

# County Councillors' Report, Spring 2022

## From Cllr Robin Bennett

**I will keep this report brief as it's my first year...the big news was the Oxfordshire Fair Deal Alliance taking control of the council in May 2021.**

The Alliance consists of Lib Dem, Labour and Green councillors, who between them now hold 40 out of the 63 seats on Oxfordshire County Council. I took part in discussions to agree the priorities for our four year term, which are as follows:

1. Tackling the Climate Emergency through rapid decarbonisation, proper accounting of carbon emissions and ambitious targets, as well as supporting climate resilience;
2. Tackling inequalities and providing opportunities for everyone in Oxfordshire to achieve their full potential;
3. Prioritisation of wellbeing – improved outcomes for residents and improved air quality and access to libraries, cultural facilities and the arts;
4. Review and reform of the social care system to prioritise end-users and carers with a focus on co-operative and community provision of social care, helping those who want to stay in their own homes;
5. Increased investment in an inclusive, integrated, county-wide active and sustainable travel network fit for the 21st Century to improve choice and reduce car journeys across the County;
6. Improved access to nature and green spaces for all communities, and landscape-scale nature recovery across the county;
7. Supporting all our children and young people to achieve improved health, wellbeing and educational outcomes; improved provision for children with additional needs; all decision-making to have regard to impact on young people and future generations;
8. The creation of a resilient local democracy where decisions are devolved to the lowest possible level and residents are meaningfully involved in the decisions that affect their lives;
9. Support for local employment and businesses, working with partners to make Oxfordshire a centre for green and sustainable technologies through a local 'Green New Deal'; we will use our purchasing power and contracts to maximise benefit to local employment and businesses.

## **Oxfordshire County Council and Cherwell District Council end formal partnership**

At the start of 2022, Oxfordshire County Council and Cherwell District Council brought their formal partnership arrangements to an end. The arrangement between

the two councils, which took the form of joint services under a single chief executive, had been in place since September 2018. The ending of the partnership meant that the former joint chief executive has returned to her post as CEO for Cherwell District Council. Stephen Chandler has stepped up as Interim CEO while a long-term solution is considered.

### **Proposal to move Oxford United FC to Stratfield Brake (Kidlington)**

Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet conducted a public engagement exercise on the proposal from Oxford United Football Club to develop a new 18,000 capacity football stadium with linked leisure and commercial facilities at Stratfield Brake in Kidlington (on land owned by the County Council), and discussions will continue into the new year.

### **Oxfordshire County Council Budget 2022-2023**

OCC passed the first budget of the Oxfordshire Fair Deal Alliance in February. We want to build on our strengths while confronting the challenges we face: addressing climate change, tackling inequality, strengthening the resilience of individuals and communities, fostering more social cohesion and common purpose.

We called on national government to respond to the challenges facing local government in a meaningful way through the autumn spending review . Unfortunately, they did not. Instead, in adult social care for example, they directed that local authorities should use council tax to meet rising costs. This represents a double-whammy for households at a time of real pressure on living costs.

We found that the sums provisioned for capital projects by the previous administration were inadequate. This is true of Kennington Bridge, where the £50million estimate accepted by the previous administration is now projected to be £87million. We had no choice but to provide £27million of the additional funding to allow this project to proceed.

The largest examples are the two Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) schemes. When the previous administration committed to government that it would deliver these schemes, it accepted the full financial liability for any additional costs arising. We now face disruptions to the supply chain, very significant inflation and labour shortages in the construction sector, through a combination of COVID and the policies related to the UK leaving the EU, which will inevitably affect the cost of these projects. We have asked officers to redouble their scrutiny of future capital projects.

Our budget proposal in December had more than double the number of responses received last year. Additional proposals as a result of the consultation included:

1. £500,000 to support the review into home-to-school transport to assist in transitioning to any new arrangements, with a particular focus on supporting more active travel and more sustainable transport opportunities.
2. We are offering tenants of the Council in community assets a one-year rent holiday to take account of financial pressures many community and voluntary organisations have faced during the pandemic
3. a strategic rail feasibility study to establish what it would take for new rail links to Cowley, Grove/ Wantage, North Cotswolds and West Oxfordshire.

4. Accelerating our work on active travel in the county: planning for new schemes and advising on opportunities to integrate active travel more fully in future proposals.
5. Replenishing the budget priorities reserve to allow for further investment in 2022-23 to (a) generate future savings for the Council budget; (b) make early interventions to improve the lives of children and young people; (c) accelerate our climate response.

We look forward to making substantial further progress in 2022-23 on our 9 priorities, while we also be directing substantial efforts and resources to support refugees from Ukraine and their hosts in the county, making sure the right support and safeguarding is in place.

### **From Cllr Ian Middleton**

#### **Local roads and transport issues**

The 'Twenty is Plenty' scheme will now be rolled out across the county with the costs being covered by an £8m grant from the county council over 4 years. This will have a hugely positive impact on reducing fatalities on our local roads, especially in terms of child deaths and injuries. Signage will be going up in our area in the next year with all local roads reduced to 20MPH. Enforcement will be light touch but the hope is that most responsible motorists will 'buy in' to the scheme.

#### **Airport**

I have attended several meetings of the revived Airport Consultative Committee. The management of the facility have made some progress in providing the opportunity to report problems with low flying aircraft however they do not seem to have come up with a solution as to how to deal with these. The airport also continues to push additional development on the site using permitted rights whereby they do not need to obtain planning permission. I have tried to encourage the management to engage more with local residents on these plans but so far they have not been keen. I have also tried to arrange a public meeting with the airport authorities and residents, but despite initial enthusiasm for this they withdrew their support when the proposal looked like becoming a reality. I will continue to try to engage with them.

#### **Housing developments**

These are ongoing after the failure of the judicial review to stop them. I am monitoring the situation closely and engaging with developers and planners to ensure that all the local villages get the best out of the proposals, especially with regard to local infrastructure, public and active transport facilities, schools, health centres and other essential facilities.

#### **More recently**

The County Council has just passed the first stages of agreeing a county-wide food strategy which will support the needs of our communities both in terms of food

production and access to healthy and affordable food. This includes financial support for individual districts including Cherwell towards local food initiatives.

This is partially linked to the Green motion to introduce a plant-based menu for all catering for members and events within County Hall. A large part of the focus of that motion was to enhance education in schools on food production, preparation and waste prevention. Unfortunately the Conservatives' focus on the ingredients in members full council buffets seems to have side-lined some of those aims so I'm keen to work within the council to ensure we get back on track and follow through on those priorities as well.

Proposals have also just been passed on enhanced support for local libraries and improving outcomes for children with special educational needs and disabilities. These are due to be expanded on in the coming months.

For my part it's been an interesting year as a county council member as part of the controlling group. It's also been an interesting year in terms of local politics in Oxfordshire with most local councils undergoing a change in leadership. Cherwell District Council is now the only remaining council in Oxfordshire under Conservative control with a very slim majority of 2.

On a personal note I have just become the leader of the Green group on the county council which makes me Deputy Leader of the Green/Libdem Alliance. Thanks To Pete Sudbury for leading the County Group for the last year. I hope I can continue his good work into the second year of our term.

I am also now the Deputy Leader of the Official Opposition on Cherwell District Council. There's a good chance that a Green/Libdem/Labour/Independent alliance may well take control of CDC next year. But we need to work hard in Bicester to gain another seat from the Tories and in Kidlington where I am up for re-election next year and we may also have a by-election which would see the last remaining Tory seat turn Green.