County Councillor Update

October / November 2026

Cllr Maggie Filipova-Rivers

Dear Clerks, Chairs and Councillors,

This update covers some of the key developments at Oxfordshire County Council, including highways maintenance, flooding, transport and support for residents, alongside two major proposals for the future of local government: Local Government Reorganisation and devolution. Both could have lasting implications for how services are delivered and funded across Oxfordshire.

As Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council and a County Councillor, a considerable amount of my time has been devoted to these complex issues in recent months. I appreciate your patience as I balance this work with addressing local concerns and progressing casework across our division.



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1. Local Government Reorganisation: Government announces revised proposals

Following a pause in September, the Government announced on 29 October that it is minded to replace the seven existing councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire with three unitary authorities. A unitary council brings together services currently split between district and county councils, including planning, waste collection, highways, education and social care. This remains a proposed decision, with a further opportunity for council leaders and MPs to make representations over approximately three weeks and an update to Parliament expected before Christmas.

The proposed new councils are Greater Oxford, covering Oxford and surrounding areas; North Oxfordshire, covering most of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire; and Ridgeway, bringing together West Berkshire with most of South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse.

I remain disappointed that the proposal divides South Oxfordshire, moving some rural villages into Greater Oxford despite their connections to surrounding rural communities. We have consistently argued for an approach that better reflects local identity, service delivery and financial resilience. However, I welcome the fact that the revised boundaries would now retain Nuneham Courtenay, Culham, Clifton Hampden, Marsh Baldon, Great Milton, Wheatley, Waterstock and Holton within Ridgeway rather than Greater Oxford.

For county services, the practical challenge is considerable. Existing county responsibilities, including social care, education and highways, would need to be divided between the successor councils while maintaining continuity for residents. The transition must be judged by whether services remain effective and financially sustainable, not simply by where lines are drawn on a map.

The Government has indicated that representations can still be made and proposals refined. I am considering how best to use this opportunity, drawing on evidence about local identity, travel patterns, service relationships and infrastructure. Parish councils with specific concerns or evidence about the proposed boundaries are welcome to let me know.

Oxfordshire County Council issued a formal pre action protocol letter to Government in October, seeking the evidence and analysis underpinning its original decision to divide Oxfordshire into three unitary councils. It also lodged a protective claim with the court ahead of a potential judicial review.

Following the Government's new minded to decision on 29 October, the County Council has been advised that its previous legal action no longer applies. The Council remains opposed to the three unitary model, citing concerns about financial sustainability, service delivery and accountability. It intends to make further representations to Government and is considering whether to pursue a new legal challenge. No decision to launch a further challenge has yet been announced.

Under the current timetable, elections to the new shadow councils would take place in May 2028. Those shadow authorities would prepare for the transition but would not yet deliver services. The existing councils would continue until 1 April 2029, when the new councils are due to take over. The scheduled May 2027 local elections are expected to proceed on existing boundaries.

2. Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority: opportunity and questions about devolution

Separately from local government reorganisation, the Government is proposing a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) for Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon. This would create a new regional level of decision making, led

by an elected mayor, with potential powers and funding for strategic transport, infrastructure, housing, skills, economic development and investment. It would sit above the local councils rather than replace them.

I support the principle of devolution: decisions affecting our communities should be taken closer to them, and greater local control over investment could bring substantial benefits. But the geography and the way this proposal has been developed raise serious questions. Our preferred arrangement has been Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, reflecting existing economic and public service links across the Thames Valley.

The Government instead proposed including Swindon while Buckinghamshire is not currently participating. That could have implications for established partnerships and service boundaries, including policing, fire and rescue, health and other regional arrangements. The costs, disruption and practical benefits have not yet been adequately established.

Following a ministerial meeting on 21 October, leaders were effectively given just two working days to respond. That was insufficient time for a decision with such lasting consequences to be properly examined by councils or communities. I therefore wrote to Minister Jim McMahon on 26 October, setting out both our support for devolution in principle and our reservations about the proposed geography and process.

OCC has agreed to participate in the next phase of developing the proposal, but this is not an endorsement of the final arrangements. We need a credible, evidence based assessment of the funding, powers, costs, governance and impacts on existing services, followed by meaningful public consultation. Any final proposal would still need to pass through the appropriate democratic processes.

