

REPORT TO PARISH COUNCILS

FROM YOUR COUNTY COUNCILLOR

FEBRUARY 2015

Just back from a fabulous trip to see my son and family in Australia and faced with 742 emails to plough through papers. Sometimes I wonder if it is worth going away!

While away I spend at least 30 minutes a day answering emails but apologies to those who had delayed replies as I don't have Wi-Fi access.

Most of the news is about saving money and debate over sharing services between councils. Oxfordshire County Council and other counties while district councils are debating again having a unitary authority.

All with the aim of making shrinking budgets go further without reducing front line services.

County Council News

Figures from The Economist:

Since 2007, gross value added (GVA) per capita has grown by 20% in Oxfordshire (to £28,767 per capita in 2013), compared to only 9% in Cambridgeshire (to £26,150 per capita).

☐ Latest figures show that full-time workers in Oxfordshire earned an average hourly rate of £17.82, compared with £17.25 in Cambridgeshire.

☐ 2011 Census figures show that 35.7% of Oxfordshire residents have higher level qualifications (degree level or above), compared with 33% in Cambridgeshire.

☐ Oxfordshire is ranked sixth by Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) area in the UK Competitiveness Index, with the Greater Cambridgeshire & Greater Peterborough LEP in 10th place.

☐ Housing affordability, cited by the economist as a key cause of Cambridge's outperformance, is worsening at a faster rate in Cambridge as the affordability gap between the two cities closes.

Since 2004 the average income multiple has risen from 12.8 to 16.1 for Oxford, but much more quickly (from 9.2 to 14.8) for Cambridge.

According to the 2011 Census, more than 70,000 people in Oxfordshire live alone. This group of residents are more likely to be aged 65 and over, own their home outright and live in a property with more than one bedroom. In this month's Oxfordshire Insight we present a demographic and socio-economic profile of one person households in Oxfordshire.

Latest figures show 21,000 households in the county living in fuel poverty

Oxford continues to compare well against other cities across the UK

Published by the Centre for Cities earlier this month, *Cities Outlook 2015* provides an economic index of the 64 largest cities and towns in the UK.

According to the report, Oxford has the:

- 10th highest GVA per worker (2013), at £56,900
- 8th highest average weekly wage, 2014 (£555).

However, with the 4th biggest increase in house prices from 2013 to 2014, Oxford also has the 2nd highest average house price, making it the least affordable to house buyers (affordability ratio of 16.1)

- 3rd highest proportion of the population with high level qualifications (49%) and the 8th lowest proportion with no formal qualifications (6.4%)
- Highest proportion of jobs in knowledge intensive sector (32.5%)
- Lowest proportion of private sector jobs (50%) and greatest reliance on public sector jobs (defined as those jobs in public administration, education and health). This is driven in large part by the inclusion of the two universities as 'public sector'.
- 3rd lowest JSA claimant count in November 2014 (0.9%), the 2nd lowest young claimant count and the lowest long term claimant count. Oxford also had the third lowest level of employment inequality with just 2.8 percentage points between the LSOAs with the highest and lowest JSA claimant rates.(average = 7.8%)

One third of people living alone in Oxfordshire had a long-term health problem or disability (33.3%)

- This was slightly lower than the proportions seen in the South East (35.9%) and England overall (38.6%). The proportions were broadly similar across districts. The rate is however higher than that for households in Oxfordshire with two or more residents (25%).
- Among people aged 65 and over living alone in Oxfordshire, over half had a long-term health problem or disability (54.2%, numbering 16,200). This was similar to the proportion seen in the South East (54.9%) and slightly below that for England overall (59.6%). Again, proportions were broadly similar across districts.

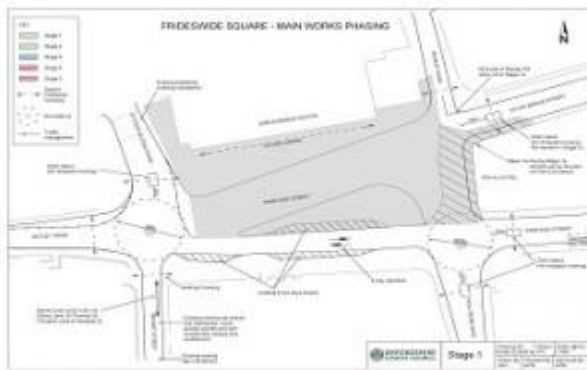
Although living alone does not necessarily imply loneliness, people who make the transition to living alone in later life (primarily due to the death of a cohabiting partner) have been found to be more vulnerable to psychological distress in the initial period thereafter.² Social support has been shown to affect the extent to which people recover from the transition to living alone.

Various national and international research studies have linked social isolation and loneliness with adverse health outcomes, including higher mortality rates. A national survey of GPs in 2013 found that over a quarter saw one to five people per day who they thought had come in mainly because they were lonely.³ One in ten reported seeing

between six and ten lonely patients a day, and a small minority (4 per cent) said they saw more than 10 lonely people a day.

There is evidence to suggest that older people can be more susceptible to social isolation and loneliness.⁴ Analysis conducted in 2013 found that 25% of people aged 52 and over in England sometimes felt lonely, with 9% saying they often did. Proportionately more of those aged 80 and over felt lonely sometimes or often (46%, compared to an average of 34% of those aged 52 and over). This figure was around three in five for people who lived alone.

Preparations for the £5.8million transformation of Frideswide Square are to begin in mid February 2015.



Starting overnight from 16 February engineers will begin the process of removing traffic islands and placing traffic signals into concrete filled barrels.

The full traffic management system, which will be in place throughout the first phase of work, will be implemented overnight on 27/ 28 February 2015.

