County newsletter

November 2020

from Nick Carter & Jeannette Matelot

HIGHWAY AUTHORITY CONSIDERS NEW PARKING ARRANGEMENTS

The County intends to apply to the Department for Transport to change parking enforcement across Oxfordshire from a police responsibility to a civil one.

County Councils are able to apply to the Secretary for State to take on powers for Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE), which allow local authorities to issue penalty charge notices for parking offences under civil law. In districts where CPE is not in place – such as South Oxfordshire – enforcement is supposed to be carried out by the police under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984.

To take on powers for civil enforcement, County Councils are required (on behalf of District Councils) to make an application to the Department for Transport and assess how CPE will be successfully introduced and operated. This assessment demonstrates that the highway authority would provide a service which conforms to the Traffic Management Act 2004, and which would be managed either by the County as the local highway authority or by the District Council as its agent.

In a CPE system, both on-street and off-street parking enforcement would be covered by the same legislation. A parking fine would no longer be considered in the courts and would follow the same nationally standardised appeals process for an off-street ticket. A national independent adjudicator also considers appeals that are not resolved by the issuing authority.

The introduction of CPE means South Oxfordshire would become a 'civil enforcement area', created by a Statutory Instrument in Parliament. Having taken over responsibility from the police, the Highway Authority then retains the income from on-street penalty charge notices, to help fund the scheme, and is also able to consider further measures such as the introduction of parking charges and residents' parking schemes.

The preparation for introducing CPE includes ensuring that map-based Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs), signs and lines associated with parking restrictions are accurate, enforceable and comply with current traffic regulations, so that motorists understand the restrictions in place.

Prior to applying to the Government for CPE, the County is required to carry out extensive consultation with stakeholders, agencies and neighbouring authorities to gain support for the creation of a civil enforcement area. Reponses to these consultations are required as part of the application process.

An initial feasibility study shows that the introduction of CPE in South Oxfordshire, the Vale of White Horse and Cherwell districts would result in an operating loss of more than £50k in its first five years. However, the introduction of additional parking charges – in Banbury, Bicester, Abingdon and Wallingford – could turn this loss into a surplus of more than £370k. This compares with the projected initial set-up costs of £430k across the three districts.

Referring to those four towns, a County Council report says: "The introduction of paid parking would make CPE financially viable and would bring wider benefits to the local economy by encouraging the turnover of parking spaces whilst also encouraging users to think about their travel choices, especially for short journeys."

The report adds: "The communities in each of the districts will see positive economic and social benefits from improved kerbside controls. From the initial baseline of enforcement at CPE's inception will come opportunities to develop the service to meet local needs."

And it continues: "A clear programme would need to be created that sought political support and involved key stakeholders including the police and Town Councils at an early stage."

The answer to a formal question about CPE by Jeannette Matelot at November's County Council meeting was: *"It is currently not our plan to devolve the development and implementation of Civil Parking Enforcement to the Town and Parish Councils at this time.*

"During the feasibility phase of the project, we saw that the best result came from a large-scale project run centrally for the Districts. The scheme could not be made to pay at a more local level. We are keen to maximise the use of local knowledge to inform our deployment models and ensure we can run an efficient and effective service."

The statutory consultation, which would include town and parish councils, is likely to be from February to April next year, and the earliest date for CPE's implementation would then be November 2021.

The above is an edited synopsis of the County Council's detailed report, which is at: https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s53269/CA_OCT1320R23%20Annex%202%20-%20CPE%20business%20case.pdf

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CLIMATE ACTION UNDER WAY

Lessons being learnt in Oxfordshire during the COVID pandemic will be used to help the County achieve its goals for tackling the climate emergency.

A new Climate Action Framework sets out the County's plans to be a carbon-neutral organisation by 2030, and to enable Oxfordshire as a whole to become zero-carbon by 2050. It acknowledges that the Council and the county's towns and villages have adapted to cope with coronavirus, and some of these adaptations have reduced carbon emissions.

