.8m is intended to improve housing support for these people, as well as another £300,000 for more social workers in this area.

A new investment of £2.2m. in 'community networks' will help communities to help the most vulnerable locally. These are intended to be informal care networks which will help the County to manage future demand for adult social services.

STUDY REVEALS FUNDING DEFICIT

A new study by PwC, the giant firm of auditors, has revealed that county councils face a deficit of £46bn over the next five years.

The Government's funding announced last September, predominantly for care services, has reduced this figure by 35%. But if all county councils raise their council tax by the maximum over the five-year period, the funding gap will still be £19bn.

The analysis shows that council tax rises would be felt most in the rural shire counties. Taxpayers in county areas will face an average rise of £69 compared to £45 for residents in Inner London. The average Band D will rise to £1,853 in shire counties, some 40% higher than Inner London (£1,332). These higher council tax levels are due to historically lower funding.

This huge funding gap persists despite the Government providing councils last September with the 'largest real-terms funding increase in a decade'. OCC will be watching to see if the new Chancellor commits to long-term funding of councils at his Budget on 11th March.

Meanwhile, a care charity that provides services for about 90 adults in Oxfordshire says it will shut them by the end of May.

Hft said running them was leaving it with a £5,000 shortfall every week, as a result of "chronic underfunding of adult social care". OCC commented: "Hft's business decision to close its Milton Heights site is supported by the County Council, and we will continue to work with it and other providers when operating difficulties are experienced."

BUDGET REFLECTS CLIMATE CHANGE

The County will be continuing to invest in reducing energy usage and carbon emissions in the coming years, as part of its drive to be carbon-neutral by 2030.

OCC has already reduced its own carbon emissions by 50% in the last decade, and it is also the best county council for recycling in the country.

The new budget includes £700,000 of 'pump-priming' money, so that the County can invest in energy generation, greater energy efficiency in its buildings, 'greener' travel options, and other innovations.

An extra £500k is in budget for a joint team with Cherwell District Council, in Banbury, to develop and promote climate action across the two councils during the next two years, and supporting the delivery of further carbon reduction activity.

Over the next five years, OCC will spend £40m on replacing 56,000 street light bulbs with new LED technology. And a further £500,000 will be invested in improving sustainable travel plans to ensure bus, cycling and walking routes are integral to new property developments.

WHEN IS A LOCAL PLAN NOT A LOCAL PLAN?

A controversial decision by the Government to stop SODC from changing its well-developed Local Plan and to hand control of it to the County Council came to a head at OCC's regular meeting of councillors in February.

The Secretary of State for Local Government, Robert Jenrick, decided to freeze the Local Plan towards the end of last year in order to safeguard more than £500m of local infrastructure funding that depended on the Plan's continuing progress through a formal inspection.

SODC's new Lib Dem and Green coalition had previously decided to remove the Plan from its inspection in order to amend it and start the process all over again. This prompted the Minister to impose an order preventing the district council from doing this, and earlier this year he asked the County if it would agree to an invitation to take control of the Plan. In a stormy debate at OCC's full council meeting in February, the majority of the Conservative members and all of the Labour group voted to accept this invitation.

Nick and Jeannette both abstained from the final vote on this issue because:

1) In the absence of a formal invitation from the Government, we did not agree that OCC should risk muddying the waters by voting on what was merely a hypothetical issue. However, with the Labour group backing most of the Conservative councillors, it was certain that the County Council would vote to take control of the Local Plan if the Government were eventually to issue an invitation.

2) We agreed it would be preferable in the interests of local democracy for the County Council to control the Local Plan, than for the Government to take it over. However, we felt the best solution would be to allow SODC's democratically elected Lib Dem administration the time to see sense, stop its political posturing, and enable the Local Plan to resume its progress through an independent examination.

3) We felt this solution would be the only sure way to avoid scuppering more than £500m of future infrastructure investment for the rest of the county. Now that further time has elapsed, it seems that the Lib Dem & Green coalition at SODC is indeed going to fall into line, however reluctantly, with all the other district councils in Oxfordshire.