For Oxfordshire residents, the relationship between a future mayor, the new unitary councils and existing countywide services will be particularly important. I will be looking closely at democratic accountability, transport priorities, rural representation and whether new investment genuinely reaches communities beyond the main urban centres.

3. Oxford Growth Commission and Proposed Development Corporation

Another significant strategic issue that has taken considerable time and attention is the Oxford Growth Commission's proposal for a Greater Oxford Development Corporation. While its direct impact on villages in the south of our district is likely to be limited, the wider implications for planning, housing and infrastructure are important.

Following conversations with the Chair of the Commission, I can share several developments:

- **Boundaries**: The proposed Development Corporation's area is likely to closely mirror that of the proposed Greater Oxford unitary council.
- **Planning powers**: The Corporation is expected to take responsibility for planning decisions above a certain threshold, focusing on major strategic development sites. The precise scope and thresholds still need to be defined.
- **Housing growth**: The interim report included some eye watering projections for future housing growth, including development in the Green Belt. However, the more immediate and realistic priority is likely to be unlocking existing allocated sites that have stalled because of economic conditions and infrastructure constraints
- **Infrastructure first**: One potentially positive development is the Commission's emphasis on delivering infrastructure before housing, alongside efforts to secure additional government funding.

Under current planning arrangements, infrastructure is often delivered in stages as developments reach agreed housing numbers, rather than being provided at the outset.

- **Representation on governance board**: I have been reassured that district councils will be represented on the board until such time that LGR takes place.

I was critical of the interim report's rather negative portrayal of local authorities and have been assured that the final report will present a more balanced assessment. The final recommendations are expected in November, with consultation on the Development Corporation proposals to follow. I will continue to scrutinise the implications, particularly for local democratic accountability, planning powers and the delivery of infrastructure that our communities need.

4. 4 million Investment in Electric Vehicle Charging

Oxfordshire County Council is rolling out a **£4 million government-funded programme to install more than 1,500 public electric vehicle charging points by summer 2028**, more than doubling the county's existing provision. The first 11 on-street locations were approved in September, including sites in Berinsfield and Henley. The programme is particularly important for the estimated 30% of Oxfordshire households without private driveways, who cannot easily charge vehicles at home. Most new chargers will be installed in public car parks, with others on residential streets. Read the county council announcement.

The programme also includes **community charging micro hubs**, offering parish councils and other community organisations the opportunity to host public chargers at village halls, sports facilities and other suitable car parks. Residents without driveways can also apply for pavement cable channels to charge vehicles using their home electricity supply. Parish councils interested in hosting a micro hub can contact **EVInfrastructure@oxfordshire.gov.uk**, and residents can suggest locations for future chargers through the county council's EV infrastructure webpage.

I am pleased to confirm that Wheel Orchard car park in Goring is included in the programme for new electric vehicle charging facilities. I will share further information on the anticipated installation timetable as soon as it becomes available.

5. New £6 Million Recycling Centre Planned for Oxfordshire

Oxfordshire County Council has announced plans for a **new £6 million household waste recycling centre in Bicester**, replacing the ageing **Ardley facility**, which is now over 40 years old. The proposed site, next to Bicester Park and Ride, would provide modern recycling facilities and a new reuse shop where suitable unwanted items could be given a second life. The council is aiming for completion by 2030, subject to planning permission and public consultation.

The current planning permission for Ardley expires in December 2026, and the council is seeking an extension until March 2031 to allow sufficient time for the replacement to be built. The proposals have attracted some local concerns about traffic, particularly around Vendee Drive, and these will need to be examined through the planning process. The scheme also aims to achieve a 20% biodiversity net gain.

For residents in Goring, Woodcote and surrounding villages, there are no proposed changes to Oakley Wood recycling centre near Wallingford. The investment is intended to maintain Oxfordshire's existing network of seven recycling centres, rather than reduce provision. Residents should remember that visits to all Oxfordshire recycling centres now require advance booking.

