

COUNTY COUNCILLOR'S ANNUAL REPORT – APRIL 2011-2012

COUNCIL TAX

The Council Tax was not increased in 2011/12 thanks to central government support, and there will be a second year of tax freeze in 2012/13 due to a further £7 million grant from government. This is good news especially when people are struggling with frozen or declining incomes to know that there is at least one household bill that has not increased over three years.

At the same time the County Council has been working very hard to deliver savings of £119 million over the medium term – 2011/12 to 2015/16. During the current year savings of £55 million have been achieved. Senior management has been reduced by 40% and overall the Council provides 600 less jobs than a year ago. But while achieving these savings the Council has protected the fire & rescue service and vulnerable children and will continue to do so.

It is clear that the public spending position will remain challenging – probably for the next ten years. But the County Council is confident that our forward planning has placed us in a strong position to meet whatever further challenges we face.

REVISED PLAN FOR LIBRARIES

After a huge outcry in response to an original set of proposals that would have seen 20 libraries closed, and a subsequent four month long public consultation, the County Council agreed to revised plans for the county's library network on 12th December 2011. This plan will see all 43 libraries remain open. 22 libraries will stay fully staffed by council employees; 16 will be manned by a mix of paid personnel and volunteers and the remaining 5 will be two-thirds staffed by the council and one-third by volunteers.

After making strong representations to my colleagues, I was delighted that Berinsfield library was switched from the group facing potential closure, into the core group of 22 libraries that will continue to receive a comprehensive service and remain fully staffed by the Council.

MINERALS & WASTE CORE STRATEGY 2012 - 2030

Over the past year it has been my responsibility to oversee the progress of the Minerals & Waste Core Strategy which covers the County Council's plan for minerals (including gravel) extraction and waste management over the next twenty years. This wide ranging plan has been in development for more than seven years and has been the subject of three separate public consultations.

The plan was agreed by the Minerals & Waste Working Group on February 24th 2012, accepted by the Growth & Infrastructure Scrutiny Committee on 27th February 2012, agreed by the Cabinet on 13th March 2012 and endorsed by the whole County Council on 3rd April 2012. Conditional upon one further check for soundness the plan can now move forward towards a public inquiry in the Autumn and final adoption by the Secretary of State hopefully by the end of 2012 or early 2013. There is a vital and pressing need to provide clarity and certainty within the county's minerals and waste planning process for all concerned, and I am hopeful that we are now quite close to achieving that objective.

Minerals (Gravel Extraction) Proposals

The County Council responded to the final consultation and in particular to the objections to the inclusion of Cholsey/Wallingford as the preferred option for an extraction area in the south of the county to replace Sutton Courtenay when it runs out in about 8 years time. After careful re-examination of the proposals, our officers are confident that Cholsey is the best option in terms of location, lack of constraints, closeness to market and access to good transport links. Many of the concerns raised by the Cholsey campaigners are issues that should and could be dealt with at the planning application stage through mitigation measures and are not relevant for inclusion in a strategic document.

Waste Proposals

These proposals make provision for both municipal and commercial waste. A key challenge for this council is to provide and enable facilities that will increase recycling and the recovery of materials as an alternative to sending them to landfill.

Oxfordshire has been hugely successful in recycling, indeed at over 60% our figures make us the best county council waste authority in the country, which is a reflection of the joint vision we hold with our colleagues on the District & City Councils, and the truly commendable commitment of the county's residents.

As Chairman of the Oxfordshire Waste Partnership, I have been pleased to promote this success and encourage even greater levels of recycling by raising our target to 70% by 2025 which will in turn result in our investment requirements becoming less. We also want to work to ensure that our facilities meet Oxfordshire's needs, not others.

After a long legal battle in the High Court, the Ardley Energy from Waste facility is now under construction. It will treat at least 95 per cent of Oxfordshire's non-recyclable household waste, diverting it away from landfill, while generating enough electricity to supply more than 38,000 households.

SPATIAL PLANNING – COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE LEVY

When I took over as Cabinet Member for Growth & Infrastructure in May 2011 one of my first tasks was to Chair the Spatial Planning & Infrastructure Partnership. This group consists of the four District Councils, the City Council and the County Council. Its key role is to work with the newly established Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership to develop a Strategic Infrastructure Framework for the county. This prioritized schedule of infrastructure projects will provide a strategic framework for growth and investment over the next twenty years. It will also be the basis upon which the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) will be charged.

CIL is the new system of developer funding established under the Localism Bill and the National Planning Policy Framework. It will largely (though not completely) replace the use of S106 agreements to secure contributions from developers towards infrastructure. It is a £/sqm charge which will be levied on most types of new development, not just large schemes. The district councils are the charging and collecting authorities. The funds collected by CIL will not be tied to requirements related to a specific development or the provision of specific infrastructure, which means there will be far more flexibility to use this money to best effect across the area.

