**County Councillors' newsletter**

**December 2020**

*from Nick Carter & Jeannette Matelot*

## POLICE CHIEFS PRESENT THEIR PLANS

Jeannette and Nick were recently able to quiz the Thames Valley's Chief Constable and the local Deputy Police & Crime Commissioner when they presented their 2020/21 strategic plan to the County's main scrutiny committee.

The highlights of the discussion with Chief Constable John Campbell were:

• Amended shift patterns have led to increased police patrols, especially at night, and the number of detectives in local areas has also increased.

• Arrests have increased by 13%, detections by 24%, and 'stop and search' by 58% compared with last year. Mr Campbell said stop and search methods had been under-used in the past, and were now only used in conjunction with body-cams to enable an independent review of video records where necessary.

• More resources have been put into the 101 telephone service, leading to faster call responses.

• The number of online reports received by Thames Valley Police (TVP) in the last six months has trebled to 66,000 compared with the same period in 2019.

• In the five months from 1st June, TVP dealt with 126 protests and demonstrations, including 49 which related to 'Black Lives Matter'.

• The policy for policing Covid19 regulations and dealing with breaches was to engage, to explain, to encourage, and only as a last resort, to enforce.

• While applying that policy, TVP has so far attended 2,800 'Covid-related' incidents in Oxfordshire and has recorded 530 Covid-related crimes in the county.

• There has been a 100% increase in assaults on police officers in the 7 months since 1st April. There are around 4,000 officers in the Thames Valley region, and 945 of them were assaulted during that period, of whom more than 200 were in Oxfordshire. There were 53 Covid-related assaults in Oxfordshire, including 41 officers who were spat at — all of the spitting offenders are now serving an average of 6 weeks in prison.

• A five-day recruitment window in June resulted in 345 applications to join TVP. There are currently 37 PCSO's serving in the South and Vale area of Oxfordshire, and two further PCSO posts will soon be filled.

• An operation took place in September against 'county line' drug dealers in Oxfordshire's South and Vale district, and 90 suspected offenders were arrested.

• A 45% reduction in residential burglaries is attributed to the fact that more people have been working in their homes during the lockdown. However, TVP has dealt with a 20% increase in domestic incidents.

• 'Community Speedwatch' is an initiative which is particularly intended to target antisocial boy racers. A pilot scheme is currently being trialled in Bucks, and another scheme will be introduced in Oxfordshire in the New Year.

• Mr Campbell also explained that one of TVP's challenges during the next 3 years was to save a minimum of £13 million.

The Chief Constable's presentation can be found at:
https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s53515/PSC_NOV1220R05%20-%20TVP%20Presentation.pdf

_____

## YOUR CHANCE TO PLAN FOR 'GOOD GROWTH'

Oxfordshire's Growth Board is planning to develop a 'strategic vision' setting out its ambitions for the well-being of individuals, communities, the economy and the natural and built environments across the county.

It says this vision will help to create "an agreed set of strategic economic, infrastructure and environmental priorities designed to deliver the outcomes that local people want". It intends to work with bodies that are preparing other strategic plans, such as the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 and the Oxfordshire Industrial Strategy, aiming to build consensus around a common set of goals for the county.

The Board explains: "We need to plan positively for growth if we are to realise our ambition of improving our wellbeing. Growth can be defined narrowly in terms of homes, jobs and economic output. But growth can also be inclusive, allowing improvements for individuals and society. We think this is a better approach."

It describes this approach as 'good growth', which will:

• **Be sustainable** – focusing development in ways that enhance quality of place and at locations that enable people to live and work nearby, avoiding unnecessary travel in the first instance, but using opportunities to increase movement by sustainable and active modes of travel when needed.

• **Be healthy and inclusive** – with all development addressing inequalities and contributing positively to the overall health and well-being of Oxfordshire's communities, environment and economy.

• **Be clean and green** – placing the county at the leading edge of UK and global decarbonisation efforts by maximising all opportunities to significantly reduce Oxfordshire's carbon footprint and increasing natural capital across the county.

• **Embrace innovation** – based on the county's technology sectors and knowledge-intensive activity, to develop innovative solutions for working, learning, mobility, health care, energy, sustainable design and improved public services.

• **Facilitate efficient use** – of Oxfordshire's natural resources and land, with priority given to supporting a high-productivity economy.

