

Focus on Parish Councils – Monthly Update

May 2026

Cllr Ben Higgins

County Council – ben.higgins@oxfordshire.gov.uk

Dear parish councillors and residents,

Please find below a range of updates. I am planning to attend as many of the upcoming annual parish meetings as possible and happy as always to answer questions on the work of both councils that I sit on.



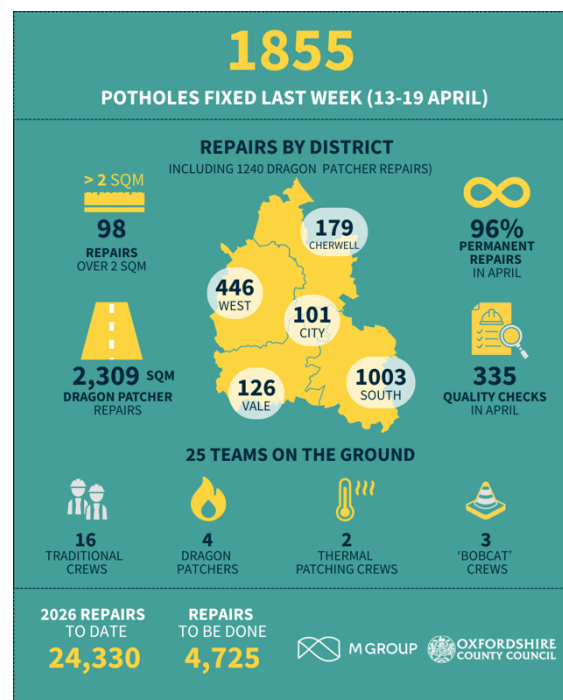
OCC News

1. Highways

Highway repairs have now “turned the corner”, with 4 consecutive weeks where the overall number of outstanding defects has reduced, with more being completed than reported. Whilst there is still a significant backlog to be tackled to return to the normal planned response times, considerable resource continues to be deployed.

The 2026 surface dressing programme started on 7 April and will run until 20 June. It will eventually treat 1,031,331 sqm of road to prolong its life by 8-10 years and prevent pothole formation.

I am now trained as a “super user” which allows me to escalate FixMyStreet reports for repair where they are in 20mph or 30mph areas, rather than having to wait for them to be centrally reviewed. I can do this for existing defects as well as ones I add to the system myself, so if you have any reports that you would like progressing, please do get in touch.



2. Government lifts SEND improvement notice for Oxfordshire

The government has removed the improvement notice for services for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) in Oxfordshire, recognising ongoing improvements following the 2023 Ofsted and Care Quality Commission local area partnership inspection.

In a letter dated 15 April, the Secretary of State for Education acknowledged improvements across the local area partnership, including better use of the views of children, young people, parents and carers in planning services. Progress was also

noted in partnership working, information sharing, the timeliness of education, health and care plans, joint commissioning and reductions in waiting times for key support.

The council and NHS Thames Valley Integrated Care Board have emphasised while this is an important milestone, further work is needed to deliver consistently timely, joined-up and responsive services, and to rebuild confidence with families.

3. 1500 new public EV charge points to be installed across Oxfordshire

The new public EV chargers are part of Oxfordshire's Local EV Infrastructure (LEVI) programme which has received over £4 million of funding from Department for Transport. Its purpose is to accelerate the transition to clean, green electric vehicles by providing charging options for the estimated 30 per cent of Oxfordshire residents who don't have a private driveway. Contracts have now been awarded to two charge point operators, Connected Kerb and EZ-Charge, who will be responsible for installing, operating and maintaining the chargers on a concession basis.

The aim is to make a highly accessible and equitable network of charging points across the county. Data mapping and consultation, with both internal and external stakeholders, has already fed into decision making about the proposed site locations within the programme. These decisions are also very much influenced by a range of practical factors, the most crucial being the availability of suitable electrical connections. Local demand is also a key, which is why residents (and elected members and other community stakeholders) are invited to continue to use the Oxfordshire electric vehicle charger and car club demand tracker tool to indicate where public chargers will be welcomed.

As an alternative option to public chargers, residents who can park on the street outside their home can also now apply for an EV charging cable channel at a heavily subsidised upfront cost of £300. Full details are available online.

