­Cllr Robin Bennett, County Councillor Report: April 2025­

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**Local Government Reform**

Oxfordshire councils had to respond to the government with ideas for council reorganisation by March 21st. Oxfordshire County Cabinet favoured a single unitary covering the current county area, while South, Vale and the other rural districts favoured a 2-unitary option which includes West Berkshire as well, to be called ‘Ridgway Council’- you can read more at <https://ridgewaycouncil.org>.

The City council submitted a somewhat vague proposal demanding an expanded ‘Greater Oxford’. Which areas would be included, and what that means for other areas, is unclear. The councils have to come up with a final plan for reorganisation into a ‘unitary’ council or councils by November this year, or the minister will impose one. In the meantime, there will be ‘engagement’ – it’s not an official consultation as the legislation does not provide for one.

**Elections**

This all means that there **will** be elections on May 1st, on new boundaries, which will likely be the last ever county council elections. Don’t forget to **register to vote** if you haven’t already, and remember you need eligible **photo ID**.

The old **Berinsfield & Garsington** division that I’ve represented for the past 4 years, with 15 villages, is being split 3 ways. Dorchester and Warborough will be in with Benson, Stadhampton, Chiselhampton and Newington will be with Chalgrove, while the rest will stay as the new Berinsfield and Garsington division.

**Thankyou from me!**

Given the changes, it seems like a good moment to adjust my commitments, so I’ll be completing my district term and stepping back from the county council – both of these councils will be replaced by whatever the new council is in 2-3 years’ time.

It’s been fascinating to work on the challenges faced by our villages and, I hope, going some way to helping with them and getting things done. It’s been great to meet all the parish councillors and residents at meetings, and I’d like to **thank you all** for your warm welcome. I’m happy to say the Greens are fielding excellent candidates in all 3 areas – of course, other parties are available! I will still of course be taking a keen interest in projects I’ve been involved in from my vantage point as a district councillor and local resident.

 Please note: the end of term for councillors elected to the 2021-2025 County Council will be 6 May 2025. The term for councillors elected on 1 May commence on 6 May 2025.

1st April was the final full council of the year. 2 councillors elected as Conservatives in our area had switched to Reform, meaning the council has a Reform ‘group’ for the first time.

**Citizens’ assembly on transport in Oxfordshire**

In early 2025, 34 Oxfordshire residents selected by democratic lottery took part in Oxfordshire County Council’s first ever citizens’ assembly (I can confirm one of them was a resident of this area). Participants dedicated 45 hours across nine meetings and 14 separate sessions to answer the following challenge question:

**‘What steps do we need to take so Oxfordshire's transport system enables our county's health, economy, and environment to thrive in 2050?’**

The assembly's purpose was to make recommendations on how the vision and targets set out in the council’s local transport plan can be achieved in ways that best meet the needs and preferences of the people of Oxfordshire.

A full report of the citizens’ assembly and the council’s response to the assembly’s recommendations will be published in July. As a member of the advisory board (all political groups were represented), I can confirm it was an excellent process, with views heard from all sides and a wide variety of experts. It will be interesting for future administrations to consider when planning transport in the county. My only disappointment is that a tram system for Oxford didn’t quite pass the 80% support threshold!

Results from the assembly included. These will be considered by county cabinet in future when taking decisions.

* *97% support for improved Park & Ride, with longer hours and better bus links and walking/cycling connections.*
* *91% support for better community medical facilities, reducing the need to drive to major hospitals.*
* *88% support for building new housing developments so that major facilities are within walking distance.*
* *88% support for designated roads just for a bus system (and cyclists, emergency vehicles, Blue Badge holders and taxis during certain hours), using existing roads.*
* *88% support to make Oxford city centre car-free – making sure there a plenty of alternatives to get around, while not disadvantaging key groups.*

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**Public Health Annual Report looks at mental health in young people**

Oxfordshire County Council’s Director of Public Health, Ansaf Azhar, is calling for a change in attitudes towards mental health in young people as he launches his latest annual report. It’s an excellent and timely report - you can read it here:

<https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s75728/CC20250401R09%20Director%20of%20Public%20Health%20Report%202024_2025.pdf>

**He said**: “Good mental health is essential for leading healthy, fulfilling lives, but we've seen an unprecedented increase in referrals to mental health services. Around one in five young people in Oxfordshire had a mental health problem in 2023, and demand for services is rising.”

**Micro annual report: some achievements at the County Council in 2024-5:**

* Waiting times for Eductional Health Care Plans for children with SEND within statutory timeframe now over 50% (above national average) rather than 5%
* Reinstatement of annual gully cleaning and introduction of flooding taskforce
* Major investment in highways maintenance for the coming year
* Approval of the Strategic Active Travel Network, and many Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans, including some - Abingdon, Didcot and Wallingford - which include our villages, making it easier to request funds from developers
* Completion (under budget) of rollout of 20mph for communities across Oxfordshire
* Completion of the draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy (to be finalised in 2025) and the Oxfordshire Climate Adaptation Routemap, to complement the Oxfordshire Net Zero Map and Action Plan.
* Public health reports on Climate Change and youth mental health
* Citizens’ assembly looking at future travel across Oxfordshire (not just Oxford!)
* Introduction of Community Profiles and Action Plans unlocking funding and help for areas which need extra support, including Berinsfield.