

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

Shiplake – 9th February 2026

Fire & Rescue service – review Consultation

I participated - alongside Stefan Gawrysiak, Freddie Van Mierlo MP and Mayor Tom Buckley - at the public meeting at Christ Church in Henley on the 15th January. I advocated for retention of the Henley Fire Station and for it to have a full-time day (say 8am-8pm) shift and an On Call night shift. We all agreed.

The standards being sought are for 80% of “first pump” responses to be within 11 minutes and 95% to be within 14 minutes.

The analysis which Stefan and I did, plus further work helpfully done by officers in response to our targeted requests have I believe pointed the way. The consultation was extended to 31st January and is now closed. I made a full response in some detail and referenced all the other analysis and observations made to senior officers. Of course officers will now review the responses and do further modelling and analysis. I am hopeful that we will get a modification and carry the appropriate result – on the merits of our case.

Whilst parts of the Henley “ground” might be just about do-able from Caversham or Wallingford (such a Playhatch or Sonning Common) it became thoroughly clear that the proper standards could not be delivered to the large population area of Henley and Shiplake. (“Ground means the “normal” designated area of a fire station.) Moreover, there were concerns about coverage of Wargrave etc over the Oxfordshire border. There is only one tender in Caversham and it would be unduly stretched – needing aid from Wokingham Road station which is on the A329 getting on for Earley. The response times for Henley and Shiplake would be more like 16-20 minutes – very frequently outside even the outer response time standard. I fear that some calls - all the way from Wallingford or Caversham stations - could take close to the standard drive-times of 31 minutes and 21 minutes respectively. Of course blue lights help, but day congestion can be challenging and the tenders are heavy vehicles!

The modelling had reported averages by ground, had ignored calls outside Oxfordshire and had not well coped with the complexity of a large “edge” population like Henley and Shiplake. Ironically, the crewing of Wallingford had been proposed for upgrade and the outputs indicated that responses around that area would be very fast – considerably below the required times. There is a clear message that some rebalancing with Henley station is indicated!

An upgrade of Henley to full-time day crewing would be consistently available and save the cost of distant service from Wallingford and Caversham/Berkshire. It would also earn from some service to cross-border needs in Wargrave etc. In addition focussing all the available On Call resources onto the night shift would also hopefully provide a high standard of availability then too.

I believe that officers have heard the concerns and we will now seek to follow-up once the consultation responses have been understood and further work done on a revised proposal.

LGR consultation by UK Gov

There is to be a consultation on the 3 options for Local Government Reorganisation in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire

The government intends to decide on which structure is implemented in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire before the government's summer recess in July. The preferred model is expected to be fully operational in April 2028, replacing the current councils.

Residents can take part in the consultation by visiting <https://consult.communities.gov.uk/local-government-reorganisation/oxfordshire>

The consultation is open from 5 February to 26 March 2026. Respondents can either take part in an online survey or write directly to government with their views.

Residents can read the full two-unitary proposal or a shortened version on the website www.twocouncils.org. The proposal covers all the key points, including how services will be run, financial modelling, implementation plans, and the vision for the future.

The other two proposals can be found at:

- Single unitary proposal – www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/oneoxfordshire
- Three unitary proposal – www.oxford.gov.uk/three-councils

My position is that I firmly prefer the 2-council option and believe the so-called 3-council (“Greater Oxford”) proposal to be madness!

Potholes

From the 9th December to the end of January 2026 the UK weather has been abnormal - with a sustained cycle of freeze-thaw conditions interspersed with bucket of rain. Indeed, researchers at the University of Reading recorded 25 straight days of rainfall at the start of the year - the lengthiest unbroken run since records began nearly 120 years ago. The spell makes it the fourth wettest January in the Berkshire town since 1908, following a 2025 year that was one of the warmest and sunniest on record. Moreover wet weather is expected to continue throughout February.

