

Focus on Parish Councils – Monthly Update
January 2026
Cllr Ben Higgins



County Council – ben.higgins@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Dear parish councillors and residents,

I hope that you had an enjoyable Christmas and wish you all a Happy New Year. I am pleased to confirm that following an initial walk-round with highways, I have further sessions booked throughout March across the rest of the division. I have been asking in meetings, but please do let me know any areas of concern and I will aim to visit them with the team.

Before Christmas we had two notable successes with potentially disruptive utility works. First there were proposed works by Thames Water in Christmas Common which would have proved devastating to the very seasonal Christmas tree business located there as well as the pub. Escalating the matter led to the permit being revoked. In Stoke Row, Gigaclear were proposing to close the main road for a significant part of December, affecting the businesses there. Following discussions with the parish council, the OCC team and Gigaclear, and a follow up meeting at the village shop, the programme was amended, accelerated and conducted under traffic lights with no road closure. So the system can work! I try to keep an eye out, but please do reach out if you are made aware of any works which seem unduly disruptive.

In December I also visited both the secondary and primary school in Watlington to meet with the heads, understand the fantastic work they do and engage on any issues I could support with.

OCC News

1. Budgeting

Setting of the county council budget for the coming financial year is set to dominate the first few weeks of 2026. The government only told councils how much money they would be receiving just before Christmas, leaving no time for officers to work up savings proposals for 2026/27.

The county council has options for delivering a balanced budget in 2026/27 but will be unable to expand services as it would have liked and will ask scrutiny councillors and cabinet for views on how a current funding gap of £5.4m can be dealt with by 10 February when a budget is set.

Measures will be proposed for debate including the use of reserves; setting less money aside in forecasting annual pay inflation and increasing the amount anticipated to be accrued in bank interest on money the council plans to spend in the normal process of delivering services – each of which come with risk.

Another proposal for debate is increasing funding that will potentially be needed to fund the cumulative High Needs dedicated schools grant deficit but not by quite as much as originally planned. A further option that would help the longer run budget is to seek additional savings of £1.5m from services in 2026/27.

The council now knows for certain that it will need to find further savings of at least £14m in 2027/28 (in addition to the £5.4m in 2026/27) because the government provided funding information for three years. As such there will need to be planning work throughout 2026 to meet this large challenge. Further savings will be needed in 2028/29, the first year of local government reform in Oxfordshire.

By 2028/29 there is a reduction of £24.1m in funding from central government. Within that there is an increase of £3.1m in funding for the Families First Partnership that the government will expect the council to use to fund new investment and activity in preventative services for children's social care. Excluding that, the reduction in grant funding is £27.2m.

Councillor Dan Levy, Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet Member for Property, Finance and Transformation, said: "While we always take a prudent approach to budget setting there are pressures relating to social care that need to be met. These services are demand-led and if that demand rises then we have to find the money to meet the costs. There are also inflationary costs to be met in 2026/27.

"As a cabinet we will listen to councillors in the scrutiny committee and debate ourselves how we balance the 2026/27 budget and we have options that do not impact on services. However, people need to be under absolutely no illusion that in future we and many partner councils in local government will not have that luxury. Having three years' worth of funding information means we know that stark reality for certain.

"Money is being redistributed away from Oxfordshire and other areas on a large scale by the government. There will be very real impacts on our budgets and our services in future.

After scrutiny this Friday 16th and a further cabinet discussion, the budget will be debated at a full meeting of the council on 10th February.

2. Oxford Congestion Charge – Update

Oxfordshire County Council's current offer of free park and ride bus journeys in Oxford will continue until the end of March 2026.

This offer was introduced on 29 October for three months to support the council's temporary congestion charge, which has been implemented as an interim measure while Botley Road remains closed, preventing the start of the traffic filter trial.

The offer has seen many more people benefit from park and ride travel and is one way that income from the council's temporary congestion charge scheme is being spent.

I continue to encourage all residents to apply for permits if you have not done so already. It's too early for detailed feedback on its impact, but my personal anecdotal take is that congestion on the busy Abingdon road which I use when travelling in for meetings at county hall is much improved.