The 'decade of action' has begun with the pandemic which has accelerated the pace of learning, the appetite for change, the adoption of new skills, and how we have adapted our lives and work.

One of the priorities for the County's climate action working group is to retrofit streetlights with efficient, environmentally friendly LED lamps, and this work is scheduled to take four years to complete. The County is investing £38m over this period and is expecting savings of more than £75m over the next 20 years. The investment will also fund the replacement of 23,000 lighting columns which are nearing the end of their lives.

This move will reduce the amount of carbon dioxide being produced by 70%. Currently, Oxfordshire's street lights account for around 7,596 tonnes of CO2 every year — representing nearly 35% of OCC's total emissions.

The County acknowledged the climate emergency last year and committed to prioritise action on climate change across its decision-making and all of its services and activities. The new Climate Action Framework is the next logical stage and will affect all aspects of OCC's policies and responsibilities. It includes:

- Replacing its fleet with electric vehicles (EVs) and creating more EV charging points
- Generating its own clean power and buying from green energy sources
- Seeing what services can be delivered digitally
- Promoting active travel such as walking and cycling
- Reducing its demand for energy
- Setting sustainability standards for its suppliers
- Helping schools meet their low-carbon targets
- Maximising waste reduction and recycling.

The Climate Action Framework is at: https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/file/about-council/OCC_Climate_Action_Framework-August2020.pdf

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LOCAL TRACK & TRACE

A local contact-tracing system is intended to help people who have recently tested positive for COVID-19 as part of the County's efforts to stop the spread.

OCC and the county's five district councils are working together to contact people whom the NHS test and trace system is unable to reach.

Where OCC's local call-handlers are unable to contact affected people, trained staff from the district councils visit cases at home or deliver letters asking them to contact the call centre.

They will be advised how to access local support when isolating, and asked about their close contacts so that these can be followed up by the national NHS test and trace team.

The service runs seven days a week, with OCC's calls using an Oxford (01865) phone number. Text messages will also be sent to people with mobile phones telling them to expect a call.

Meanwhile, 600,000 rapid coronavirus tests are now being sent to public health authorities to detect asymptomatic cases. These 'lateral flow' test kits can deliver results in an hour.

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PLAN FOR CYCLE PATH REMAINS A PRIORITY

Despite pre-election rumours and misinformation, a cycle path from Thame to Haddenham remains a priority for the County Council.

The funding for the project so far consists of about £800k which has accrued from S.106 contributions during the last few years in Thame. The idea of a hypothetical addition to this fund was introduced last year in the Government's Growth Deal, but it was entirely dependent on a considerable increase in the number of new homes being built in Thame, over and above the town's existing allocation.

It was soon realised by both the Government and Oxfordshire's Growth Board that this additional housing would not be feasible, and the idea of the hypothetical funding was withdrawn earlier this year.

The answer to a formal question by Nick Carter at November's County Council meeting was as follows:

"The Thame to Haddenham Greenway would route through Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, and is a scheme that is supported by both County Councils. The scheme was originally estimated at £10m, of which £8m was to be funded from the Government's Housing & Growth Deal and the remainder from secured developer contributions.

"Through option appraisals, exploration around land ownership and deliverability, the estimated cost dropped to £4m. It was identified that there is 3rd party land required for the delivery of the scheme. If it couldn't be secured through private agreement, this would need a Compulsory Purchase Order which would delay the delivery beyond the 2023 funding window.

"The housing delivery attributed to this scheme was reviewed by South Oxfordshire District Council, and it was found that the accelerated number of homes was lower than the original estimate, a reduction from 223 to 26 homes. *[Note: this 'accelerated' number was the addition to the existing housing allocation for Thame, mentioned above, and was intended to finance the cost of the cycle way.]*

"As a result of these changes, the Thame to Haddenham scheme could no longer be justified as a scheme that was funded from the Growth Deal due to the low number of accelerated houses now attributed. This is not a reflection of the value of the scheme, merely that it no longer fitted the criteria for the Growth Deal.

