

REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS **MARCH 2024** FROM CLLR NIGEL SIMPSON

Oxfordshire County Council

OCC BUDGET 2024/25 REVIEW

County council budget agreed, with cash for social care, SEND and highways

A budget for 2024/25 has been set at Oxfordshire County Council following the annual budget setting meeting of all county councillors on Tuesday, 20 February.

All three main political groups on the council presented their own budget proposals. The Liberal Democrat Green Alliance group forms the administration at the council and they first published a draft budget in late November.

This went through several changes as levels of government and other funding became clearer. A balanced budget was proposed by the council's cabinet in early February, which later included additional money awarded to councils in England from central government.

The Conservative and Labour groups each independently proposed their own amendments to this budget. Each set of budget proposals was debated in the council chamber.

The Liberal Democrats accepted Labour group amendments and a budget was agreed.

What changes were made from the budget proposed by cabinet in January?

The cabinet's original budget contained real terms increases for both adults and children's social care. There is a ten per cent real terms increase for children's services aimed at helping children stay at home where possible and in Oxfordshire when they need residential support and to support improvements in special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

There is also extra money for highways, especially gulley maintenance.

Cabinet's longstanding commitment to reductions in air pollution and congestion, and to support bus use and active travel are also important parts of the budget.

The Labour amendment that was accepted means that the following is also included in the budget:

- Increasing early intervention work in early years and primary school settings to respond to SEND needs and proactively support the transition into mainstream education (£500,000 in 2024/25 and £380,000 ongoing funding from 2025/26).

- Invest in the Family Help Team to reduce the future demand and cost of care. £375,000 in 2024/25 rising to £500,000 in 2025/26
- Introduce four new Controlled Parking Zones (£200,000 in 24/5)
- Investment in improved collection of fees, charges and penalties (£210,000)
- Restore cost of living funding to support local advice centres. (£300,000)
- £300,000 revenue funding for borrowing supporting £5m additional funding for scheduled highways maintenance added to the capital programme.
Meanwhile other capital investments include £6m for additional new children's homes and £12.65m for additional active travel work

Other key information about the county council budget for 2024/25 and the vote:

- The net budget for 2024/25 will be: £611m.
- Council tax will rise by 4.99 per cent.
- Spending on both adult and children's social care will rise in real terms to meet rising demands and costs.
- A total of 37 councillors voted in favour of the budget and 18 abstained

The political groups at the county council

- There are 63 county councillors however some were unable to attend.
- The Liberal Democrat Green Alliance group is made up of 23 county councillors (20 Liberal Democrat and three Green)
- The Conservative group is made up of 21 county councillors, with one independent councillor aligned with them in the Conservative Independent Alliance.
- The Labour & Co-operative Party group is made up of 14 county councillors.
- There are four independent councillors including one member of the Henley Residents Group.

OCC BUDGET 2024/25 REVIEW – Conservative observation

OCC Full Council met for a marathon 10-hour session on Tuesday 20th February to debate budget proposals. The minority LibDem/Green administration put forward their proposals, then the Conservative Independent Alliance (the official Opposition) and the Labour Group each put forward proposed amendments.

The Conservative Independent Alliance sought to:

- slim down the 50-strong PR/Strategy team
- refocus the ever-expanding Climate team
- push back the Oxford congestion measures that are intended to extract £57m from motorists over a five-year period
- allocate more money for vulnerable children (particularly Special Educational Needs and Disability)
- meet demands from residents to spend much more on roads and drains.

Regrettably, these ambitions were thwarted by the LibDem/Green and Labour groups.

At the end of the meeting it became clear the debate had been pointless as the minority administration accepted the Labour amendments in their entirety. The fact that the revised budget papers had been pre-prepared suggested this was always the intended outcome, and that the minority administration believed they could not run the council without wholehearted Labour support.

