

Report from OCC Cllr Tim Bearder for Annual Parish Meeting in Wheatley Tuesday 13th April 2021

The Expressway has been cancelled.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps announced the cancellation of the Oxford-Cambridge (Ox-Cam) expressway on 18 March 2021, after “analysis confirmed the proposed project was not cost-effective”.

Whilst I believe this is tremendous news (albeit he seems to have based the decision entirely on the finances of the case), there have been several reports in the Oxford Times about the “Expressway by Stealth”. Responses to recent FOI requests indicate that changes were made to the South Oxfordshire Local Plan at a late stage on the initiative of County Council officers with no councillor involvement - in particular the addition of a proposal to “improve” the B4015, the removal of the safeguarding plan for Stadhampton Bypass and the inclusion of possible M40 junction changes outside the District. All this gives support to the suspicion that a major new route through our area is being planned.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/oxford-to-cambridge-expressway-project-cancelled-as-transport-secretary-looks-to-alternative-plans-for-improving-transport-in-the-region>

Future housing

Government have announced an intention to establish a new single voice for the area - an Arc Growth Body - to drive and support economic growth

Already we have a wealth of bodies like England's Economic Heartland who are pushing for a very large number of new houses. I asked a question of the cabinet last month which revealed 862,000 new houses across the arc are expected - the National Infrastructure Commission recommended a million.

Either way that would represent continuous and unchecked housing delivery for the next 30 years at rates far in excess of anything seen in the last 20 - possibly ever!

A growth of 105% in Oxfordshire compared with the 16% predicted for the nation as a whole by the Office of National Statistics.

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Horspath Bridge

Oxfordshire County Council have contacted the Historical Railways Estate and advised that they are happy to work with them on the diversion associated with the refurb works.

The Historical Railways Estate consequently instructed their consultant to ‘bin’ the planning application relating to demolition. The ecologists have been told to plan for surveys relating to refurbishment rather than demolition – they think they may only need summer bat surveys at the moment. So it may be ready to go earlier than expected.

So – fingers crossed... This is a vital piece of infrastructure that prevents large lorries accessing the Ladder Hill area of Wheatley and is a much loved historical landmark.

Parking contract

Mistakes made over the awarding of a parking contract have cost Oxfordshire County Council more than £1.6m.

This is incredibly disappointing because that is enough to pay for the rent on the Maple Tree Children's centre, which I've been part funding from my Councillor Allowance, for 160 years!

To make matters worse they spent £20,475 on an independent report to look at what went wrong and are now refusing to show that to councillors because it is confidential. There was a motion moved to end last month's full council meeting early because we'd had an emotional debate on domestic violence. That was the item before the Parking Contract was to be discussed. The Chair of the Council has decided that there should be an Extraordinary Meeting on the 7th to finish the meeting.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-56187024>

Government has just published a National bus strategy

They are asking Local Transport Authorities to begin the process of establishing Enhanced Partnerships with bus operators across their entire area by the end of June, otherwise they will lose a lot of funding. This is a similar approach adopted for the Active Transport funds last summer. It led to some rushed decisions and lots of white lines being repainted. I will of course be pressing their feet to the fire on it and trying to get some long term funding for the Wheatley to Temple Cowley Bus and asking them to look at an enhanced Otmoor Flier set up as a proper bus service.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/969205/DfT-Bus-Back-Better-national-bus-strategy-for-England.pdf

Local Plan

I've been actively involved in the preplanning exercise set up by Christchurch looking at the land north of Bayswater Brook and have held meetings with Brookes about the development site in Wheatley. It is essential that we are very closely involved in all these plans so that we can get the best for the community. It doesn't seem that the Planning Inspector has left us many levers to compel developers to improve cycle paths or develop car free plans but it is something I will be pushing for as hard as I can because the impact on the local infrastructure of these many thousand houses will be immense.