I hope that everybody was able to enjoy a very different Christmas break and wish you a Happy New Year. Once again, I start my article again by saying the COVID pandemic is a fast-moving situation with the regulations changing all the time.

The recent rapid spread is being attributed to a new variant of COVID-19, which is passed on far more easily. Although there is currently no evidence that this variant causes a more severe illness nor that the vaccine will be any less effective, it is 70 per cent more transmissible. This new variant is increasingly becoming the dominant strain across the country.

You can view the latest figures on our [new interactive dashboard](https://phdashboard.oxfordshire.gov.uk/), which is updated on a daily basis.

At OCC we will continue to provide support for all those residents that require assistance. Most of our services continue across the county although there may be some changes to ensure we are complying with the regulations. I would like to thank all the groups and volunteers that have provided valuable support and assistance to others throughout the crisis.

There is good news regarding the roll out of the vaccination programme which is a major logistical challenge. Oxfordshire County Council is working with the local NHS team and City/District colleagues to manage how the vaccine will be administered to residents across the county. The programme is administered on a medical basis and G.P.s will be notifying patients when to attend.

I would like to caution, however, that even as the rollout of the vaccine is underway, the threat from COVID-19 still remains real. We are therefore continuing to underline the need for people to follow protective measures to minimise the risk. These include washing your hands, covering your face and increasing ventilation in enclosed settings, and maintaining a social distance from others where possible.

We are in the process of setting the budget which will go before Full Council 9th February. The additional pressures from COVID has added to the pressures however I’m confident that the proposals will protect front line services along with investment for the future to help protect residents from the longer-term impact of the crisis. The proposals that will go to Cabinet in January include:

* A total of £1m long term funding would be invested in expanding the youth offer in Oxfordshire. A study is due to report in the Spring on the needs of young people and how the wider partnership of the voluntary, community and public services can best provide support.  An additional £500,000 of one-off accelerator funding will also be provided to develop sustainable long terms approaches and help tackle the impacts of the pandemic on young people.
* An extra £4m will be added to the adult social care budget for 2021/22. This includes a total of £1.35m for managing risks such as provider sustainability.
* The Better Care Fund (BCF) is a programme spanning both the NHS and local government. It seeks to join up health and care services so that people can manage their own health and wellbeing and live independently in their communities for as long as possible. For 2020/21, the county council agreed with health partners that £1.2m of the improved BCF for Oxfordshire would be used to support activities agreed to deliver better outcomes over the winter period in the county. However, it was one-off funding. The council is proposing to continue the funding for 2021/22, which would be used to support measures to help people be discharged from hospital and enable new ways of working and better outcomes for residents.
* The number of adults of working age with physical disabilities has increased in 2020/21 and there are forecast overspends for both care at home and for residential care. While this is being managed within pooled resources between the NHS and council in 2020/21, it is not anticipated that this can be maintained in the longer run. Pending a review of the needs and activity for these service users, £750,000 has been proposed to support expenditure on assessed care needs from 2021/22.
* The county council has been part of a joint partnership to procure and manage services for single homeless people in Oxfordshire since it was formed in 2017. A further one-off contribution to the partnership of £500,000 was included in the budget, with £250,000 of this allocated for 2020/21 and the same in 2021/22. The council is proposing to continue the council’s support for the partnership from 2022/23.
* During the period of the pandemic, more people have chosen to take up drugs and alcohol residential rehabilitation services and this has led to the council proposal to put £50,000 more into existing services.
* An extra £400,000 is proposed for highway maintenance focused on additional resource for vegetation and drainage clearance plus supporting the roll out of a trial currently being undertaken enabling parish councils to implement 20mph schemes in their villages.
* A £300,000 fund to support innovative community-developed projects and activities that improve people’s health and wellbeing in Oxfordshire is proposed. A total of £150,000 of this will be new funding and £150,000 will come from existing public health budgets.
* An extra £330,000 will be invested into children’s services on increasing early intervention services, increasing the skill base of children’s social care workers and special educational needs related services.
* A total of £81,000 would be invested in domestic violence services and £150,000 into apprenticeships.

The parking situation in Woodstock needs to be addressed, I will work with the Town Council, District council and other key partners to find a solution. This is not just about the centre of Woodstock as there is displacement parking to other roads such as Cockpit Close, New Road, Oxford Road and Union Street. There is also the problem of visitors to Blenheim parking in and around Brook Hill and Old Woodstock. all these areas need to be considered if there is to be more enforcement. The solution will not be easy and not please everybody however the current situation is not sustainable.

Please do not hesitate to contact me and keep safe.

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