**2020/2021**

News

Update

Oxfordshire County Council

**Annual Parish Report**

**A summary of key events during the past year**

**INTRODUCTION**

As County Councillor, I represent Chalgrove and Watlington Division, which is made up of some fifteen parishes across South East Oxfordshire. It is my pleasure to present this report to you and if there is anything I can help with, all my contact details are on the OCC website.

In addition to representing the interests of residents in this Division and my place on Full Council, I am Cabinet Member for Children and Family Services and, in this capacity, chair several related committees.

**COVID-19**

Obviously, the past year has been dominated by dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. It has had a huge impact on how we as a Council have delivered our services, with most of our offices being closed and many staff working remotely online, dealing with residents as well as holding many internal meetings. All Council, Cabinet and other committee meetings have been driven online and members’ attendance at local Parish Council meetings has followed suit.

An upside to this has been the discovery that much of our work CAN be delivered far more efficiently via online systems, though not all, as personal contact is still vital in areas such as children’s services. Nevertheless, significant savings in travel costs have been achieved if nothing else.

The long-term effects of Covid on how we conduct our business are yet to be felt but we intend to take forward the positive lessons we have learned by implementing such things as hybrid meetings to minimise travel time and costs, and selective home-working for our staff.

Some of the savings achieved during the pandemic include:

* A potential £306,000 saving in utility bills. This is the result of many of the county council’s buildings being closed for several months due to COVD-19, and to anticipated increases in utility rates not materialising.
* A saving of £400,000 is expected because 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 19 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 is anticipated that 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 model of implementation for the new family safeguarding model of delivering care, which is being introduced during 2020/21. A delayed implementation from summer to autumn due to COVID-19 has meant lower running costs in this year; redesigning and reducing set-up costs; 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 the council 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 been operational 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, and it will be looking for groups/organisations to bid to undertake this work. 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 and Rescue propose 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.

**Local government structure**

During summer 2020, independent experts took a fresh look at the different options for local government structures that could emerge for debate among communities and councillors in Oxfordshire as the nation awaits a Government blueprint for the future.

Cherwell District Council and Oxfordshire County Council recently commissioned a piece of work to look at the various options that may be viable in the county. This followed a motion unanimously agreed by county councillors in July.

Both councils asked experts at PwC to complete the work. PwC are currently acting in an advisory capacity to Government and other local authorities undertaking similar pieces of work.

The report sets out a high-level appraisal of three options for local government reform in Oxfordshire:

1. Optimising the existing two-tier collaboration

2. Establishing a new single unitary authority

3. Establishing two new unitary authorities, based on a 50/50 split of the population to meet Government criteria around size

It is important to note that this review does not seek to make recommendations about the future of local government in Oxfordshire. Instead, it examines three options, which have been modelled using existing published data, and is designed to provide a useful basis for a positive conversation about how we can work as a local authority family across Oxfordshire to achieve the best outcome for residents.

Oxfordshire currently has one county council providing services such as social care for adults and children, highways, libraries, fire and rescue, trading standards, registration services (births, deaths, and marriages). Oxfordshire County Council is also the local education authority.

Oxford City Council, Cherwell District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council, South Oxfordshire District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council provide services such as waste collection, environmental health, planning, leisure, and housing.

We await direction from central government as to how these options may be moved forward.

**Budget for 2021/22**

Full Council agreed a balanced budget in February 2021 that will provide continued investment in key services and avoid any cuts to frontline delivery. Locally, councillors’ Priority Fund budgets have been reduced, spreading the usual £15,000 over a two-year period, effectively halving the amount we have available to support local initiatives but also ensuring that we still have some means to continue our support for these projects.

Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you require any further information.

Above all please take care, stay safe and follow the advice.

Kind regards

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**Steve Harrod**

County Councillor

*Chalgrove & Watlington Division*

Cabinet Member for Children & Family Services

**Oxfordshire County Council**

M: 07944 077 209

T: 01844 278 068

E: [steve.harrod@oxfordshire.gov.uk](mailto:steve.harrod@oxfordshire.gov.uk)

W: <https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/mgUserInfo.aspx?UID=9776>