

Many of you may already know that I stepped down from Cherwell District Council in May 2023, so my comments are in relation to Oxfordshire County Council only. Additionally, I currently have caring duties, so if I am unable to attend your annual meeting, please accept my apologies and I report as follows.

General Overview of OCC 2023-24

County Hall, under the Lib/Lab/Green alliance, and more recently under the minority Liberal/Green alliance (They fell out with Labour over an excoriating Ofsted review of Special Educational Needs & Disabilities services), remains a deeply dysfunctional institution. Despite the headcount increasing by over 400 people in the last two or three years, getting anything done is harder than ever. A much-vaunted restructure of highways has left councillors and communities unable to reach anyone who can actually achieve anything. Amongst other impacts, it is now very hard for communities who receive S106 income from new developments to get new schemes designed, let alone implemented. This has been exacerbated by the blanket introduction of 20mph schemes. It has further stretched resources and their abandonment of the Dept. of Transport design code, which recognises that the environment needs to be appropriate for a 20mph scheme to gain public compliance, means many communities now tell me that the limits are simply ignored, and worse, many are now reporting instances of cars overtaking in villages. Thames Valley Police have objected to virtually every 20mph application and made it clear that they will not enforce them unless it is a known black spot. All deeply disappointing for local communities who were led to believe that simply by changing speed signs, motorists would all obey the new limits. In truth, the Lib/Lab/Greens are obsessed by all things bike, and from their prosperous homes in the leafy suburbs of Oxford, where busses abound, they are determined to tax or embuagger motorists off the roads across the whole county.

On 17 March the Department for Transport published draft statutory guidance for councils on low traffic neighbourhoods (LTNs), which have caused real problems for residents and businesses living around them on Oxford, setting out that they must gain buy-in from local residents, businesses and emergency services when considering implementing new LTN schemes. Local authorities are expected to follow the guidance and ensure local people support their plans. Recent examples where councils have implemented these schemes without public support have been shown to cause disruption and have unintended negative consequences. If local authorities fail to deliver sensible road schemes that work for local people they could see future funding withdrawn, and under powers from the Traffic Management Act, the government could ultimately take control of an authority's roads where they are deemed to be widely mismanaged. Separately, councils have received strengthened guidance on setting 20mph speed limits, reminding them to reserve them for sensible and appropriate areas only – such as outside schools – and with safety and local support at the heart of the decision. Local authorities are expected to consider this guidance, and as with the LTN guidance, this could have implications for the awarding of funding in the future.

OCC has also announced that the Oxford city Zero Emissions Zone pilot generated £702,940 income from charges and fines over its first full financial year of operation. Critics have labelled this 'pay to pollute' scheme a policy failure but a financial success. The forthcoming Expanded Zero Emissions Zone is projected to generate £25m for OCC over a five-year period.

The Liberal/Green administration is also planning to introduce a tax of £600 per parking space on all organisations with more than ten parking spaces in the city of Oxford. In addition to businesses, schools and other public organisations are likely to be hard hit. This matter is back in the news as BMW has controversially been exempted from the tax.

If the Liberals and Greens aren't stopped at the ballot box, expect to see similar measures in a market town near you soon!

Meanwhile, late night opening at recycling centres has also been cut, and they will no longer stay open late on Thursdays. The seven centres, operated by OCC, had previously opened until 8pm every Thursday between April and September. However, the extra service is being discontinued this year. Green Councillor Pete Sudbury, Deputy Leader of OCC with Responsibility for Climate Change, Environment and Future Generations, said: "We realise this decision will disappoint some people..." but they've never let that stop them from making bad decisions.

Children's services remains a real focus of my work at OCC and I was appointed the shadow cabinet member for SEND improvement, following the shocking Ofsted report last year. Officers are determined to make real changes, but progress has been mixed. On the plus side, funding of £2.23M has been secured to create 23 new places at Mabel Prichard Special School in Oxford. The school provides education and support for pupils with a range of severe learning difficulties and is managed by The Gallery Trust.

This is in addition to a new £14.4m special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) school is set to be built in Didcot will teach up to 120 children with special educational needs related to autism and/or social, emotional and mental health. Work should start in 2025. However, a further new school is required in the south of the county and funding has not yet been secured for this. In a further blow, the council operated special school, Woodeaton Mannor, received a double inadequate assessment from Ofsted, with some very concerning safeguarding concerns for both staff and pupils. In addition to the overall SEND improvement plan, work is now underway to try and firmly bolt yet another stable door as the horse clears off into the distance.

Most recently, OCC were once again in the news for defunding a well respected family support initiative operated by the charity Autism Family Support Oxfordshire. Working with colleagues, I have managed to secure some emergency funding to help see what can be done longer term. Sadly, it was yet another example of an administration too preoccupied by its pet schemes to keep its eye on its substantive responsibilities.

In all of these cases OCC, one way or another, attempted to shift the blame onto others, most often parents and children. At Full Council on 16th April I confronted the cabinet member for SEND improvement with this, eliciting a rare apology and retraction. Let's hope the lesson sticks and the Lib/Greens pay more attention to this vital area and move from victim blaming to coproducing SEND services with parents, carers and young people.

In addition to matters at County Hall I continue to deal with a wide range of casework, which by its nature must remain confidential, as well as with parish councils. Recently I have also convened meetings with our MP as well as Thames Water, The Environment Agency and Network Rail and I will continue to work hard on your behalf over the next 12 months.

Finally, I still have Councillor Priority Funding available. I am particularly eager to hear from small community groups that could benefit from a grant towards their activities. If you could spread the word, asking people in the first instance to contact me by email at ian.corkin@oxfordshire.gov.uk that would be much appreciated.