We will refrain from saying "we told you so" until after it happens and this ridiculous row can finally blow over.

An early clue that the penny had finally dropped at SODC came in a letter last month from the district's Lib Dem leader, Cllr Sue Cooper, to the Secretary of State, in which she said: "On the understanding that you continue to view eLP2034 [*the Local Plan*] proceeding to inspection as the only possible way forward, it would help us if your officials could list some examples of the kinds of significant changes which would address our concerns that can be made as modifications during inspection."

The final clue is in a report to SODC's Cabinet which meets later this month:

<http://democratic.southoxon.gov.uk/documents/s19021/Report.pdf>

COUNTY SETS OUT ITS CORPORATE VISION

The County's new corporate plan focuses on three main subjects and reflects OCC's target of zero carbon by 2030. The broad aims under the three headline themes are:

Thriving people

- Strive to give every child a good start in life and protect everyone from abuse and neglect.
- Enable older and disabled people to live independently and care for those in greatest need.
- Reduce the health gap between different communities with different levels of disadvantage.

For example:

There were 7500 births last year in Oxfordshire, but child poverty has increased from 9.8% in 2015 to 10.1%.

The proportion of pupils attaining a 'strong' pass in English and Maths is slightly higher than the national average. On the other hand, the number of children in care has risen by 80% since 2011, and those with special education needs have increased by 9% in the last year.

Most adults in Oxfordshire are categorised as obese (56% of people over 18 years old)! But nonetheless, there is a high life expectancy of 81.6 for men and 84.6 for women, and the number of over-85s is expected to increase by 63% to 10,900 by 2032.

Thriving communities

- Help people to live safe, healthy lives and to play an active part in their community.
- Provide services that enhance the quality of life in our communities.
- Protect the local environment.

For example:

Oxfordshire's 682,500 residents use 2785 miles of local roads, and so there is constant pressure on the County highways services.

The vast majority of residents (82%) work within Oxfordshire, but this is the most rural county in the south-east of England, which makes access to transport and the quality of the roads network all the more important.

One quarter (26%) of Oxfordshire is an 'area of outstanding natural beauty', and many precious local resources need protecting, such as 25 wildlife reserves and 122 protected species of wildlife.

Thriving economy

- Support a thriving economy by improving transport links to create jobs and homes for the future.
- Secure the Government's investment in affordable housing.
- Drive skills development, business growth and employment, and deliver key infrastructure to support growth.

For example:

Oxfordshire's economy generates £22 billion of output per year from 400,000 jobs and more than 30,000 businesses.

Average earnings are now supposed to be around £35,000 in Oxfordshire, but average house prices continue to increase and Oxford itself is the least affordable city outside London.

More than 6800 apprenticeships started last year in Oxfordshire and more than 4600 apprenticeships were completed.

'SPECIAL NEEDS' SERVICES IMPROVING

Support for children with special educational needs & disabilities (SEND) has made progress in Oxfordshire with senior leaders from the education, health and care services working effectively together.

This was the finding of a recent Ofsted review of SEND services. The report described the leaders as having an ‘aspirational vision’ for SEND children, and inspectors found that leaders across the education, health and care system were taking full responsibility to improve the service.

“Accountability has been strengthened and there is now a helpful mechanism for overseeing improvement,” the inspectors said.

Three out of five areas that needed reviewing after Ofsted’s full inspection in 2017 are now making ‘sufficient progress’, while two need further improvement. Inspectors found that parents do not yet feel part of this vision and do not fully understand what work is being done to achieve it. The County recognises this challenge and is addressing it with education partners.

Inspectors acknowledged progress in the Council’s and Clinical Commissioning Group’s work to improve the quality of education, health & care plans (EHCs), which identify needs and set out the additional support to meet those needs.

More EHC needs assessments are being completed within the statutory 20 weeks, despite a significant increase in the number of assessment requests. However, overall, the quality of EHC plans remains variable, not reliably reflecting the aspiration of children, young people and their parents.