Fencing around the area where the first phase of work will take place will be put up on 2 March 2015, marking the start of the main phase of work.

The attached map shows where the first phase of work will take place, and the routes that will be taken by drivers, pedestrians and cyclists.

Vital gateway into Oxford

Frideswide Square provides a vital link between the major road routes into Oxford. It is therefore of strategic importance in Oxfordshire's road network, handling tens of thousands of journeys every day as well as being the gateway to the area for rail passengers.

When the work is finished traffic will follow a free flow arrangement, with all traffic signals being removed. The current traffic light controlled junctions will be replaced by three roundabouts and traffic will travel along one central boulevard carriageway.

Milton Interchange

Preparations to install the next stage of traffic management for the £11m Milton Interchange improvement scheme will begin in the evening of Saturday 24 January 2015.



The next stage of work on Milton Interchange improvement scheme started on Monday 26 January 2015. This will be preparatory work on the A34, which will take place under night-time closures, to install CCTV, adapt lane markings, remove permanent safety barriers and construct a hardened crossover.

When this has been completed a full traffic management system will be implemented 24 hours a day from Monday 16 February 2015.

Traffic travelling south (towards Newbury) on the A34 will be subject to a 30mph speed limit in the vicinity of the work. The left hand lane will be diverted down the slip road, around the A4130 roundabout, and back up onto the A34. This arrangement has been introduced at the request of the Highways Agency in order to ensure that they have the space necessary to grit the A34 in the event of icy conditions. Traffic flow information indicates that normally at peak traffic hours almost half of the southbound traffic on the A34 at Milton leaves the A34 on this slip road.

Traffic travelling north (towards Oxford) on the A34 will be subject to a 40mph speed limit in the vicinity of the work, within narrowed lanes.

Traffic management on the A4130 roundabout: Two lanes of traffic will be maintained around the roundabout throughout the work. Areas of the third lane will be coned off as required to enable work to be carried out.

£9.9m expansion of Growth Deal boosts local plan for Oxfordshire economy

Published 29 January 2015

Grant Shapps MP, Minister without Portfolio, was in Oxford as it was announced that an extra £9.9m is to be invested in Oxfordshire.



The Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership has agreed an expansion to its Growth Deal with the Government which will see an extra £9.9m invested in Oxfordshire between 2016 and 2021. The Government will work with the LEP to bring together other funding to support the delivery of this deal. This is in addition to the £108.5m of funding committed by the Government on 7 July 2014.

Over the lifetime of its Deal (2015-2021) the Local Enterprise Partnership estimates that up to 9000 new jobs could be created, 5000 new homes built and that it has the potential to generate £440m public and private investment.

The additional proposed projects include:

- A package to improve transport in North Oxford and enable the **Northern Gateway Development**, which will provide business and research space, and new homes.
- Transport and site improvements to support the **Oxpens development**, which will provide much needed office and research space and new homes in the heart of Oxford.
- Establishing the **Activate Care Suite** to improve adult social care and healthcare in Oxfordshire.
- Improvements to the **A34**, including the Lodge Hill Junction, to relieve significant congestion and so allow future housing and economic developments.

In addition, £20m of discounted borrowing from the Public Works Loan Board is being made available. This will be used by the Local Enterprise Partnership to support their Science Transit infrastructure Programme promoted through the Oxford and Oxfordshire City Deal.

The Oxfordshire Growth Deal is part of a long term plan to devolve at least £12 billion from central government to local economies. The plan aims for every part of the country to be a motor of growth for the national economy – building on the strength of the Oxfordshire area.

The LEP Chair Adrian Shooter, CBE, said: “This additional investment of £9.9m of local growth fund for these key projects builds on our previous award of £108.5m announced in July 2014 which will, with the support of our partners, improve economic activity and job creation across Oxfordshire for the next five years”.

Councillor Ian Hudspeth, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council said: "I welcome this increase in Growth Deal funding in Oxfordshire. This represents a great deal of confidence

that the county is moving in the right direction and looking to deliver projects that will boost growth and support the expansion the county is expecting to have in the coming years."

Councillor Bob Price, Leader of Oxford City Council and LEP Board member, said:

"The developments at Oxpens and Northern Gateway are critical to the continuing success of Oxford and the wider knowledge economy, as well as the delivery of the City Deal. The LGF funding for infrastructure is essential to support these schemes and allow early progress."

The proposed transfer of the Oxpens site to a Council partnership, with LGF funding for infrastructure, will enable the Council to establish a new employment and residential quarter to meet the needs of business and housing pressures. At Northern Gateway, the LGF will fund advance infrastructure including public transport, to enable the creation of a new employment area linked to our world class universities and businesses.

£108.6m Growth Deal for Oxfordshire signed

Published 22 January 2015

A £108.6m investment into Oxfordshire has been given the go-ahead today with Minister Greg Clark MP signing a Local Growth Deal that will create 6000 jobs and 4000 homes across the county by 2021.

The Minister for Universities, Science & Cities signed the Growth Deal today at the Abingdon campus of Abingdon & Witney College. Local MP's and businesses joined the Local Enterprise Partnership Board (OxLEP) to take part in the signing ceremony.

£15.7million of investment has been confirmed for the first year commencing 2015/2016 with a further £92.9 million of commitment through to 2020/2021 which will be used for ten transport, infrastructure and skills projects throughout Oxfordshire and generate up to £208.5m in public and private investment.