"The Housing & Growth Deal agreement meant that the councils needed to demonstrate how Government money provided through the deal is being spent in accordance with value for money requirements, alongside additional information on how a longer-term step-change will be made to plan for and support the delivery of 100,000 homes by 2031.

"The County Council as the accountable body had therefore to recommend this scheme was removed from the Growth Deal programme, and this was endorsed by the Growth Deal Programme Board in early 2020.

"There is wide-held recognition that the scheme provides environmental and social benefits in line with the County Council's and Growth Board's aspirations and objectives around climate action, public health and connectivity to stations and key hubs.

"The scheme therefore remains in place as a pipeline scheme that is currently not fully funded but has some Section 106 funding from Oxfordshire County Council and Buckinghamshire Council. Other funding sources are being investigated but not confirmed. It will re-enter a construction programme when suitable alternative funding is sourced."

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VISITOR FIGURES SHOW CHALLENGE AHEAD

New data show that 2019 was a record year for tourism and the 'visitor economy' in Oxfordshire — and that there is an equally huge challenge to recover after the pandemic.

A report by Experience Oxfordshire, the local tourism organisation, shows the county bucked the national trend last year with a significant increase in visitors' spending. The study points to growth of 9%, taking the value of the visitor economy in Oxfordshire to £2.5 billion per annum.

The newly published Economic Impact Report for Tourism in Oxfordshire shows that the county welcomed nearly 31 million visitors, slightly down on the previous 32 million. The decline was in day visitors, while overnight visits increased.

The report also shows there are more than 42,000 jobs in the sector across Oxfordshire, an increase of 9% on the previous year. More than 3,000 additional jobs were created compared to the previous year, and the total accounted for 12% of all employment in the county.

Overseas visits increased nationally by 3% and across the South-East by 4.5%, but Oxfordshire saw an increase in overseas visits of more than 9%. Experience Oxfordshire has been targeting international markets over recent years and these figures reflect that work.

The benefit of encouraging visitors to stay overnight in Oxfordshire is also clear: 28 million day-trips last year brought £1.23 billion to the county, while more than £824 million was spent in Oxfordshire from just 2.8 million staying trips.

The average spend by an overseas visitor was £492 per trip compared to £215 per trip for domestic visitors. Of these, business visits increased from 19% to 29%, but the main reason for visiting was for a holiday at 45% and visiting friends and relatives accounted for 20%. The largest proportion of visitor spending was in Oxford (40%), and the largest number of visits was to North Oxfordshire (26%) with Oxford City at 25%.

Experience Oxfordshire says its report is a stark contrast to the current situation where businesses in the visitor economy have been badly hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. The organisation continues to lobby for support for the sector and provides advice on funding and support. So far it has dealt with more than 8000 Covid-19 enquiries from local businesses.

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LOCKDOWN UPDATE

Libraries in Oxfordshire are closed during the current four-week lockdown, but a new click-and-collect service has been launched at some of OCC's libraries, including Thame.

To access the click-and-collect service, residents need to complete a short online form available on the council's website, telling the library what sort of books they like to read and how many they would like. Or residents can call 01865 897811.

Experienced staff will handpick up to six books that fit the interests and preferences given, and there is also an option to select a surprise extra book.

This service also covers audiobooks and DVDs, although charges may apply for these. The service user will be notified when the books are ready for collection at one of the 14 participating libraries, including Thame.

The County's library service also has an array of online resources at www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/libraries along with operating its home library service.

Other services

OCC's household waste recycling centres (HWRCs) and registration services are continuing to operate during the current lockdown, although the HWRC at Redbridge in Oxford is closed until 30th November for essential structural repair work.

Residents can still register births and deaths over the phone, but weddings, civil partnerships and citizenship ceremonies at register offices have been paused.

The Oxfordshire Comet bus service is only available for essential journeys for shopping once a week or for medical appointments for individuals who have pre-booked. All group bookings and timetabled services are currently suspended.

