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A busy month dealing with storms and flooding

Our Emergency Planning, Fire and Rescue and Highways teams have had a busy February dealing with the local impacts of the storms and flooding that have made national headlines.

Storm Ciara and Storm Dennis hit the UK on consecutive weekends in mid-February and with river levels already high as a result of much higher Autumn and Winter rainfall than the average, the Environment Agency issued scores of Flood Alerts and a number of the more serious Flood Warnings.

Highways teams dealt with more than 150 incidents as a result of Storm Ciara and more than 100 stemming from Storm Dennis. The Storm Ciara incidents largely related to high winds (fallen trees blocking roads, debris) whereas Storm Dennis was also about flooding with some roads closing and surface water causing issues.

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Airband starts work on ultrafast broadband boost for rural Oxfordshire

Independent broadband firm Airband has started work on its fibre network in Oxfordshire as part of the BiRO project, which delivers ultrafast broadband to businesses in rural Oxfordshire.

Work started in the first week of February 2020, with night work on Thame High Street. Airband is deploying fibre to the premise, ultrafast broadband direct from the exchange.

The Worcester-based firm specialises in bringing high-speed broadband to hard-to-reach rural and urban areas and has recently completed the second phase of a fibre roll-out in Herefordshire as part of the Fastershire project.

Airband Project Lead, Andy Brain, said he was pleased with the progress that has been made:

“This first cluster stretches from Thame to Chinnor. We’ll also be working on other clusters at the same time including the second cluster which goes from Henley-on-Thames to Lower Shiplake and Sonning Common and a third cluster from Childrey to Kingston Lisle, west of Wantage. We expect all of these clusters to be finished by June 2020 if not before.”

The BiRO project is funded by £6.3m EAFRD funding through the Rural Broadband Infrastructure scheme to improve broadband for businesses in rural Oxfordshire and will provide ultrafast broadband to 970 SMEs across the region. The project is managed by the Oxfordshire County Council Digital Infrastructure programme in partnership with Airband.

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Oxfordshire offers new ways to repair and reuse small electrical items

Oxfordshire County Council has launched a new trial service to residents with a way to ensure their unwanted small electrical items can be repaired and reused, reducing what the county would otherwise send to waste.

There are already many ways to recycle small electrical items that are beyond repair either at the kerbside or a recycling centre. Funded by Valpak, the council is trialling drop off points for unwanted small electrical items that are still in good condition at a number of participating Oxfordshire libraries.

The trial is to run at Banbury, Bicester, Kidlington, Witney, Carterton, Oxfordshire County Library, Headington, Cowley, Littlemore & Blackbird Leys libraries.

Once goods have been dropped off, the items will be collected by Bicester Green or Orinoco – two local charities who help reuse and recycle waste – where they will be tested. Minor repairs will be made by volunteers and the items will then be sold on to benefit the charities.

The drop off point is for small electrical items only – toasters, kettles, radios etc – items you can easily carry. The libraries are not able to accept anything large or heavy – such as televisions, monitors, microwaves, white goods or fridges and freezers – or anything damaged and beyond repair.

Drop offs can only be made when the libraries are open – please check opening hours before visiting.

The council is asking residents to ensure any disposable batteries – i.e. standard AA/AAA/9V batteries – are removed from donations of battery powered devices. These can be recycled at the kerbside. If the item has a rechargeable lithium-ion battery – like the ones in cordless power tools or mobile phones – please leave them in the device when donated.

To find details of all recycling services using a newly launched search tool visit the Waste Wizard – www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/wastewizard

To find your nearest electrical repair event and for other tips on how to reduce your waste visit www.oxfordshirerecycles.org.uk.

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Bicester revealed as start location for prestigious women's cycle race

Bicester is to host the start of the prestigious Women's Tour professional cycling race, which will pedal from the town on Monday 8 June, it has been announced.

Oxfordshire pro-cyclist, Katie Scott, joined community cycling groups and local children from Bicester's Longfields Primary School and The Cooper School (secondary); at the official announcement in the town's Garth Park. Katie, 18, is a CAMS–Tifosi team rider, from Faringdon; she hopes to be one of around 100 women taking part in the gruelling six-stage tour later this summer.

This is the second year that Oxfordshire has hosted the Women's Tour. The district councils, Oxford City, and County Council are working in partnership with race organisers Sweet-Spot to deliver the event, in a three-year commitment which began in 2019. Different routes are planned each year to showcase the county's diversity to a national and international audience.

This year, the county will host the prestigious opening stage, with Bicester having the honour of starting the race.

Cycling fans are expected to visit Oxfordshire to watch the event, generating additional business for restaurants, bars, hotels, B&Bs and shops along the route.

After leaving Bicester, about 100 professional riders will weave their way through towns, villages and rural areas, inspiring local schools to organise themed sport and fitness lessons. Highlights of the race will also be screened on ITV4.

Families are expected to line the route to cheer on competitors, turning the event into an exciting community spectacle. Spectators will be encouraged to use healthy and environmentally-friendly transport to reach vantage points to watch the race.

Last year's race has already created a lasting health legacy for Oxfordshire. The County Council has been working in partnership with Active Oxfordshire, TRAX, British Cycling and Thames Valley Police to refurbish 'waste' bikes for young people facing barriers to cycling.