The deal includes:

- Investment in substantial measures to reduce the risk of flooding, ensuring businesses continue to operate, roads and railways remain operational and people can be confident that their homes and businesses won't be damaged.
- Joint investment with the University of Oxford in a new Centre for Applied Superconductivity to bring university professors and entrepreneurs together to collaborate on exciting developments in fields as diverse as computing, cryogenics, x-rays and MRI scanning and electricity storage.
- Investment with the both City of Oxford College and Abingdon and Witney College in state-of-the-art skills centres enabling local people to be trained in vital skills in science, engineering and technology, preparing them for future employment.
- Significant investment to improve transport links including roads, cycling networks and parking – linking Oxfordshire's world class universities with businesses and helping people get to where they need to be faster.
- Continued investment into Oxfordshire's Growth Hub, Oxfordshire Business Support (OBS) which helps local businesses access the support and make the connections needed for growth.

The Oxfordshire Growth Deal is part of a national £12 billion long-term programme to revitalise local economies and was announced by the Government in July 2014. The deals are

significant for rebuilding the British economy and sharing the benefits locally through the network of 39 LEAs.

For Oxfordshire, it means building a stronger economy and a fairer society with the creation of jobs, providing new innovative training opportunities for young people and investing in skills in key sectors such as science, engineering and technology, building new homes and improving transport links to connect businesses and communities across the region.

Oxfordshire leads the way for recycling

Published 17 December 2014

Oxfordshire County Council has maintained its position as one of the best counties for recycling of waste in the country, coming top in 3 of the 7 categories.

Figures compiled by the Department for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs (Defra) show that Oxfordshire had the lowest amount of residual waste per household in the country. The county was also top of the tables for recycling & composting percentage and dry recycling percentage and where the best performing county council for household waste per head.

Oxfordshire is pursuing a clear vision for sustainable waste management and resource efficiency, working in partnership with the district councils, residents and waste management companies to reduce waste and to maximise reuse, recycling and composting.

The county council topped the table for percentage of household waste sent for recycling, with an overall rate of 59.22%, beating the next council by over 3%. The county also has the lowest amount of household waste being sent to landfill, at just over 420kg per household, this is 40kg better than the next best county.

Recycling has great benefits, not only to reduce the amount of waste thrown away, but also in the energy that is used to process it, for example; recycling 1 aluminium can uses 95% less energy than making a brand new one.

Recycling also can help with energy production. The food waste processing plants at Cassington and Wallingford use food waste to produce energy for about 4,800 homes and reduce greenhouse gas emissions to the equivalent of taking 71,000 cars off the road annually. The facilities also produce fertiliser that can be spread on 2,500 acres of local agricultural land.

Oxford City Council, Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire district councils all performed well in the collection figures, rating mostly in the top half of all collection authorities and South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse topping the tables in two separate categories.

Councillor David Nimmo-Smith, Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet member for Environment, said: "These figures clearly show that we at Oxfordshire County Council take waste management and recycling extremely seriously and that our planning and investment in this area is bearing fruit. The work of the City and district councils cannot be underestimated and are a vital part of the waste management programme."

"We would like to thank all the residents who take the time to sort their rubbish and ensure that the right bins are used for the appropriate waste."

“There is more work to be done and initiatives like the Ardley ERF will help us reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill, which in turn will reduce costs for the council and allow us to invest more into services.”

A New Fire Cadet Unit formed in Bicester

A new Fire Cadet Unit in Bicester which helps equip youngsters aged 12 to 18 with practical life skills is to be officially opened.

The unit at the town's fire station began working with young people at the start of the year and is the sixth of its kind to be run by Oxfordshire County Council's Fire and Rescue Service.

The new cadets will be joined by Chief Fire Officer David Etheridge OBE from 6.30pm on Monday 2 February for the official opening.

What do Fire Cadets do?

Boy and girl cadets meet at fire stations once a week and follow a structured programme of core training activities, delivered by supervisors, many of whom work for the Fire and Rescue Service.

These include sessions about water awareness; being taught first aid and attending fire drills. They also learn about the science behind fire and experience rescue techniques.

Cadets can also be given the opportunity to take part in other activities and camps at weekends and during school holidays.

Cadets are able to use their work as evidence under the skills section for the Duke of Edinburgh Bronze Award. An annual awards night involving all of the units takes place where Mr Etheridge gives out the Cadet of the Year and Most Improved Cadet of the Year accolades.

He said: "Our cadets scheme is in its 22nd year and really does help improve the future prospects of many young people as well as enhancing Oxfordshire County Council's Fire and Rescue Service's already strong bond with local communities.

"It is fantastic that a new cadet unit is now operational in Bicester and I look forward to meeting the young people involved."

The cadet scheme was started in 1993 and also has units in Banbury, Kidlington, Oxford, Watlington and Witney.

Those interested in finding out more can contact their local fire station; call 01865 842999; visit www.365alive.co.uk; send an email to fire.cadets@oxfordshire.gov.uk or write to:

Oxfordshire County Council has been working closely with the Highways Agency to design and approve arrangements that will ensure that the A34 and the A4130 roundabout below remain open while work is done to transform the roundabout below.

Debate - One council for Oxfordshire could reduce Council Tax and increase investment in roads

Published 19 January 2015

Creating a single council for Oxfordshire would save up to £33m a year, according to independent financial analysis.



Oxfordshire County Council has released the report, as the Cabinet recommends a budget for 2015/16 which requires more than £20m of savings, on top of the £265m either made or already planned by 2017/18. The report itself can be found [here](#)

The saving could be made by combining the county, four districts and city council into a single 'unitary' local authority. The report concludes that savings could be made by reducing bureaucracy and the costs of democratic decision making, while creating a single council that would be better able to meet the major challenges of a growing and aging population.

The Government has reduced local government funding and capped council tax, which means only changing council structures can deliver the savings required to maintain vital services and plan for economic growth. By 2020, 75% of the county council's budget will go on social care for 2% of the population on current trends.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council, said: "We are beyond the point where further savings can be achieved by finding more efficiencies or 'salami slicing' of services and we must find a different way of being able to provide essential services to our residents.

