

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 has 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%.

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.

BACKLASH AGAINST SHIRE COUNTIES SETTLEMENT

Up to 50 MPs are understood to have signed a letter demanding changes to the Government's proposed settlement with local government, which was published last month. The letter calling for shire councils to be given more money has been sent to the Communities Secretary, Greg Clarke, before a final deal is laid before the Commons within the next fortnight. The Government insists the proposal is a good deal because it also allows local authorities to set their own business rates and increase council tax to make up the shortfall. But one Conservative MP said: "There are a lot of us who are absolutely furious about this. We accept the need for cuts, but it's about fairness. How can it be right that rural councils are facing cuts of 33 per cent, but urban areas – where it is cheaper to provide services – are facing a reduction of just 19 per cent? In Wales, it's just 8 per cent and Scotland 4 per cent."

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.

VIEWS SOUGHT ON PLANS FOR FUTURE OF HILL END

A consultation on plans to secure the future of popular outdoor education centre Hill End has been launched. Site owner Oxford University and OCC, which manages the centre, are planning to investigate setting up an independent charitable company to run the activities and unlock new sources of funding. Due to the budget cuts previously referred to, OCC can no longer provide the investment needed to improve services and meet on-going repair and maintenance costs. Both the university and OCC wish to ensure Hill End continues to provide an excellent service for children and young people, supporting their social and emotional health and well-being. The consultation does not affect current or future bookings and, if taken forward, transition to a charitable company would mean 'business as usual' for schools and other service users.

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.