4. National award for our partnership with trade unions

Our work with trade unions has been recognised nationally with an award win at the PPMA Excellence in People Management Awards 2026.

Judges praised our partnership with UNISON as a strong example of effective trade union collaboration, describing it as a "blueprint" for how organisations can work together positively. They highlighted the focus on open working, shared problem-solving and joint decision-making, and the real impact this is having on workforce outcomes.

This recognition reflects the day-to-day work colleagues across services are doing to build constructive, proactive relationships with UNISON and our other recognised trade unions. We are now building on this further through a new trade union and management strategy.

5. Fire Service Consultation

Following a public consultation that asked communities to help shape how Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service operates, no fire station closures are now being recommended.

As a result of feedback received by Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service between late October 2025 and January 2026, a proposal is being made to continue focusing on recruitment and community engagement at Eynsham, Henley and Woodstock fire stations.

The three fire stations had been considered for closure due to persistent low availability of on-call crews. However, residents' feedback made it clear how important local fire stations are with communities showing strong support for retaining them. Newly shaped proposals were considered by Oxfordshire County Council's cabinet on 21 April 2026.

The main proposal in the public consultation was to address ongoing challenges with fire engine availability during the daytime, when demand and risk are highest. As part of this, the consultation explored proposals to improve daytime fire and emergency response cover across Oxfordshire.

Work will continue to identify how Oxfordshire Fire and Rescue Service can deliver its key objectives of improved first response times, increased daytime cover, stronger service resilience, and an increased amount of fire prevention work. Further engagement with employees and the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) will take place to help shape how proposals could work in practice.

Rob MacDougall, Oxfordshire County Council Fire and Rescue Service's Chief Fire Officer, said: "I'd like to thank everyone who shared their views on our proposals during the public consultation. We received over a thousand responses, and it was important that we listened carefully to what people told us. "It's important that we regularly review our resources and work closely with our local communities and colleagues to gain consensus on how best to shape the service to meet current and future needs. "It's apparent, having read and listened to those who gave us their feedback, that local people are keen to support existing fire stations in their towns and villages."

Cabinet were also asked to agree to withdrawing the proposal presented in the public consultation to remove the second fire engine at Thame fire station. This was put forward based on low availability of crews and because the vehicle had been attending less than 20 incidents a year.

This will allow time to consider consultation feedback alongside similar proposals recently consulted on by Buckinghamshire Fire and Rescue Service, particularly given the proximity of Thame and Haddenham fire stations.

6. Consultations

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

East West Rail consultation

East West Rail (EWR) is running a route-wide public consultation from 14 April to 9 June 2026 on updated proposals. The consultation focuses on changes since winter 2024/25, with particular relevance to Oxfordshire at London Road, Bicester, and Oxford Parkway.

During this consultation period EWR is holding several events:

- Three online webinars on 20 April, 6 May and 2 June.
- An in-person event at the King's Centre, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES on 12 May, 11am-6pm.

This is likely the final public consultation before EWR submits its development consent application in summer/autumn 2027, making it an important opportunity for the public to share views while the proposals are still being developed. We will be submitting a response to this consultation.

For more information, visit EWR's website.

7. Funding

I have made my allocations under the SODC councillor grant scheme, which are in the process of being awarded.

There is an OCC councillor priority fund scheme open – the link is below. Any applications need to be discussed with me before submission under the scheme rules.

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

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, CIL funding, Church St/Chapel St/New Road.
- Britwell Salome – expansion of the 20mph area raised in parish meeting, road conditions.
- Checkendon – review of application for extension of 20mph limit; flooding issue by pub
- Stoke Row – road conditions, lotting.
- Pishill with Stonor – mobile phone coverage with retirement of analogue phonelines, road condition.
- 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 (alternatives after recent trial).
- Swyncombe – issue with unpermitted development on lotted land.
- Nettlebed – community sports facilities, cycle path from Nettlebed to Bix.
- Rotherfield Peppard – repeated issue with drain cover, road conditions, junction of Stoke Row Road/Gallowstree Road.
- Highmoor – flooding issue on Holly close