"As Leader of the Council it is my job to leave no stone unturned in seeking to provide the best services for Oxfordshire's residents. Fundamentally I must ensure that we have the resources available to fund the services that our residents need.

"This is now the start of a debate. I am sure all options in this report will be considered and examined in detail. There may be other options that people wish to propose, I will welcome the opportunity to consider them as part of the debate."

One council for Oxfordshire would be better able to plan for the expected growth in population by combining responsibility for housing, schools, planning and transport. This could all be done while reducing the Council Tax paid by most residents in Oxfordshire, and reducing the pressure on frontline services.

The report by global accountancy firm EY was commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council as part of a fundamental rethink about how it can meet rising demand for adult and children's care services, while meeting the challenges of enabling economic growth to ensure a thriving Oxfordshire in the long term.

Cllr Ian Hudspeth, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council, added:

"After looking at all the options for reducing our costs and still needing to find more savings it was clear we needed a game-changer to protect frontline services in the longer-term.

Creating one council for Oxfordshire could well be that game-changer and we need to have a debate about that.

“By saving £33m a year, which means Council Tax could be reduced, I would argue this presents the best deal for Oxfordshire residents. It would also create a once-in-a-generation chance to invest in Oxfordshire’s transport network, including road and public transport improvements.”

The report looked at three models of council reorganisation: a single council for Oxfordshire; two councils based on Oxford and the rest of the county; and three councils covering the city, north Oxfordshire and south Oxfordshire. All three models would save money, but EY found that the single council option created by far the biggest potential saving. It concluded that a single council could:

- Reduce the number of chief executives and senior managers that are duplicated across the current arrangements;
- Reduce the numbers of councillors and their costs. There are currently 309 Oxfordshire councillors at county and district / city council levels, with expenses of over £2m per year. This could be reduced to under 100 councillors, sitting on a single council and dealing with all service issues in a coordinated way;
- Potentially reduce council tax levels for 80% of Oxfordshire's residents to the current lowest rate in the county. This would dramatically reduce bills for many, particularly residents in the city of Oxford who currently pay £167 per year for city council services. This could be reduced to the level in West Oxfordshire, currently £82 per year.

The report also highlighted the potential for pooling council reserves worth over £250m into a single pot. A new unitary council could then decide to invest strategically in vitally needed infrastructure - for example, potentially providing the much wished for relief roads in Banbury, Didcot and Wantage and tackling congestion on the A40.

Staff message - Changes ahead and new ways of working

Dear Colleague,

We are writing to let you know about plans we are putting in place to protect front line services in the light of further likely cuts to local government funding after the General Election in May. During the life of the next parliament we will need a new way of working, building on the partnerships we have been developing over the last few years. This means:

- More joint working in all sorts of ways – in health and social care with the NHS, with schools in our Teaching Schools Alliance, our back office partnership with Hampshire and our new Tri-County arrangements for the economy with Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire
- Going “Digital by Default” to make things easier for the public, and streamlining processes through “Lean” working as we have been doing in adult social care

- Rationalising our office bases with public sector partners, and rolling out agile working across the council
- Making the best possible use of our contracts and being more commercial in all we do

You will also have heard about our ambition to start a debate about how local government should be organised in Oxfordshire to simplify things for the public and save money for essential services. All this requires a new, more networked approach to how we manage the council so as part of this we will be making changes in the summer to our top team. The traditional model of a Chief Executive and separate Directorates needs to be modernised so we will be moving to a more distributed model of leadership with decision making devolved down the organisation and much closer working between officers and councillors.

Joanna will be standing down at the end of June to allow this to happen and we will flatten the structure further to bring everything closer to our residents. We will be working together in the meantime to make sure that we cover all the different responsibilities the Chief Executive's role currently covers. This is a new way of working and we are breaking new ground about how public services are run locally but it is the right time for us to make another step change. More details will follow in coming months but we wanted to let you know early as we are determined to stay ahead of the curve to protect essential services.

We would also like to thank you all again for your hard work and everything you are doing to help us achieve this.

Ian

Councillor Ian Hudspeth
Leader of the Council

Joanna

Joanna Simons
Chief Executive

The OCC figures have been hotly contested by all district Councils in the county see Cherwell DC News below.

Cherwell District Council News

Joint statement issued on behalf of the Leaders of Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire District Councils

Wrong figures, wrong century, wrong solution:

Three wrongs don't make a right!

Rural districts unite to fight county bid for unitary takeover

Oxfordshire's four rural district councils have united in opposition to a unitary bid being considered by Oxfordshire County Council as a response to its financial woes.

The district councils are disappointed that a report has been commissioned by the county council, at taxpayers' expense, without any consultation or engagement with its district partners.

As a consequence the Districts will now need to respond, on behalf of their residents, to the consultant's report to ensure that a 'true and fair' picture has been painted by the consultants – who also happen to be the county authority's auditors - and the county officers who have commissioned them. This will detract from resources that should be being spent on service delivery priorities and the districts' own efficiency agendas.

Wrong Figures

The report, published on Monday 19 January 2015, has been written using high-level assumptions and having no regard to actual service delivery arrangements on the ground. All four rural districts are at the vanguard of modern, innovative and sustainable solutions that have already delivered, and will continue to deliver, significant and increasing savings for their local taxpayers.

Even a cursory review of the figures provided by the consultants indicates that the savings at £33m are vastly overstated and the costs of implementation significantly understated, yet the county council consistently use the highest figure in respect of the savings even when the consultants, with their flawed logic, give a range.

