

Buckinghamshire Cllr Chris Poll - Report to EPC February 2021

Extra £4m for gully cleaning

An extra £4m for investment in drainage has been added by Cabinet to original proposals for the new financial year starting in April, for consideration by full council on 24 February. On Tuesday Cabinet agreed a final proposal to go to full council for a 1.99% increase in basic council tax and a 2% increase in the Adult Social Care Precept (a total increase of 3.99%). The extra funding and money released from our reserves will ensure that all our blocked gullies are cleared this year and fund some much-needed structural repairs. In total, this will mean £7.7m spent on drainage in 2021/22.

ARG Additional Restrictions Grants award £8.3m to local businesses

We're now in Round 3 of our Bucks Additional Restrictions Grants (Bucks ARG) payments. So far, in this round alone, we've received over 1,500 applications and paid out around £1.5million. These grants help businesses who fall outside the main government criteria for the Local Restrictions Support Grants. They have been a lifeline for over 5,000 businesses and in total we've distributed almost £10 million. In addition we have topped up LRSG payments made in December by an average of £1,000 per business.

Cabinet agrees actions to be carbon neutral by 2050

The council has made a firm commitment to take action against climate change by adopting 60 different actions to become carbon neutral by 2050. Actions include installing renewable energy systems (such as solar panels) on our buildings, using electric and low emission vehicles in our fleet, continuing to upgrade street lighting to LEDs and using our planning powers to support climate change. To help offset carbon emissions, over the next ten years we will plant a tree for every person (543,000) living in Buckinghamshire. We'll also support each of the 16 local community boards in their local climate control initiatives to help deliver practical carbon reduction actions at a grass roots level.

Shielding - risk factors added

You may have seen that yesterday the government added a further 1.7million people to the 'shielding' list, as they are now taking in other risk factors such as age, ethnicity and weight when evaluating how vulnerable a person is to COVID-19. Any Buckinghamshire residents who fall into this group will get a letter from the NHS explaining that they will now be advised to 'shield' and will be eligible for added support as a result, such as priority shopping slots; plus they will be eligible to receive a vaccine now. So far we know that this is an additional 6,049 people, and we expect to hear about a second tranche of residents needing to shield shortly.

Rapid COVID test facilities extended

Our COVID-19 rapid-testing process has expanded - with four sites now available in Aylesbury, Wycombe, Amersham and Buckingham for everyone who leaves home to work or volunteer. We welcome walk-ins as well as booked appointments and we are working hard to promote the rapid-testing process as widely as possible. Cases of COVID-19 may be decreasing - but they are still high and helping to identify asymptomatic cases of COVID-19 could make a big difference.

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Initial feedback from our users is that the process is 'smooth and efficient' with the majority of people in and out within 15 minutes. We are continuing to promote the service on social media, through our Community Boards and in the community. We also have some new flyers which will be circulated this week – targeting areas based on their proximity to a testing location.

Buckinghamshire Council elections

The UK government announced this week that it had laid legislation to reduce the number of subscribers that are required by each candidate for local elections (Buckinghamshire Council wards) taking place on 6 May 2021. This will mean that only a proposer and seconder are required to support a nomination. Original signed forms must still be handed to the Returning Officer. The Electoral Commission (EC) are updating the guidance and resources accordingly. In the meantime, the EC have temporarily removed the nomination forms from their website, updated forms will be available once the legislation is made.

Parish elections

There are no changes to the proposer and seconder required by each candidate for parish elections taking place on 6 May 2021. The **EC's parish guidance and forms** are available.

Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner election

Cherwell District Council is the lead authority, and Yvonne Rees will be the Police Area Returning Officer (PARO) for the Thames Valley police area - which covers Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire.

Preparation for surge variant testing in specific areas

Public Health England has recently identified several cases of the COVID-19 variant first discovered in South Africa across the UK. At present no variant clusters have been identified in Buckinghamshire however, as a precautionary measure, Buckinghamshire Council is carrying out preparatory planning in case action is required.

Pledge to plant trees.

The next steps of an ambitious programme to plant a tree for every resident in Bucks took a step closer to fruition this morning after Cabinet agreed plans to progress the scheme.

The large scale tree planting aims to see approximately 543,000 trees planted on large sites of council-owned land over the next ten years in a bid to address climate change in Buckinghamshire. It is planned that the scheme, which links to the Climate Change Strategy, would see the council becoming carbon neutral by 2050 or earlier.

Bill Chapple OBE, Cabinet Member for Environment and Climate Change, said:

"I'm delighted that Cabinet has given their full backing to this fantastic programme. We're committed to tackling climate change issues and improving air quality in Buckinghamshire and these trees will play a crucial role in offsetting our emissions, as well as all the other benefits they will deliver.

"Trees enhance our environments, they provide biodiversity benefits not only by providing food and water but also giving our birds, bats, mammals, insects, fungi and butterflies homes, playgrounds,

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and hiding spots from predators. These new woodland areas will create more space for nature to grow and thrive and will improve public health and wellbeing.

“As the project progresses we will look at how we can involve our communities and schools so that we can all work together on community tree planting, and play our part in making Bucks greener and cleaner for generations to come.”

Once the sites have been finalised, work will begin on designing detailed creation plans to ensure that the right tree is planted in the right place. The council will ensure it secures the available grant funding for both planning and creating these woodlands in order to offset some of the cost of buying and planting the trees. The woodlands will be designed in accordance with the Woodland Carbon Code to provide assurance on the levels of carbon being captured.

Although we will still be planting trees this season; it's anticipated that approximately 75% of the tree planting would take place over the next five years starting during the next planting season which is December 2021 to March 2022. Once delivered in full, the project has the potential to create at least 200 hectares of new woodland in Buckinghamshire, that's the equivalent of 285 full sized football pitches or the size of Monaco.

Tree planting in our parks, open spaces and along highways will continue outside and beyond this project.