

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

Shiplake – 10th November 2025

Council on 4th November

Council accepted the Cabinet report including the go-live for the Oxford Temporary Congestion Charge, an Enhanced Partnership with bus companies, scope for Part Night Lighting (where local parish and town councils agree), Strategy Plans on Nature Recovery and Biodiversity, more action on use of s106 funds and a Get Oxfordshire Working Plan to tackle economic inactivity with targeted support.

The Strategic Plan for the County was approved with aims for the county to be Greener, Fairer and Healthier.

A motion proposing to scrap the Congestion Charge was firmly defeated.

Local Government Reorganisation

Ahead of the November deadline, all 3 of the proposed options for local government reorganisation have published their draft proposals. They can be read at the below links. The councils proposing each option are now undergoing various review, scrutiny and approval processes ahead of submission later this month.

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>

Oxford Congestion Charge – Update

The congestion charge is now live! 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>

It's too early for detailed feedback on its impact, but early indications are good, the streets are less congested, buses have higher usage and Park & Ride (P&R) usage is up. Redbridge P&R is busy and is to open up more space. The Abingdon Road from Abingdon to central Oxford is noticeably freer and faster – as I notice from the bus when going in for meetings!

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.)

Cowley Branch Line

Last month, the future opening of the Cowley Branch Line was celebrated when the government announced £120 million of funding to reopen the line to passengers, including two new stations at Oxford Cowley and Oxford Littlemore.

This investment will transform connectivity for communities in Littlemore, Cowley, Blackbird Leys and Greater Leys, linking them to central Oxford in under 10 minutes and onward to London Marylebone. It also unlocks access to key growth areas such as ARC Oxford, The Oxford Science Park, the Ellison Institute of Technology, Oxford West End and Oxford North.

Reopening the Cowley Branch Line has been a long-standing priority for us and the city council, and reflects years of partnership and commitment. It will support sustainable economic growth, reduce congestion, cut carbon emissions and create thousands of jobs.

Oxfordshire Works

The Oxfordshire Works Plan or get Oxfordshire Working Plan has been approved.

Oxfordshire enjoys the highest overall employment rate in England, so the task is less about lifting general employment levels, but more about addressing entrenched inequalities, improving access, and tackling the barriers that prevent specific groups from participating fully in the labour market. The report contains sections on:

- Labour market analysis
- Drivers and causes of economic inactivity
- Current system and offer
- Working with partners
- Systemic challenges
- Priority actions and longer-term goals
- Governance, local engagement, and future iterations

It also needs to be signed off by the local Integrated Care Board and Jobcentre Plus.

Improvements in the plan are generally about systematic changes. There is not additional central government funding available at this point to implement the plans recommendations, but there is plenty we can do in the context of the current system. Some of that is about better data and knitting together our provision better, some of it about better targeting. There are six themes identified in the report and specific actions listed so we can turn the exercise into delivery and progress.

The report (awaiting final changes and formal approval) can be found here -

<https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s78364/CA211025%20Get%20Oxfordshire%20Working%20Plan%20Annex%20Oxfordshire%20Works%20-%20A%20Local%20Get%20Britain%20Working%20Planv1.2.pdf>

Gigahubs project wins national recognition

OCC is delighted to announce our GigaHubs project, one of the projects of the Digital Infrastructure Programme, has been awarded Best Public Sector or Community Project at the INCA Awards. The project has connected 192 rural public service sites—including schools, GP surgeries, libraries, and community centres, with gigabit-capable broadband.

Key achievements:

- £69,619 annual savings on council connectivity costs;
- £20,000 social value contribution used to purchase 30 public computers for local libraries;
- Three years of paid internet access for 55 community centres and village halls; and
- First-of-its-kind deployment in the UK, setting a precedent for rural connectivity.

The GigaHubs project is a catalyst for further investment and supports the vision for a smart County. More information is available online here -

<https://digitalinfrastructureoxfordshire.co.uk/projects/gigahubs/>

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)
- Cost of living support – residents survey 2025 (open until 17th November 2025)

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

A set of proposals will be consulted on, designed to ensure that, as Oxfordshire grows and changes that its fire stations, resources, and people are in the right place at the right time to meet the needs. This includes for communities, safety, efficiency and resilience of the service. (Open until 20th January 2026).

There are a number of changes proposed – including the closure of 3 fire stations – including Henley. This is something that only went public after crews and staff had been advised, but was a surprise to me.

Now that it is public I have asked a host of questions to explore and challenge the case.

In so far as I have covered this so far it is to strongly challenge the case.

The 3 stations are Henley, Eynsham and Woodstock. Other stations are changing from on-call part-timer crews to full day-time crews.

It is also proposed to create a new, modern fire station in Crowmarsh to replace the old Wallingford one; with better size and modern features.

Full-time crews are at the station or out on shouts through their shift. On Call crews agree between 40 and 120 hours on call per week. They then respond when they get a call and go to the fire station from their work, leisure or bed. They are paid a retainer of some 10-15% of a full pay and then get paid an enhanced rate for the first hour of a call and then a standard rate for subsequent hours. Nationally this method is in decline and working less well than in the past. Pay is set nationally – so it can't just be varied locally. It is increasingly not attractive for recruits but in a big rural county can be cost-effective.

The case for closing Henley is that the inability to get "on-call" staff means that the tender is not able to attend most shouts. Shouts cover fires but also collisions (RTAs). It is stated that daytime availability has been only 9% and night 24%. What this has meant is that in real life cover comes from Reading (Caversham), Watlington and Wallingford.

Ideally call out times for the "first pump" or tender should be within 10 minutes, because after that the hope of getting people out or saving much of the property diminishes rather rapidly. It takes time to muster on-call fighters from their other jobs/bed etc, but they can help cover a big rural landscape.

The proposal is to cover Henley and our area from the other stations, with Wallingford/Crowmarsh being a full-time day crewed station (2 shifts to cover a long day and 5 crew per tender). Overnight cover would be on an On Call basis. There are very few shouts overnight from 10pm to 8am and of course there is much less congestion then. (There is also an On Call tender at Goring).

Fire engines operate on a cross border basis – so cover between Berkshire and Buckinghamshire tenders go as needed and support each other on need not locality.

Henley has a limited capacity to reach many nearby settlements – including across the river.

However, I am very concerned at what local response times have been vs the 10 minute ideal and what they might be in future. This is the acid test. We must acknowledge that the current model is not, it seems, working well. The Chief Fire Officer, Rob McDougal is highly respected and is doing the review to seek to cut response times across the county and not to save costs. In real life there is already rather distant cover.

It may not be possible but I am asking to explore scope for a I am asking to consider a 2 shift full day crew at Henley. That will come with quite a lot of cost, but I have also asked for a proper review of the costs of distant cover. 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>

Councillor Priority Fund

Reminder: This fund supports councillor priorities in local areas.

The fund has re-opened and the County budget has provided £10,000 per councillor over the 2025-27 financial years to support local community projects.

The application closing deadline will be 5pm on 30th November 2025.

Shiplake represents about 17% pro rata of the Sonning Common & Henley South division – so say £1.7k.

Applicants will be required to open an account to submit their application form. It would be helpful to have some liaison before submission to consider opportunities and any competing bids.

To find out more and how to apply please see

<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/communities/councillor-priority-fund>

Leigh Rawlins

County Councillor (Sonning Common & Henley South)