

Report from Cllr David Hingley

It has now been almost four years since I was first elected to represent Bloxham on Cherwell District Council, and I remain extremely honoured to have been trusted with the task (and privilege!) of standing up for the village's interests at the council, alongside my Lib Dem colleagues Rob Pattenden and Gordon Blakeway. I have also served as Oxfordshire county councillor for Bloxham for the past 11 months, which together with serving as Leader of Cherwell has kept me very busy on behalf of residents. The following are just some of the main high-level matters; obviously, a lot of work goes into representing individual residents and dealing with specific casework which I will not go into here but which, suffice to say, is always a most fulfilling responsibility. Much of that casework is to do with highways matters, from road safety issues to escalating repair work, or planning issues, and I have been pleased to work on multiple such matters in support of village residents.

CDC Local Plan

This year saw the submission of a new Local Plan for Cherwell designed to meet modern and future local housing and employment needs, ensure Cherwell meets the targets mandated for us by government while protecting our villages and countryside, and aiming to allocate appropriate levels of housing in the right places to meet local needs, backed by appropriate infrastructure, with green buffers around settlements. The Plan is currently progressing through the various stages of inspection prior to being adopted, with an initial review having taken place. The Bloxham Neighbourhood Plan currently in development will sit alongside the Cherwell Local Plan to form a coherent set of policies for the village and wider area once adopted.

Planning, Housing Developments and the Housing Land Supply

Bloxham has witnessed a high level of housing development in recent years and continues to experience a large number of speculative applications especially to the south of the village. As county councillor, I have argued in my submissions that the cumulative impact of these developments needs to be taken fully into account in determining applications, and importantly that highways matters are crucial concerns not least in terms of safety. As district councillor, I have worked hard with my ward colleagues in putting the case for resisting inappropriate developments at Planning Committee, including proposing that such applications be refused, and I will continue to work to highlight the interests and concerns of the village as future applications are considered. Furthermore, I secured a sensible housing allocation for Bloxham in the new Local Plan to provide protection for the future once that Plan is adopted. In the meantime, as parish councillors know Cherwell does not currently have a five-year Housing Land Supply as a result of national targets and decisions such as requiring Cherwell's overall housing requirement to be calculated in combination with the Oxford City unmet need requirement rather than separately. The HLS has nonetheless improved this year, and my administration has put in place a Housing Delivery Action Plan aimed at supporting affordable housing, addressing infrastructure issues and prioritising council resources. Indeed the impacts of new housing on local infrastructure such as medical facilities and on drainage matters must be taken fully into account and we will continue to argue these points. Additionally, I have been pleased to assist residents with various concerns about a number of smaller housing developments / applications and to liaise on their behalf with planning officers both proactively and when requested to do so.

Bloxham Primary School / S106 monies

I secured a site visit in Bloxham with the relevant OCC Cabinet Member and with OCC officers to discuss concerns around highways safety outside the primary school earlier this year. As a result, a programme of potential work has been identified, however no timetable for this work or portions of it has been confirmed and as such I will continue to argue alongside parish council colleagues for early provision of measures in the locality, given the high importance we all attach to these. I am also arranging a separate site visit with OCC officers to discuss approx. £35k of S106 funding that has been unlocked and allocated for use on highways measures in Bloxham.

CDC offices

CDC's move to Banbury has bedded in well and has meant the council is operating from central, modern premises that have earned a high environmental / energy rating in line with the council's operating ethos. The site at Bodicote House has recently been announced as to be sold to the Graven Hill Village Development Company, which while owned by the council operates under its own structures with its own business plan and management. It is hoped that with the sale now in progress a suitable and sustainable plan will soon come forward for developing the site in line with the needs of the area, in accordance with the Cherwell Local Plan.

Balanced Budgets

Both OCC and CDC have set balanced budgets for 26/27, despite a challenging national picture. In the case of OCC this was done in the face of significant government funding cuts but nonetheless covers essential services like adult social care and SEND, while also investing in valued services such as libraries (including Adderbury library), and maintenance of highways and drains, tackling the previous administration's stated policy of 'managed decline' of our highways. A programme of repairs and road surfacing has been instigated and is ongoing, however adverse weather conditions over the winter has necessitated further investment which the council has provided. It is important that where possible residents report deficiencies on Fix My Street so that they are added to the maintenance schedule, however these can also be reported to me so that I can escalate them directly. A full programme of gully clearance also took place during the year across the county.

With regard to CDC, the council under my leadership has succeeded in setting a balanced budget despite significant last-minute government changes to the council's finance settlement, which threatened to remove £2.335m from Cherwell between the provisional and final finance settlement stages, an unprecedented intervention from government. Following urgent and intense lobbying (including by myself), the government has supplied an Adjustment Support Grant to cover the shortfall in 26/27, however no such undertaking has been received as yet for future years, but we will continue to press the government for proper and meaningful funding levels for our residents. For the 26/27 budget, the administration has been delighted to respond to calls for funding of Banbury Museum, increasing the level of funding proposed in the initial budget, and to protect front line services such as bin collections as well as investing more in temporary homelessness accommodation and in maintaining our popular health and wellbeing programmes, as well as dedicated investment for our town centres. In short, CDC is very well

placed for 26/27 and residents can be sure that their council is being run efficiently and sensibly.

Local Government Reorganisation

Of course both CDC and OCC are on course for being abolished by the government thanks to its programme of local government reorganisation (LGR). Under current plans, this will see the district and county councils removed by 2028 in favour of a unitary council that will cover all services currently provided by Cherwell and OCC. There are three proposals for LGR in Oxfordshire: a single county unitary favoured by the OCC Cabinet, which would see the whole county served by just the one authority; a two-unitary authority model favoured by the district councils, which in our case would cover Cherwell, West Oxfordshire and Oxford City (the other authority to cover Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire and include West Berkshire); and a three-unitary model favoured by Oxford City Council which would see a Greater Oxford with the city boundaries expanded to include the southern section of Cherwell, leaving our area to be included in a small unitary serving the 'rest of Cherwell' (Banbury / Bicester and surrounding areas) plus West Oxfordshire. The government – not our councils – has the final say on the matter and has recently concluded its consultation – a decision on which model will be adopted will (we are told) be advised this summer. Once the decision is made the present councils will work flat out to set up the new body/bodies – as it is proposed that the unitary/unitaries will come online in April 2028, with a 'shadow' unitary being established from May 2027 to run alongside the final year of Cherwell and OCC.

Devolution

Discussions are also ongoing with regard to setting up a potential authority at the regional level, a so-called Mayoral or Foundation (non-mayoral) Strategic Authority. Talks have been progressing for such a body to cover the Thames Valley area of Oxfordshire and Berkshire, potentially including Swindon. Buckinghamshire have been invited to participate but have so far declined to engage in talks. No decision has yet been taken by the government as to whether to proceed with a devolved authority for our area or not.

In conclusion it has been a real pleasure representing Bloxham over the past year, as indeed it has been for the past four years. I am grateful for the support of parish council members and of my district council colleagues, and look forward to serving the village into the future.

Cllr David Hingley

CDC and OCC councillor for Adderbury, Bloxham & Bodicote