February 2023 County Councillor Report – Cllr Robin Bennett

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**Updated budget proposals for 2023/24 at Oxfordshire County Council** include more funding than when proposals were first announced in late 2022, but also significant further pressures on services that stem from high inflation and growing service demands. The newly updated position and revised proposals were agreed by the county council’s cabinet on 24 January. The annual budget setting meeting of all 63 county councillors will confirm the council’s budget for 2023/24 on 14 February.

Since the autumn when OCC set out the proposed budget for consultation, we have seen rapid changes in a very volatile political and economic environment – both nationally and internationally. We learned in December that some government grants would continue into 2023/24, enabling spending to be increased in some key areas.

Responding to the feedback received during public engagement, a total of £4.9m is to be assigned to **improving roads, promoting access to public transport and encouraging cycling and walking for young people, including:**

* community transport initiatives in both rural and urban areas (£1.2m)
* extension of the current discounted ticket offer at park and rides (£500,000)
* expanding the supported transport team to work with young people and their families to develop active travel options for getting to their place of education (£300,000)
* expanding the School Streets pilot to make it safer and easier for children and parents to walk and cycle to school (£500,000)
* £500,000 investment into transport hubs including e-bike hire, car club promotion etc. There would also be improvements to travel information (£100,000)
* building flood resilience across Oxfordshire (£600,000), including practical projects with parish councils and proactive ditch clearance in areas prone to flooding
* £1m for local priority improvements to highways, cycle paths and pavements.

**Support to children and families:**

* £500,000 is proposed to be invested in additional capacity for SEND educational and health care plan (ECHP) reviews and assessments
* £500,000 to speed up the development of community hubs to support children and families.
* £2.3m will be allocated to Council Tax Support Scheme and cost of living measures to help those most in need in Oxfordshire – ensuring that they do not have pay the full increase in council tax this year

**Deal signed to bring 159 electric buses to Oxfordshire**

The first vehicles in a fleet of 159 new battery electric buses are set to arrive in Oxfordshire in September, after an £82.5 million deal was finalised. Last March, Oxfordshire County Council was awarded £32.8 million from the government’s Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas (ZEBRA) scheme.

Along with £6m from the council itself and £43.7m from bus companies Stagecoach and the Go-Ahead Group, which includes the Oxford Bus Company, Thames Travel, and City Sightseeing Oxford, the scheme will deliver the electric buses and charging systems.

The scheme is expected to support a reduction in nitrogen dioxide (NOx) levels, reduce noise pollution, and will help make Oxfordshire a net zero carbon county ahead of 2050. Oxfordshire was one of only 12 local authorities to successfully apply for ZEBRA funding, and this is one of the biggest schemes in the country, and will mean that most services across the [Oxford Smartzone](https://www.oxfordbus.co.uk/smartzone) will be operated by battery electric buses. All the new buses are being manufactured in the UK and are expected to arrive by March 2024.

**Cabinet approves continued stadium discussions with Oxford United and commits to seek views before final decision**

Oxfordshire County Council’s cabinet has agreed to start negotiations with Oxford United FC on outline legal and commercial terms relating to the club’s proposal to lease land for a new football stadium, while ensuring that residents are properly consulted as proposals are developed. The land in question is east of Frieze Way/south of Kidlington roundabout, known as “the triangle”, close to the previously discussed land at Stratfield Brake and Oxford Parkway Station.