

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

Shiplake – 9th March 2026

Fire & Rescue service

The outputs of the consultation are now being reviewed. I am hopeful that the merit of the case made for Henley and the wider area has been understood and that adaptation following careful modelling work will follow.

LGR consultation by UK Gov

Reminder: 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

The number of teams working on potholes has been trebled – with a view to restoring a better situation as soon as may be. Quite a lot of defects have had to be plugged with temporary patches – due to weather and urgency and will in due course need to be returned to, to do permanent fixes – with road closures in some cases.

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.

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

Reminder: 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

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). The settlement assumes that council tax will be increased by 4.99% in all 3 years and in effect leaves no (real) choice.

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.

The budget provides for £5.4m of expenditure savings but leaves £22m of the £27m to be found by the 3rd year. Enormous. (The annual whole of rev Fire & Rescue is £33m and all of rev Highways & Environment is £56m!)

Government make much of the “£168m” of funds provided for Oxfordshire’s roads – except that is :- over 5 years, back-loaded, not guaranteed and replaces slightly smaller funding that was

provided in past years by the last government! In addition there will be the enormous budget squeeze from annual cuts in LG Revenue Support Grant funding covered above.

The budget provides £8m transferring to reserves for the SEND cost net of Government support. The gross SEND negative reserve is expected to be £163m by March 2026 and to increase to £242m by March 2027, then rising by perhaps £100m per annum on current trends. The Government are announcing changes to restrict legally binding EHCP (Education Health & Care Plans) only to the most complex cases in future with the rest going through mainstream schools – but with additional resourcing there. In theory that will be much more cost-effective and potentially a better “education for life”. The Government are also now to start providing some financial support for councils who have been struggling with the SEND deficits under the “statutory override” whereby council were instructed to fund such spends “off balance sheet” and outside normal financial rules.

In addition some extra £3.2m will be needed for EHCP school transport – but this will be offset by £1.2m of efficiencies through better working and routing/sharing.

Adult care continues to grow due to demographic changes but this is being contained via assistive technology, home care and contract efficiencies.

The annual gully-clearance programme will continue with 2026-27 being the first “normal” year after the catch up planned in 2025-26, which is running slightly behind – because of the challenges encountered. This is key to reducing flooding – and resultant potholes.

Overall the budget for 2026-27 is balanced. The future will be very challenging.

There is a strong capital programme – including use of s106 and CIL funds. This includes continuation of the road dressing programme, work on capital renewal of some drains and gullies (£2m) and other new roads such as HIF1 from Culham to Didcot and the Watlington and Benson relief roads. Also library refurbishments, new SEND facilities/schools, capital to unlock stalled s106 projects, contribution to East-West rail (£1.6m) and walking and cycleways.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (“S.E.N.D.”)

As noted above, the Government are progressing a revised SEND strategy. They have announced that they will reimburse 90% of the net schools and SEND deficits for the period up to end March 2026. This is an important move and largely honours the implied promise made by the last Government. As anticipated the direction of travel is to maximise use of mainstream schools – with some extra special resources – with EHCPs restricted to the most complex cases of disability etc. The suggestion is that Government may fund SEND provision from April 2028, within the limits of the revised policy. The detail on the deficits in the period from April 2026 to March 2028 is not yet fully clear. However overall this policy is helpful for the “tier 1” Local Government sector – those having SEND responsibilities.

Government Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) Diktat

The Government requires an SDS for the Thames Valley including Bucks, Berks, Oxon and Swindon. Buckinghamshire object. Most other councils object to the inclusion of Swindon; its inclusion appears to be on political grounds. Oxford City and Reading BC support its inclusion.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/areas-for-producing-spatial-development-strategies/areas-for-producing-spatial-development-strategies#annex-a-proposed-sds-areas>

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