Further information: OCC announcement | Detailed plans and consultation information | Find and book a recycling centre

6. Oxford Traffic Filters: What Residents Need to Know

Oxford's six traffic filters came into operation on **28 September 2026**, replacing the temporary congestion charge. The aim is to reduce congestion, improve bus journey times and make walking and cycling safer. The filters restrict cars travelling through certain roads during specified hours, but **they do not prevent anyone from driving to any part of Oxford**. Drivers without a permit may simply need to take a different route, often using the ring road.

I appreciate that the scheme has been controversial, and the early experience has not been without problems. There have been reports of significant congestion around Botley Road, Oxpens Road and the Westgate shopping centre, as well as concerns about the impact on businesses and journey times. These are legitimate concerns which need to be properly assessed rather than dismissed. I recently drove to Westgate myself and found that, while I had to take a longer route, it added around ten minutes to my journey. This will not be everyone's experience, but it illustrates an important point: **Oxford remains accessible by car, even without a permit.** The question is whether the benefits of reduced traffic and improved public transport ultimately outweigh the inconvenience of longer journeys for some drivers.

For residents of Goring, Woodcote and surrounding villages, the most useful thing to know is that Oxfordshire residents are entitled to 25 free day passes per year. These allow you to drive through the filters on days when you need to, without taking a diversion. You must apply for a free permit and register your vehicle. Residents who already had an Oxfordshire permit under the temporary congestion charge should have had it transferred automatically, with their allocation reset. There are also additional permits available for Blue Badge holders, unpaid carers, frequent hospital patients and certain other groups. You can check eligibility and apply for your permit here. The filters operate between 7am and 7pm at four locations, with shorter peak-time restrictions at Hollow Way and Marston Ferry Road. Driving through without a valid permit can result in a £70 fine, although first-time contraventions during the initial six months receive a warning rather than a penalty.

Importantly, **this is a trial, not a permanent decision**. It can run for up to 18 months, with monitoring of traffic, bus journey times and other impacts. The public consultation is open until **28 March 2027**, and I would encourage residents to share their experiences, whether positive or negative. Decisions about the scheme's future must be based on evidence, including its impact on people travelling into Oxford from our rural communities.

Further information: Traffic filter locations and guidance | Apply for free permits | Public consultation and FAQs.

7. Support Available for Unpaid Carers in Oxfordshire

More than 50,000 people in Oxfordshire provide unpaid care for a family member, friend or neighbour, often without recognising themselves as carers. This might involve helping an elderly parent with shopping and appointments, supporting a partner with a long-term illness, or caring for a child with additional needs. **If this sounds familiar, there is a range of support available, and you do not need to provide full-time care to ask for help.**

Through Carers Oxfordshire, residents can access free advice, emotional support, local support groups and a **free carer's assessment**, which looks at how caring affects their own health, wellbeing and daily life, and what additional help they may need. This can include exploring respite care, practical assistance, emergency planning and support for the person being cared for. Carers can also apply for a free **Carer ID card** and access wellbeing offers, including (Some offers have eligibility conditions or associated costs):

- discounted leisure activities
- subsidised counselling
- opportunities for short breaks.

Financial support may also be available. Those providing at least 35 hours of care each week may qualify for Carer's Allowance, subject to eligibility and earnings rules, while Carer's Credit can help protect National Insurance contributions towards a State Pension. Carers should also register with their GP, who may be able to offer additional support. Young carers can seek help through their school, GP or the county council's family support services.

I would particularly encourage residents who have taken on caring responsibilities gradually to explore what is available rather than waiting until they are struggling. **Contact Carers Oxfordshire on 01235 424715 (Monday to Friday, 9am–5pm)** or email carersinfo@carersoxfordshire.org.uk. Further information is available in the Oxfordshire County Council guide to caring for someone and its carer's assessment guidance.

8. Highways Maintenance: Potholes and Drainage

I continue to work closely with Oxfordshire County Council's highways team to address potholes, blocked gullies and drainage problems across Goring, Woodcote and our surrounding villages. I have been able to get quite a few longstanding issues resolved, and am currently pursuing several urgent repairs. There is still plenty to do, particularly where poor drainage is contributing to road deterioration and localised flooding.

Please continue to report potholes, blocked drains and other highway defects through Fix My Street, ideally with photographs and an accurate location. Even if you have raised an issue with me directly, having it **formally logged with a picture** helps ensure it is recorded and assessed by the highways team. If a problem remains unresolved, or you believe it needs urgent attention, please escalate it to me, preferably with the Fix My Street reference number. I cannot promise every repair will be immediate, but I can follow up with officers and press for action where needed. Your help with reporting really does make a difference.