Ofsted stated it was encouraged by the reduction in the number of school days lost to exclusion: “Initiatives to reduce the high level of fixed-term exclusions in mainstream secondary schools are starting to make a difference... The rate of fixed-term exclusions for pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs in secondary schools is also lower than it was in 2017.”

Leaders from both the County Council and CCG acknowledge the need for significant further improvement and are committed to working together. The Ofsted report on the visit can be read at: <https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50136587>

FIRST CHOICE FOR MOST PARENTS

Initial figures show that the vast majority of parents and children across Oxfordshire have been offered their first choice of secondary school for 2020/21.

Almost 89% of applications have been awarded their first choice, and an overall total of 97% have been offered one of the four choices they listed on their application.

Oxfordshire’s 89% compares with the following national averages for first choice offers in recent years:

2015/16	84.2 per cent
2016/17	84.1 per cent
2017/18	83.5 per cent
2018/19	82.1 per cent
2019/20	80.9 per cent

Once again, OCC’s school admissions team have done an excellent job, and although the 2020/21 national average will not be published for a few months, the County is likely to be ahead once more. The aim is to give every child a good start in life and the school admissions team plays a key part in that philosophy.

IMPROVING ONLINE SERVICES AND REDUCING CYBER-THREATS

As it becomes the norm to access public services on computers and mobile devices, the County is planning to 'future-proof' its digital systems as part of a two-year overhaul.

Councillors have approved a new information & communication technology (ICT) strategy, which will lead to investment in smarter, more secure systems and better customer services.

OCC's website gets 370,000 page views per week and receives around 1300 online payments per week. An online Blue Badge application process with credit card payments launched last year, and now nearly 70% of applications are online.

The County has also signed up to the Government's 'local digital declaration', which commits it to designing online services that meet the needs of residents, while protecting their privacy and security.

The ICT strategy emphasises the importance of protecting systems against cyber security risks, and a new 'cyber security officer' is now responsible for protecting data and computer systems. The ICT strategy includes a long-term commitment to switch to more efficient 'cloud' computing, which will also reduce energy consumption and contribute to the County's commitment to becoming carbon-neutral by 2030.

OCC is developing and sharing its ICT services with its partner, Cherwell District Council, with a long-term ambition to improve digital connectivity across the whole county.

Further information on the ICT strategy and the digital declaration is here:

https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s49225/CA_DEC1719R06%20ICT%20Strategy%20-%20Digital%20Strategy%20-Local%20Digital%20Declaration.pdf

DEALING WITH STORMS AND FLOODS

OCC's emergency planning, Fire & Rescue Service, and highways teams had a busy February dealing with the local impacts of the recent storms and flooding.

Storm Ciara and Storm Dennis hit the UK on consecutive weekends in mid-February, while river levels across the county were already high as a result of much higher autumn and winter rainfall than average.

Highways teams dealt with more than 150 incidents as a result of Storm Ciara and more than 100 stemming from Storm Dennis. The Ciara incidents largely related to high winds (fallen trees and debris blocking roads), whereas Dennis was also about flooding with some roads closing and surface water causing issues.

Emergency issues should be reported to OCC's contact officer, Rob MacDougall: rob.macdougall@oxfordshire.gov.uk

