



Annual Report 2023

Cllr Freddie van Mierlo, Chalgrove and Watlington Division

Liberal Democrat

Now 2-years into its first 4-year term, it is an opportune moment to reflect on the progress made by the Oxfordshire Fair Deal Alliance administration since taking control from the Conservatives. Its vision is laid out in the [9 priorities](#) adopted, that includes ‘putting climate at the heart of everything we do’. The IPCC’s ‘final warning’ to humanity in March this year, puts back into focus the importance of following through on this commitment – even in the face of rising opposition from conspiracy theorists, climate change deniers, and those who would wish to see a much-diminished role for the county council.

The County Council is responsible for delivering a range of services to residents of Oxfordshire, including adult social care, children’s services – including for children with special educational needs and disabilities, and of course, maintaining Oxfordshire’s highways and transport infrastructure, and a range of other services, including libraries, fire and rescue, and coroners’ services.

Adult social care is largest responsibility of OCC in terms of spend. Demand is growing due to our ageing population and an increase in complexity of needs. In Oxfordshire, we are seeking to manage this demand with a pioneering ‘Oxfordshire Way’, that aims to keep people active and independent for as long as possible in their homes and communities. As part of this, OCC has been promoting a scheme to empower small scale care businesses in the community to thrive. Support is provided to ‘micro-enterprises’ to navigate the paperwork and start out as a commercial enterprise. An all-age unpaid carers strategy review is also ongoing to better support this vital group in our communities.

Children’s services remain a challenge, particularly in the area of SEND. The service receives this year an inflation busting boost to its budget of 12.3% (£18.8m), which will provide much needed funds to improve the assessment of EHCPs in particular. The county was also successful in bidding for £5.2m to fund new residential homes for children with autism and children with adverse childhood experiences.

In transport and highways, the county is leading the way, alongside the Welsh government, by moving to 20mph as the speed limit for villages and towns. The newly adopted Local Transport and Connectivity Plan (LTCP5) is a radical change from the previous plan, and places an emphasis on active travel, public transport and reducing car journeys. Its ambitious targets to reduce car journey's by 25% by 2030 and 33% by 2040 will shape infrastructure decisions going forward, and be a powerful tool when developers seek massive car-centric developments (e.g., Chalgrove Airfield, Harrington). The freight strategy (which sits as part of LTCP5) is being developed further with inputs sought from communities on area weight restrictions and problem areas for HGVs. The strategy seeks to move non-local freight onto the strategic road network (M40, etc.), rather than use inappropriate local roads. Additional investment is being made in taking on stubborn highways flooding issues that will see more projects brought forward in 2023 and 2024 to take on problem areas.

As ever, I continue to advocate for projects and issues important to local communities and individual residents. Issues have ranged from road agreements, active travel, trees, road markings, flooding, children's services, and much more! In Watlington, key areas of focus have been representing the views of the community to the County on the Watlington Relief Road. I've also been delighted to see the progress made to bring the unoccupied property at 33 High Street back to life. The work done by Watlington Welcome and the parish council is testament to the power of local communities and unlocking their potential. Work continues in the background to cement the handover of the Charlotte Coxe Trust (owner of 33 High Street) to the parish council.

I have also been delighted to support a wide range of projects through the Councillor Priority Fund. The fund was renewed in February's budget on the same basis as previously (£15,000 over 2 years), with new applications opening in April 2023. Given the impact of inflation, and a last-minute rush that is delaying approval of applications, I again will favour projects that can be delivered early and start providing benefit to the community this year.

Housing developments also remain a concern for residents. While strictly speaking a district matter, the major road developments associated with Chalgrove airfield development, and the potential Harrington development bring in County level concerns. I continue to oppose both of these schemes, which would have a deleterious impact on the local environment and climate due to their remote and rural locations.

Finally, with Oxfordshire's growing population, the electoral commission has determined a review of current county council division boundaries is required. The election commission has agreed with a recommendation from council that the number of councillors be increased from 63 to 69, which would keep the number of electors per councillors roughly the same as they are now up to 2029. The increase in councillors will likely see the Watlington and Chalgrove division broken up into two separate divisions – with Chalgrove and Watlington being the major population centers in each of the new divisions. For me, this will be bitter-sweet, since I very much enjoy serving all the communities of the current county division, but it's wide geographic spread does make it extremely challenging, which will be somewhat alleviated by new boundaries.