• **Build resilience to change** – with growth planned in a way that can accommodate changes in technology, and in the way that people live and work, changing demographics, and global impacts, particularly climate and economic changes.

• **Expect high quality** – development which will have a positive impact on communities in terms of design, energy efficiency and the public realm, which utilises low-impact building and construction methods and materials, and which is properly supported by the necessary infrastructure. The Growth Board says: "Everything we build or design in Oxfordshire will be fit for purpose in the world of 2050."

You can read more about 'good growth' at:
http://democratic.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/documents/s49108/OGB.StrategicVision.EngagementDraft.pdf

Individuals, organisations and communities can take part in the Growth Board's consultation at:
https://www.oxfordshireopenthought.org/strategic-vision#respond-now


## LOW-CARBON AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Oxfordshire's Growth Board is hosting a webinar to promote the delivery of low and zero carbon affordable housing.

Expert speakers will showcase exemplar developments, explain the local and national policy environment and discuss the challenges for delivery.

The webinar is on Wednesday 9th December from 11am-1pm. For information and to register for this free event, please see this link: https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/oxfordshire-growth-board-webinar-low-carbon-affordable-housing-tickets-127988008579

————

## NEW GROUP TACKLES SPEEDING

Residents will be given more of a say on how to stop drivers speeding in their neighbourhoods, thanks to a new organisation set up to tackle the problem in Oxfordshire.

The speeding taskforce is a joint initiative between the County Council, the Fire & Rescue Service, and the Police. It was announced to coincide with Road Safety Week in mid-November, and its aims include helping communities to tackle the issue of speeding motorists.

This may involve more enforcement by the Police, or OCC changing the layout of roads or reducing speed limits in areas, but the key point of the new group is to focus on changes in order to save lives.

Deputy Police & Crime Commissioner Matt Barber describes the initiative as a strategic approach which involves more targeted, intelligence-led police enforcement and safer road management by councils.

The organisations will share data about key accident and speeding hotspots. The group will also focus on awareness campaigns, alerting drivers to the consequences of speeding and giving the issue as much attention as drink-driving or not wearing a seatbelt.

It also aims to support communities that want to help tackle speeding by setting up Community Speedwatch groups in their area to monitor motorists who break the limits.

————

## ADVICE ON HEALTHCARE SERVICES

A key part of the healthcare services' winter plan in Oxfordshire is to help people to know which service to use and when.

Local health professionals are urging people to sign up to the NHS App as the winter pressure on services increases.

The all-round NHS App is different from the NHS COVID-19 App, which is specifically focused on combating the virus and the pandemic.

The NHS app helps users to get the right care from the most appropriate place, make a GP appointment and even avoid a visit to a hospital emergency department. The App is to:

- Check your symptoms
- Find out what to do when you need help
- Book and manage appointments at your GP surgery
- Order repeat prescriptions
- View your GP medical record securely
- Register to be an organ donor
- Choose how the NHS uses your data.

The free NHS App can be downloaded from Google Play or Apple app stores.

————

## PANDEMIC SUPPORT FOR SCHOOLS

Local schools are receiving COVID-related support and advice from a County team made up of School Improvement staff and Public Health experts.

