

Focus on Parish Councils – Monthly Update
November 2025
Cllr Ben Higgins



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Dear parish councillors and residents,

October has felt like a busy month. As well as attending parish council meetings, full council meetings of both the county and district councils, and cabinet meetings, I have held my regular drop-in session with residents in Watlington, in partnership with the parish council. These sessions feel valuable, and residents come with a range of questions and issues. Attendance is building as well. I am very open to holding these in other areas of the division and am running an extra evening session ahead of the Watlington PC meeting on Tuesday 11th November.

Last week I had a walk-round Watlington with the highways team to review some of the priority interventions identified by residents, and the damage done during diversions for the recent gas main works. I will be replicating these sessions across the division, so am very keen to hear from residents and parish councils on the priority road issues in your area.

OCC News

1. 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. In my role on the Oxfordshire County Council cabinet, I will be involved in the decision-making process for that body at a special cabinet meeting on Thursday 13th November.

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>

2. 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. It's too early for detailed feedback on its impact, but my personal anecdotal take is that congestion on the busy Abingdon road which I use when travelling in for meetings at county hall is much improved.

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

Oxfordshire County Council is providing free park and ride bus journeys in Oxford for an initial period of three months from 29 October.

3. Cowley Branch Line

Last month, we celebrated the opening of the Cowley Branch Line 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.

4. Oxfordshire works

In October I was proud to present my first item to formal cabinet for approval – the Oxfordshire Works Plan.

We are fortunate in Oxfordshire to have the highest overall employment rate in England, and therefore the task is less about lifting general employment levels but more about addressing entrenched inequalities, improving access, and tackling the barriers that prevent specific cohorts 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>

5. Gigahubs project wins national recognition

We are 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 our vision for a smart county. More information is available online here -

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

6. Consultations

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

- Shaping the future of our fire and rescue service - a set of proposals will be consulted on, designed to ensure that, as Oxfordshire grows and changes its fire stations, resources, and people are in the right place at the right time to meet the needs of communities and improve the safety, efficiency and resilience of the service. (open until 20th January 2026)
- 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.

7. Funding

The SODC councillor community grant scheme is open until 5th December. I have a ward budget of £7,500 and applications of under £4,000 to date so am keen to see more. Details here -

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/community-support/grants/councillor-community-grants/>

The Common Ground Resilience Fund was launched in September to support local places. Details are here - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/common-ground-award-prospectus/common-ground-award-prospectus>

Parish Round-Up

I hope to attend Parish Councils in person as regularly as I can. Below are some notes on issues raised at recent meetings:

- Watlington – relief road continued planning delays.
- Britwell Salome – expansion of the 20mph area raised in parish meeting; has been followed up with OCC.
- Checkendon – review of application for extension of 20mph limit; flooding issue by pub
- Stoke Row – road conditions, lotting of woodland – with “Danish bunkhouse” and Airbnb letting now an issue.
- Pishill and Stonor – mobile phone coverage with retirement of analogue phonelines.
- Cuxham – Chalgrove New Town and removal of bypass proposal, HGV traffic (including construction traffic), condition of roads.
- Nuffield – Speeding enforcement, speed limits on the A4130, condition of Ewelme junction next to May’s farm cottages, Fred’s field.
- Shirburn – 20mph limit request, chicane (recent trial carried out and data being collected).
- Swyncombe – issue with unpermitted development on lotted land.
- Nettlebed – community sports facilities