<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/transport-and-travel/oxfords-temporary-congestion-charge-cars-cars/apply-permit>

3. Kidlington Illegal Waste Site

You may be aware of the horrific illegal waste site discovered toward the end of last year, which made national news.

On Thursday 11 December, the Environment Agency (EA) announced given a revised assessment of the risk of fire, they had made the exceptional decision to clear the site of waste. The details of the announcement are available on gov.uk. The county council has welcomed this announcement and will continue to work with the agency and other partners to manage ongoing risks at the site and to implement the plans that have been made for removal.

While the waste is removed, the EA continues to lead a multi-agency Strategic Co-ordination Group (SCG) under the Thames Valley Local Resilience Forum arrangements. The group comprises Oxfordshire County and Cherwell District Councils (CDC), Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service (OFRS), Thames Valley Police, representatives of NHS services, the UK Health Security Agency, National Highways, SSE Power, DEFRA and MHLCG.

Residents will rightly be concerned about the potential for contamination of the surrounding land and waterways – which is why works have been ongoing at the location over recent weeks to tackle those challenges, as well as a comprehensive programme of monitoring to understand what materials might pose a risk.

The EA's specialist officers are carrying out an extensive sampling process of the waste pile to establish what substances are present. The river water is also being monitored and the EA has committed to publishing these results. At this point no pollutants associated with the site have been detected. OFRS and the EA will continue to carry out thermal surveys of the site using drone technology and probes to check for any hot spots.

A barrier designed to prevent any potential movement of waste from the site towards the river and unauthorised access to the active crime scene has been installed. Full fencing, and 24-hour security, motion sensors and CCTV is also in place. Footpaths leading to the site have been temporarily closed to prevent access to the site, as it is an active crime scene and a restriction order is in place.

4. Energy saver app wins Utility Week award

We're thrilled to announce that our energy saver app has reached another milestone! After previous recognition at the Edie Awards, we've now won the Net Zero Engagement category at the Utility Week Awards.

This achievement recognises the app's impact in encouraging behaviour change, supporting the journey to net zero. OCC's partnership with Smart Metering Systems beat strong contenders like British Gas, Good Energy, Granular Energy, Northern Powergrid & E.ON Next, and UK Power Networks.

5. Consultations

There are a range of consultations open on <https://letstalk.oxfordshire.gov.uk/>, including:

- Shaping the future of our fire and rescue service - a set of proposals will be consulted on, designed to ensure that, as Oxfordshire grows and changes its fire stations, resources, and people are in the right place at the right time to meet the needs of communities and improve the safety, efficiency and resilience of the service. (open until 20th January 2026)
- National highways and transport network 2025 – a nationwide survey on public satisfaction with transport and road services (open until 28th February 2026)

Thames Water has now also launched its statutory consultation on the South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO) scheme. It will close on 13 January 2026.

6. Funding

The SODC councillor community grant scheme is now closed. Applications will be checked for compatibility with the criteria, and I will then be making funding decisions.

There is an OCC councillor grant scheme which I will share details of in an upcoming report.

The Common Ground Resilience Fund was launched in September to support local places. Details are here - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/common-ground-award-prospectus/common-ground-award-prospectus>

Parish Round-Up

I hope to attend Parish Councils in person as regularly as I can. Below are some notes on issues raised at recent meetings:

- Watlington – relief road continued planning delays, CIL funding, Church St/Chapel St/New Road.
- Britwell Salome – expansion of the 20mph area raised in parish meeting; has been followed up with OCC.
- Checkendon – review of application for extension of 20mph limit; flooding issue by pub
- Stoke Row – road conditions, gigaclear disruption.
- Pishill and Stonor – mobile phone coverage with retirement of analogue phonelines, road condition.
- Cuxham – Chalgrove New Town and removal of bypass proposal, HGV traffic (including construction traffic), condition of roads.
- Nuffield – Speeding enforcement, speed limits on the A4130, condition of Ewelme junction next to May's farm cottages, Fred's field.
- Shirburn – 20mph limit request, chicane (recent trial carried out and data being collected).
- Swyncombe – issue with unpermitted development on lotted land.

- Nettlebed – community sports facilities, cycle path from Nettlebed to Bix.
- Rotherfield Peppard – repeated issue with drain cover, road conditions.
- Highmoor – flooding issue on Holly close