

Cllr Hugo Brown, District Councillor Report for 2018-19
For Hook Norton, Milcombe, Sth Newington and Wigginton

As I approach the end of my 3rd year on Cherwell District Council, I now contemplate my re-election on 2nd May and hope to be returned as your District Councillor so that I may continue working on your behalf with the Council

Firstly, as always, I should like state how valuable it is for me to attend Parish Council meetings and to thank all Parish Councillors for welcoming me. This is undoubtedly the finest way to “take the temperature” of local feeling and to learn first-hand the issues which affect our communities. Since I now sit on only 1 Council Committee (Accounts, Audit & Risk), I have more time to put in regular appearances in the Villages. In between times, any constituent is more than welcome to contact me at any time, on any issue, either via e-mail (preferably) or by phone using the contact details shown on the CDC web-site.

Many have done so and I am delighted to have been able to respond to them. The vast majority are in respect of planning applications – either seeking help with their own or making an observation about a neighbour’s. Where an application has become “stuck” in the system I have found that a gentle prod from me can help it along. I would add, however, that our Planning Officers are consummate professionals and for them to do their job properly, in accordance with the ever more complex regulations, does take time especially in view of the increasing number of applications passing over their desks. One of the responsibilities of a District Councillor is that of “calling-in” Planning applications. This means that, having been requested by a Parish Council to do so, I can seek, from the Chairman of the Planning Committee, permission (not always granted) to appear before the Committee to make a representation, generally against an application which the community is unhappy about; obviously, this also works the other way and I can call-in an application which the Officers seem likely to turn down in order to seek Committee approval for it to go-ahead. Call-in is strictly time-barred to 21 days so please do contact me as early as possible if you would like to consider this option.

I have noticed an up-tick in constituents contacting me with regard to social housing issues. In most cases, Sanctuary Housing is the Registered Provider and queries should be directed to them in the first instance. However, where this has not resulted in a satisfactory outcome I can contact the Housing & Social Care Department at Cherwell to try and get matters resolved

Housing, generally, and housing numbers, in particular, remain a great concern for many residents of Cherwell, especially the rural residents. My opposition to the Oxfordshire Housing & Growth Deal is well documented. It would be churlish not to admit, however, that this deal is not all bad. It has been responsible for delivering some well-designed affordable housing in the urban areas. I, and I suspect many rural dwellers, have no objection to much needed housing being built where it is of obvious benefit. To this end, I am a supporter of the Hook Norton Low Carbon project to build a small number of adaptable and affordable dwellings for local people. What many object to are the large-scale housing developments being built in such a manner as not to respect the community in which they are sited. I will keep fighting against these but I must caution that the system is slightly against us

The Cherwell Local Plan, which identified housing and employment sites throughout the District, is a fine attempt to manage the many conflicts inherent when an expanding population conflicts with a finite amount of land which also conflicts with a desire to retain economic relevance.

This conflict will only escalate as Oxfordshire Plan 2050 swings into life. This Plan, which is essentially the Joint Statutory Spatial Plan extension to the Oxfordshire Housing & Growth Deal, proposes a further 250,000 houses for the County in addition to the 100,000 which are part of the original Growth Deal. Clearly, building on such a scale is intended to house more people than “local need” requires and once new employment land has been factored in to give jobs to the new population it becomes clear that a decision has been made, somewhere, to urbanise Oxfordshire regardless of our wishes or, indeed, our needs.

This will be exacerbated still further by the development of the so-called Arc the vision for which is to transform the landscape between Oxford and Cambridge into a UK version of Silicon Valley. Central to the vision are the East-West Rail Link currently being put together and, more controversially, an Expressway (ie: a motorway) along which will be built c. 1,000,000 new homes.

For those of us who cherish Oxfordshire as a rural county, the future will be challenging as we are drawn more into becoming an outer suburb for both London and Birmingham

Cherwell is actively involved in these plans and I and many other Councillors are constantly urging the Leader to make Cherwell’s voice heard and not simply be a passive and acquiescent partner

There has been a great change in Cherwell’s Governance. The so-called Joint-Working with Sth Northants District Council came to an end due to the problems encountered by Northants County Council. This has, inevitably, caused some shake-up. One of the main considerations for CDC was that with many of our costs having been shared with Sth Northants we were not keen to re-absorb them in their entirety. Since then, CDC has gone into partnership with Oxfordshire County Council which is, I think, the first time a District and a County have set up a formal joint-working relationship of such depth. While the synergies were not immediately obvious, as each body has different responsibilities, there are, in fact, a remarkable number of areas ripe for “vertical integration”, quite apart from the sharing of a Chief Executive (Cherwell’s CEO, Yvonne Rees, was appointed to be OCC’s as well). For instance, District is responsible for Planning and County for Spatial Strategy, District is responsible for bin-emptying and County for waste disposal; the list goes on. The un-knitting of the relationship with Sth Northants and the knitting together with OCC is extremely complex. I am not involved in either but pay huge respect to those Councillors and Officers who are. Most importantly, the over-arching ambition is that you should not notice any impact on the services you receive (from either Council) and in this I think they have been very successful

The one County service which you may have notice deteriorate, and is almost a “standing item” on all Parish Meeting agendas, is Highways (and potholes in particular). Much as I would love to be able to help residents here (I do get a fair number of e-mails asking for it) all I can do is point you in the direction of your County Councillor and I can vouch for the fact that they are pushing as hard as they can given the constraints they are under

One last word on the subject of Governance, you may recall much talk about Oxfordshire becoming a Unitary Council (ie: one Council for the County and the abolishing of the County Council and District Council differential). This proposal seems to have disappeared for the time being which is to be welcomed. While on paper there were clearly some advantages, the main objections were that local representation would disappear (everyone would be governed from Oxford) and that one supra-County-wide Council would be unable to deliver the cost savings promised. This idea may come back to life at some stage but I understand it is no longer a priority of the Department for Communities and Local Government

You will all be aware that Council Tax has gone up by 4.2% overall. Council tax bills are made up of 5 elements of which Cherwell District Council is but one, accounting for 6.96% of the total. Cherwell decided that, for the first time in 10 years, its share of the overall tax bill should increase and this was raised 4% from April, which equates to around £5 per year (or 10p per week) for a Band-D house

The District Council is involved in a whole host of other activities probably the most visible of which is the re-development of the Castle Quay site in Banbury with construction on Castle Quay 2 having begun in February. With the retail sector having suffered something of a decline recently, many do question the wisdom of investing so heavily in a shopping centre and then building onto it with a cinema, supermarket and restaurants. CDC has also been acquiring other sites in Banbury including an ex-car-dealership site. These are not strict commercial decisions as would be made by a development company and nor, to my mind, should they be. CDC needs to think wider than this and these acquisitions form part of a long term plan to regenerate Banbury Town Centre which is precisely what, in my opinion, a District Council should be doing

I am proud to be a District Councillor for Cherwell and to represent the Council to the residents of Deddington Ward but prouder still to represent the residents of Deddington Ward to Cherwell District Council. Hopefully, I shall be re-elected on 2nd May so that we may continue our work together

Finally, I should like to thank all the Parish Clerks and Members of Parish Councils who have been a great support to me over the past year and to all the Villagers of Hook Norton, Milcombe, Sth Newington and Wigginton for continuing to place their trust in me to represent and to help them.

HMHB

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