COMMUNITY GROUPS TACKLE CLIMATE CHANGE

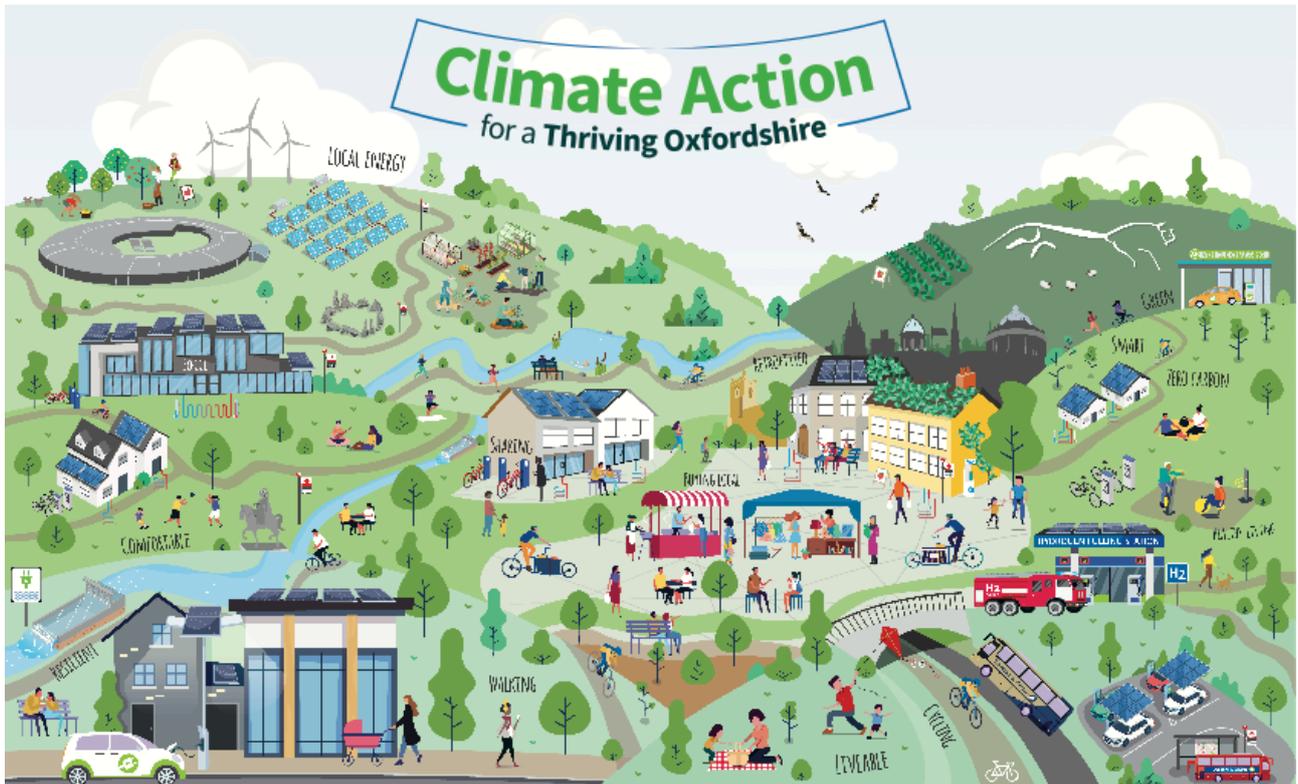
Community groups running repair shops, community fridge groups and carbon reduction schemes across Oxfordshire have taken control of their county-wide parent network, which is funded by the County Council as part of its long-standing environmental commitment.

During 2018-2019 the community action groups ran over 4,000 events, with 80,000 participants, and contributing 51,000 volunteer hours – equivalent to 31 full-time staff.

Now the 65 groups are taking over the reins to run it as an independent body, and with OCC's continued support and funding, a community benefit society will now coordinate activities.

As a community benefit society, the aim is to unlock new funding opportunities to help reduce carbon emissions in Oxfordshire. The community action groups will continue to flourish at a time when the County pushes forward its own climate action work.

Further details here: <https://news.oxfordshire.gov.uk/county-councillors-back-climate-action-plan-to-join-green-revolution-in-oxfordshire/>



EASY ACCESS TO HOME REPAIRS

OCC's new online service 'Winter Warmth' helps vulnerable residents to access funding for home repairs. The aim is to improve the home environment which will additionally support physical and emotional wellbeing for residents.

The easy-to-use service signposts property-owners or private tenants to a website where a postcode is entered to find the most appropriate organisation. The services and funds available include grants, loans and energy company schemes that provide home repairs.

The funding can be used to fit or fix a new boiler and install loft and cavity wall insulation to keep people affordably warm. There is also general advice on how to stay safe and well, and home repairs are also available for people with disabilities.

