



Annual Report 2024

Cllr Freddie van Mierlo, Chalgrove and Watlington Division

Liberal Democrat

2023 saw both significant changes to the administration running Oxfordshire County Council and progress against county-wide and local objectives.

In October, the Liberal Democrat-Green group set up a minority administration following the departure of the Labour group from the Oxfordshire Fair Deal Alliance. The Labour group walked away after parents and Lib Dems/Greens called for the resignation of the Labour cabinet member for Children's Services following a poor Ofsted report into Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The new administration created a dedicated cabinet portfolio for SEND improvement, now headed by Cllr Kate Gregory (Thame and Chinnor), with significant progress already made against the SEND improvement plan. Cooperation still exists between the Labour group and Lib Dem/Green administration who voted together to pass a budget in early 2024.

The macro budget environment for councils across England remains extremely challenging, with falling government funding and rising demands for adult social care and children's services. However, recognizing the importance of protecting vulnerable adults and children, the administration passed a budget with above inflation rises for both these services. All parties put forward proposals for the maximum allowable tax rise of 4.99%. 2023 also saw new SEND schools in Didcot approved and an unpaid carers strategy approved.

Highways remains the main way in which residents interact with council services on a daily basis – and also the source of much correspondence. 2023/4 saw improvements to how residents can report road defects through Fix My Street and ongoing efforts to improve customer service. While the council receives well below the budget needed to maintain the roads from central government, the administration approved a £7m project for 2024/5 to repair roads with a programme of surface dressing. Locally, with the support of residents and parish councils, wherever potholes and drainage issues occur I have sought to encourage speedy and long-lasting repairs for our area. I'm delighted that this year we will see extensive surface-inlay (resurfacing) to the B480 at Cuxham and Brook Street in Watlington, as well as drainage

improvements across the network. Progress continues on plans for the Watlington Relief Road, with a public consultation held in 2023/4 on a planning application, which will be determined later this year.

Climate has also been at the heart of the council's activity, with heavy rain focusing minds on the consequences of a changing climate. Key initiatives, including the Strategic Active Travel Network, Mobility Hubs, Vision Zero, EV charging, electric buses, and active travel funding bids are all contributing towards OCC's overarching vision of a cleaner and greener transport network. Oxfordshire County Council's hard work was recognized as it topped the Climate Emergency UK climate action score card league table for upper tier authorities. I am also extremely proud to have welcomed new rural bus routes to Chalgrove and Watlington division, bringing back services for the first time since Conservatives cut them. Watlington is now served by not only the 11 bus to Oxford, but also buses to Reading (Mon, Wed, Fri) and Thame (Tues, Thur). My sincere hope is that this is just a starting point of a revival of buses in our area.

As ever, I continue to advocate for projects and issues important to local communities and individual residents. Issues have ranged from road agreements, trees, road markings, flooding, children's services, traffic calming and much more! Some issues seem interminable with progress excruciatingly slow – for example the pedestrian link between Red Kite View in Watlington and Cuxham Road, or progress on traffic calming in Cuxham. However, I remain determined to represent residents and parishes to the Council and push for progress – however slow. I have also again been privileged to support community projects through the council's Priority Fund, including First Steps Family Hub Chalgrove, Watlington Concert Band, Watlington Allotments, Watlington Bowls Club, Nettlebed Sports Association, and various projects with parish councils across the division.

The next County Council elections will be in May 2025. These will be fought on new divisional boundaries, which split the Watlington and Chalgrove division into two separate divisions. Watlington will become part of a 'Watlington and Rotherfield' division, while Chalgrove forms its own division with part of Thame. Ewelme moves to become part of a revised Benson division. This means regardless of the outcome of upcoming national and local elections many villages I currently represent will get a new county councillor from 2025. Over the next year I will continue to work with residents and parish councils to move forward projects and resolve issues, leaving them hopefully in a better state than when I started in 2021!