

COUNTY COUNCILLOR'S ANNUAL REPORT APRIL 2020 – APRIL 2021 BY COUNCILLOR LORRAINE LINDSAY-GALE

COVID-19

The past year has seen us working, caring and coping with the impacts of COVID-19 on our lives. County Council staff have continued to work from home wherever possible, and the vast majority of meetings have been held online via Teams or Zoom. Throughout this awful time our officers and partner organisations have maintained the public services that we rely on, and in many cases have gone far beyond what was required of them to ensure that all our residents received the care and support they deserve.

Libraries

In my own Directorate, Cultural Services and Education, I was proud to hear of library staff directing traffic queues at waste recycling centres, helping man the phones for the Shielding Operation and driving vital legal documents around the county so that our registrars could register deaths. And now I'm delighted that all but a few of our 44 libraries that are undergoing alterations will be open on 12th April.

Schools

I have to pay a very special tribute to our teachers, who have coped with a hugely demanding situation of having to provide as virus free an environment for our children as possible, while dealing with the uncertainty of whether they would be open or have to close. They've been spectacular, and currently attendance levels are in the region of 95%, well above national averages.

In June the County Council stepped in and provided all schools with free PPE equipment worth £2million to help staff and parents feel more confident about levels of protection, and we have led a county-wide service providing free laptops to children who may have found online learning difficult because they hadn't got the equipment they needed. The Council has continued to provide school places and transport throughout lockdown. We were proud to announce that for entry next September over 90% of primary school children were offered their first preference school place and 89% of children making the move into secondary education.

BUDGET

Our response to COVID-19 has been costly, in the region of £60million to date, but the Government has remained true to its word and

reimbursed the Council to a significant degree. To ensure our financial situation was secure, in September we announced an Extraordinary Budget, seeking to find an extra £15m of savings. This was achieved, and now the Council is in a firm financial situation. The budget we announced in February was balanced, and contained not only savings, but investments in some services such as our provision for young people.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Between April 2020 and March 2021, Oxfordshire County Council treated just under 1.5 million square metres of highway at more than 220 sites with works valued at over £20m. This included a significant amount of work in Garsington amounting to over £60K on resurfacing and drainage repairs. The Council will be investing £31.3 million in our highway repairs and improvements in the coming year.

Clifton Hampden Bypass

However, the big news for this Division's highway network was the announcement of £218million for a new road north from Didcot and a river crossing that will join the A415 near Culham Station. A large roundabout outside the Science Centre will guide traffic around a bypass for Clifton Hampden that will join the A4074 at the Golden Balls roundabout. This area has suffered from traffic congestion for many years and the new scheme is seen as a vital element in improving our local infrastructure. It will be completed by 2024, and work has already begun.

New Bus Service – 45

I have campaigned for a long time to get transport links for Berinsfield. I was delighted that from 1st September Thames Travel began running the 45 service between Abingdon, Culham, Berinsfield, the Science Park and Cowley. A school transport service is also provided by the County Council to the three Abingdon secondary schools, Larkmead, Fitzharries and John Mason. This is not available to the public due to social distancing requirements, but it is hoped to offer these journeys to everyone in the future.

Minerals & Waste Plan

The County Council's Minerals & Waste Plan has been delayed yet again. This time it was due to Nuneham Courtenay and Sandford-on-Thames residents' successful challenge to the proposal put forward to identify a large area between the two villages as the sole new area to provide gravel from the South of the County up until 2031. They proved

that the Council's consultants had got their figures wrong, and that the amount of gravel that could be expected to come out was half of what they had predicted. The Council has had no option but to go back to the beginning of this very lengthy process of identifying suitable sites. The focus could now fall upon the land between Stadhampton, Drayton St Leonard and Berinsfield. There is not likely to be an adopted plan much before 2023.

CLIMATE CHANGE

In 2019 the Council acknowledged there is a climate emergency. Since then, we have been putting this issue at the centre of our activities - every purchase we make, every policy we consider and every strategy we plan. We have pledged to become a carbon neutral authority by 2030. We set ourselves a 6% target and smashed it achieving 8% up to the end of 2020. But we also want to make Oxfordshire a carbon neutral county by 2050 and are working with organisations across Oxfordshire to achieve this. Soon we will see Low Traffic Neighbourhoods and a Zero Emissions Zone for Oxford, plus congestion charging from the end of the year. The switch to electric vehicles will help, and we are planning a county-wide network of charging points. With improved public transport, cycleways and pedestrian routes we hope to encourage people to ditch their petrol and diesel cars.

In spite of all the challenges Oxfordshire County Council has had a positive 2020 – 2021.