In its first month, the website has received more than 50 emails which have been sent directly to the services who can provide the help, when and where it is needed.

The service aims to make a positive difference during cold weather, which is often linked to an increase in heart attacks, strokes, respiratory problems as well as isolation. Flu, coughs and cold symptoms also increase during the winter months, especially for those who have a pre-existing health condition.

Ansaf Azar, the County's Public Health Director says: "This website is going to support residents to live well and independently. It will make life easier, so they don't have to contact different organisations and make multiple calls before they get the information they need."

The County's ICT team created intricate algorithms for the website, in order to provide users with seamless access, regardless of their address in Oxfordshire. Further information at: www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/homerepairs

CONTINUED SUCCESS AT RECYCLING

For the sixth year running, Oxfordshire has been named the best-performing county council waste disposal authority in England, thanks to residents' commitment to the environment.

Residents are recycling or composting a larger proportion of their household waste than in previous years, although the national average for recycling fell, according to Government figures.

OCC's recycling officers point to residents recycling more of their food waste as a key reason for the increase. Nearly 20,000 tonnes of food waste was recycled in 2018/19 – up by 6% on the previous year.

The district councils operate the kerbside collections of household recycling and waste, which Oxfordshire County Council then has to manage and dispose of. Overall, 58% of household waste was recycled in Oxfordshire last year, compared to 57% the previous year. The national average was only 44.8%, according to the figures from the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs.

Individually, the five district councils in Oxfordshire have also achieved excellent results above the national average. But waste officers say more still needs to be done to improve recycling rates, and the County is keen to see further improvements as part of its goal to becoming carbon-neutral by 2030. The target is to increase recycling to 70% by 2025.

WASTE SITES CLOSE FOR CLEANING

Seven of OCC's household waste recycling centres will close for two days in March and April to carry out a deep clean and essential maintenance.

The work forms part of the council's planned approach to maintenance, and is designed to keep the sites safe and clean. Only one site will be closed at any one time and all other sites will be open on those days.

All closures are on quieter midweek days to minimise disruption, and each site will reopen at 8am following its two-day closure. Residents are asked to plan for these closures by visiting the neighbouring sites.

Closure dates:

Alkerton 3rd & 4th March
Redbridge 10th & 11th March
Ardley 17th & 18th March
Dix Pit 24th & 25th March
Oakley Wood 31st March & 1st April
Stanford 21st & 22nd April
Drayton 28th & 29th April

STAYING WELL THIS WINTER & BEYOND

The County is working with its NHS partners to promote a range of local health services to treat and support residents, including measures aimed at reducing the pressure on hospital emergency departments.

The advice for residents includes:

- Minor injuries units (MIUs) can treat deep cuts, small burns, sprains, sports injuries, infected wounds and foreign bodies in eyes. There are three MIUs in Oxfordshire (Henley, Witney and Abingdon) and also three First Aid Units (Bicester, Chipping Norton and Wallingford). The quickest way to be seen is to go through NHS 111.
- Having a winter plan is also advisable, including an annual NHS flu jab and keeping your home warmed to at least 18°C. Keep an eye out for elderly neighbours especially in wet and cold weather.
- Visit your local chemist's for advice on coughs, headaches, upset stomachs and indigestion. Your chemist can help stop coughs and colds from getting worse.
- If your GP practice is closed, you can contact NHS 111 where call-handlers will help you choose the right health service for your needs. You can also get NHS 111 advice online at <https://111.nhs.uk/>
- Download the 'Health & Care Oxfordshire' app to find health services near you: <http://bit.ly/iphoneappchoosewell> or <http://bit.ly/androidappchoosewell>

The accident & emergency department at the John Radcliffe Hospital or the Horton Hospital in Banbury and the emergency ambulance service provide vital care for life-threatening emergencies, such as loss of consciousness, suspected heart attack or stroke, severe breathing difficulties or severe bleeding that cannot be stopped. In these cases, call 999.