Full details of the final budget are available on the council website. These show that the Labour amendments accepted by the administration will result in a massive extra borrowing of £23.45m. As usual, Labour focused on Oxford-centric matters, including Oxford parking zones, Oxford ANPR cameras, Oxford congestion, Oxford 'Mini-Holland' project (at a capital cost of £2m per year) and an Oxford 'Citizens' Assembly' (at a cost of £150,000).

The nine priorities of the administration remain unchanged:

- 1) Climate Emergency
- 2) Tackle Inequalities
- 3) Health & Wellbeing
- 4) Social Care,
- 5) Sustainable Transport
- 6) Nature Access
- 7) Children's Opportunities
- 8) Vibrant Democracy
- 9) Business Cooperation.

Despite repeated resident surveys and feedback from Councillors which show that roads and drains are near the top of the list of resident concerns, they still fail to get a mention and it is likely satisfaction with the council will continue to decline. (The latest 'Residents Survey' shows that 'Maintenance of roads' was rated by 67% of residents as one of their four most important council services, but just 19% were very or fairly satisfied.)

Electric car club trial extended until September 2024

A year long Oxfordshire car sharing pilot scheme, [launched in April 2023](#), is being extended by six months due to popular demand, with more vehicles to be added to the scheme shortly.

The trial features electric vehicles (EVs), which can be hired on an hourly or daily basis from district and city council owned car parks around the county. They are currently in place in Bicester, Banbury, Kidlington, Eynsham, Henley, Wallingford, Abingdon, Witney and Oxford.

The pilot has been organised by Oxfordshire County Council and supported by Oxford City Council, Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire district councils to assess the demand. The vehicles are provided by hire companies Co Wheels, Zimbl, and Enterprise CarClub.

STREET WORK STARTS IN PREPARATION FOR OXFORD TRAFFIC FILTERS TRIAL

Work started on 26 February on Oxford streets to prepare for the hugely controversial £6.5m scheme to install six traffic filters as part of a trial approved by OCC's Cabinet in November 2022. These filters will split the city into four zones, and only authorised vehicles will be able to pass freely between the zones, with all other traffic being diverted onto the ring road to get from one zone to another. The trial is due to start in October this year, after Network Rail's work to improve Oxford Station is complete. Before then, contractors working on behalf of the council are installing signage and cameras in stages until September, with most work expected in May and June.

OXFORDSHIRE IS A COUNTY OF SANCTUARY

On 7 November 2023, a motion was passed at Full Council stating that migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, are set to continue to be welcomed in Oxfordshire with the county council reaffirming the county's status as a place of sanctuary. The Conservative Independent Alliance Opposition voted against the motion on the basis that it was too sweeping and dealt with matters outside OCC's remit, such as calling on the UK Government to repeal the Illegal Migration Act and the Nationality and Borders Act, and to withdraw from the UK–Rwanda partnership. The motion has subsequently been reaffirmed again by Liberal Democrat Councillor Liz Leffman, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council, who has signed a pledge to fight the anti-refugee laws on behalf of the council.

LATE NIGHT OPENING OF HOUSEHOLD WASTE RECYCLING CENTRES TO CEASE

At a 'Cabinet Member Decisions Meeting' on 22 February, the Deputy Leader of the Council (and senior Green councillor), Cllr Dr Pete Sudbury made the decision to cease late-night summer opening at Household Waste Recycling Centres on Thursdays from 1 April 2024.

Cherwell District Council

Council budget and Cherwell investment approved
Cherwell District Council has approved its 2024/25 budget and future investment priorities.

At its meeting on Monday 26 February, Full Council confirmed a net budget of £27.0 million for the 2024/25 financial year and agreed to £40.4 million of capital programme expenditure over the next five years.

The council has worked hard to effectively manage the financial challenges that local government faces due to inflation and the increasing cost of living. To achieve this, the council found savings and operational efficiencies worth £1.7 million and funds of £608,000 to address further budget pressures.

This financially responsible approach has helped achieve a balanced budget for 2024/25 and ensures the council will maintain and improve vital services such as waste collections, housing, planning, and enforcement.