Each District Council will need to prove that there is a need for a levy by drawing up a costed infrastructure list and identifying possible funding towards that need. The justification relies on there being a gap between need and funding. Hence there may be different levies put in place across the County. Officers at the County Council are working with the District Councils to try and ensure that the list – the Strategic Infrastructure Framework – is coordinated and consistent. This work is challenging, since it requires the District and City councils to think strategically, accepting that there is the wider goal of supporting economic growth across the whole County. The deadline for introducing the Levy is April 2014.

MAJOR CHANGE AHEAD IN OXFORDSHIRE'S EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Council has endorsed the Government's national drive to develop the Academy programme nationally and bring fresh focus on the ways in which underperforming schools are supported to improve as well as encouraging good and outstanding schools to achieve academy status. The Government has said it wishes to see increased autonomy from local education authorities for all schools - with Academies being supplemented by a network of free schools and greater accountability for underperforming schools alongside the Academies programme.

In Oxfordshire almost 40 per cent of all secondary schools are currently expressing an interest with the Department for Education in becoming an academy. Two further schools have already converted as academies – King Alfred's School and Wallingford School. There are three existing sponsored academies – North Oxfordshire Academy, Oxford Academy and Oxford Spires Academy. The Department for Education has started discussions with three primary schools who do not meet basic national minimum targets – Berinsfield Primary School, Windale Primary School and John Henry Newman Primary School.

The Europa School, Culham

The County's first free school is now all set to open at Culham in September 2012. The school will eventually take over from the existing European School which was set up in 1978 to provide for children of employees of the European Commission's JET nuclear fusion project, which is due to close because too few pupils are children of workers at the project. Like the European School, the new school will be multilingual and multicultural and children will be taught in at least two languages. The school aims to have up to 800 pupils aged 4 -18 and will be funded directly by central government.

Culham Parochial Primary School

The County Council had been faced with the difficult decision as to whether it should close Culham Primary School because of dwindling numbers. After a truly magnificent campaign to keep the school open by the governors, the staff, the parents, the children and most of the village residents, on the 24th May 2011 the County Council Cabinet agreed to give the school three more years in which to see if they could make it financially viable. I was pleased to support the campaign, and to report that currently the school is thriving and numbers are up to an acceptable level. However, it has to be seen how the opening of the Europa Free School will impact upon pupil numbers going forward.

Berinsfield School

Berinsfield Primary School has been identified as being among the 200 worst performing primary schools in the country. As a consequence the Department for Education is taking measures to force the school to change into an Academy. The County Council is working closely with DfE to find a suitable sponsor for the school, and has replaced the board of governors with an Interim Executive Board which is appointed on a temporary basis in exceptional circumstances such as these. Regrettably as this situation is, I fully support moves that will deliver a better education for the children of the village.

THE BIG SOCIETY FUND

Since its launch in February 2011 The Big Society Fund has proved successful and popular with community groups across the County. I was delighted to sponsor a bid for £50,000 on behalf of Stadhampton's Community Building Project, as a contribution towards the conversion of their Church into a badly needed community centre.

HIGHWAYS LOCALITY FUND

In 2011 the County Council set up a new funding opportunity that aims to address minor highways problems across the county. The Fund is being administered through the 14 Localities now established by OCC as the structure for delivering Big Society grants. We are in the Benson, Berinsfield and Wallingford Locality.

Allocation of the funds is in the gift of the County Councillors. So far I have been able to provide funds for pedestrian warning signs before the bus stops on the A4074 at Berinsfield, new additional cycle racks by the bus stop at Nuneham Courtenay, signposting in Dorchester, and a new hard-standing area and barriers outside Clifton Hampden Primary School. Several of my parish councils have asked for pedestrian crossings in various locations. I have had these priced and as might be expected they are costly. However, I am progressing the possibilities at Shillingford and hope to have good news for the residents there in the near future.

BERINSFIELD DAY CENTRE

On 26th May, after many months of trying to find a venue for the Berinsfield Day Care Centre in Berinsfield village, I was very pleased to be able to broker an agreement that the County Council's Adult Learning Service would vacate their premises on Wednesdays and Fridays from July 2011 allowing the Day Centre a legal tenancy for two days a week. This is an ideal venue for the Day Centre, next to the primary school and joined to it by a corridor onto the school hall. The Parish Council and the school's headmistress were fully supportive of this move, and I am delighted to find that this co-location is working to the significant benefit not only of the Day Centre clients but the school children and other members of the wider community.

COUNTY COUNCIL BOUNDARIES REVIEW

After consultation the Boundary Commission has published its proposals for changes to the Divisional boundaries effective from the next County Council elections that will take place in May 2013. There will be an overall reduction in the number of Councillors from 74 to 63. The Dorchester & Berinsfield Division will increase to take in the Parishes of Marsh Baldon, Toot Baldon and Garsington.

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County Heritage Champion