

Andrew Crawford's report continued

The Government has placed Oxfordshire's *public transport service* in the top 10% in the country calling it "well above average" in a recent report. As a result we have received extra central Government funding for Transport.

Council Tax 2004/05 and Spending in the Coming Year

The Audit Commission have accepted that there are "fundamental flaws" in the current system of funding local government and that it is "unclear and in need of reform". It also accepted that the recent trend has been to fund Councils in the South East less generously than those elsewhere which resulted in the horrendous rises last year. This year the County Council have managed to limit this rise to 6.25%. This is still twice the current level of general inflation.

Personally I believe Council Tax to be fundamentally unfair – especially to those on low incomes and on fixed incomes, particularly pensioners. At present the poorest 10% of the population pay an average of 15% of their income on Council Tax whereas the richest 10% pay less than 2%. It is also very inefficient to collect – adding over £700 million in unnecessary administration costs to councils each year. Lib Dem policy is to abolish Council Tax and replace it with a Local Income tax based on the ability of people to pay.

Priority spending areas have been identified:

- Over £4.5 million will have to be spent repairing roads affected by the very dry conditions last year. This is nearly 15% of our roads maintenance budget and will impact other repairs.
- On Child Protection another £1 million will have to be spent to ensure the recommendations of the Victoria Climbié enquiry are fully implemented.
- An additional £4 million will be spent in local schools over and above inflation to help drive up standards across the County.
- The County has experienced significant difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff to the less well paid jobs because of the high cost of living – especially housing in the County. To counter this a full review of the pay and grading structure was undertaken last year which resulted in increases over the rate of inflation for some key problem posts – for example Home Helpers. This will cost a further £2.5 million.

Structure Plan

This has now reached the Second Deposit Draft stage and will be examined by an Inspector before it is finalised. In September last year a coalition of Conservatives and Labour County Councillors voted to allow the building of 1,000 homes in the Green Belt south of Oxford. I am pleased to report that all Lib Dems voted against this, fearing that it would open the floodgates. This is what happened with, for example a 3,500 home development proposed for Green Belt land west of the A34 near Sunningwell. As a result of pressure from Lib Dem Councillors and a concerted campaign by the public (over 2,500 letters of protest were written) those Councillors who had previously supported Green Belt development relented and the decision was reversed.

The Government's Boundary Commission have recommended changes to the County Council Division boundaries which are likely to be approved in July this year. Marcham is to be placed in a new Division known as "Hanneys and Hendreds". As a result Marcham Parish will be in an area which stretches from the Thames to the Berkshire border with half of the parishes looking to Wantage for its major amenities and facilities and the other half to Abingdon.

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Barbara and Bryan Scarrott, winners of the Best Kept Garden Competition 2004



Runners-up in the Best Kept Garden Competition 2004 collecting their awards from Colin.



Lesley Clark, Headteacher, Marcham Primary School



Martin Thorne receiving his Parishioner of the Year award from Colin Bough