Oxfordshire Music Service's Centre for Music is closed to students, but online lessons are continuing. The Oxfordshire History Centre in Cowley, the Oxfordshire Museum in Woodstock and the Museum Resource Centre in Standlake are all closed.

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MEASURED APPROACH TO THE BUDGET

The County is proposing a careful and measured approach to its budget challenges caused by the pandemic, and it aims to minimise the impact on frontline services, protect the most vulnerable and support the county's recovery.

OCC is projecting a £16m shortfall as a result of loss of income and extra expenditure stemming from the pandemic. It is taking a fresh look at all services in order to find new ways of delivering them rather than following the route of cutting services.

The crisis has presented opportunities for new ways of working and making greater use of digital technology. For example, 3,500 members of council staff are continuing to work remotely from home, which has resulted in a saving in utility costs across council buildings.

Recommendations include not filling vacant posts, delaying the purchase of some new equipment and simplifying how the Council delivers new programmes.

The County is facing additional costs and lost income of approximately £51 million as a result of coronavirus. It has received almost £31 million in grant funding, and the Government's Income Guarantee Scheme for sales, fees and charges is expected to provide around a further £4m during the year. This means the overall shortfall this financial year is forecast to be £16 million.

Proposed measures include:

- Around £306,000 saving in utility bills. This is the result of many of the County's buildings being closed for several months, and anticipated increases in utility rates not materialising.

- £400,000 is expected as a result of reduced spend on travel, printing, stationery, expenses and other areas.

- In Adult Social Care, additional funding from the Hospital Discharge Scheme will save £1.3m. Additional funding from NHS England is expected to be made available nationally to support the on-going cost following discharges from hospital since March 2020. This means council funding for care now being met by the Hospital Discharge Scheme (HDS) can be released on a temporary basis. Responsibility for on-going assessed care needs will revert to the Council with assessed contributions from people towards the cost of their care once the HDS ends.

- The total council contribution to the Better Care Fund pooled budget in 2020/21 is £102m. The Better Care Fund (BCF) is a programme spanning both the NHS and local government which seeks to join up health and care services so that people can manage their own health and wellbeing, and live independently in their communities for as long as possible. By increasing the focus on maximising use of residential and nursing beds available through existing contracts, minimising the length of any vacancies, and looking for creative ways to meet needs at lower cost while also helping service users be as independent as possible, it may be possible to reduce spend by around 1% in the second half of 2020/21. This would save £500,000.

- In Children's Social Care a total of £903,000 will be saved due to a revised implementation for the new family safeguarding model of delivering care. A delayed implementation from summer to autumn due to COVID-19 has meant lower running costs this year; redesigning and reducing set-up costs; and reducing the project team that is supporting the implementation. However, the Council is maintaining its frontline investment in the new service so that it can still improve services for children and families.

- The Council allocated £200,000 in 2020/21 to carry out an assessment and redesign of youth services. COVID-19 has prevented it from progressing this work, as services for children in need of immediate help and protection had to be prioritised during the lockdown, while youth groups were not operating in this period. However, the Council has designed a proposal for the assessment that can take place this year, for which £25,000 is earmarked. A saving of £175,000 will therefore be achieved.

- Community Support Services have remained open throughout the coronavirus pandemic which has required the use of different approaches to support people to meet social distancing requirements. During the remainder of 2020/21, this has enabled the Council to identify an alternative base for its community support service in Didcot which has merged with Wantage. Everybody who received a service at Didcot will still do so. This will save £75,000, but also offers the opportunity to explore alternative delivery models for Community Support Services in the future.

- In highways and transport, £500,000 relating to various schemes will be charged to capital (project) budgets instead of from day to day spend in revenue budgets.

- Extra money as a one-off was allocated for 2020/21 for additional vegetation clearance and sign cleaning. A total of £175,000 of additional 2020/21 allocation is being offered back as a potential saving. This does not affect the Council's normal level of service.

- Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service proposes to save £200,000 by delaying plans to replace older diesel vehicles with electric vehicles by one year. The ambition is to have a full fleet of electric cars for general and operational use. It will have no impact on service delivery, but will delay the reduction in emissions from the fleet.

