

REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS FEBRUARY 2016 FROM CLLR LORRAINE LINDSAY-GALE

BUDGET

As reported last month, prior to Christmas, Oxfordshire County Council went out to consultation on possible additional budget cuts totalling £51m, which at the time was believed to be the worst-case scenario. It was hoped that when central Government confirmed the local government settlement that not all the 95 savings measures consulted on would have to be taken. As it transpired, due to a change in the funding formula which unexpectedly penalised shire counties, the settlement was even worse than expected and the total additional savings required now total £69m.

The Council found a series of short-term measures, including drawing on reserves, to buy time before we have to make yet more new savings to cover the difference between £51m and £69m. Our approach remains the same: we want to try to protect the most vulnerable people in Oxfordshire – by which we mean those adults who need help with basic personal care and children at risk of abuse or neglect.

By law, OCC has to produce a balanced budget and Cabinet has made the necessary recommendations that will be debated by Full Council on February 16th. This includes a proposal to raise Council Tax by 3.99%.

BACKLASH AGAINST SHIRE COUNTIES SETTLEMENT

On the 8th February the Minister Greg Clark announced a final Local Government Settlement. Due to significant pressure from over 50 MPs from shire counties, a 'Transitional Grant' to alleviate the impact of proposed cuts to services was included. Oxfordshire will receive £4.5m in 2016-2017 and £4.5m in 2017-2018. The decisions about how this money will be used will be made following the setting of the budget on February 16th.

PROPERTY, BACK OFFICE AND RESERVES

There have been misleading media reports that OCC could reduce its financial challenges by selling property, cutting the back office and drawing on reserves. The reality is that OCC has already sold more than 100 properties realising over £62 million that has been used on capital projects. Furthermore, 26 leases have been terminated saving over £2.1 million pa. With regard to back office functions, the number of directors has been cut by 50%, senior managers by over 40% and staff generally by 30%. Various services are already shared with other councils and partners, and further options are being explored to find even more back office savings. Reserves are already being drawn upon and will soon become low compared to expenditure.

RISE OF APPRENTICES BOOSTS THRIVING OXFORDSHIRE ECONOMY

Recent growth in the number of Oxfordshire young people choosing apprenticeships as the key to forging a career is outstripping regional figures. While the number of apprenticeship starts for 16-24 year-olds fell across the South East by 2.5 per cent in 2014/15 compared with the previous academic year, Oxfordshire's figure rose by 2.4 per cent, as employers took on 2,510 new starters.

TEMPORARY NEW HOME FOR OXFORD CENTRAL LIBRARY

Continuing work to transform the Westgate Shopping Centre in Oxford has led to OCC's Central Library temporarily moving to a nearby location. Redevelopment work at Westgate includes the complete transformation of the front of the current library building. The existing frontage of the Central Library will be replaced to become part of the new curving wall forming the south side of Bonn Square marking the new entrance to Westgate. Once complete, the new library will feature a new entrance foyer, a refurbished and extended children's library and new feature windows with views over Bonn Square and Castle Street. While this work takes place, the location for the temporary library will be in the nearby Castle Quarter. Current plans are for the existing library to close to the public on February 27, with the new smaller temporary library opening its doors at the end of March. The library will remain there for 18 months until the new Westgate Oxford opens in October 2017.

SUPERFAST BROADBAND ARRIVES IN BERINSFIELD AND CLIFTON HAMPDEN

The County Council's Better Broadband for Oxfordshire programme has finally arrived in more parts of this Division. Ask your internet service provider about how to upgrade or go to: www.betterbroadbandoxfordshire.org.uk to find out more and use our Availability Checker. The internet is essential to modern life. With superfast broadband you can:

- Watch TV over the internet and download HD films and music
- Let the whole family get online at the same time without it slowing down
- Create, work and run a business remotely from home
- Transform your business using Cloud services and faster data transfer
- Learn online, access healthcare and other public services more conveniently

CHERWELL LOCAL PLAN CONSULTATION

A partial review of the Cherwell Local Plan (Part 1) has started regarding Oxford's unmet housing need, alongside a review of Development Management Policies and Sites. The consultation period extends to Friday 11th March 2016. Full details are on the Cherwell website.

WODC LOCAL PLAN

The West Oxfordshire plan has been put on hold to give an opportunity to identify more sites. It may be that the inspector will wish the authority to take into account the unmet need of Oxford, especially as Cherwell is consulting on additional sites for the unmet need. Whatever the outcome of these proposals, it is vital there is appropriate infrastructure to mitigate the development.