The dedicated service helps school leaders deal with COVID-19 cases and offers guidance about closing bubbles or year groups.
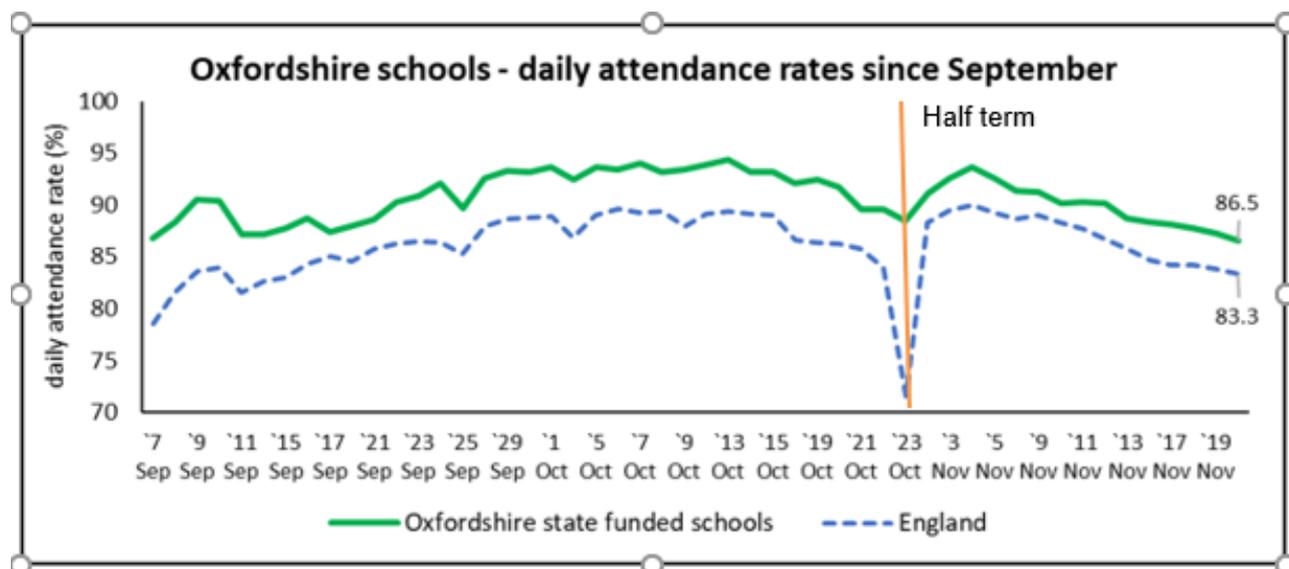
The team meets weekly with the heads of schools and FE colleges, and the managers of early years settings, to update them on local intelligence about the virus and to share good practice. The weekly meetings attract more than 150 headteachers, while monthly briefings are held with school governors and trustees, with over 60 people attending.

OCC's team have also been delivering a range of online training to support headteachers. These include case studies for online learning, which Heads can use with their staff, and a webinar on resilience and wellbeing for headteachers will be held in December to explore the challenges and demands of leading through a crisis. The webinar will be followed by a weekly follow-up for Heads from a professional coach and mentor.

Schools across the county have been working to ensure they remained fully open during the autumn term. In total, 8 primaries schools, 1 secondary school and 2 special schools have had to close and, in all cases, this was due to a lack of staff.

Two members of OCC's Education team have been deployed full time to coordinate support and advice if a school has had a confirmed COVID-19 case or outbreak, and they have been supported by two members of the Public Health team.

The overall daily attendance rate in Oxfordshire's maintained schools, including academies, has remained consistently above the national average, as shown by this graph:



Daily attendance in primary schools has been high at 93%, while the attendance rate in secondary schools was between 80%-85% at the end of November. Where pupils need to remain at home, 'remote' education has consisted of a blend of text book, work book and online teaching, and there has also been some face-to-face teaching.

## FOCUS ON PUPILS WITH MILITARY PARENTS

All schools receive funding from the Department for Education for every Service pupil on roll (currently £310 per annum). This is to enable the school to mitigate against the impact of parents' regular deployment.

The County supports this with training to help headteachers and governors to review their spending and its impact, and to help them to strengthen the work they are undertaking.

A new Children's Progression Alliance Hub was launched in Oxfordshire on 23rd November, joining seven other regional hubs in England, one in Wales and one in Scotland. These alliance hubs bring people together to support practitioners and professionals to champion the progression of children and young people from Armed Forces families and ensure the best outcomes.

The new Oxfordshire hub is a joint venture between OCC's School Improvement team and Oxford University. It is the first hub to be jointly led by a local authority, making it a unique collaboration. The hub connects professionals to ensure the success of the Armed Forces Covenant and strengthens local efforts for the benefit of local Service children.

Further details about the Armed Forces Covenant are here:
https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/council/armed-forces-oxfordshire/armed-forces-covenant

_____

## STAY ALERT FOR SCAMS

The County's trading standards team is continuing to warn residents to be on their guard against criminals and scammers exploiting the pandemic.

Officers are aware of various scams targeting people by email, text and on the doorstep, such as:

- People offering miracle cures or vaccines for coronavirus
- People impersonating healthcare workers, claiming to offer 'home-testing' for COVID
- Emails offering a refund on council tax or utility bills
- People asking for money upfront to do shopping, and then disappearing
- People selling new mobile phone apps that claim to give updates on the virus, but instead lock your phone and demand a ransom.

The Trading Standards service's advice is: "It is ok to 'take five' and give yourself time to think about it. Have the confidence to put the phone down, delete the text or email, or shut the door."

