REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS MAY 2024
FROM CLLR NIGEL SIMPSON

GENERAL OCC REPORT

OXFORDSHIRE 'PARK AND RIDE' SITE BUILT WITHOUT ROAD ACCESS

OCC has almost finished building a £51m 'park and ride' site with 850 spaces near Eynsham, but it remains closed because there is no access road. Concerns have been expressed that the site will sit unused for years until OCC secures funding to build the necessary road. However, the council stated that the park and ride site was intentionally completed ahead of the roadwork to save costs amid rising inflation and construction expenses. The broader A40 improvement plan, including bus lanes, is now subject to funding discussions with Homes England and the Department for Transport. OCC hopes to finalise funding agreements soon and to have the park and ride fully operational by 2027.

OCC SEEKS TO EMBED COMMERCIAL MINDSET

OCC has launched an authority-wide strategy to “get the organisation thinking more commercially” – which could lead to “bigger opportunities” in the future. An overview of the commercial strategy presented to OCC’s cabinet, states that the council “aims to optimise organisational efficiency and generate sustainable revenue through innovative and responsible commercial activities”. Some councillors have raised concerns around the council’s need to get the right balance between commercial endeavours and serving residents. Councils have a very mixed record when it comes to making investments outside their areas of expertise.

OFSTED JUDGES CHILDREN'S SERVICES IN OXFORDSHIRE AS “GOOD”

Ofsted has judged OCC’s children’s services as good as part of an inspection that took place in February 2024. The assessment took place as part of the government’s inspecting local authority children’s services (ILACS) system. Inspectors praised the county council for a number of improvements across its services since its last inspection in 2018, which were also judged overall as good, leading to even better outcomes for children and young people.

HEADS OF TERMS AGREED WITH OXFORD UNITED FOR STADIUM LAND

An agreement has been reached on heads of terms for OCC to lease land it owns near Kidlington for Oxford United to develop a new football stadium. The council’s cabinet agreed in principle for land known as the “triangle” to be leased at its meeting in September 2023.
Detailed negotiations have now led to heads of terms being agreed. Several other key legal and partnership agreements will follow to meet the council's strategic objectives and also to ensure that the club fulfils its commitments to the local community and sports groups.

Collaboration agreement and lease option agreed for stadium land.

Following the recent agreement of heads of terms for the lease of council-owned land near Kidlington for a new football stadium, Oxfordshire County Council and Oxford United FC are pleased to confirm that all other legal documents have now been agreed by both parties.

These include a lease option for the land known as the Triangle and a collaboration agreement, which ensures the club meets its commitments against the council's strategic priorities and to the local community and sports groups in both the short and long term.

This represents a significant milestone in helping the club secure a long-term home in the county.

OUFC will now focus all its attention on securing planning permission from Cherwell District Council for the new stadium, which is a requirement before the lease of the land can be completed.

Cost of living support proposed for approval.

Residents struggling to meet basic living costs will continue to benefit from Oxfordshire County Council's cost of living support, with a new package of measures for 2024/25 proposed for approval by the council's cabinet on 14 May.

Following an allocation of £3,361,256 from the government's Household Support Fund, the council would be able to provide support for the next six months.

This funding is the fifth round of assistance provided by the government's Household Support Fund to support vulnerable residents. All funding must be spent by 30 September 2024.

The programme will provide support to the following groups:

- Children and young people in early years settings, schools and colleges will continue to receive free school meal equivalent support ahead of school holiday periods.
- City and district councils will receive additional funding for locally targeted support as in the previous year.
- The Residents Support Scheme funding will stay at the same level as 2023/24, ensuring anyone experiencing financial crisis can get assistance with basic household costs.

The Residents' Support Scheme launched back in June 2023 and helps residents with one-off short-term basic living costs such as food, credit for gas/electric prepayment meters and essential household items. During the first 10 months of the scheme, 5,238 applications were received, with 3,620 of those resulting in an award being made.

Residents can learn more about help available during the cost of living crisis at Oxfordshire County Council's dedicated webpage oxfordshire.gov.uk/living.

Foster Care Fortnight comes to Oxfordshire, 13 - 26 May 2024

Residents are being encouraged to consider becoming foster carers for Oxfordshire County Council in a campaign marking Foster Care Fortnight, 13 - 26 May 2024.

Samantha Allen, from Oxford, has been a foster carer for 14 years and is helping to raise awareness of what is involved and why the experience is so rewarding.

"There are so many fostering options," explains **Samantha**. "I've been a parent/child foster carer for the past seven years, that's when I support both the parent and their child, and I've done some emergency fostering in between. I love the happy endings, which come in many guises, such as seeing the children I've looked after maturing and growing in confidence as they prepare for life ahead.

"There are lots of other parts of the role that I love, things like watching the babies I have cared for develop and thrive and making them feel secure and loved. It's also great witnessing children going onto their adopted parent or parents, and mums going home with their babies once they've completed a 12 week assessment with you.

"Sometimes new mums can't see how well they're doing. In these cases, I see it as my role to empower them, to boost their self-belief, and you can never praise enough, so what I do is just keep doing it and that way I gradually instil confidence.

"It's wonderful to see them blossom, knowing that a mum has overcome her anxiety and she will cope as a mother. It's so uplifting for me, and, of course, wonderful for the mum and child as they bond ever closer."

Oxfordshire County Council provides foster carers like Samantha with lots of help, including access to a social worker and a host of other support services. The council aims to create a fostering community, a network where foster carers can seek assistance and guidance to help them make a positive difference to local children.

Samantha explains: "There are so many options to fit around an individual's time and availability, from respite, to short-term or long-term, emergency care and where you support both a parent and their child. You can be single, same sex or however your family presents itself. Age isn't a barrier either, because if you're 21 or over you can potentially foster.

"The children I have had the privilege of fostering have brought so much fun and purpose into my life. My advice to anyone thinking about fostering is to take your time to research and ask questions. There are lots of foster carers, like me, who would love to share our experiences with you, giving you a realistic perspective of what's involved. People should be reassured that there is loads of support available

from Oxfordshire County Council and they'll help you connect with other foster carers as part of a support network."

Oxfordshire County Council's foster carers receive:

- A welcome payment of £1,500, to help make the transition to foster carer.
- Generous fees, paid in addition to the child's allowance, based on experience and skills.
- Dedicated social worker support.
- Access to professionals involved with the child/children, linked with support groups and specialised training.

For further information visit oxfordshire.gov.uk/fostering, email fostering@oxfordshire.gov.uk or phone 0800 783572.

Cherwell District Council

Local election results

Sixteen out of the 48 seats on the council were up for election on 2 May. The political make-up of the council is now as follows:

- Conservative: 11
- Green: 4
- Independent: 3
- Labour: 13
- Liberal Democrat: 17

The turnout was 30.58 per cent. The council's political administration will be confirmed at the annual council meeting on 22 May.