

County Councillor annual report

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Parishes: Blewbury, Chilton, Harwell, Upton, Western Valley

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Dear Parish Councillors and residents,

It's been a very busy first year as a councillor, and I want to thank everyone who has been in touch, raised concerns, or invited me to meetings and events. The advocacy work I've taken on has followed clear themes, and I've done my best to push for progress on the issues that matter most to our parishes. It has also been a steep learning curve, and I'm extremely grateful for the patience and support of our parish councils as I've found my feet.

Scrutiny & Policy Work

As a member of the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, I've worked to ensure that the Council has a 'critical friend' to its own services. This year, we examined Supported Living for Adults with Learning Disabilities, Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation, and the Unpaid Carers Strategy. I've raised concerns about the timing of support sessions for carers and pushed for more accessible options. In Oxfordshire, we have over 50,000 unpaid carers, saving the system an estimated £1 billion per year. They're the backbone of our community and I'm keen that we do as much as we can to support them.

On the Education and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee, we've focussed on SEND provision, including quality and timeliness of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and the clarity of EOTAS (Education Other Than at School) guidance. I was also elected to chair a review panel on the forced academisation of an Oxfordshire SEND school, to ensure lessons are learned from what happened at Woodeaton.

Highways, Transport & Flooding

Highways and flooding have dominated my casework. In Harwell, traffic calming works have finally been confirmed, with 20mph signage and raised tables on the way. A crossing on the A417 at the Winnaway is also in the 2026/27 budget.

In Blewbury, we secured funding for wigwags, dropped kerbs and bollards, and I continue to push for a crossing at Savages, expected this financial year.

I've escalated concerns about soft verges on Hagbourne Hill, (now under review for a permanent fix), and highlighted the poor surface along the A417 through Upton, which will be prioritised for repairs before planned surface dressing.

Flooding hotspots in Harwell, Blewbury, Grove Road and Frank Williams Way have required repeated escalation. I've arranged site visits from senior officers and continue to push for interim measures while we wait for longer-term drainage solutions. In Grove Road, the suspected cause has now been identified and work is underway.

I've challenged poor contractor performance, including the Milton Interchange markings (now corrected), substandard works in Blewbury (under formal review), poorly run works on Grove Road, and poorly communicated closure of Didcot Road (where I was able to arrange for the suspension of a bus gate so that resident access was maintained). I also prevented a proposed three-month full closure of Harwell High Street by SGN, securing a safer, shorter alternative using traffic lights.

I've also challenged officers as necessary. Harwell has suffered from poor Network Planning this year. In the last few weeks, I've met with the Operational Manager for Network Co-ordination, the Head of Network Management and the Director of Environment and Highways. I also wrote to the Leader of the Council, articulating mine and others' concerns about planning and oversight.

A major review of highways planning, communications and quality assurance is now underway. The scope for this review was originally limited to the network management team, who schedule roadworks, but I have asked for it to also include Planned Maintenance schemes, who plan and run the scheduled works. In addition, I'm involved in a small pilot to address gaps in communication of planned works to councillors.

Following my escalation of concerns around bus provision to villages during the Didcot Road closure in October, officers now hold weekly meetings between network management, contractors and bus companies. This has improved contingency planning for bus routes during road closures (although there is still more work to be done on communicating these plans with residents!)

Community Engagement & Local Support

I've attended most Parish Council meetings across the division and joined Speedwatch teams, councillors and officers on site visits to discuss signage, trees, roadworks and road safety. I've supported residents at meetings with the Trees Officer in Chilton and coordinated flooding and pavement repair visits in Harwell and Blewbury. I've visited the sites of all major roadworks over the last year, to keep residents as informed as possible during disruption.

In October, I hosted the 'Pubs of the Parishes' walk – a great opportunity to meet residents informally across the division.

I visited Didcot Fire Station to hear concerns from our local firefighters and ensure their voices were heard during the Fire and Rescue consultation. Off the back of this consultation, the council has rolled back its proposals to close two stations in Oxfordshire and remove engines from service. I also visited Didcot Primary Academy, to hear directly from staff and parents about the challenges they face, particularly around space and SEND support.

Major Service Changes

This year saw the introduction of a booking system for Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs). While I understand the short-term need, I remain concerned about the evidence behind the decision and have secured a commitment that the system will be reviewed once Redbridge HWRC reopens. Early data (not yet confirmed) is not as damning as I had originally expected; although there are fewer visits, the tonnage of waste brought per visit is up by 13kg. We have saved over £40000 so far in landfill costs, as more waste is being recycled, and we've raised over £5000 from out-of-county users, who now pay to use our HWRCs. However, I remain sceptical that a booking system is the only means by which we could achieve these outcomes, and I look forward to the chance to review the data more fully.

It's been a full and fast-paced first year, and I'm incredibly grateful for the support and engagement from residents, parish councils and community groups. Much of the work has required persistence; chasing updates, escalating concerns, and holding services to account – but I remain committed to making sure your voices are heard and your priorities acted upon. Please do continue to get in touch if there's anything I can help with.

Best wishes,
Bekah