HELPING OLDER PATIENTS RETURN HOME

Age UK Oxfordshire has joined forces with the NHS to help older people keep well in a project backed by the County Council.

Patients will be given specialist support by Age UK Oxfordshire staff to feel more confident on returning home from hospital and helped with accessing support in the community. Age UK Oxfordshire staff are based at the John Radcliffe Hospital.

The support ties in with the health & social care system-wide 'home first' plan, which prioritises treating people closer to home and avoiding prolonged hospital stays. It is supported by the Clinical Commissioning Group, Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, the County Council, and the South Central Ambulance Service.

The Age UK Oxfordshire team is contracted to work with the Trust for a year and expects to assist with at least four discharges a day. The team is funded by OCC and the CCG.

BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF DEMENTIA

OCC is implementing plans to become a dementia-friendly organisation, by developing awareness, understanding and support for vulnerable residents who are impacted by the devastating illness.

The number of people with dementia in the UK is expected to rise to 1 million by 2021. About two in every 100 people aged 65-69 have dementia, and this rises to one in five for

those aged 85-89. Oxfordshire has an ageing population, and the number of residents aged 85-plus is also forecast to increase.

More people in Oxfordshire are likely to be affected by dementia themselves or through someone they know with the condition. More people may develop the illness whilst still in employment, while others will be combining work and a busy lifestyle with being a carer for a person with dementia.

Awareness is key to understanding the lifestyle changes, choices and challenges that will occur with an individual's diagnosis. The County aims to help people who live with dementia to stay independent in their communities for as long as possible.

These plans are part of a wider initiative by the Alzheimer's Society that aims to create a network of four million Dementia Friends across the country.

As a first step, the Society held a 'dementia friends' training session at County Hall in February to improve awareness and learn about dementia friendly communities in Oxfordshire.

The next step in the plan is to help to develop dementia friendly communities across Oxfordshire to reduce isolation and support people to be aware of and understand dementia. This will enable people living with dementia to live well in their local communities for as long as they are able.

SMART BIKE LIGHTS PROVIDE CYCLING DATA

Oxfordshire cyclists are testing a new 'smart' bike light linked to a phone app that will provide data on cycling journeys. The trial will provide the County's transport planners with insights into travel patterns that will help improve cycling infrastructure.

The project is one of a growing number of transport innovation projects backed by the County as part of the 'Smart Oxford' programme, which applies digital technology to transport and environmental challenges.

The light operates in tandem with the app, which then transmits data on the ride and route to a data hub, where it can be analysed. Over 100 million points of anonymised data have already been collected across Oxfordshire, showing where and when people cycle, as well as speeds, obstructions and road conditions.

OCC's partners in the project are Milton Park, Smart Oxford, and a smart cycle light company, called See.Sense. The project will run to December 2020.

INTERNATIONAL CYCLING EVENT

The prestigious Women's Tour professional cycling race is to start on Monday 8th June in Bicester.

Local pro-cyclist Katie Scott joined community cycling groups and children from Bicester's Longfields Primary School and The Cooper School (secondary); at the official announcement. Katie, 18, is a CAMS-Tifosi team rider, from Faringdon and hopes to be one of around 100 women taking part in the gruelling six-stage tour later this summer.

This is the second year that Oxfordshire has hosted the Women's Tour. The County is working in partnership with race organisers Sweet-Spot to deliver the event, in a three-year commitment which began in 2019. Different routes are planned each year to showcase the county's diversity to a national and international audience.

Cycling fans from around the country are expected to visit Oxfordshire to watch the event, generating additional business for restaurants, bars, hotels, B&Bs and shops along the route. Highlights of the race will be screened on ITV4.

Following last year's race, the County has been working in partnership with Active Oxfordshire, TRAX, British Cycling and Thames Valley Police to refurbish 'waste' bikes for young people facing barriers to cycling.

BUSINESSES GET FIBRE CONNECTIONS

Work has started on a new fibre network in the Thame & Chinnor area as part of a project to deliver 'ultrafast' broadband to businesses in rural Oxfordshire.