- Last year Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue changed how it worked, increasing the flexibility of the service to meet demand at different times of the day. This trial has allowed it to delay the delivery of one fire engine this year – leading to a 2020/21 saving proposal of £130,000. The service has the resilience to support this for an additional 12 months.

- A review of roles in the Council's Road Agreements Team would contribute to a £230,000 saving. This is about using income the Council receives in a different way. Income will be used to fund some junior posts instead of the Council's base budget. Part of the saving would also be met from a change to how the Council supports its Lead Local Flood Authority work.

These proposals relate only to the current financial year, and a budget for 2021/22 will not be set until February 2021.

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HELP FOR CARE-LEAVERS

Young people in care in Oxfordshire are to benefit from a new peer mentorship programme run by one of the county's homegrown social enterprises.

Oxfordshire Care Leavers Association (OCLA) is a local body supported by the County Council which provides children's social care services. OCLA was formed in 2017 after a group of care-leavers decided to use their experiences to help other youngsters.

The programme will begin by matching five young people aged 13-19 with five older care-leavers who have volunteered their time to share and support those at an earlier stage in the care system. On completion of the pilot stage in 2021, the programme will be expanded to offer more opportunities to others.

The peer mentoring scheme was launched during the recent National Care Leavers Week and is intended to encourage young people to connect with others. The advice and support comes from people who they know have had some of the same experiences.

OCLA also offers training to help care-leavers with independent living skills, and it collaborates with the County Council to develop work placement opportunities with local businesses.
For more information about OCLA: www.oxfordshirecareleaverassociation.co.uk

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UNWANTED HEALTHCARE EQUIPMENT

Anyone who has unused health and social care equipment is being urged to return it. Worldwide manufacturing has slowed because of the pandemic, and new equipment is harder to come by.

Oxfordshire's 'Hand it Back' campaign encourages people to get unused items collected from them. An unused chair or piece of equipment can be recycled for somebody else in need.

The items being sought are:

- Chairs, beds, bed rails and mattresses
- Wheeled commodes
- Any electrical items
- Walking and toilet frames
- Pendent alarm equipment/sensors (Telecare)
- Slings.

All items for return must have a barcoded NRS or Millbrook sticker on them, and they can be collected by NRS Healthcare or taken to the NRS Bicester depot. People must not take items back to other health or social care buildings.

Anybody wanting to give back equipment can arrange a collection by calling NRS Healthcare on 01869 225420 or by sending their details to enquiries@oxfordshire.nrs-uk.net. NRS Bicester Depot is at Unit 8, Longlands Road, OX26 5AH and is open from 8.30am-4.30pm on weekdays.

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EXPANDED GRITTING OPERATION

The County has expanded its team responsible for gritting roads, and 65 drivers are now on standby at OCC's depots in Drayton, Deddington and Woodcote.

Highways managers monitor a bespoke weather forecast several times a day in case road surface temperatures are set to drop, and contingency plans ensure the gritters can hit the road even if a number of drivers are forced to self-isolate at some point during the winter.

Each vehicle is fitted with a satnav set to a specific route, enabling the driver to work through the night, with each run taking about three and a half hours. There are 25 lorries on the road at any one time, and each treatment uses about 220 tonnes of salt. Each time they are called out, the County's gritters cover more than 1,000 miles, salting all A-roads, B-roads and some C-roads.

The gritter drivers all have other day jobs, such as filling potholes, patching roads, and clearing drains.

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ROAD CLOSURES IN TOWERSEY

Road access in Towersey will be restricted at the end of November, while fibre-optic cables are being installed by Airband Community Internet.

Firstly, a section of Chinnor Road will be shut from 23-27 November between 9:30am-3:30pm. Then Manor Road will be closed from 30th November to 2nd December during the same hours.

Access will be maintained for emergency service vehicles and for those frontages within the closure area.

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Report by Nick Carter and Jeannette Matelot