

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

Shiplake – 13th October 2025

Council on 9th September

Council accepted a Remuneration Committee report recommending that the Opposition could only enjoy one set of Special Allowances. Because the Labour and Conservative (with Independents) Group both had tied with the same number of councillors there had been some suggestions that they would both have rights and that they would both gain a full set of roles and allowances. Unsurprisingly the Remuneration Committee judged that there could only be one set of rights and funding and that if necessary that should be shared. (Arrangements for Parental Leave were also accepted.)

Subject to funding council agreed to explore help for Best Start Family Hubs and existing children's centres. All in areas of greatest need. Evidence that such centres greatly improve outcomes and attainment is strong.

Council supported exploring ways to safeguard the important Healthwatch function to represent patients' experiences and spotlight opportunities to improve NHS delivery.

Oxford Congestion Charge Proposal

On the 10th September OCC's Cabinet approved the £5 Congestion Charge which is expected to go live from Wednesday 29th October.

The scheme is estimated to raise over £3m and it was agreed that there would be flexibility in its application. It must be spent on transport related things and will be focussed on easing congestion, aiding bus usage and access. A significant spend will go to discounting Park & Ride costs, however scope will remain to support buses, including more rural buses, and active travel facilities.

Residents outside Oxford can apply for 25 free permits per annum.

Apply for a Temporary Congestion Charge Permit

The permit application system for Oxford's temporary congestion charge is now live, **Oxfordshire residents are eligible for 25 free permits**. Applicants will need to provide **proof of address** and **vehicle registration details** (V5C or approved alternative). Permits are valid for 12 months and free for residents in the central permit area. Permit types include options for residents, Blue Badge holders, unpaid carers, school transport vehicles, health and care workers, and more. Apply online <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/transport-and-travel/oxfords-temporary-congestion-charge-cars-cars/apply-permit>.

As part of the launch, freePark&Ride bus travel :-

<https://news.oxfordshire.gov.uk/free-park-and-ride-bus-travel-with-temporary-congestion-charge/>

will be available for an initial three-month period from 29th October. Up to two adults and three children can travel free of charge on any Stagecoach or Oxford Bus Company service from Oxford's Park and Ride sites when they hold a valid parking ticket.

This initiative is designed to encourage public transport use and ease congestion in the city, especially in the busy run-up to Christmas. Bus operators are also introducing new routes and services, including additional cross-city links and enhanced evening and Sunday services, improving access for residents and visitors alike.

Together, these measures represent a genuine effort to make public transport more attractive and affordable while supporting local businesses and reducing traffic emissions. As with any new system, there may be some initial challenges.

Henley Road renewals

Two stretches of the A4155 in Henley are being resurfaced – from the Tesco roundabout to the 3 Horseshoes (done) and around Christ Church from Hamilton Avenue to Friday Street.

HGVs in Henley

OCC are exploring options to limit HGV problems in Henley.

Highways – visit to M Group's Drayton depot open day (Nr Abingdon)

On Saturday 27th September I visited the Highways depot at Drayton. A wide range of equipment was displayed with actual repairs demonstrated. There was illustration of new wider area surface patching to prevent surfaces degrading and give a new lease of sealed life. Dragon patcher repairs were also demonstrated. The salt barn and new gritters were shown. Also equipment from Drainline the specialists in drainage and drain-camera surveys; very impressive. They also illustrated a new approach to surface fixes around larger drain covers.

The event indicated confidence in improvements and a better future – alongside the larger stretches of resurfacing and top-dressing being seen around our area. Hurrah!

School Streets and Active Travel

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) is encouraging schools to work with us to promote **active travel** and explore the potential for **School Streets**, temporary, traffic-free zones outside school gates at drop-off and pick-up times. These schemes aim to make the school run safer, reduce congestion, and improve air quality.

More information on how School Streets work is available on the OCC website:

<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/school-streets/about-school-streets> .

OCC's School Engagement Officer has contacted local primary schools at the start of term to encourage participation. Before any School Street can be considered, schools need to be engaged for at least one academic year, implementing active travel initiatives and developing a School Travel Plan (STP). Schools also need to identify a member of staff to co-ordinate this work in collaboration with OCC.

A recent School Street Prioritisation Exercise is underway to identify suitable sites across Oxfordshire. Once the results are available, OCC will review which Henley area schools may be feasible.

Some initial discussions and feasibility checks have already taken place:

- Certain sites have been found unsuitable due to road layouts or shared facilities.
- Others have shown potential and may be revisited for follow-up.

OCC welcomes **support from councillors and parish councils** in encouraging schools to engage with the active travel programme. If you have suggestions or would like to discuss a specific school, please contact me and I can set up a meeting with the relevant OCC officer.

Draft Strategic Plan 2025 to 2028 - Have Your Say

Oxfordshire County Council has published its draft strategic plan for 2025-2028, setting out a vision for a greener, fairer and healthier county.

Key aims include:

- **Greener Oxfordshire:** cutting emissions, improving air quality, investing in sustainable travel and boosting nature recovery.
- **Fairer Oxfordshire:** tackling inequality, supporting families and creating fair access to jobs and services.
- **Healthier Oxfordshire:** helping residents stay healthy and independent, improving mental wellbeing, and expanding support for children and older people.

Flagship projects include the rollout of family and community hubs, the Connect to Work programme for jobseekers facing barriers, and net-zero transport initiatives. To read more, click <https://mycouncil.oxfordshire.gov.uk/documents/s77808/Annex%201%20Draft%20strategic%20plan%202025-2028.pdf>.

£500k Investment to Create Oxfordshire ‘Digital Twin’

Oxfordshire County Council has approved a **£500,000 investment** to create a “digital twin” of the county’s mobile phone network.

The innovative model will allow the council to test “what if” scenarios, such as adjusting antenna direction or adding new small cells, to identify ways to improve mobile signal and coverage for residents and businesses.

The project aims to tackle poor connectivity, which the council says is increasingly a barrier to growth and daily life. Other councils may later join the scheme to help share costs.

To read more, click <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn82yzkm0iyo>

Fire and Rescue Cover Review

OCC officers will present a paper to Cabinet on October 21st outlining a proposed review of **fire and rescue services** across the county.

The review is needed because response times have gradually increased in recent years, and the traditional on-call firefighter model has become increasingly difficult to sustain, particularly during daytime hours, as working patterns and lifestyles have changed. This has led to periods when many on-call fire engines are unavailable, even during peak demand, requiring OCC Fire and Rescue Service to rely on reactive measures such as relocating crews and paying overtime to maintain minimum coverage. These challenges place pressure on resources and reduce the capacity for firefighters to focus on preventative and community safety work.

The proposed new cover model aims to better align staffing and equipment with the times and locations where emergencies are most likely to occur, helping to improve response times and ensure a more resilient workforce. Discussions with unions are ongoing, but OCC recognises that change is essential to sustain the high-quality fire and rescue service that residents expect and rely upon.

Adult Social Care

Work within Adult Social Care is currently being shaped, as it is each year, by ongoing budget discussions and negotiations.

The Health and Social Care Secretary has announced a **£500 million package** intended to improve pay and conditions for care workers. However, trade unions have highlighted that substantially more funding will be needed to meet the ambition of a national care service.

Here is a video <https://youtu.be/-nEHarUrqpE> about the 'Good' CQC rating of OCC's Adult Social Care Service.

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)