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Seven recycling centres to close for Spring clean in March and April

This March and April seven of Oxfordshire County Council's Household Waste Recycling Centres will be closing for two days to carry out a deep clean and essential maintenance at the sites.

The work forms part of the council's planned approach to maintenance, and is designed to keep sites safe, looking clean and fresh and helping improve the customer experience when using these important environmental facilities.

Only one site will be closed at any one time and all other sites will be open on those days. Residents are asked to plan for these closures, ideally holding on to your waste until the site reopens or if that is not possible visiting one of the neighbouring sites.

Site closure dates:

Alkerton 3rd & 4th March 2020

Redbridge 10th & 11th March 2020

Ardley 17th & 18th March 2020

Dix Pit 24th & 25th March 2020

Oakley Wood 31st March – 1st April 2020

Stanford 21st & 22nd April 2020

Drayton 28th & 29th April 2020

For those residents with permits, please note that these can be used at any of the sites.

Steve Burdis, Principal Officer for the Oxfordshire County Council Waste Team said: "The deep cleans of our sites enable us to carry out essential cleaning and maintenance including pressure washing the sites and structures, repainting lines and safety areas, along with other general and grounds maintenance ahead of the busy summer months.

"All closures are on quieter midweek days to minimise disruption and sites will reopen at 8am following the two-day closure. For practical and safety reasons we need to close the sites for this short period and apologise for any inconvenience this may cause and thank residents for their understanding."

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Winter Warmth website helps residents

Oxfordshire County Council has implemented a new online service called 'Winter Warmth' to help vulnerable residents receive support and access funding for home repairs. The aim is to improve the home environment which will additionally support physical and emotional wellbeing for residents across the county.

The easy to use service signposts property owners or private tenants to a website where a postcode is entered to find the most appropriate organization. The services and funds available include grants, loans and energy company schemes that provide home repairs, so residents can stay safe, secure, independent and warm.

The funding can be used to fit or fix a new boiler and install loft and cavity wall insulation to keep people affordably warm. There is also general advice available on how to stay safe and well, and home repairs are also available for people with disabilities.

In its first month, the website has received over 50 e-mails which have been sent directly to the services who can provide the help, when and where it is needed.

The service aims to make a positive difference to peoples' health which can be negatively impacted by the cold weather conditions. The colder weather is often linked to an increase in heart attacks, strokes, respiratory problems as well as increased cases of isolation. Flu, coughs and cold symptoms can also increase during the winter months, especially for those who have a pre-existing health condition.

It is hoped that accessing the services from this user-friendly online website, will make a positive difference to bring comfort to people's homes, encourage independence and care for those in greatest need.

In 2018, Oxfordshire's vulnerable residents benefited from just over £3 million worth of support to keep them safe, healthy and independent in their homes, so this website is greeted with positive enthusiasm to make a difference.

For more information go to: www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/homerepairs

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Update on the youth opportunities fund

Voluntary and community organisations have been awarded a share of Oxfordshire County Council's new £1m Youth Opportunity Fund.

The fund is aimed at groups that can provide activities and opportunities for young people between the ages of 11-18, and 11-25 special educational needs.

Feedback from Oxfordshire residents' points to strong support for improving community-run youth services. This new fund was made available to help existing projects expand and new ones get started. The successful bids will now receive grants of up to £70,000 over the next few months.

By offering start-up funding in previous years, the council has already helped many community-run groups provide support for younger children and families. Now the aim is to do the same for youth services.

Community-run youth schemes complement the work of the county council's children's services, which target resources at young people and families with additional needs and those at risk of abuse and neglect. The council also has a desire for more youth clubs to be established.

The county council believes communities are well placed to provide universal services and this is already an established model in Oxfordshire.

A fund was launched in 2016 to provide grants for local groups to start services for children such as 'stay and play', with the creation or continuation of around 40 projects. A similar fund was created for voluntary and community groups to start up day services for older and disabled people in Oxfordshire.

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Becoming a dementia friendly council

Oxfordshire County Council is implementing plans to become a dementia-friendly organisation. The aim is to develop further awareness, understanding and support for vulnerable residents and staff who are impacted by the health condition.

The number of people with dementia in the UK is expected to rise to 1 million by 2021. About two in every 100 people aged between 65 to 69 have dementia, and this rises to one in five for those aged 85 to 89. Oxfordshire has an ageing population and the number of residents aged 85 and over is forecast to increase.

This means that more people in Oxfordshire are likely to be affected by dementia, either by having a diagnosis themselves or through someone they know with the condition. More people may develop dementia whilst still in employment; others will be combining work and a busy lifestyle with being a carer for a person with dementia. Therefore, awareness is key to understanding the lifestyle changes, choices and challenges that will occur with an individual's diagnosis.

Oxfordshire County Council aims to help people who live with dementia to stay independent and live well in their communities for as long as possible. The council's plans are part of a wider Alzheimer's Society initiative that aims to create a network of four million Dementia Friends across the country.

As the first step to becoming more dementia friendly, the Alzheimer's Society held an event for staff and councillors at County Hall on Tuesday 25 February to complete a 'dementia friends' training session to improve awareness and learn about dementia friendly communities in Oxfordshire.

The next step in the plan is to help to develop dementia friendly communities across Oxfordshire to help to reduce isolation and support people to be aware of and understand dementia. This will enable people living with dementia to live well within their local communities for as long as they are able.

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