Unsurprisingly, these conditions have generated a huge rash of potholes. Oxfordshire County Council have doubled the number of pothole fixing crews to respond. At one point crews had to operate gritters to keep the roads safe and crewing had to be taken from road mending crews. To further complicate life when the weather is very cold or wet it is not possible to get existing and new materials to melt and meld together (except to a certain degree using the few “dragon-patcher” machines). Where there are priority potholes on key roads it may be necessary to do a temporary patch and then need to come back in better weather and when, where necessary, a road closure or partial closure can be done. The amount of potholes is currently backlogged, but the extra crews will hopefully help with catching up over time.

Happily, the results from the roads that have been dressed or resurfaced is that the seal has worked and these have generally not shown potholes. However that programme is expensive and requires capital expenditure.

County councils face a lot of statutory obligation for things like adult and social care which consume some 70-75% of revenue funds. Since the 2008-10 financial crash, UK Gov has cut back council funding very aggressively. This means that funding is now down to around 10% of what it needs to be. In the decade after 2010 there were failures in the Highways programme that caused the whole network of assets to become degraded. However now, given the high value and key importance of the Oxfordshire road and paths network, Oxfordshire is funding capital expenditure to protect these key assets – albeit at the cost of some debt.

In certain circumstances it is possible to claim some compensation for pothole or road defect damage. The courts have excluded claims that are before a pothole has been reported and indeed before a “reasonable” time has passed to allow a road repair. For highly dangerous “red” (painted) potholes the aim is for 24 hours, subject to the conditions, but for most potholes the aim is to fix within 28 days, subject to the conditions. Claim can be put forward here:

<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/transport-and-travel/street-maintenance-z/compensation>

However not all claims made will meet the requirements.

Please report potholes using www.fixmystreet.com, preferably with **photographs** if it is safe to take one. Fix My Street reports are generally investigated within 10 days of being raised.

Resurfacing works in Henley

Highways have confirmed that road resurfacing work are scheduled for resurfacing scheme at A4130/A4155 Marlow Rd Roundabouts. The work is set to commence on **Monday 16th March; 20:00 – 06:00Hrs** and will include **two consecutive overnight full road closures**.

This will cover :-

- The A4130 Northfield End will be closed south of Badgemore Lane.
- The A4155 Marlow Rd will be closed south of the Henley Rugby Club.
- The A4130 Bell Street will be closed north of New Street, although residential access maintained up as far as Bell Lane.
- The Kings Road will be closed east of Ravenscroft Road.

Gatemen / Traffic Marshals will be positioned at all hard closure points during the road closure. They will direct traffic and pedestrians to ensure the safety of the public and workforce during working hours. We ask that you give them your full support and heed their advice whether you are a pedestrian, cyclist, or motorist. They will endeavour to maintain vehicular access to those businesses and properties affected by the works. However, there may be occasions where delays are likely once the new surfacing is laid, as it takes time to cool down and cure, apologies for any inconvenience this may cause.

Surfacing operations are moving operations so the highest levels of noise will only be experienced by individual frontages for short periods. The noisiest operation, the milling of existing road surface will be completed by 2300hrs, although some construction noise will still be evident during the latter stages of the resurfacing operations.

Several methods of communication are being used to keep residents and users informed of these works:

- Signs are being placed on site to forewarn road users in advance of the works.
- A maintenance information website, which will be updated should any changes occur:
www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/roads-and-transport/roadworks/planned-road-maintenance

See attached plan/map.

County Budget

The UK Government announced the financial settlement for 2026-27 and the following 2 years just before Christmas. They have been keen to provide extra funding to councils with deprivation challenges; coincidentally these are often councils where Labour form the administration.

Unfortunately this extra funding is not new money from government. Instead via a “Fair Funding Review” it is being delivered by imposing funding cuts and new extra austerity to all the other councils – with some suffering worse than others. For Oxfordshire this will mean a loss of at least £24m and potentially £27m (subject to a couple of grants that may vary a bit by that time).

Given the very high 70+% of revenue budget that has to go on statutory obligations such as adult and children’s care, this is likely to put great pressure on the non-statutory areas. These include highways maintenance, buses and libraries amongst others. The changes are being phased in meaning that 2026-27 fares better but this would cause a great challenge over the next couple of years. An extra complication and cost is of course the planned LGR – with the new council(s) expected to be in operation by April 2028... Full budget next month!

[Leigh Rawlins](#)

County Councillor (Sonning Common & Henley South)