Victims should report any scam to Action Fraud: 0300 123 2040. Other advice is available from Citizens Advice consumer helpline on 0808 223 1133, or Age UK's support service for older people and carers on 01865 411288.

_____

## FIRE SERVICE'S ANTI-TERRORISM SQUAD

Oxfordshire Fire & Rescue Service (OFRS) has joined with neighbouring fire services to create a team of specialist officers who will respond to terrorist incidents.

Their intention is to support police and ambulance services in the event of a marauding terrorist attack and to work within what is referred to as the 'warm zone' at such an incident.

OFRS exercises regularly with other fire, emergency and military services in the Thames Valley in order to test their resilience and response, and a recent week-long exercise simulated a terrorist attack on a train.

In Oxfordshire, OFRS is an integral part of the County Council, which last year spent £26 million on the service, equating to about 10p per day for each person in the county. Total expenditure per member of staff at OFRS was £50,700, which was less than the average for fire & rescue services in the South-East.

_____

## PLANS FOR SOLAR FARM

OCC is objecting to aspects of a proposal to build a large solar farm on the outskirts of Tetsworth.

The proposal is for the construction of a solar photovoltaic farm and associated infrastructure (including inverters, substation compound, security cameras, fencing and access tracks) at Harlesford Farm and neighbouring sites.

The County's civil engineers say the planning application needs to include a sustainable drainage system, based on information from the Environment Agency about the ability of surrounding watercourses to cope with surface water and flooding on the site.

And the County's archaeologists are calling for a comprehensive archaeological evaluation of the site, including a geophysical survey and aerial photography.

They say this would "define the character and extent of the archaeological remains within the application area, and ensure that the significance of any heritage assets lost is understood before any decision is taken".

OCC's objections to the proposal are in response to a consultation by the local planning authority, SODC. The consultation runs until 4th December, and the details are at: https://data.southoxon.gov.uk/ccm/support/Main.jsp?MODULE=ApplicationDetails&REF=P20/S3245/FUL

————————

## INSPIRATION FROM ARC LEADERS…

A fascinating webinar about the Oxford-Cambridge Arc is intended to bring residents and businesses up to date on the future of our region, which the Government views as increasingly important to the country's economy.

The Arc's name refers to the geographical ellipse from Oxford at one end to Cambridge at the other, with Milton Keynes in its centre, consisting of five county councils and numerous planning authorities.

The webinar's inspiring presentations focus on the huge prospects in the Arc region for economic development, technological innovation, the future of business and industry, and the green sustainability that will underpin transformational growth with the backing of the Government and international investment.

The discussions also include an explanation of the vital role of the Arc's group of nine universities by Prof Sir Peter Gregson, Cranfield's vice-chancellor.

The aim of the 90-minute webinar is to introduce and explain the ideas and developments that will have a significant impact on Oxfordshire in the years ahead. The link to the recording is: https://m.youtube.com/watch?t=1219s&v=3ZeO-MKy0CA

The webinar followed the recent launch of the Arc's economic prospectus, which can be found at: https://news.oxfordshire.gov.uk//services/downloadfile.php?f=oxford-cambridgearcprospectus-approved.pdf&uid=935113&hash=377820846837d283f5f3817f46f29d1433389fbc

## …CRITICISM FROM ENVIRONMENT CAMPAIGNERS

The Ox-Cam Arc is not without its critics, however, including the Oxfordshire branch of CPRE, the Campaign for the Protection of Rural England, which says the Arc has "no justification in geography or history, and is a promotional device to justify over-development".

In its autumn newsletter, CPRE says:"We call on our local authorities to reject both the Arc-wide economic prospectus and the concept of an Arc-wide spatial framework.

"The focus should return to the Oxfordshire 2050 Plan, the strategic spatial plan for the county, which is the appropriate level at which to be discussing and agreeing the future of Oxfordshire, engaging with local communities through a proper democratic process."

CPRE is particularly critical of the Arc Leaders Executive Group, which consists of a number of council leaders and others, whose role is to collaborate with the Government to ensure the Arc's success. Their meetings are not public, and the minutes are not published.

"On whose authority are our council leaders pursuing this course of action?" asks CPRE. "Local people have not been asked for their view of the Arc. When there has been limited consultation, such as on the Expressway, residents have resoundingly rejected the proposals."

