

## **Cherwell District Council Summary (2025 –2026)**

I wish to begin this with mention of the tragic incident at Bicester Motion, where lives were lost in a fire. This event cast a long shadow across the district and prompted expressions of condolence and recognition of the emergency services' response.

Alongside this, planning pressures were intensifying. Developments such as the 130-home scheme in Bloxham and proposals in Hook Norton demonstrated a recurring pattern: where neighbourhood plans were in some way insufficient, planning decisions increasingly favoured developers under the “tilted balance” of national policy.

At the same time, major strategic proposals began to emerge, most notably the Botley West Solar Farm, a scheme of national significance with the potential to become the largest in Europe. This reflected a shift in the scale of development affecting the district, moving beyond local housing into nationally significant infrastructure.

Through June and July, the Cherwell Local Plan progressed toward submission, with Regulation 19 consultation completed and the plan prepared for Full Council approval. This marked an important milestone, though it was acknowledged that the plan would carry limited weight until formally adopted following examination.

During this period, concerns grew around infrastructure provision, particularly for me surrounding primary care. While some progress was made in securing developer contributions through planning applications, the ability of the Integrated Care Board (ICB) to effectively utilise Section 106 funding remains woeful.

By late summer, the Local Plan had been submitted for inspection, and planning activity continued at pace. Applications such as the Milcombe development and the Oxford United stadium highlighted both the volume and complexity of decisions being taken.

At the same time, a significant financial risk emerged with the Government's announcement of a full business rates reset. While Cherwell had historically benefited from strong business growth, this change was expected to reduce retained income and place additional pressure on council finances.

In response to growing concerns about healthcare provision, a motion on primary care expansion was brought forward and adopted. This sought to strengthen collaboration with the ICB, encourage broader use of developer contributions, and recognise a shift in healthcare delivery toward digital services and preventative care.

By autumn 2025, the scale and intensity of development pressures had increased significantly. Major proposals including Heyford Park, the rail freight interchange, large-scale warehousing, and the Puy du Fou theme park collectively highlighted the cumulative impact of growth across the district.

This period also saw recognition that parish and town councils were often under-resourced when responding to complex planning applications. In response, a motion was advanced and later approved to provide training, guidance, and dedicated planning support to local councils, strengthening their ability to engage in the planning process.

Environmental and infrastructure challenges also became more visible. The discovery of a large illegal landfill site in Kidlington raised serious concerns regarding environmental risk, cost, and accountability, with uncertainty over funding and responsibility for remediation.

At the same time, transformation within the council itself was underway. Initiatives included digital and IT modernisation, service redesign, and collaboration with neighbouring authorities, alongside preparations for wider local government reorganisation and devolution.

By December, financial pressures had become more acute. The council launched a budget consultation for 2026–27, identifying a range of savings proposals to address funding shortfalls. These included three-weekly bin collections, increases in service charges, reductions in service provision, and potential closures of facilities.

Underlying these financial challenges was a broader structural issue: the anticipated reduction in income from business rates and the withdrawal of national funding streams such as the New Homes Bonus.

Primary care infrastructure emerged as a critical concern during this period. Despite ongoing housing growth, there remain significant barriers to delivering new GP facilities. Evidence highlighted the complexity of the funding and delivery model, including reliance on private providers, constraints in rent-setting mechanisms, and limited engagement from NHS bodies.

A key concern was the length of time required to deliver new facilities, with some projects taking up to a decade. This raised serious questions which I was delighted to take to Wes Streeting, shame he and his team didn't engage.

At the start of 2026, planning decisions reflected a more assertive stance from the council, with several major applications, including warehouse developments at Baynard's Green, refused by the planning committee.

However, these decisions also exposed limitations within the system. There was little flexibility to redirect developer contributions toward locally identified priorities such as environmental improvements or traffic mitigation. Similarly, options to use planning mechanisms to address issues like heavy goods vehicle movements remained constrained.

The Local Plan examination process began in February, with the council's housing land supply position still significantly below the required five-year threshold. This continued to weaken the council's position in resisting speculative development.

At the same time, structural issues within the planning system became more apparent. Concerns were raised about Section 106 agreements, including the use of “mortgagee in possession” clauses, which could result in the loss of affordable housing in Deddington when developers encountered financial difficulties.

By March 2026, the scale of activity had intensified further, with approximately 300 planning applications under consultation. Additional committee meetings were scheduled to manage this workload and avoid delays in decision-making.

National policy changes also began to reshape the planning landscape. Proposals to require referral to the Secretary of State for refusals of large developments indicated a potential shift toward greater central government involvement in local planning decisions.

Meanwhile, local government reform and devolution progressed, with plans to move toward a mayoral strategic authority. However, questions remained about governance, funding, and the extent of local democratic oversight.

The future of major developments such as Heyford Park remained uncertain. While it was not selected as a new town, it continued to progress as a large-scale development, raising further concerns about infrastructure provision and cumulative impact.

For me, Primary Care remain a significant unresolved issue. Evidence presented to scrutiny committees showed that:

- Funding secured for healthcare infrastructure was limited relative to housing growth
- Contributions per dwelling were well below potential levels
- The ICB had not brought forward funding requests for new facilities in many years

This highlighted a systemic disconnect between development and service provision, with no clear mechanism to ensure delivery of essential infrastructure.

It's been a busy year and I hope this give a flavour of what has been going on.

I've been to Westminster to lobby for Farmers, Primary School and SEND funding, Primary Care funding and issues surrounding the Heyford Park New Town.

As Chair of Overview and Scrutiny I've had the chance to direct the work program to focus on infrastructure delivery.

As a member of the planning committee, I've ensured that every penny that should be going to Primary Care does and also that the views of this Ward are heard.

As a member of the Full Council I've brought a number of motions to support the rural communities and to benefit us all.

And I've attended as many Parish Council meetings and site meeting as I can to offer my support as Parish Councils are the absolute bedrock of local democracy and the work done at grassroots is so vitally personal and important that you all deserve respect and gratitude.