As part of the revenue budget, there will be a slight increase of £5 in district council tax for 2024/25, resulting in a Band D charge of £153.50. This increase equates to a 3.4 per cent rise.

The confirmed budget was determined following a public consultation held in late 2023, and the Executive recommended the budget to council in February.

In approving the revenue budget that funds daily services, the council is investing in projects to promote healthy communities, strengthen the economy with vibrant towns and centres, ensure appropriate housing, and commit to the climate change agenda.

New initiatives backed by capital funding include £1.6 million for new 3G synthetic grass sports pitches at North Oxfordshire Academy, £600,000 to further develop Activity Play Zones, and £125,000 for sustainability projects.

The budget includes a request from the Progressive Oxfordshire group for £129,000 to keep some fees and charges at their current levels and to provide ongoing funding for public conveniences at Pioneer Square in Bicester.

Councillor Barry Wood, Leader of Cherwell District Council, said: "The approved budget and our financial strategies reflect our commitment to financial prudence and forward-thinking. Responding to inflationary impacts and changing circumstances all councils face, our sound financial planning includes identifying appropriate savings and funding sources, managing our assets, mitigating risks, and, crucially, investing in the future of Cherwell to benefit our residents and communities.

“A key priority for this council is to continually build our reserves so that we can face future challenges head on. We are therefore able to include the amendments voted through by councillors using contingencies already built into our plans for the coming financial year without altering the overall balance of the budget.

“Our proactive and diligent approach demonstrates how we continue to offer our residents and businesses high-quality services. It also helps secure economic growth, provides appropriate homes, promotes health and wellbeing and encourages climate action. We look forward to continuing to work towards a sustainable and prosperous future for Cherwell.”

Councillor Adam Nell, Deputy Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance, said: “Financial responsibility is a cornerstone of a well-run council and this budget balances the need to be realistic about the challenges facing councils everywhere, with prudent investments that support our vision for a district which is a great place to live and work.

“We take a forward-looking approach to financial management, and are successful in encouraging economic growth across the district, all of which helps keep us on a sustainable footing in the medium term. Our plans for the coming financial year protect the high quality services that our residents value and represent good news for everyone living in north Oxfordshire.”

Coffee pod recycling scheme hits million milestone

A recycling initiative which reduces the environmental impact of home coffee machines has hit a massive milestone, with over a million coffee pods now recycled.

Cherwell District Council works with not-for-profit organisation Podback to collect residents' used coffee pods and ensure the materials that make them up are recycled.

Collections started at the end of May 2023 and over 3,000 households have signed up and are using the service. Together, they have recycled 1,048,397 pods, tipping the scales at 16.4 tonnes.

The news is another measure of residents' commitment to sorting their waste correctly after the district was ranked 31st out of 210 waste collection authorities in a national recycling table for England.

Holiday club is back with cracking Easter activities

With less than a month to go to the Easter holidays, parents can now secure children's places on the fun and friendly Activate holiday club.

Cherwell District Council's popular Activate holiday club is designed to keep young people on their toes and allow them to try new things while they're off school.

The programme centres around an inspiring blend of sports, arts, crafts and games and starts on Wednesday, 3 April, running across the two weeks of the school holiday.

Councillor Nigel Simpson, Portfolio Holder for Sport and Leisure, said: “We want the district’s young people to make the most of their Easter holidays, and the Activate holiday club is here to help them do just that.

“Encouraging active lifestyles is a key aim for the council, and the holiday clubs are part of this mission, helping young people build healthy habits from an early age.

“For any parents who might not have sent their children to the hubs before, I can assure them that it is a welcoming, non-competitive environment that offers children the chance to build their confidence and make new friends.”

All staff leading the sessions are First Aid trained and have been Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checked. Activate holiday clubs will be held at Spiceball leisure centre in Banbury and Bicester leisure centre.

The sessions cost £22.50 per session, run from 8.45am to 3pm and are offered for children aged 5 to 11.