

REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS FEBRUARY 2024 FROM CLLR CLLR KEVIN BULMER

GENERAL OCC REPORT

COUNCILS SECURE £600M ADDITIONAL FUNDING PACKAGE

Communities Secretary Michael Gove last month announced a total of £600m of additional funding for local authorities in England – including a £500m addition to the social care grant, and a £100m increase in core spending power. OCC is expected to benefit to the tune of approximately £5m.

BUDGET PROPOSALS FOR 2024/25

This unexpected development noted above means that the Liberal Democrat/Green administration and opposition groups are having to rework their Budget proposals. As previously reported, the minority administration cannot pass a Budget without support of the opposition parties. A meeting of Full Council on Tuesday 20th February will vote on the options, however intense negotiations between the parties are expected in advance of this once the proposals have been published.

JUMP IN PROFITS MADE KEEPING CHILDREN IN CARE

The Times reported last month that Children's groups have accused private sector-backed firms of making "obscene" profits, charging councils up to £280,000 per year to care for young people. An investigation reveals the average cost of residential care for a child is £5,400 per week, exceeding £10,000 in some cases. Councils pay 25% more than two years ago, and the income of the top 20 independent care operators reached £1.63bn last year, with 19% as profit - up six points from the year before. The House Magazine survey shows the average annual cost of residential placement is £281,000, six times the cost of keeping an adult in prison. The highest annual average was £373,000 in the London borough of Sutton. The Children's Home Association argued: "There is a huge difference between 'profit' and 'profiteering'. The cost increase between public and private provision has been comparable for several years."

FIXMYSTREET APP IMPROVEMENTS FOR QUICKER AND MORE EFFICIENT RESPONSE

Oxfordshire's FixMyStreet app, which allows residents to report potholes, faulty streetlights and a host of other street defects and queries, has been updated. The number of categories has been streamlined but they have now been split up into sub-categories to make it easier for people to find the section they are looking for. In some cases, more information and illustrations have been provided to help users choose the most appropriate category. The changes are aimed at reducing the number of reports sent to the wrong department or council, which can delay the problem being resolved. The updated version also includes an aerial map of the county, as well as a regular map, to help people pinpoint the location of the problem. The changes will be monitored over the next three months to see what impact they have, and the views of users will be sought. More than 1,000 reports are regularly made to Fix My Street every week, with users encouraged to include photographs of the defect to help the inspectors. Where the issue is Oxfordshire County Council's responsibility, an inspector will prioritise it depending on how dangerous it is and the person making the report will be kept up to date on its progress.

LAUNCH OF ALL-ELECTRIC BUS FLEET TO SERVICE OXFORD PASSENGERS

A partnership between OCC and bus operators has launched what will be one of the biggest UK fleets of electric buses outside London. The £82.5 million project will deliver 159 new battery buses on to the roads of Oxford – the first of which have already gone into service. It has also funded two associated electric charging hubs at the city’s bus depots. The bus fleet has been funded through a collaboration between the county council and Oxford Bus Company, owned by The Go-Ahead Group, and Stagecoach. The council was awarded £32.8m from the government’s Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) scheme and contributed £6m directly, while bus operators invested £45m. The Conservative Opposition welcomes this development but continues to lament the focus on Oxford at the expense of rural areas.