In an attempt to bribe the electorate, there is a proposal to bring Council Tax down to the lowest currently charged in Oxfordshire, at a cost of £9m. However, even these figures are fundamentally flawed, realistically being half as much again at £13.5m, exposing the report for what it is: half-baked and error-strewn.

Realistically, the rural districts all know that given the county's anticipated budget shortfall of £72m they will be unable to reinvest any savings in a Council Tax cut, or, achieve a reduction anywhere close to the average Council Tax currently charged in Oxfordshire - residents need simply look at the county's record over the last few years, compared to districts. Under these proposals, Council Tax levels are more likely to move upwards to Oxford City levels, not downwards to that charged by rural districts.

Wrong Century

The County case argues that political accountability will be improved, yet the democratic deficit left by the absence of the rural districts would lead the county council to become yet more Oxford-centric than it is already. Do the residents in well-run rural districts really want to place their trust

in a huge monolithic county council, which has difficulty managing its finances, is forced to cut vital services to rural communities, and lurches from one funding crisis to another?

The county council answer to its financial woes is to blame someone else, whether it be Government or, in this case, rural residents who will not want a one-size fits all service. This approach to calling for council boundary restructure is of the last century. It is contrary to Government policy, which says 'don't waste your time and money on unitary bids'. It appears once again that the county council is ignoring national guidance, in the same way that it did when offered government incentives to freeze Council Tax - unlike the rural districts which have frozen, or reduced, tax levels charged to residents.

Wrong Solution

The districts in Oxfordshire are at the forefront of the 21st century approach to local government – delivering services collaboratively and sharing resources irrespective of administrative boundaries. All of the rural districts have been recognised by the Government as trailblazers in modern, efficient local government through transformation agenda funding of in excess of £8m based on sound, robust and well-argued business cases backed up by evidence of savings made historically. The county council has received no such recognition.

If the county council was to look at the approaches adopted by the districts and apply those principles to its own services, working collaboratively with its recently announced tri- county partners for example, they could deliver the bulk of the £72m savings required without exposing rural Oxfordshire residents to a democratic deficit and delivering standard countywide solutions that may work in an urban environment, but not across the many different and varied rural communities of Oxfordshire.

Three wrongs do not make a right! ENDS

The debate continues so see how councils can reduce costs without affecting front line services.

Planning the perfect Valentine's date?

Planning the perfect date can be stressful as there's a lot to worry about, including whether you'll make a good impression. The last thing you want to think about before an important dinner is whether or not the place you choose takes food hygiene seriously.

The Food Hygiene Rating Scheme means you don't have to. You can look before you book and check the food hygiene rating before deciding where to go on your special date.

You can't tell a restaurant's hygiene standards by how clean and tidy the staff look or by how romantic the décor and ambience is. It's the things you can't see, like germs spread by bad hygiene practices, that you need to consider. Check the food hygiene rating. It tells you about hygiene standards in restaurants and other food businesses.

Cherwell District Council's deputy leader, Cllr George Reynolds, said: "The council can't advise you on the best flowers to buy your partner on Valentine's Day, but we can help you

choose the most hygienic restaurant. Even if you need to book a table well in advance there's still plenty of time to check the food hygiene rating before you pick up the phone or send the email.

"This rating scheme makes it easy for everyone to check the premises and choose to eat a romantic meal in places where food hygiene is taken seriously."

Just go online at www.food.gov.uk/ratings, or if you're out and about look for the green and black sticker; if you can't see one just ask the staff. In Cherwell the ratings are determined by the council's food safety officers. They rate hygiene from 0 to 5, with a 5 meaning very good.

Nationally, 92 per cent food businesses are rated a 3 or higher so there are plenty of places with good food hygiene standards, you can choose from. This means you can easily avoid taking your special date to those places not meeting the grade.

It's good for business too. Valentine's is a busy time for food businesses and a good food hygiene rating is something to be proud of. Make sure you reassure your customers by putting your sticker up in the window. Businesses with higher food hygiene ratings agree that can help bring hungry customers through the door. Thousands of food businesses displaying a 3 to 5 rating say it made a positive difference to their business.

Cherwell Executive agrees draft budget

At its meeting last night (2 February) Cherwell District Council's executive endorsed the council's draft budget for 2015 - 16. The executive has also recommended that the full council approve a council tax freeze when it meets on 23 February.

The council is required to produce a balanced budget as the basis for calculating its level of Council Tax. It must base that budget on its plans for service delivery during the year and recognise changes in demand that may arise in future years.

The first draft was reported to the executive in December. The information has now been updated and this agreed final draft will be used to prepare the budget proposal to be presented to the full council meeting on 23 February.

The report also details Cherwell's proposed performance pledges for the coming year. This year the pledges will fall under the headings of "a district of opportunity" "safe clean and green" "thriving communities" and "sound budgets and a customer focused council". Amongst the proposed performance pledges are a savings target of £500,000, continued improvements to the council's website, and extended joint working to save money and maintain a low council tax.

Pioneering scheme continues to move forward

The consultants tasked with investigating whether household waste could be used to heat homes in Bicester will present their final recommendations later this year.

Last year Cherwell District Council and their sustainability partner Bioregional appointed Ramboll to undertake a feasibility study to explore the technical and economic viability of using Viridor's Energy Recovery Facility at Ardley to heat the North West Bicester Ecotown which is located about one mile away.

At the first Eco Bicester Strategic Delivery Board meeting of 2015, representatives for Ramboll said they had almost completed the technical element of the feasibility study and were now examining if the project would be commercially viable before presenting their recommendations in July.

