

**CLLR DAVID FOWLES, COTSWOLD DISTRICT COUNCILLOR
2024 ANNUAL REPORT – COLN VALLEY WARD**

In May 2023 I was delighted to be elected as your District Councillor and have been proud to serve you for the last 12 months. Please find my annual report.

PLANNING

As part of the Levelling Up Act, Planning Fees are to be increased to assist Councils with respect to providing the Planning Service. This is to be welcomed and will assist in reducing the overall cost of delivering the planning service (planning fees only account for approximately 50% of the total cost of running the 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. 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 preapplication service, 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 Area of Conservation (SAC) and planning update. 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 Area 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.

David Morren, the Interim Development Officer, did good work improving the function of the Planning Department. Sadly he has now left, but he has put some good processes in place which I hope will form the foundation for further improvements. He has been replaced by Adrian Harding.

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

From February to April last year, we had the Planning Inspectorate inquiry into the application for major development in the Cotswold National Landscape (formerly AONB) for a HGV truck stop. This application was refused at Planning Committee in 2022 and the PINS decision, hoped for in mid-July, was eventually published in November marking the end of a long and hard fought campaign. I was hugely relieved when it was DISMISSED.

ROADS

A417 MISSING LINK

In January 2023 the Secretary of State approved the funding of the A417 Missing Link after years of planning and consultation.

There has been much frustration with road closures and long diversion routes, especially at night, however generally the worst incidents are caused by accidents on the A417, or minor road closures such as for ash tree die back work, and the subsequent rat running through our little villages, often causing log-jams on narrow lanes.

Roads are a County Council remit and should be reported to them. Frustrations about repair of potholes and road repairs remain a constant issue with all Parishes.

FLY TIPPING

Fly tipping continues to be an issue. Fortunately, CCTV cameras are being installed and are now providing evidence resulting in many more prosecutions.

The £200,000 CDC Clean & Green programme has now run its course. Its effectiveness could not be monitored but thankfully we still have legendary ERS officer Kev Lea, who already does the work of two people.

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.

This is a step in the right direction, but why should tax payers contribute at all? Culprits should pay the whole cost of collection.

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. (from Feb 2024 Budget papers). See more about this below.

CDC LEISURE CENTRE

The leisure centre continues 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

I am delighted that at long last photovoltaic solar panels are to be installed at the CDC Cirencester council offices. Former Councillor and Leader, Tony Berry has been driving this since I was first elected in 2019. 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 HAS NOW BEEN SPLIT INTO NORTH AND SOUTH COTSWOLDS

North Cotswold will be joined by wards in Stroud and Tewkesbury including Minchinhampton and Painswick, also included are Chipping Campden, Stow-on-the-Wold, Northleach. Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown has been adopted as the Conservative candidate for the new North Cotswolds constituency.

South Cotswold includes Cirencester, Lechlade and Fairford along with their surrounding villages and merging with northern parts of the Wiltshire constituency.

Coln Valley is in North Cotswolds

CDC FINANCES BUDGET

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

- Council Tax by the maximum permissible level and will increase 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.
- Car Parking Charges from 1 April 2024 - 15% increase in car park fees and Free Sunday parking scrapped.

The Chief Financial Officer stated in the budget papers that there is no immediate risk of Cotswold District Council having to consider issuing a section 114 notice, however the budget gap forecast over the medium-term must be closed to maintain financial sustainability. 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.

FORECAST SPENDING – PUBLICA AND CAPITAL PROGRAMME

The decision to withdraw from Publica is a vast unknown. The estimated cost has already increased by 150% since November 2023 and the budget now includes a reserve for the Publica transition of £500k. This amounts to nearly 80% of the council's increase in Core Spending Power for this coming financial year. There are concerns that costs are likely to escalate further as costs for external consultants, HR and Legal advice etc. Furthermore, we await clarity regarding the impact of the Staff Pension scheme to the council following this transition. There are potential benefits to returning service provision "in-house" such as staff recruitment and retention and operational agility, however, these benefits need to be weighed up against the financial costs of both the withdrawal process and the ongoing financial impact once the transition has been completed both of which are currently unknown.

Other than the £500k "green bond", CDC has historically been debt free. It is forecast that significant prudential borrowing of over £4m will be required in 2026/27 to deliver the planned capital programme.

COUNCIL SPENDING - CAPITAL PROGRAMME 2023/24 TO 2026/27 - click here:

<https://meetings.cotswold.gov.uk/documents/s6823/2023-24 Budget and MTFs Report - Annex D.pdf>