DISPOSE OF LIMITED QUANTITIES OF DIY WASTE FREE – BUT BOOK FIRST

A new system is in place at recycling centres following change in legislation. Oxfordshire residents can now dispose of limited amounts of DIY waste free at the county’s household waste recycling centres (HWRCs) by using an online booking system. The booking system, which was launched by OCC last month, means householders wanting to use their free DIY waste allocation will need to book in advance through the [website](#). The move follows a change in government legislation which now permits small amounts of household DIY waste to be disposed of free. The legislation came into force at the beginning of January. Online bookings for free DIY waste only are for a single visit. Oxfordshire residents will need to register their address, vehicle registration number, email address, and the date they wish to visit, along with the site they want to use. They will then receive an immediate email confirmation of their booking, which must be shown to site team on arrival. It is important residents stick to their booked date otherwise they may be charged, and only authorised bookings will be accepted. Free allocations are limited to five standard DIY items for free, or one plasterboard sheet, once every seven days. Where more than the allocated free allowance is presented, the cheapest items will be treated as free. Any DIY waste above this level or deposited more frequently than every seven days will remain fully chargeable at the advertised rates. Full details and examples of charging scenarios are available on the [Oxfordshire County Council website](#) and will be available on site. Examples of DIY waste include baths, sinks, toilets, cisterns, and a 20-litre bag of rubble or tiles. Five of these items would make up a household’s free seven-day allocation. The booking system for free DIY waste will only permit residents to make one visit every seven days. For example, if a free booking is made for a Tuesday, the next free allocation will not be permitted until the following Tuesday. However, all residents can visit more often than every seven days, but the DIY waste brought on those visits will then be fully chargeable at the advertised rates. The booking system and free DIY allowance is only for Oxfordshire residents. Non-Oxfordshire residents can still use the county’s sites for DIY waste without booking but will be charged in full at the advertised rates.

PROPOSAL TO MOVE COUNTY COUNCIL OFFICES TO NEW OFFICES TO PROGRESS

After extensive and independent evaluation, and consideration by a cross-party cabinet advisory group on city centre accommodation, it’s proposed that the council moves its Oxford headquarters from County Hall to a reimagined Speedwell House campus. The sale or lease of County Hall is expected to meet the refurbishment costs of Speedwell House, which is already owned by OCC. The old part of County Hall, which includes the council chamber and coroner’s court, would be included in engagement with the market to inform a final decision on its future. The report to Cabinet was clear that doing nothing is not an option – there would be significant investment required in County Hall to bring up to appropriate standards. It adds that by proposing to proceed with relocation to Speedwell House, not only would the council regenerate

that part of Oxford but the release of County Hall would allow for better strategic planning in the West End of Oxford. The report was approved by Cabinet on Tuesday, 23 January.

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OCC BUDGET 2024/25 REVIEW

OCC Full Council met for a marathon 10-hour session on Tuesday 20th February to debate budget proposals. The minority LibDem/Green administration put forward their proposals, then the Conservative Independent Alliance (the official Opposition) and the Labour Group each put forward proposed amendments.

The Conservative Independent Alliance sought to slim down the 50-strong PR/Strategy team, refocus the ever-expanding Climate team, push back the Oxford congestion measures that are intended to extract £57m from motorists over a five-year period, allocate more money for vulnerable children (particularly Special Educational Needs and Disability) and to meet demands from residents to spend much more on roads and drains. Regrettably, these ambitions were thwarted by the LibDem/Green and Labour groups.

At the end of the meeting it became clear the debate had been pointless as the minority administration accepted the Labour amendments in their entirety. The fact that the revised budget papers had been pre-prepared suggested this was always the intended outcome, and that the minority administration believed they could not run the council without wholehearted Labour support.

Full details of the final budget are available on the council website. These show that the Labour amendments accepted by the administration will result in a massive extra borrowing of £23.45m. As usual, Labour focused on Oxford-centric matters, including Oxford parking zones, Oxford ANPR cameras, Oxford congestion, Oxford Mini-Holland project (at a capital cost of £2m per year) and an Oxford Citizens Assembly (at a cost of £150,000).

The nine priorities of the administration remain unchanged: 1) Climate Emergency, 2) Tackle Inequalities, 3) Health & Wellbeing, 4) Social Care, 5) Sustainable Transport, 6) Nature Access, 7) Children's Opportunities, 8) Vibrant Democracy, 9) Business Cooperation. Despite repeated resident surveys and feedback from Councillors which show that roads and drains are near the top of the list of resident concerns, they still fail to get a mention and it is likely satisfaction with the council will continue to decline.

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