Cllr Barry Wood, leader of Cherwell District Council, said: "This is a pioneering scheme which would use the facility's excess heat to heat an underground pipe system which would link to the homes at North West Bicester. In theory, it is a sustainable and affordable scheme which would take heat from the facility at Ardley in a highly efficient manner in order to provide cheaper and more environmentally friendly heating to the residents at North West Bicester. However before we commit we need to check the theory against the reality which is what Ramboll are doing.

"As part of a feasibility study they will check whether the scheme can technically be delivered and secondly, whether it is commercially viable. Once these two studies are complete they will present their recommendations and findings to us in July before we make a decision on whether to proceed."

The project will involve using the excess heat which is generated from the disposal of household waste at the facility in Ardley. This would be used to heat water which would be pumped through buried pipes from the energy centre, to the homes at North West Bicester. From here, the heat would be transferred from the district heating network to the houses and the cooler water in the network returned to Ardley.

Last year Cherwell received a grant of £83,000 from the Department of Energy and Climate Change's Heat Network Delivery Unit to fund the feasibility study exploring the possibility of introducing this scheme with a potential to expand to the wider Bicester area if supply could meet demand. The project is being co-project managed by sustainability charity Bioregional. Ramboll is a leading European engineering, design and consultancy company with more than 10,500 employees operating from more than 200 offices across 22 countries, including the UK where almost 1,000 staff are employed.

Fraud brings fines not benefits

Two women who failed to notify Cherwell District Council of a change in their circumstances have each pleaded guilty to separate charges of benefit fraud.

At Banbury Magistrates' Court on Tuesday, 27 January Brooke Collins of Bartsia Road, Bicester pleaded guilty to one offence of dishonestly failing to notify of a change of circumstances affecting her benefit and one offence of fraud by false representation.

The court heard that between 1 September 2010 and 29 November 2012 Collins failed to notify council officials that her partner was living with her and as a result, she was overpaid a total of £9,3571.71 in housing benefit, council tax benefit and council tax reduction.

Prior to Tuesday's hearing, Collins had entered into a repayment plan with Cherwell District Council to return all of the fraudulently claimed money and this was considered by magistrates in their sentencing. She was given a two year conditional discharge for each offence, ordered to run concurrently and told to pay a contribution of £50 to the prosecution costs and £15 victim surcharge.

The same day Jacqueline Beck of School Lane, Banbury pleaded guilty to knowingly failing to notify of a change of circumstances affecting her entitlement to benefit.

Magistrates were told between 12 September 2011 and 15 June 2014 Beck failed to inform Cherwell District Council that she had taken a second job and was overpaid at total of £4,629.85 in housing benefit, council tax benefit and council tax reduction.

Beck, who has entered into a repayment arrangement with the council, was sentenced to a four-week community order with a daily curfew from 8pm to 7am. She was also order to pay a contribution of £50 to the prosecution costs and a £15 victim surcharge. .

Cllr Ken Atack, Cherwell's lead member for finance, said: "The benefits system is in place to help people in genuine need and we will take a firm and unwavering approach to anyone who abuses it. By defrauding the system these two women did not just steal from the council but from the taxpayers who contribute towards this system. As such we, as an authority, have a duty to our residents to act on their behalf and prosecute those who choose to steal from them."

No registration, no vote

Letters are being sent to every home in Cherwell and South Northamptonshire advising occupants if their details have been included on the new electoral register.

Last year the Government introduced Individual Electoral Registration (IER) which made every eligible voter responsible for registering their own vote instead of one person confirming details for an entire household.

Since then the majority of voters have had their details matched to the details held by the Department for Work and Pensions, however due to the extra work involved in this matching process the Government decided not to carry out the usual annual autumn refresh of the electoral register.

Sue Smith, electoral registration officer for Cherwell and South Northamptonshire, said: "When IER was first rolled out last summer, every eligible voter was sent an individual letter confirming whether or not they had been automatically matched, but this year we were not required to write to each property to check if the people who live there had changed. As electoral registration officer it's my duty to ensure that every eligible voter is registered, so with funding provided by the Government we've decided to write to every property to confirm who is registered to vote.

"If the details on the letter are correct, nothing further needs to be done by the people at that address. However if residents receive a letter which does not include their name or contains the name of someone who no longer lives at that address they need to take action straight away."

Although eligible voters do not have to participate in elections, it is a legal requirement that their details are submitted for inclusion on the electoral register. Aside from providing people with a right to vote, the register is also used for jury service selection and to perform credit checks which can be affected by inaccurate or outdated details. Failure to submit details is punishable by a £1,000 fine.

Those whose details are omitted from the letter or if their details are incorrect, they will need to register their details online at www.gov.uk/register-to-vote or call their district council to request a form be sent in the post. Equally, residents who do not receive any letter or who live in a new build property will need to ensure they also submit their details for the register.

Residents who receive a letter with the details of someone who no longer lives at the address should contact their council immediately.

Cherwell residents who need assistance should call 01295 227005 while residents in South Northamptonshire should call 01327 322128.

Council responds to Cherwell boundary change proposals

Plans to revise Cherwell District Council's ward boundaries have been discussed by members at a special meeting.

As part of an electoral review into Cherwell, the Local Government Boundary Commission for England has proposed reducing the number of councillors from 50 to 48.

It is proposed that the boundaries of the council's existing 28 wards would be redrawn to create a total of 16 wards across the district, each of which would be represented by three councillors.

Cllr Barry Wood, leader of Cherwell District Council, said: "The boundary commission conduct these reviews to create more elector equality by ensuring each elected member represents a similar number of people. As it stands, some members represent significantly more residents than others and so by revising the boundaries they aim to even things out.

"While we understand the reasons for this review, it is important to members that this does not come at the expense of communities or the voters within them. We want to protect the identity of areas; ensure existing community connections are not broken and make sure any movement of boundary lines is appropriate in not just meeting electoral targets but in the needs of our residents."