It began in the first week of February 2020, with night works on Thame High Street. A company called Airband is deploying fibre to the premise, with broadband direct from the exchange. Connection will offer speeds up to 1Gb/s and bring superfast coverage in Oxfordshire to 98%.

The firm, which specialises in bringing high-speed broadband to hard-to-reach areas, said: "This first cluster stretches from Thame to Chinnor. We'll also be working on other clusters at the same time from Henley to Lower Shiplake and Sonning Common, and from Childrey to Kingston Lisle, west of Wantage. We expect to be finished by June 2020, if not before."

Airband has a £2.8m contract to supply 557 business premises and connect 619 incidental residential properties along the way, delivering total connectivity to 1176 premises as part of a programme funded by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs. The project is managed by OCC's digital infrastructure programme.

To connect rural businesses, Airband uses existing infrastructure where possible, which is sometimes via private land. Part of this new project uses infrastructure at the Oxfordshire Golf Club, which is where this photo was taken when Nick Carter dropped in to discuss it with OCC's digital programme director, Craig Bower (2nd from left).



COUNTY'S CORONAVIRUS ADVICE

A decision to close Burford School in West Oxfordshire was made as a result of a recent visit to Italy by a pupil who then developed flu-like symptoms.

OCC continues to support the school and its local community by working with key partner agencies, but the County's director of public health emphasises there is no need for concern. The vast majority of Coronavirus tests across the country are confirmed negative, and up-to-date information and reliable advice are available at the following website:

www.gov.uk/coronavirus

This information is updated every day at 2pm, and by the end of February Public Health England had not advised any further schools in Oxfordshire to close due to suspected cases.

All schools are provided with the following PHE guidance, including sections 5 & 6 on suspected and confirmed cases: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19>

TAKING OVER COMMUNITY ASSETS

Changes to the policy covering OCC's assets will give greater clarity to community organisations interested in taking over council buildings.

The County owns more than 700 'assets', including land and buildings. When buildings are not needed for OCC's own purposes, consideration is given to leasing out wherever possible. Of the properties which are leased out, 85 are leased to community organisations and provide an income of about £170k per annum.

The revised policy enables OCC to be flexible in agreeing appropriate terms with community groups in future transfers, for example regarding rent and repair liability, and aiming ultimately to maximise the use of its assets for community benefit.

RECRUITING MORE FOSTER CARERS

The County's fostering team is encouraging more people to consider fostering to increase availability of placement for vulnerable children.

There has been a 66% increase in the number of children looked after in Oxfordshire since 2015. Two-thirds of them are over the age of ten.

OCC is always looking for more foster carers, and different types of fostering are provided to meet the needs of both the children and the carers.

- You don't need a specific qualification to be a foster carer. Once approved, carers are supported, provided with training and help to prepare them to foster. There are lots of opportunities for training and learning.
- There is no upper age limit to foster, and the County has foster carers who are in their 70s. The lowest age is 18.
- Being single is not a problem – children need stable loving homes with single parents or couples, whatever their gender or sexual orientation.
- Disabilities or health problems are no barrier, provided you can care for the children.

Further information is here: https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/children-education-and-families/fostering?utm_term=nil&utm_content=

ASSISTANCE FOR SOCIAL ENTERPRISES

Six 'enterprise hubs' have been set up to provide help and support for social enterprises through workshops, networking and peer-to-peer learning sessions.

The hubs are provided and co-ordinated by the Oxfordshire Social Enterprise Partnership, as part of the 'Business eScalate' programme run by OxLEP, the Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership. The scheme began in February, with four hubs in Oxford, one in Bicester and one in Didcot.

Social entrepreneurship across Oxfordshire is described by OxLEP as a growing force for change. People from all walks of life are looking at new ways of addressing social and environmental issues. Social entrepreneurs and innovators are setting up and running business ventures that trade for a social and/or environmental purpose.

