

OCC (Sonning Common & Henley South) councillor's report

Shiplake – 12th January 2025

Council on 9th December

Council confirmed the Expression of Interest (EOI) for Oxfordshire to join the Thames Valley MSA (Mayoral Strategic Authority). I spoke to support but with strong caveats around developing an appropriate Economic Strategy; some City and Government voices are getting a bit extreme in suggestions of headlong economic, employment, population and housing growth! Levelling Up remains important for the future of the UK.

After a number of years the independent remuneration panel produced a report, which was accepted. This included indexation arrangements going forwards.

Concern was raised through a motion on the SE Strategic Reservoir proposal near Abingdon and arrangements for construction, emergency discharge to the Thames and associated risks of flooding. It is at consultation from Thames Water. There was also support for social cohesion and positive efforts for integration across communities. Separately there was a call for better mental health care in the face of a backlog and some tragic consequences; OCC works closely with the NHS on health and well-being.

Cabinet's report was accepted – noting that the SEND High Needs Deficit was forecast to rise to £153m by end March 2026. This is a national problem caused from the “statutory override of the last Government. This cost lost interest and great uncertainty about covering these SEND costs. Government have put off until Spring a review but promised they will take ongoing costs from April 2028!

Annoyingly there is a proposal to introduce a booking and verification scheme at OCC's Household Waste and Recycling centres from early 2026. A primary need for this is that the Redbridge centre needs to close for 3 months (Presently estimated from June 2026.) Councillors have mixed views about this but I have joined with those pressing for a review and return after the Redbridge works. In future residents will face a charge for asbestos disposal and those residents from outside Oxfordshire will have to pay a fee per visit to use local centres (£15). There are discussions about permits or other proofs of identity and address.

Oxford Congestion Charge – Update

The congestion charge seems to be working well. The first month of data has been published. It shows usage of the Redbridge P&R up 27% and faster bus times with good central footfall. There are a few places where there is less success and these are being closely studied. However so far and overall nit is looking good.

I would encourage all residents to apply for permits if you have not done so already.

<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/transport-and-travel/oxfords-temporary-congestion-charge-cars-cars/apply-permit>

Oxfordshire County Council is providing free bus journeys in Oxford from the P&Rs for an initial period of three months from 29 October. (There is still a modest parking charge - £2.50 for 16 hours for instance.) The first month of income (before costs and bus discounts) was £300k and on track. (Subsequent NB now extended free bus until end March 2026 – scheme has earned very good income.)

Local Government Reorganisation

All of the bids were submitted ahead of the 28th November deadline.

The 3 bids can be read at the below links.

One unitary proposal - <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/council/local-government-reorganisation-and-devolution/one-oxfordshire>

Two unitary proposal - <https://twocouncils.org/home>

Three unitary proposal - <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/three-councils>

Consultations

There are a range of consultations open on <https://letstalk.oxfordshire.gov.uk/>, including:

- **Shaping the future of our fire and rescue service – see below.**
- National highways and transport network 2025 – a nationwide survey on public satisfaction with transport and road services (open until 28th February 2026)

Thames Water has now also launched its statutory consultation on the South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO) scheme. It will close on 13 January 2026.

Fire & Rescue service – review Consultation

I am not satisfied that response times which should be under 11 minutes with an outer level of 14 minutes will be achieved if Henley Fire Station closes.

That said it was not right before and the overall changes are set to improve responses in Oxfordshire within the same budget.

It may be that Henley needs some more full-time shift working to ensure availability. That may cost more, but safety is important!

As yet I don't know the full answer, but my searching questions have been taken seriously and are being reviewed. To be fair this is a consultation. You can respond to the consultation here:

<https://letstalk.oxfordshire.gov.uk/ofrs-consultation>

There will be a public meeting in Henley at Christ Church, Reading Road at 7.30pm with the Chief Fire Officer Rob MacDougall, Freddie van Mierlo MP, me and Stefan Gawrysiak.

Happy New Year!

[Leigh Rawlins](#)

County Councillor (Sonning Common & Henley South)