

District Councillor's Update for Blockley Parish Council Annual Meeting, May 2025

Residents can contact me, Clare Turner, at Clare.Turner@cotswold.gov.uk

Privacy Statement

As a Councillor I may need to collect personal data to process constituents' requests for assistance or respond to their enquiries. As a Councillor I will only collect the personal data from constituents that is needed to provide them with relevant information, services or support. I will not give information about you to anyone else or use information about you for any other purpose, unless the law allows me to. Further privacy information see our Councillor Privacy Notice <https://www.cotswold.gov.uk/support/privacy-and-data/service-privacy-notice/councillors-privacy-notice/>

1. Cost of Living

The Council continues to try and provide support to those most in need via a number of measures including Council Tax support and the income threshold was increased towards the end of 2024 to make sure people on the lowest incomes could still access the support. The council also operates a Hardship Fund <https://news.cotswold.gov.uk/news/cotswold-district-council-improves-its-council-tax-support-scheme-for-202526>

Find out more about support here: <https://www.cotswold.gov.uk/council-tax-and-benefits/council-tax-support/>

A new (updated) **Cotswold Worrying about Money** advice leaflet (May 2025) is now available. The interactive version is linked below and takes people through a series of questions to steer them to relevant support A printable pdf is also available for noticeboards etc: www.worryingaboutmoney.co.uk/cotswold

The Council has also subscribed to the Low Income Family Tracker (LIFT) which brings together different data sources to enable the Council to identify where households are entitled to benefits that they are not claiming and better understand where households may be struggling with the cost of living. A targeted communications campaign over the winter for example identified pension-age residents entitled to, but not claiming, Pension Credit. The campaign has delivered:

- £68,545 in annual Pension Credit
- £15,079 in backdated payments
- £4,400 in Winter Fuel Payments

The lifetime benefit to this group of people is estimated to exceed £400,000 and further success has also been seen since the publication of this good news story:

<https://news.cotswold.gov.uk/news/cotswold-district-council-helps-vulnerable-residents-secure-over-gbp-88-000-of-unclaimed-benefits>

2. Waste collections

A large reorganisation of waste collection rounds was implemented last summer and although we experienced minimal problems in the Parish, there were parts of the District that had more significant issues as the new Rounds became established. The problem was exacerbated by extremely high levels of sickness amongst the collection crew during the summer, when many staff also take annual leave. The situation has been monitored, some lessons learned and processes updated. Councillors, including myself, continue to scrutinise the service and ask for better data to make sure the experience for residents is positive.

The licence fee for Garden Waste Collection (green bins) has increased again this year and now stands at £69. It is intended that the fee covers the cost of operating the service so that those not using a green waste collection are not subsidising the cost of the green waste collection. Last year the income from licences exceeded the cost of the service however, because the uptake of licences was greater than anticipated. Discounts are available to those in receipt of Council Tax and Housing Benefit. Claimants who provide their claim reference number (5 digit benefit reference number) when signing up to the service will receive a 50% reduction in the licence fee. Residents should note that claims made after sign-up will not be processed though.

3. Overview and Scrutiny Committee

I have continued to sit on the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which gives me a great opportunity to raise residents' concerns and hold the Council to account. If councillors or members of the public have specific areas of Council work that they would like to see scrutinised, I'd be happy to discuss it further and put items forward for the Committee's work plan, if appropriate.

4. Planning

The Planning Service has been the subject of a Peer Review and a feedback session highlighted the importance of moving quickly to update CDCs Local Plan, to avoid leaving the council vulnerable to speculative development as a result of the increased housing numbers being imposed by the Government. The full report is pending and will be published in due course.

While there has been successful recruitment for a number of roles in the planning department (and subsequent improvements to the time it takes to get a decision on planning applications, there continues to be a lack of resource for Enforcement issues, with hundreds of open cases. As Councillors we continue to take every opportunity to voice our concerns about the lack of progress on enforcement cases.

Progress on the Local Plan has been impacted by the change of Government and changes to the National Planning Policy Framework.

Biodiversity net gain was introduced just before the start of the year and additional staff time has been allocated to the Ecologists in the planning department to ensure the Council can consider this element for applicable Planning Applications.

5. Political make-up and leadership

There have been three by-elections in the last year (wards in Cirencester and Tetbury) which have seen the Liberal Democrats lose one representative and the Conservatives gain one. We have also seen a recent change in Leader of the Council: Cllr Mike Evemy will take over from Joe Harris as Leader at our May meeting. Mike Evemy has been a member of the Cabinet for many years and is currently the cabinet member for Finance.

6. Local Government Reorganisation

The Government published their Devolution White Paper on 16/12/24. Whilst there is widespread support for devolution, the white paper represents a shift of power from central government to regional mayors rather than a shift of power to local communities. Unitary authorities will be formed in areas where there are currently two tiers of governance; it's a matter of "when" rather than "if".

The probable outcome for us is that the county of Gloucestershire will form a new unitary authority (and 12 months later the six District Councils will cease to exist) and then that unitary authority will become part of a strategic area or combined authority with a mayor. There are still lots of unknowns in terms of exactly how the unitary will function. There is not universal agreement on the best way forward for Gloucestershire within the County Council and Districts, with some proposing the alternative approach of creating two Unitary Authorities in Gloucestershire (with an east/west divide). Whatever happens, the councillor numbers will decrease and are likely to decrease by the same number whether a single unitary or two unitary authorities are created for Gloucestershire; all the responses that have been sent to Government so far from all District Councils and the County Council propose the same number of councillors. While this may generate efficiencies, it means some of that local connection that District Councillors currently have with the communities in their relatively small wards will be lost. Again this is consistent across all proposals.

I think the evidence needed to determine what represents both best value in terms of tax payers money and best representation for residents is still being compiled. There are definitely good reasons to keep

Gloucestershire as a single unitary eg potential cost savings and better alignment with other services such as the police, which cover Gloucestershire as a whole. But there is also an inherent risk for rural areas like ours, which will find themselves competing with all the urban areas of Gloucestershire to get a fair slice of the funding pie; this is already an issue where number of beneficiaries per £ spent is higher in urban centres compared to less densely populated areas.

Either way, it's a complex problem to solve and will cost a lot of money initially; I have yet to see any fully worked up figures of how cost savings would be achieved in the long run, the same number of services will still need to be delivered so reduced staffing is likely to be restricted to areas like Chief executive salary etc. Some services like IT provision and legal services are already shared across multiple authorities which brings a cost saving that would be lost in the reorganisation (eg Cotswold share services with West Oxfordshire which it would be unlikely to do under either model proposed for Gloucestershire)

The government's current timetable would mean a Unitary Authority (or authorities) would be created in 2027 and the District Councils would cease to exist in 2028.

The impact of all of this on Parish and Town Councils could be significant and there is a CDC event scheduled for Parish and Town Councils on 4th June <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/latest-news-for-members-from-council-and-partners/cotswold-district-councils-local-government-reform-summit/>