The Oxfordshire Social Enterprise Partnership (OSEP) has been set up to help existing and prospective social entrepreneurs plan, develop and grow their businesses.

Estimating the number and size of social enterprises in Oxfordshire is difficult, as they exist across a wide range of business sectors, have many different business structures and do not always classify themselves as social enterprises. Following a grant from the Local Enterprise Partnership, OSEP is conducting a mapping exercise of social enterprise activity and estimating its contribution to Oxfordshire's economy.

Social enterprises that would like to be listed, or need to update their listings, should contact OSEP via <https://www.osep.org.uk/contact>

OxLEP describes its eScalate programme as "designed to support social enterprises, social entrepreneurs, enterprising charities and other purposeful businesses" that are committed to having a positive social or environmental impact as well as growing businesses that are looking to scale up.

Grants from £1,000-£25,000 are available for eligible small and medium-sized organisations. For further information, see:

https://www.oxfordshirelep.com/escalate?mc_cid=192ab57612&mc_eid=b2ffd9954f

ON THE POLITICAL RADAR:

"Gerrymandering" democracy

The following is a letter from John Howell MP, which was published in February in the Henley Standard, the only serious local newspaper that remains in South Oxfordshire. We reproduce it here because it deserves a wider audience.

John writes:

"The solution to the issue of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan lies, as it always has done, with SODC. The District Council was advised by its own officers (on 3rd October 2019), by Government in the form of MHCLG (on 20th September 2019), and, for what it is worth, by me to allow the Plan to go to Examination in Public before an Inspector — *with the ability of the Council to put forward changes* (our italics).

"This is the place where issues such as those over the Green Belt and whether its use is appropriate and proportionate can be resolved. But SODC has chosen not to take this course of action although it still could.

"[...] Liberal-Democrats cannot gerrymander democracy to suit their own needs. Many of the other Local Plans produced by district councils in Oxfordshire have already been

through the democratic process, and this is likely to be compromised by the actions of SODC. That is why many of them have objected to the course of action SODC is proposing.”

We should add that the County Council, too, has spent many long hours since the summer with SODC's newly elected members and the district council's professional officers, discussing the implications of their desire to make a political statement by ripping up the long-awaited Local Plan and starting from scratch.

The County has consistently urged SODC to follow the procedure which John Howell outlines in his letter – to develop the Local Plan by proposing amendments while it is being formally examined by an independent inspector.

Now we hear that the leader of the Lib Dem & Green coalition that runs SODC is changing tack and is likely to follow this advice after all. We will update readers when the *status quo* has been resumed.

Every resident of 'extra-care housing' saves the health and social care system an average of around £2,500 per year because they need fewer health service interventions and because they stay out of costlier care homes, according to a new study by researchers in the housing sector.

In this area, there is a growing demand for extra-care housing such as the complex in Windmill Road, Thame. Nick and Jeannette will continue to press the county and district councils to include more of these facilities in their planning.

Readers may recall that the proposed Oxford-Cambridge 'expressway' became something of a contentious issue in the weeks before the 2019 general election. This led the Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps, to state that the Conservatives would review the expressway proposal as a priority if they won the election.

Nick and Jeannette are waiting to hear more about this review, and we will hope to provide an update in the next newsletter. We have been opposed to the expressway since it was first mooted, because (a) even if construction were to start now, the road would largely be a white elephant when it finally opened in a decade or more, and (b) the construction phase would be a lengthy disruption for Thame and the area to the west of the town.

In the meantime, it may be worth pointing out that it was the Lib Dems when in a coalition government who initiated the Oxford-Cambridge Arc scheme, and the Lib Dem election manifesto in 2015 proposed building a massive number of houses along the expressway route.

And finally, hundreds of candidates standing for the local election to Oxford City Council in May will be offered "conflict awareness training". The city council believes that "personal safety is unfortunately a significant issue for members".

In guidance that will be issued to councillors, the city council said seven potential hazards for election candidates included being held against their will, physical attack and the risk of false accusations.

Report by Nick Carter and Jeannette Matelot