————————

## FIBRE BROADBAND FUND

The County's Digital Infrastructure Programme has been awarded £1m by the Govt to help hard-to-reach rural premises to access full fibre broadband.

The funding tops up the existing broadband voucher scheme up to a value of £7,000 for each qualifying residential or business property in Oxfordshire and it provides an opportunity to increase broadband speeds up to 1,000Mb/s on a full-fibre connection.

Applications must form part of a group project — two or more residents and/or SMEs must combine their vouchers towards the shared cost of infrastructure, as single connections are not eligible for funding. The application process starts at: https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk

————

## A40 WORKS AT TETSWORTH

A huge project to stabilise the crumbling embankments on the A40 at Tetsworth is finally coming to an end, and the road will be open again on 12th December.

Despite higher than average autumn rainfall, the re-construction of the embankments has progressed well, and the large team's final activities during early December include finishing the footway reconstruction, reinstating boundary hedging and fencing, and laying a new road surface.

OCC now says the roadworks will be completed on Friday 11th December, and the road will be reopened the next day.

This picture illustrates the scale of the work to rebuild an embankment along this section of the A40, which acts as a relief road for motorway traffic if the M40 has to be closed.



————

## WATCHING OUT FOR DOMESTIC ABUSE

During lockdowns, people suffering domestic abuse are less able to reach out for help, which means the whole community has a role in looking out for neighbours and friends.

The County's domestic abuse service helps people at risk by finding safe alternative accommodation or by increasing safety measures to enable them to remain at home. Its advice is:

• Anyone in immediate danger should phone 999.

• If in danger and unable to talk on the phone, dial 999 and then press 55. This will transfer the call to police, who will assist without the caller having to speak.

• OCC's service offers free advice on 0800 731 0055 (Mon-Fri 10am-7pm), or via email at das@a2dominion.co.uk

• Alternatively, call the 24-hour national helpline: 0808 2000 247.

• Anyone who is worried about causing harm to loved ones can also get help by contacting Respect Phoneline on 0808 802 4040 or https://respectphoneline.org.uk/

———————

## SUCCESSFUL DEBUT FOR CONTACT-TRACING TEAM

More than 500 residents have been successfully reached and had their contacts identified by Oxfordshire's local Covid contact-tracing system since the service launched in mid-October.

The success of the local team over the past few weeks has been a key factor in the recent fall in Oxfordshire's Covid cases. The 500 local contacts would not otherwise have been reached and may have gone on to spread the virus during October and November.

The scheme is a partnership between OCC, Public Health England, NHS Test & Trace, Oxford's two universities, and the five district councils. The NHS Test & Trace national system initially tries to contact all cases in the county, but where they are unable to reach someone within 24 hours, the case passes to Oxfordshire's local contact-tracing team.

OCC's call-handlers first try to reach cases by phone, but if they are unable to get through, trained staff from the district councils visit the relevant individuals at home or deliver letters asking them to contact the call centre.

The affected people are advised to isolate, told how to access local support and asked about details of their own contacts so these can be followed up by the national NHS Test & Trace team.

The local service has been running seven days a week, with calls coming from OCC's call centre using a local (01865) phone number. Text messages and emails are also sent to people with mobile phones and email addresses telling them to expect a call.

The Government decides which areas of the country are allowed to launch local test & trace systems based on criteria including the number of local cases being reported. Oxfordshire was given approval to launch its own local system on 13th October and was one of the first in the South-East to go live.

———————

## INDEPENDENT HEAD OF SAFEGUARDING

The new independent Chairman of the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board is Derek Benson, who took up the role at the start of November.

Derek's background includes operational and strategic experience in the Metropolitan and Essex police forces, and he currently chairs a number of other safeguarding partnerships.

He takes over from the Oxfordshire board's former chairman Richard Simpson and the subsequent interim chairwoman Jane Portman.

———————

## MICRO-MANAGING THE ROADS

The highway authority's 'micro-surfacing' programme recently came to an end before the onset of winter.

OCC's contractors took advantage of mild weather between the spring and autumn to treat 26 sites with 'micro asphalt' — a cost-effective method which protects surfaces for around 10 years.

This year's programme covered 4.6km of carriageway with 76 tonnes of binder, 520 tonnes of stone and 5.3 tonnes of cement.

