

Bourton Vale Ward

Annual Report – 2023 - 2024

Cllr Len Wilkins, Bourton Vale District Councillor
len.wilkins@cotswold.gov.uk
07970668849

In May 2023 I was delighted to be elected as your District Councillor. It is an honour and a privilege to serve you. My apologies for not being with you but I have two AGMs occurring on the same night and I had already accepted an earlier invitation. Would have loved to be with you.

Council Decisions

Planning

Good planning decisions in the precious and sensitive areas of the Cotswold National Landscape are vital - bad planning decisions cannot be 'undone'. The help of your Parish Council and our residents is vital in this due to changes to CDC planning system.

Prior to 1st April 2024 a planning application was verified and then was allocated to a planning officer to be processed. The planning officer's report would be sent to the respective Ward Councillor. Should there be a reason to refuse an application the Ward Councillor has to make a case for refusal which then goes to a review panel. If the panel agrees with the Ward Member the application goes to CDC's Planning Committee. However since the 1st April once the application has been validated there is now only a 28-day call-in period which will begin from the date of validation and not from the date of the decision to permit or refuse. This means that in future both Ward Councillors and Parish Councillors will need to identify concerns very early on in the planning process and before the planning officer has produced their report.

The cost of running the CDC's Planning Department has always been less than the income generated by Planning Fees. Fees only account for approximately 50% of the total cost of running the service. The UK Government have now increased these fees which will help Councils provide their Planning Service. The Fees for householder development will rise by 25% and all other application types will rise by 35%. The fees will be reviewed yearly and will be increased in line with inflation. Hopefully this will allow CDC in their recruitment of planners and improve the service provided.

The Government has also removed the 'free go' provision for planning applications and has introduced a tighter planning guarantee which means that any applications over 16 weeks old with no extension of time agreed will be liable to a refund. Agents and applicants are now encouraged to use the pre-application service provided by Councils, which will ensure they get the valued advice they need to navigate the

policies, but also the Council is compensated for the time and talent of officers for that advice.

Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)

Planning Applications for new dwellings were being held up causing great problems for developers and builders. This was due to new legislation regarding Habitats Regulations, in particular at the Cotswold Beechwoods Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and North Meadow and Clattinger Farm Special Areas of Conservation (SAC). This is a government safeguard, but there has been much frustration as applications could not be approved with mitigation schemes which were almost impossible to procure.

This deadlock was resolved by the Council and its partners to be able to raise money (effectively an extra levy) from developers building new houses and holiday accommodation, to mitigate the impacts.

Enforcement

The enforcement team continues to suffer from staff losses and non-recruitment. Unresolved breaches are an issue in so many parishes, it is a frustrating situation. All we can do is to keep nudging enforcement about them! They should not be allowed to be 'greyed out'.

FLY TIPPING

Fly tipping continues to be a problem in the district but this parish has only had one incident reported to me. The CCTV cameras, which have been installed are now providing evidence resulting in many more prosecutions. CDC has accepted the proposal from the Government to increase the upper limits for various fixed penalty notices (FPNs). This means that within Cotswold District:

- The maximum fine for fly-tipping will increase from £400 to £1,000
- The maximum fine for litter or graffiti will increase from £150 to £500
- The maximum fine those who breach their household waste duty of care will increase from £400 to £600.

District Councillors believe culprits should pay the whole cost of collection. Perhaps one day.

PUBLICA

Publica is a not-for-profit service delivery company incorporated in 2017, owned by four local councils (shareholders): Cheltenham Borough Council, Cotswold District Council, Forest of Dean District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council. Politically, all four council administrations have changed since 2019 and they have

collaborated to propose to move 95% of what Publica are currently providing, in-house. Only a few back-office functions such as IT shall remain with Publica.

The rationale is that services will be more agile. The transition of services from Publica to Council will clearly have a material impact on the Council's resources and budget over the next two years. To fund the one-off costs of transition, it is recommended that £500,000 is set aside in the Corporate Priority: Publica Review reserve. Inevitably, there are likely to be workforce planning costs arising from the transfer of services.

CDC LEISURE CENTRES

The leisure centres continue to be a huge drain on Council resources. A new service provider was approved in 2023 to include three leisure centres and the Corinium Museum & Resource Centre.

SOLAR PANELS FITTED TO CDC OFFICES

Photovoltaic solar panels are being installed at the CDC Cirencester council offices. The new solar panels will contribute to environmental sustainability, they are expected to reduce the Council's CO2 emissions by approximately 43 tonnes each year, which is equivalent to the emissions from driving the average petrol powered car about 160,000 miles. The project is funded through the Cotswold Climate Investment, launched in 2022, which allowed residents and others to invest as little as £5 in local green initiatives.

COTSWOLD PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY HAS BEEN SPLIT

The former Cotswold constituency has been split into two. The North Cotswolds will be joined by wards in Stroud and Tewkesbury including Minchinhampton and Painswick, also included are Chipping Campden, Stow-on-the-Wold, and Northleach. South Cotswold includes Cirencester, Lechlade and Fairford along with their surrounding villages and merging with northern parts of the Wiltshire constituency. Ermin Ward is in Cotswolds North.

CDC's BUDGET

I was not able to support the CDC 2024 budget on 21 February 2024. Increase in car parking charges have been relentless. Last year saw the removal last year of Free after 3, which extended trading hours and especially helped the elderly and mothers on their way back from the school run. From 1st April it now costs £4.60 to park for three hours and since the Budget meeting this will include Sundays. This may not affect tourism, but inevitably it will deter local people from going into town, especially the elderly who find cashless payment confusing which in turn will inevitably be detrimental to businesses.

CDC's Core Spending Power has once again increased this year by £639k or 5.4% from £11.8m to £12.4m. Core spending power measures the resources available to local authorities to fund service delivery and sets out the money that has been made available to local authorities through the local government finance settlement. It includes various revenue streams – including Council Tax, Government funding and grants and retained business rates. Despite this increase in Core Spending Power, CDC faces external budget pressures that are impacting on its finances over the medium-term.

There remains uncertainty around inflation and associated staff pay settlements, interest rates and energy costs. A significant budget gap was noted in the budget outturn report last September which led the Leader of the Council having to raise concerns about the council going bankrupt if significant savings and cost increases were not achieved and a balanced budget delivered for 2024/25 financial year. Cuts to visitor information centre funding, a reduction in the customer service phone answering times and the disbandment of the "Clean and Green" team are examples of the cuts delivered to attempt to deliver a balanced budget.

There have been significant increases in costs to residents from Council Tax and discretionary fees:-

- Council Tax by the maximum permissible level and has increased Cotswold District Council's Band D rate by £5 from £148.93 to £153.93.
- Garden Waste licence annual fee up £7 - £64 from 31 March 2024 (2023 - £47 to £57). An increase of 12% - bringing the tally over the last 5 years to 113% and collections halved.

Uncertainty around Local Government funding from the Government in the later years of the medium-term is a significant risk within the MTFS estimates. The implementation of Local Government Finance reform (formerly known as the Fair Funding Review and changes to the Retained Business Rates system) has already been delayed from the original implementation date of April 2020 until at least April 2025 if not later should a General Election take place in the latter half of 2024. The forecast impact on Shire District Councils is likely to be significant as resources are reallocated across Local Government recognising the Social Care cost and demand pressures.

Thank You

Parish Councillors and residents are invaluable in sharing views, local knowledge and keeping me abreast of issues. Thank you, your work is rarely appreciated for its true value.