

Local Government Reform in brief:

I'll keep it brief this month... Oxfordshire councils have been asked to respond to the government on their preferred options for devolution/reorganisation by March 21st, then come up with a finalised plan by November this year. This means that the County Council elections on May 1st are likely to be the last, with a new 'shadow' unitary council likely to be elected in 2027, fully taking over both county and district responsibilities in 2028. So, for a year or so, there will be THREE sets of locally elected representatives, plus potentially a regional mayor!

County Council Budget

New funding of **more than £50m** has been agreed for **highway maintenance** with more money also agreed for active travel measures to promote walking and cycling and extra investment to improve responsiveness to flooding. The annual budget setting meeting of Oxfordshire County Council (11 February) also agreed new funding in 2025/26 for special educational needs (SEND), early years support and holding the price of joint ticketing at park and rides.

A total of two per cent of the council tax increase is ringfenced for adult social care under rules set down by central government.

While it is good news that we can spend more on priorities in 2025 the pressures on local government continue to increase and things look uncertain beyond 2025/26. All councils want more certainty looking forward.

What has been agreed?

- £1m of funding for the expansion of early years support (under 5s) so that all children can get the best possible start in life.
- The council has allocated £1.141m of extra funding in 2025/26 relating to special educational needs (SEND) and education, health and care plans (EHCP). A total of £641,000 of this would be additional money to complete EHCPs more quickly and £500,000 to facilitate the provision of expertise from special schools focused on children with EHCPs who are in mainstream schools.
- £2m of new money for early intervention to support families
- £400,000 additional funding for school transport for children with SEND
- **£3.6m for flooding measures**, including £2.1m for work with communities who have suffered flooding and £1.5m additional funding for highway drainage in 2025/26, with the council moving to an **annual** highway drainage gully emptying and jetting cycle.
- £1m funding for revenue or capital spend to drive investment in rail.
- £400,000 to support holding the price of a joint ticket (parking and bus fare) at Park & Ride car parks unchanged from 2024/25.

Spending on capital projects

Additions to council's capital budget include:

- **£38.6m for a two-year highways maintenance programme**, which will extend surface dressing, prevent potholes from occurring and improve drainage across the highways network in Oxfordshire. A further £16.2m will be used to repair and maintain bridges and £4m road safety.
- £11.1m towards the completion of Watlington relief road to alleviate congestion, noise and air pollution in the town centre and enable local walking and cycling in the town.
- £1.8m for active travel measures to encourage walking and cycling including £500,000 for active travel in rural areas.

Have your say on the Greenways project

Residents are being asked for their views on plans for six new walking and cycling routes into Oxford from towns and villages within an eight mile (13km) radius. The proposal to create a series of 'greenways' – high-quality paths in urban or natural areas prioritised for pedestrians and cyclists – comes from a joint project being developed by Oxfordshire County Council, Oxford City Council and the University of Oxford. The most local one to us is a Wheatley-Oxford route.

The consultation runs until 18 March, to take part, visit [Let's talk Oxfordshire](#).

This **doesn't** include the **Berinsfield-Oxford route(s)**, proposals for which are being worked on separately (one along the A4074, one on the Roman Road bridleway). Currently, work is ongoing identifying landowners and other constraints and options for these. There is funding from Active Travel England to get to outline design stage, at which point there should be a public consultation. I've asked for public consultation to take place as early as possible in the process.

Garsington, Wheatley Road pavement widening / Pettiwell parking

I met with parish councillors, OCC officers, Milestone and the contractors to discuss how access challenges for local farmers can be met during the construction process, to enable this project to proceed as scheduled. OCC have committed to cover some additional costs to speed up the project and allow limited access where essential for larger farm vehicles.

A consultation on plans for extended double yellow lines higher up Pettiwell will take place after the May elections.

A4074 speed limits, and layout of the Dorchester bypass

I'm also told there will be a consultation on these issues after the elections. Scheduled resurfacing of the Dorchester bypass gives scope to amend the road markings and layout.

Baldons ANPR cameras

At a recent decision meeting, use of Automatic Number Plate Recognition was approved to enforce the existing access restriction to the Baldons – designated Motor vehicles prohibited (except for access), something to be aware of!