'Micro' is a surface treatment for protecting and prolonging the structural integrity of a carriageway without the need for more costly and disruptive repairs. The County has been running micro programmes since 2016, due to the advantages over conventional resurfacing:

- It is applied cold, so traffic can often use a treated road just 20 minutes after micro asphalt has been installed.
- More work can be completed during a day, minimising traffic disruption and congestion.
- It seals the surface, keeping out water from pavement structures and minimising pothole formation.
- It can reshape and re-profile existing surfaces by filling shallow defects such as potholes, cracks and ruts.

Its initial appearance seems untidy and unfinished, but it gradually improves as the treatment is embedded by passing vehicles, and with mechanical sweeping to remove excess chippings.

The standard material is typically used on residential roads but it can also be installed on dual carriageways with tweaks to the material specification.

————

## MORE CHARGING POINTS IN CAR PARKS

A £5.2 million 'Park & Charge' programme in Oxfordshire is among the first of its kind in the UK and is set to provide up to 280 fast-charging points across the county next year.

OCC acknowledges that interest in electric vehicles is rising, but also that people are being held back because they can't easily charge them outside their home. It says an estimated 35% of residents having no access to off-street parking.

Its Park & Charge project offers residents the opportunity to park for free overnight in council-owned car parks, with access to top-of-the-range electric charging points. The project is being funded by Innovate UK, and OCC's partners in the programme also include SSE Enterprise, Urban Integrated UK and the University of Oxford, as well as the district councils.

————

## HIGH DEMAND FOR FLU JABS

Flu vaccination clinics in Oxfordshire have been extremely popular, and GP practices have had to take extra precautions to ensure vaccinations are carried out safely.

At the start of November, Oxfordshire was slightly above the Thames Valley average for flu vaccinations with 70.5% of those over 65 years old having had theirs (against a target of 75%).

The vaccination programme's focus has now shifted to pregnant women and 'at risk' under-65s.

————

## WATCHDOG CONCERNED ABOUT ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

Many changes in primary care that were forced or progressed during the pandemic have been welcomed by patients — including same-day access to a GP, and remote consultations which avoid travel to hospitals.

However, according to the watchdog Healthwatch Oxfordshire, many patients have also challenged a perceived lack of equality in accessing services. In its report to the County's health scrutiny committee in November, Healthwatch says it has increasingly heard concerns during the pandemic about access to GP services and acute care services.

The report says: "What is apparent is that not all patients' experience of access to health care is the same. Whilst some have a positive experience, others have a negative one — with long delays in accessing hospital treatment, and poor communications.

"Together with national statements about the success of digital care — telephone triage, telephone consultations, online out-patient appointments — there is a growing concern within the population that the current mode of service delivery will continue and become the 'new normal'.

"Locally, the recent public spat between GPs and acute services did not give confidence to the public that the system is working together for the benefit of patients.

"There is a need for the commissioners and service-providers to be open and accountable with patients and the wider population about what they think/plan the future will be. To listen to not only the positives of changes but also the individual and community challenges to moving towards a more digital — and distant — service."

The report concludes: "This is a responsibility of individual GP surgeries and acute service specialities. One approach does not fit all services, communities or individuals."

Further details are at: https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s53895/JHO_NOV2620R12%20-%20Healthwatch%20Oxfordshire%20Report.pdf

_____

## NEW POWER TO TACKLE COVID BREACHES

The County has been handed a new power by the Government, to shut businesses for up to a week if they breach coronavirus regulations.

The new measure will allow OCC to 'formally request rapid improvement' by any offending firm, and finally to close premises for 48 hours or seven days 'where appropriate through the issuing of notices'. Breaching improvement and restriction notices could attract fines of £2,000 and £4,000 respectively. The Government wants this new power to enable 'swift and effective action against premises that pose a risk to public health'.

The County's Covid response structure has been tried and tested since the first wave of the virus, and it is designed to manage OCC's own response to the pandemic as well as to coordinate a multi-agency response across Oxfordshire.

Gold is the term for OCC's own strategic decision-making body, while Silver is its coordinating body. The two groups are supported by senior officers in a number of 'cells', including education, finance, facilities management and communications.

They tie in with two similar groups across Oxfordshire's other public agencies, which comprise senior representatives from Oxford University Hospitals, Oxford Health, the county's Clinical Commissioning Group, Thames Valley Police, and the Local Enterprise Partnership.

The groups are also closely aligned with the Health Protection Board, which is chaired by the County's director of public health, Ansaf Azhar, and they share a similar membership in order to coordinate countywide planning and responses to the pandemic.