Under the proposals put forward by the LGBCE, by 2020 each ward would incorporate 7,740 electors, giving a ratio of one councillor to every 2,580 voters.

Currently, electors in Banbury are split across six wards which are represented by 16 councillors. However under the proposed restructure, the boundary lines will be amended so 15 councillors will be equally shared over five wards.

In Bicester, the total number of councillors will increase from 11 to 12, but the number of wards will reduce from five to four. Kidlington will retain its two wards, but the number of councillors will rise from five to six to accommodate three members each. Across the rural areas, the 15 existing wards will be cut to just five with the total number of rural members reducing from 18 to 15.

At the meeting members agreed their response to the commission on its proposals. Although councillors felt the district warding pattern was workable, they did not believe the LGBCE's proposals met community identity as well as the alternative proposals put forward by the council.

With regards to the LGBCE proposals, members suggested some boundaries should be moved to prevent electoral confusion, a loss of local identity or a more effective democratic representation. Additionally councillors expressed concern regarding the proposed warding patterns for Banbury Town Council and Kidlington Parish Council which they described as unhelpful in ensuring effective representation, which the proposals previously put forward by the council addressed.

The comments will be formulated into an official response which will be forwarded to the LGBCE to consider before publishing its final recommendations next month. If the changes are eventually agreed, a full council election would take place in 2016 to elect members into the new wards. Following this, elections would return to the current system of elections by thirds, where one third of councillors would be up for election each year and elected to serve a four year term.

Ask elections team for advice

A series of drop in sessions have been organised in Cherwell and South Northamptonshire to assist voters with any questions regarding this year's elections which are taking place on Thursday, 7 May 2015.

The shared elections team at Cherwell District and South Northamptonshire Councils will host the events to coincide with National Voter Registration Day on 5 February.

The drop in sessions will provide residents with an opportunity to confirm or provide their details on the new electoral register, explain the different ways to vote in May and promote the opportunity to work at the forthcoming elections.

Sue Smith, electoral registration officer for Cherwell and South Northamptonshire, said:

"Last year the Government changed the way in which people register to vote by introducing Individual Electoral registration which makes each voter responsible for registering their own vote. In conjunction with that, National Voter Registration Day is a Government initiative to remind people to include their details on the new electoral register in time for this year's elections.

"Our drop-in sessions are an informal opportunity for residents to approach the elections team direct to ask any questions regarding the forthcoming elections and receive advice or assistance where necessary. What's more, people can find out how to earn money during the elections by working as a poll clerk, presiding officer or count assistants in either Cherwell or South Northamptonshire."

Individual Electoral Registration (IER) involves each eligible voter confirming their own details on the electoral register, as opposed to the previous system which required one person confirming all residents within that household. The aim of IER is to cut down on electoral fraud by using information held by the Department for Work and Pensions to confirm residents'.

The drop in sessions will enable people to check if their details are included on the new register, receive details of how to register online or be registered by a member of the elections team if they do not have internet access. Residents can also receive details of how to vote at a polling station or how to apply for a postal or proxy vote. Application packs will also be available for people to take away if they are interested in working on the election.

At the Cherwell events, residents will also be able to receive information across various subjects from recycling to housing from the council's outreach team.

The drop in sessions will take place on the following dates:

- Wednesday 4 February 11am – 1pm in Sheep Street, Bicester (Cherwell)
- Thursday 5 February 11am – 1.30pm outside Marks and Spencer, Banbury (Cherwell)

For more information about the drop-in events in Cherwell call 01295 227005 or for details about the South Northamptonshire sessions call 01327 322128.

Joint campaign considered for national award

A partnership project to promote sustainable living in Bicester has been included in a list of contenders for a national award.

Cherwell District Council and sustainability charity Bioregional have jointly been named as a potential finalist in the Ashden Awards for their Energy Smart EcoBicester campaign.

Born from the council's One Shared Vision initiative, Cherwell and Bioregional developed a range of initiatives under the campaign to promote the benefits of energy efficient and low carbon living across all of Bicester.

Cllr Debbie Pickford, Cherwell's lead member for housing, said: "After North West Bicester was identified as the location for an ecotown in 2010, Cherwell developed the One Shared Vision to promote the concepts of sustainable living across the whole of Bicester. From there, we launched the Energy Smart EcoBicester campaign in partnership with Bioregional to actively promote and assist residents, businesses and organisations in Bicester with reducing their carbon footprint and improving their energy efficiency."

"In delivering this campaign we adopted various approaches to be as inclusive as possible so that existing residents, businesses and community groups were able to reap the benefits alongside those occupying the newer, more sustainable developments. We are delighted that our campaign been successful in delivering this message and subsequently recognised at a national level."

Ashden is a charity that champions the use of sustainable energy to accelerate the transition to a low-carbon world. In submitting their application for consideration, Cherwell and Bioregional had to highlight successful projects to date.

This included the Bryan House project to design and build 23 energy efficient and affordable homes and the delivery of the John Paul II community centre, which is one of the UK's largest PassivHaus civic building in recognition of its energy efficiency.

Other community projects included the delivery of the zero carbon sixth form extension at Cooper School and the Green Living information centre which was built to the energy efficient PassivHaus standard to promote the benefits of energy saving to residents.

Away from community projects, the Energy Smart EcoBicester campaign also targeted residents of existing properties in Bicester, with schemes such as the energy monitor and thermal imaging camera loan scheme highlighting heat loss in individual properties.

Residents interested in improving energy efficiency were invited to apply for subsidised cavity and loft insulation, a subsidised boiler replacement scheme and a free Green Deal assessment to highlight key areas for improvement.