The county council is also progressing its wider highways maintenance programme, including resurfacing works on 38 roads covering approximately 115,000 square metres, scheduled for completion in November. Residents can check planned gully cleaning and find out more about local highways activity through the council's highways information pages.

9. Preparing for Flooding: Oxfordshire Flood Toolkit

With winter approaching, I would encourage residents, particularly those living in areas that have experienced flooding, to explore the Oxfordshire Flood Toolkit. This is a comprehensive online resource offering practical advice on preparing for flooding, protecting homes and businesses, understanding who is responsible for drainage and knowing where to turn when problems arise. Flooding is not limited to properties near rivers. Heavy rainfall, surface water, blocked drains and overflowing ditches can all cause serious problems, as we have seen in villages across our area.

There are several particularly useful resources within the toolkit:

- **Check your flood risk:** An interactive flood risk map allows residents to search by postcode and explore risks from rivers and surface water, alongside information about drainage assets and flood investigations. The maps provide general guidance rather than definitive assessments of individual properties.
- **Prepare a household emergency plan:** The preparation guide includes a nine-step checklist and links to downloadable templates. It explains how to prepare an emergency bag, safeguard important documents, move valuables and vehicles to higher ground, protect doorways and air bricks, and make arrangements for family members and pets.
- **Protect your property:** The flood prevention section explains measures such as removable flood barriers, flood-resistant air bricks, pumps and other ways of reducing damage. The toolkit also includes guidance on flood insurance, recovery and obtaining professional advice.
- **Monitor warnings:** The local weather warnings page brings together Met Office weather warnings and Environment Agency flood information. Residents can also sign up for free flood warnings.
- **Know who to contact:** The emergency guidance explains how to report flooding depending on whether it involves a highway, watercourse or sewer. Highway flooding and blocked road drains should be reported through Fix My Street. For immediate danger to life, call 999.
- **Support for parish councils:** The Flood Library contains community flood plan templates, guidance on establishing local flood resilience arrangements, information for volunteer flood wardens and even template letters to landowners about maintaining ditches and watercourses. These are particularly useful for communities experiencing recurring flooding.

I am continuing to pursue a number of longstanding drainage and flooding issues locally, including blocked gullies and problems that require coordination between the county council, district council and landowners. However, there is also considerable value in being prepared at household and community level. **I would particularly encourage parish councils to review their emergency plans and residents who have experienced flooding to familiarise themselves with the toolkit before the next period of heavy rainfall.**

The toolkit is available at www.oxfordshirefloodtoolkit.com.

10. Oxfordshire County Council Budget: Difficult Decisions Ahead

Oxfordshire County Council faces significant financial pressures, despite balancing its budget for 2025/26. This was achieved partly through contingency funding and higher than expected investment income, neither of which can be relied upon indefinitely. Changes to government funding are expected to leave the council **£24 million worse off over three years**, while demand for adult social care, children's services and SEND support continues to rise. Substantial savings will be needed, and some difficult decisions lie ahead.

A particular concern has been the growing **High Needs deficit**, arising from the gap between government funding and the cost of supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. Oxfordshire's accumulated deficit was forecast to reach approximately **£166 million by March 2026**. The Government has committed to covering 90% of historic deficits, subject to conditions, and we have recently had the news that OCC has been successful. The challenges nonetheless remain. Improving SEND services while managing these pressures is very difficult.

One example of the difficult choices facing the council is the proposed reduction in the amount disabled residents receiving adult social care can automatically retain for disability-related expenses. The previous council introduced a particularly generous allowance, considerably higher than in comparable authorities, and I was proud of that additional support. Even with the proposed reduction, Oxfordshire's allowance would remain above that of many comparable councils. While the blanket allowance would be removed, **individual disability-related expenses would still be considered on a case-by-case basis**, recognising that people's needs and circumstances differ. These are not easy decisions, particularly when they affect vulnerable residents, but they illustrate the increasingly difficult choices councils face in balancing financial sustainability with protecting essential services.

Further information: OCC budget and financial planning | Adult social care contributions consultation.