Anyone with symptoms should book a local test via nhs.uk/coronavirus or by calling 119.

_____

## CITY MOVES CLOSER TO ZERO EMISSIONS

Motorists who drive into Oxford should be aware that plans are progressing to turn the city centre into a 'zero-emissions zone' (ZEZ).

A pilot scheme will be introduced next summer in a small area of the city, in which a sliding scale of charges will be applied for access by vehicles that are not 'zero-emission'. if this is successful, the intention would be to apply the same charges in the rest of the city centre in spring 2022.

A consultation on the ZEZ pilot scheme runs until 17th January 2021, and the County is asking for views after an earlier consultation was paused in March 2020 because of the pandemic.

The proposed ZEZ aims, in particular, to reduce air pollution. Last January, a study by Centre for Cities showed that at least one in 17 deaths in Oxford is related to pollution. This followed a report in 2014 by Public Health England which showed that long-term exposure to air pollution in Oxford could be responsible for 6% of all deaths of people aged 25-plus.

The initial pilot would charge drivers using the 'red zone' between 7am-7pm, depending on their vehicle emissions. Only 100% zero-emission vehicles would be free of charge, and various discounts are proposed for some vehicles including blue badge holders.

The pilot scheme covers Bonn Square, Queen Street, Cornmarket, part of Market Street, Ship Street, St Michael's Street, New Inn Hall Street, and Shoe Lane.

Responses to the consultation will be assessed by the County in time for a decision on the scheme in March 2021. The link is:
https://consultations.oxfordshire.gov.uk/consult.ti/formalzezpilot/consultationHome

————

### SHORT STORY COMPETITION FOR ALL AGES

The County's libraries have launched their annual short story competition for 2021 and are encouraging new writers of all ages to join in.

The winner from each of three categories will see their short story published as an e-book, available to be borrowed via the library website. Previous winners have been some of the most borrowed e-books in the County's library collection.

Now in its seventh year, the competition has added a third category for children to enter their short stories. This follows the success of a children's poetry & art competition earlier in 2020, when the library service was inundated with the response from children and young people.

The categories for the 2021 short story competition are:
- Children aged 5-11 years
- Young Adults 12-17 years
- Adults 18 years +

The competition is free to enter, and the closing date for entries is Sunday 21st February. Instructions on how to submit entries are at: http://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/shortstorycompetition

————

### VIRTUAL CHRISTMAS PRESENTS FOR HOSPITAL PATIENTS

Oxford Hospitals Charity is hoping communities in Oxfordshire will give a virtual 'gifts' to people spending Christmas in hospital.

In previous years, groups and individuals across Oxfordshire have donated toys and gifts at Christmas for patients of all ages at Oxfordshire's hospitals. This year the festive toy and gift drops cannot take place, and so the Charity has a new virtual gift-giving scheme to provide some Christmas cheer on the wards.

By going to www.hospitalcharity.co.uk/giveagift you can donate a toy for a child, a gift for an older patient, or support one of the projects to make local hospitals more welcoming for patients.

————

### HOME SCHOOLING INCREASES

The number of home-schooled children in England has risen by 38% year-on-year to nearly 76,000, according to a survey of 150 councils.

Fears around Covid were the main reason given by parents for home-schooling their children.

However, the Association of Directors of Children's Services cautioned that "without a statutory register it is impossible to know of every child or young person who is being electively home educated".

The Government has yet to publish its response to a 2019 Department for Education consultation on setting up a register of children and young people who are not educated in school.

_____

## £160m EXPANSION OF OXFORD STATION

The Oxfordshire Growth Board, representing OCC and the county's five district councils, has backed Network Rail's plans for a £160m expansion and redevelopment of Oxford's train station.

The backing comes after a study suggested a need for a 70% increase in services by 2028. The Government will now need to decide on Network Rail's application.

_____

## DEDICATION TO DUTY

We were pleased to see highway contractors working during the lockdown to repair the worst parts of Marsh End in Tetsworth. They spent three days in the November rain working on the badly damaged road surface and will be back next year to resurface the whole pavement.

_____

*Newsletter by Nick Carter & Jeannette Matelot*

*County Councillors for Thame & Chinnor*

*(the County's Thame & Chinnor division includes the villages of Aston Rowant, Crowell, Henton, Kingston Blount, Moreton, Sydenham, Tetsworth and Towersey).*