Nicole Lazarus, Eco Bicester programme manager for Bioregional, said: “Bioregional has been working with Cherwell since 2010 to bring a whole diverse range of smart energy saving projects to Bicester and we thrilled to be a part of this international recognition. We know that all of these projects are bringing to life the vision for low carbon living in Bicester.”

Cherwell and Bioregional have been included on the longlist of 15 organisations/ partnerships for the awards, with the shortlist due to be announced in March ahead of the awards’ evening in June. For more information on Ashden or the awards visit www.ashden.org

Consultation extended to invite stakeholder feedback

Residents and stakeholders are being given more time to comment on the document which will guide the layout and delivery of 6,000 sustainable homes at North West Bicester. Cherwell District Council is inviting comments on its draft Supplementary Planning Document for the North West Bicester Eco-town site which outlines the design, vision and objectives for the proposed development of 6,000 true zero carbon homes and supporting services, jobs and infrastructure.

The six week consultation was launched in mid-December and had been due to close last Friday (23 January) but has been extended to allow those who commented on Cherwell’s submitted Local plan the opportunity to take part.

Cllr Michael Gibbard, Cherwell’s lead member for planning, said: “As with any consultation, any member of the public is invited to submit comments but we have also decided to consult more widely to allow as many people as possible to get involved in the preparation of this important document. We want to hear the views of residents, stakeholders and organisations who all commented on Cherwell’s submitted Local Plan.

“We have taken this step as the development at North West Bicester is one of several large projects planned for Cherwell and we want to ensure as much as possible, that this process is joined up so that Cherwell’s expansion moves forward as one rather than as several stand-alone pockets of development. Everyone who took the time to comment on

Cherwell's submitted Local Plan has a vested interest in the district's development and as such, we want to ensure they are included as much as possible."

The document incorporates provides further guidance to developers on the policies as outlined in Cherwell's submitted Local Plan and if approved, will be used to guide future planning applications regarding the development of the site.

The consultation has now been extended until 5pm on Friday, 20 February. Until that date, invited stakeholders and members of the public can all comment on the proposals. Following the closure of the consultation, officers will review and consider feedback before presenting a final version of the document for councillors to vote upon.

If approved, it will be used as a guide for developers in preparing future applications regarding the delivery of North West Bicester's homes, shops, green spaces, transport and renewable energy over a 20 year period. The guidelines will assist developers in submitting applications which fulfil the council's policy for development and sustainability.

Construction is already under way on the first phase of the development, known as the Exemplar, which will incorporate 393 of the 6,000 true zero carbon homes, a primary school, shops, offices and an eco-business centre. Several applications relating to the development of additional phases of the site have been submitted to Cherwell and are pending consideration.

To view and comment on the Supplementary Planning Document visit www.cherwell.gov.uk/planningpolicy before the 20 February deadline.

Paying council tax does not automatically register you to vote

Residents who move house are being reminded that registering for council tax does not automatically register them on the electoral roll.

Cherwell District Council and South Northamptonshire Council are urging anyone who has recently moved or who is planning to move prior to this year's May elections to ensure they register to vote before the 20 April deadline. Although it is not a legal requirement for people to vote, it is a legal requirement to submit details for the register and failure to do so may result in a £1,000 fine.

Sue Smith, electoral registration officer, said: "The electoral register is about more than providing people with a right to vote. It is used for jury service selection and to perform credit checks for things such as mortgage, mobile phone and credit card applications and if details are not up to date, it could affect people's credit ratings.

"It is a common misconception that registering for council tax means people are registered to vote but that is not the case. People will need to submit their details specifically for the register either online or over the phone. Those who have moved into a new build house may find their address is not yet recognised online but by contacting us we can help resolve the situation which means they won't miss out on their chance to vote."

Following last year's elections the Government rolled out a new voter registration system, known as Individual Electoral Registration (IER) which will use information held by the Department of Work and Pensions to validate voter applications and cut down on electoral fraud.

This year, depending on where people live, they could be entitled to take part in up to three elections. All eligible voters will be entitled to take part in the general election to elect their MP. In many areas, district council seats will also be up for election. Furthermore, elections will also take place for some town and parish councils.

To register to vote visit www.gov.uk/registertovote. Alternatively for assistance or to request a form in the post to register a new build address call Cherwell District Council on 01295 227005 or South Northamptonshire Council on 01327 322128.

Council shortlisted for awards

The Local Government Chronicle (LGC) has published its award short list and Cherwell District Council has made the grade in two categories.

Over two hundred organisations have entered the awards, with Cherwell being shortlisted in both the Innovation and Most Improved Council sections.

The council's lead member for performance, Cllr Kieron Mallon said: "The LGC Awards are well-established and respected throughout the public sector. To be shortlisted for one award is a substantial achievement - to be chosen for two shows that Cherwell is at the forefront of local government innovation."

Cherwell made the Innovation shortlist with its developer brand, Build! which aims to create self-build housing schemes on brownfield sites. Within the context of increasing house prices, reduced public subsidy through the Homes and Communities Agency and growing concern about derelict brownfield sites, Build! is delivering 250 self-build opportunities of all tenures and sizes.

Additionally Cherwell, in partnership with South Northamptonshire Council, has been shortlisted for the "Most Improved Council" award. Both councils faced the challenge of maintaining high performance in a period of unprecedented financial constraint. In 2010 the councils established a strong alliance to protect long term financial sustainability while retaining performance, rated as excellent at Cherwell and good at South Northamptonshire. The result has been enhanced performance, significant savings, resilience and improved services.

The next stage of the judging process will see the shortlisted councils present their cases to expert panels, in the Council of the Year and Most Improved Council categories, LGC will stage live judging on the day of the award ceremony, 11 March, at the Grosvenor House Hotel in London.

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