

County Council Budget Update

The council meets next Tuesday to agree a budget for 2025-6, the last budget of this council term, assuming elections are not delayed. Even before considering the proposed reorganisation, funding continues to be tight for local councils.

Demand for services for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) continues to rise. Officers estimate that the deficit in the “High Needs Block” in 2025/26 will be at least £26.7million, bringing the cumulative deficit to over £100 million. As yet, the government has given no indication as to how they will tackle the rising deficits of this and every other council with responsibility for SEND.

The increase in Employers’ National Insurance will also cost Oxfordshire £3.9 million directly, plus the effect of this on providers and suppliers; in spite of these pressures, the administration is proposing a balanced budget that allows for investment in key areas of activity, in line with our priorities. This has been achieved through savings that total £30.1m million in 2025/26.

Key investments include £3.6 million to be spent on improving the council’s responsiveness to flooding, including £1.5 million for annual gully clearance, reversing the decision taken by the previous administration to reduce gully clearance to a four- year cycle.

In December, the Local Government Provisional Settlement set out that “Core Spending Power” for local government will rise by 6.0% for councils in England, on the basis that all councils agree the maximum council tax increase – in the case of the County Council, that’s 4.99%. This will consist of 2.99% in core council tax and 2% adult social care precept. The core revenue budget will increase from £611.2m in 2024/25 to £646.3m in 2025/26, representing an overall increase of 5.7%.

The budget includes a total of **£58.8 million for highways improvements**. In last year’s budget £7 million was included for surface dressing; This year the administration are allocating £38.6 million to a two-year programme which will extend surface dressing, prevent potholes from occurring and improve drainage across the highways network. We are also allocating £16.2m for repairing and maintaining bridges and £4.0 million for improvements in road safety.

Active travel, and improvements to our market towns to promote better air quality and safer walking and cycling, are central to this administration’s priorities. We are allocating funding to projects that include better footpaths, more active travel in rural areas, and enhancements to the market squares. We are also including a feasibility study for the long-awaited Thame to Haddenham Active Travel Link.

Rail is a key priority, and we are including £1 million in our capital budget to kickstart initiatives at stations across the county to improve the rail customer experience and support sustainable travel plans.

£11.1 million has been allocated to support the completion of the Watlington Relief Road, funding for which was removed from the Growth Deal. This project aims to take heavy traffic, including school buses and lorries, out of the historic Watlington town centre, freeing residents to walk and cycle safely, and improving air quality.

OCC are also creating, in partnership with the Oxfordshire Nature Partnership and the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, a funding pot for investment in nature recovery across the county. The council's contribution to that fund is £500,000.

The budget also includes £4 million to "unlock" £22.5 million of funding from S106 on a variety of schemes waiting to be delivered. My work with colleagues on Place Scrutiny committee identified this as a key way to get developer funds spent more quickly, so I'm glad to see this.

Other local updates:

Culham Station

OCC are working closely with GWR, South Oxfordshire District Council and key Science Vale partners – UKAEA and CEG – to deliver a phased upgrade of Culham station to ensure that it can fully support planned growth.

Benson Marina Mobilty hub

Benson was selected by officers as one of two new trial "mobility hubs" in the county. If successful, I assume these will be rolled out more widely.

The Mobility Hub is to be delivered on land adjacent to the A4074 between the junctions with Church Road and Churchfield Lane. Scope of interventions to be determined through further site investigation, stakeholder consultation and feasibility work. Detailed design work is planned as part of the next stage of work but it is anticipated that the work will focus on improving bus waiting infrastructure and active travel facilities such as secure bicycle parking. The schemes are planned to enter design and procurement for the rest of 2024/25 before delivery in 2025/26. There's a contact email, benison.mobilityhub@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Public Health and Community Action Groups support local garden projects:

An Oxfordshire County public health grant has contributed in part to Berinsfield's community garden projects at the church and the Berin Centre. In the words of Marta Lomza, Community Gardens Coordinator for CAG Oxfordshire:

"Community gardening is an act of resilience – bringing communities together to quite literally encourage and foster growth – of food, plants, and people. We believe community gardening can be a radical tool for building social infrastructure and developing more resilient communities."

<https://www.cagoxfordshire.org.uk/post/a-new-community-gardening-project-takes-root-in-berinsfield>