BUDGET

Prior to Christmas, Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) went out to consultation on possible additional budget cuts totalling £51m, at the time believed to be the worst-case scenario. However, due to a change in the funding formula, which penalised shire counties, the settlement was even worse than expected and the additional savings required now total £69m. In response to protests from shire counties, on 11th February the Government announced transitional funding and OCC will receive £9m across two financial years in respect of this.

The Council met on Tuesday 16th February to debate the budget measures necessary to achieve the savings. Although most of the savings will still go ahead, a cross-party agreement was made on the day incorporating the following changes:

- A total of £2m of savings relating to Early Intervention Hubs and Children's Centres will now not take place. An original £6m saving on Early Intervention Hubs and Children's Centres - agreed by the council at its annual budget meeting in February 2015 - will still take place. No decisions have been taken at this stage on how this £2m will be spent.
- A total of £3m of savings relating to day centres (including transport to day centres) will now not take place. Instead they will be replaced by a saving of £1m from 2017/18 resulting from a full review of all day services for older people.
- There will be a further £300,000 contribution to the budget from reserves.

The net result of this is that the council will be able to set a balanced budget in 2016/17 but over the medium term now has £15.2m of unidentified savings to make as opposed to the previous figure of £11.2m. The new £4m of unidentified savings all fall in 2017/18.

A number of other important decisions were made during the debate:

- A cross-party board of county councillors will be created to consider how best to use the transitional funds.
- The council will consider workplace parking with a view to early implementation.
- There will be a review of the number of Cabinet members.
- The benefits of a Unitary Council will be discussed on a cross-party basis and full and timetabled consultation will be prepared. This will be subject a free vote for all councillors.

PROPOSALS FOR DISTRICT UNITARY COUNCILS

On Thursday 25th February a surprise announcement was made by Oxfordshire's District Councils and Oxford City Council. (This may have been in response to OCC's call for a debate on a single Unitary Council for the county.) It called for the abolition of OCC and the establishment of four district unitaries:

- A new Southern Oxfordshire Unitary Authority would cover the area currently administered by Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire District Councils.
- An Oxford City Unitary Authority would be formed in the centre of the county, covering the area currently administered by Oxford City Council.
- A West Oxfordshire-Cotswold Unitary Authority covering the area currently administered by West Oxfordshire District Council and Cotswold District Council.
- A Cherwell-South Northants Unitary Authority covering the area currently administered by Cherwell District Council and South Northamptonshire Council.

OCC welcomes the District Councils' engagement in the Unitary debate and will shortly be putting forward its own proposals.

MAJOR INCIDENT AT DIDCOT POWER STATION

There was a partial building collapse of Didcot A Power Station on Tuesday 23rd February and a major incident was declared. The multi-agency rescue operation continued over the weekend of 27th/28th February with emergency services cooperating with structural engineers and demolition experts. The partially collapsed building remained unstable making it a complex operation. At the time of writing (February 29th), there was one fatality, three people missing and five injured. Updates are posted regularly on the OCC website.
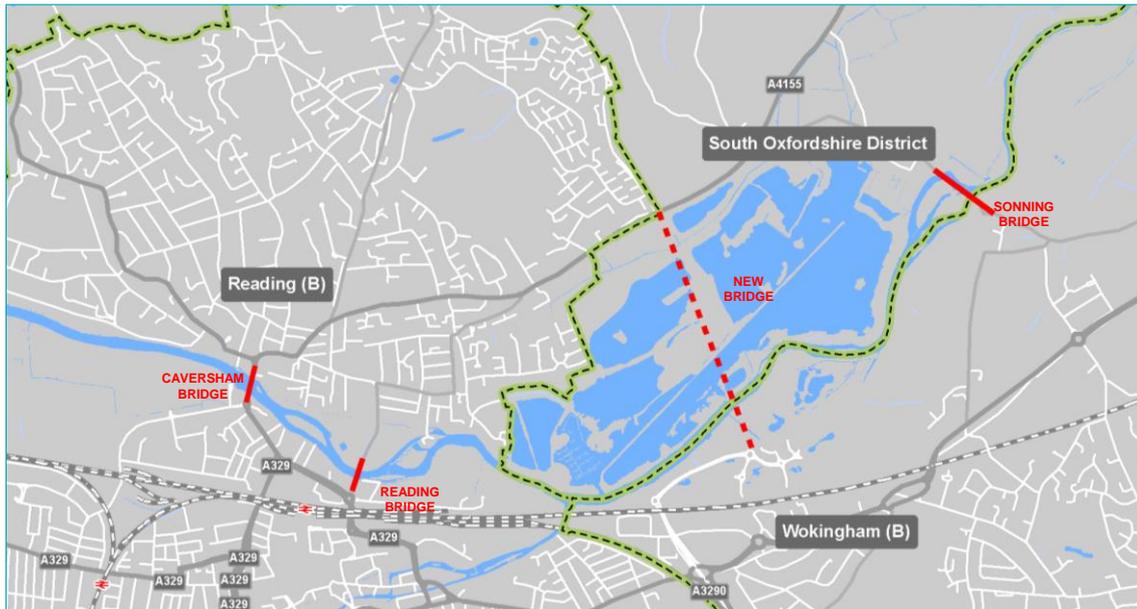
VILLAGE RESILIENCE FUND

Oxfordshire communities are being urged to tap into a special 'resilience' fund to help them to cope better with emergencies. The SSE (Scottish and Southern Energy) Resilient Communities Fund offers up to £20,000 to help communities to:
- Protect the welfare of vulnerable people during a major power cut or emergency due to severe weather.
- Enhance community facilities and services that may be needed during a major power cut or emergency due to severe weather.
- Improve communication during an emergency situation, to keep communities informed or to aid contact between local groups and response services

Further information at https://www.ssepd.co.uk/Resiliencefund/ or call 0141 224 7191

THIRD READING BRIDGE

Various Berkshire councils and enterprise groups have been campaigning vigorously in recent years for a new Thames crossing known as the 'Third Reading Bridge'. The bridge would link the end of the A329(M) in Berkshire to Playhatch in Oxfordshire. The enthusiasm of the scheme promoters is not shared by many Oxfordshire residents who are concerned about the large amount of extra traffic that would be deposited on to already congested rural roads. Historically, both OCC and South Oxfordshire District Council have shared residents' concerns, but both councils recently agreed to contribute funds to a 'Strategic Outline Business Case' in order to remain part of the process. OCC has made it clear to the other partners in this piece of work, that the council, by helping to fund this work, is not inherently supporting the scheme and will await the results of this work before taking a position on whether to support a full business case submission for funding. This decision process will also involve further consultation with the communities the scheme could impact upon. An initial report is due this autumn.

OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you require any further information.

Kind regards

Stephen Harrod

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OXFORDSHIRE
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