

County Council Report November 2010

Spending Review

George Osborne's Statement on the Spending Review 2010 has confirmed our expectation of significant cuts in government grant to the County Council. Of our total revenue spend of one billion pounds, 65% comes from central government; 29% comes from the Council Tax and 6% from other income and charges.

It appears likely that cuts in government grants will be significantly front-loaded and there is uncertainty about a large number of specific grants which are to be moved into the general funding formula. Because Oxfordshire is a floor authority, any sums transferred in this way stand to fall through the floor and be lost to us. The potential lost funding amounts to many millions of pounds. We have raised this issue with the Secretary of State and will continue our lobbying. We will not have clarity on our position until the government announces the Local Government Finance Settlement in late November or early December. We have to set our budget on 15 February 2011.

Our largest area of spend is Children, Young People & Families at £540 million. Of this £400 million goes straight to schools and is ring-fenced by the government. Also included is Children's Social Care of £43 million, School Transport of £17 million; Special Educational Needs of £28 million; Youth and Connexions Service of £12 million and Children's Centres of £11 million.

Our second largest area of spend is on Adult Social Care, totalling almost £200 million. This is under severe pressure with a growing elderly population.

Next is Environment & Economy at £83 million, including Transport at £48 million and Waste Disposal at £22 million.

Smaller but important service areas include our Fire & Rescue Service at £25 million; Libraries & Heritage at £12 million; our Schools Music Service at £2.7 million and Trading Standards at £2.5 million. With properties valued at £1.3 billion we have debt requiring annual debt repayments of £40 million.

All areas are going to have to take a share of the cuts in government funding and we are faced with some very difficult decisions around prioritisation.

Gravel Extraction

As the County Councillor who represents 10 parishes in South Oxfordshire who feared they would be devastated by large scale gravel extraction I am hugely relieved that the County Council Cabinet took the decision on 19th October to concentrate gravel extraction in existing areas of the county. I have consistently supported the option to continue working at existing sites, and I would suggest that any other option that would have blighted so many new rural communities without justification was totally illogical and unacceptable. The County Council's own published figures prove that there has been a diminishing demand for gravel for some years which is now compounded by the economic downturn and a national moratorium on infrastructure projects. In my view there is simply no need to open up new areas for extraction within the life span of the proposed Mineral & Waste Development Plan up to 2026.

However, the County Council must provide “robust evidence” of this falling demand, and I am delighted that after months of my having called for the production of county-based data modelling on aggregates production, our officers are appointing a consultant to produce a local assessment in order to challenge SEERA’s 2.1mtpa apportionment figure that we have been obliged to work towards, which has been at the root of the problem all along. This new Oxfordshire data will, in my view prove beyond doubt how unrealistic the centrally-imposed target has become and I look forward to the publication of that data before Christmas. As a result of this new data becoming available it has been decided that there should be no further consultation on the Minerals Plan until there has been time to consider the results which means February-March 2011. Should it prove, as we expect, that there is far less demand than forecast by SEERA due in part to the economic downturn, the case for not opening new areas for extraction becomes all the stronger. So I cannot say categorically that Option 1 is the final solution, but we are perhaps quite close.

This is of course sounds like very good news for our area but there is an exception. Nuneham Courtenay has been designated as an extension of the Radley works on the other side of the river. This site would come on stream as the Sutton Courtenay site becomes exhausted in about 8 years time. Access would be at the end of the dual carriageway on the A4074 which would hopefully have minimal impact upon the village, but would of course add to the volume of traffic which it is expected would mainly go out to the A34. At the Cabinet meeting on 19th October I called for the re-assessment of Nuneham’s designation, and the request was noted. Since that time I have had written clarification of the situation from our Planning Policy Officer as follows:

“The strategic areas identified for sand and gravel working necessarily have widely drawn boundaries. Therefore, in identifying existing working areas, we have not restricted them to what could be worked as extensions to existing sites. In the case of the Lower Windrush Valley, the area includes the Brighthampton – Yelford area, where there has been no previous working and would would require new processing plant and access. In the case of Eynsham – Cassington – Yarnton, we have included the Eynsham – Church Hanborough area where there has been no working for many years and which would probably require new plant and access arrangements. In the case of Radley, we have included the Sandford- Lower Radley – Nuneham Courtenay area, which would again require new processing plant and access arrangements. The issue of what constitutes new and existing areas could be discussed by the Members of the Minerals & Waste Working Group in due course and if we need to make amendments, we can do so.”

It would appear that there is room for manoeuvre over the coming months and much will depend upon the precise target level of extraction that is eventually agreed between the County Council and the Coalition Ministers working for Communities Secretary Eric Pickles MP.

Area Stewardship - Highways

Significant structural changes have taken place across the County Council's Highways and Transport Service in order to construct a new delivery partnership with Atkins. This new partnership is intended to pave the way towards a more responsive, efficient and informative way of providing highway maintenance activities. A network of Area Stewards has been put in place and the newly appointed Area Steward for the South of the County is Keith Stenning who will respond to day-to-day highway demands and enquiries. Within the South Team Area there will also be dedicated Local Highway Representatives who will be available to meet with Parish Councils and provide direct advice on highway matters. Our southern team looks like this:

Area Steward – Keith Stenning, Drayton Depot, Milton Road, Drayton, Oxfordshire. OX14 4EZ.

Senior Technicians – Bob Burgess and Tim Wilde

Representatives – Norman Howells, John King and Bill Major (Retires 26th November)

Telephone: 0845 310 1111 Email: highwaysenquiries@oxfordshire.gov.uk Post|: Highways & Transport, Oxfordshire County Council, Environment & Economy, PO Box 842, Oxford OX1 9LL.

Oxfordshire Awarded Enterprise Status

Ministers have announced the results of a nationwide process to select a number of areas to become Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs). Oxfordshire's 'City Region' bid, coordinated by the Council, has been chosen as one of the 24 successful bids out of 56 proposals. LEPs will replace Regional Development Agencies and will see local authorities, businesses and academia working together to encourage local economic growth. Oxfordshire's concentration on high-tech businesses, academic strength and tourism could put the county at the heart of the UK's future economy, leading the way in science, research and development.

Re-introduction of Safety Cameras

The County Council is in negotiation with Thames Valley Police to provide safety camera enforcement in Oxfordshire on a self funding basis. This will be done by using the educational "diversion courses" to raise sufficient funds. Agreement has been given by the Minister for Transport, Mike Penning. All activity will be managed and delivered by Thames Valley Police and not the Thames Valley Safer Roads Partnership. The current fixed sites will remain the property of the County Council who will continue to maintain them. The original level of mobile speed enforcement will return to the county. This is a very welcome development and will be well received by many residents of Oxfordshire, and especially in Nuneham Courtenay.

Lorraine Lindsay-Gale
County Councillor
Dorchester & Berinsfield