



## Annual Report, 2023-24

### Our beginnings

It seems hardly possible that it is still less than a year since our party launched on 21 November 2023.

Since then, we have been on quite a journey, and we have learned a lot from our experience of standing candidates in the Oxford City Council elections earlier this year.

We said from the start that we are not a single-issue party, but we were almost immediately labelled the 'anti-LTN party', by the media and our political opponents alike.

Of course, fighting the LTNs was the catalyst that brought us together – but they, and the other traffic restrictions being imposed on us in Oxford, are symptoms of a deeper problem – the disappearance of any semblance of democracy in local politics.

We set ourselves two key objectives: (i) upholding democracy and (ii) improving quality of life; and these are enshrined in our mission statement:

#### OUR MISSION

- **Undo policies that are currently damaging our city, our county, and ourselves.**
- **Instigate a return to real democracy, where our councillors represent their communities rather than blindly following the diktats of their party.**
- **Spend your money wisely on actions that meet the needs of the wider community.**

Our purpose from the beginning was to get on the inside of the councils, by standing ordinary local people with passion and integrity and getting them elected as councillors, so that they could influence what the councils do. This was necessary because it had become clear that neither city nor county councils were listening to their residents. We concluded if you can't change things from the outside, you need to take action from the inside.

The labels did not stop at 'anti-LTN'. We were also referred to on the night of our launch as 'right-wing extremists' and were rather delighted that the photograph from our launch, which subsequently appeared in the local press, amply countered this accusation by showing a very diverse mix of individuals.

We learned quickly that politics is not for the faint hearted.

This was also true in the context of the bureaucracy of setting ourselves up as a party. We had to create a constitution, agree a name and logo, our mission and objectives, our ethos and ways of working – all the things that define who we are, and then apply for registration. All this work had been completed before our launch, but there was no guarantee how long the Electoral Commission would take to process and confirm our registration. In order to stand as a party in the May elections, we needed our registration completed by mid-March. Fortunately, although it took many weeks, our formal registration as a political party was confirmed on 30th Jan 2024.

## City Council elections

The campaign for City was hard work. We had to recruit suitable candidates; get our message out to the public; develop effective campaign materials: leaflets, website, etc; and get out into the community to talk to people. The amount of effort required for effective canvassing cannot be under-estimated. It is at the heart of every successful campaign.

In the event, with some late additions, our candidates ran in eleven of the twenty-four wards in the city, and we won four seats on the City Council:

<b>Cowley</b>	<b>Councillor Ian Yeatman</b>
<b>Littlemore</b>	<b>Councillor Anne Stares</b>
<b>Lye Valley</b>	<b>Councillor Judith Harley</b>
<b>Rose Hill and Iffley</b>	<b>Councillor David Henwood</b> (Leader of the IOA group on City Council)

In addition, we got incredibly close to winning 3 more seats: Northfield Brook (just 8 votes short of winning); St Clement's (just 18 votes short of winning) and Barton & Sandhills (53 votes short of winning). With just 79 more votes we could have won a total of 7 seats on the council!

While we felt disappointed at being so close in those three wards and not winning them, the reality is that we had come a long way in less than 6 months. We were new and unknown when we launched on 21 November; and by 2 May we had 4 city councillors and 3 near misses. It is fair to say that the other parties noticed that our arrival had changed the political scene in Oxford, and we played a key part in Labour losing their majority on the council, with just 20 out of the 48 seats.

We conducted a review of our campaign, with the specific purpose of identifying lessons we could learn to improve our planning for county council elections in 2025. We then produced a useful list of things we would want to do differently. The city elections had given us very valuable experience on which we can and will build our larger campaign for county seats.

## General Election and Marston by-election

We had not even concluded that exercise when, in short succession, we heard the announcements of the General Election, to be held on 4 July, and the Marston by-election for Oxford City Council, to be held on 18 July.

After some deliberation, we decided to stand David Henwood as an IOA candidate in the General Election – not with a serious hope of winning, but to make a statement and reduce the Labour majority in Oxford East. We took advantage of the support offered to all MP candidates, in the form of free distribution of a leaflet, and restricted our own resource input to leaflet production and some canvassing. David Henwood covered the financial costs himself, as the IOA had been established specifically to contest local elections. We were delighted when David received a credible 2,381 votes.

Meanwhile, we placed significant resources into the Marston by-election. This was a particular challenge, as we had not found a suitable candidate to run in Marston in May, so we had no presence there and would be running against candidates already well known in the ward. This time we found a good candidate, and we implemented some of the lessons learned from May to help us achieve an effective campaign. However, being a by-election, it was held with only six

weeks' notice, complicated further by its overlap with the General Election period, meaning we had only 6 weeks to find and stand a candidate and communicate her presence; and the majority of our campaign had to be conducted in the last two weeks, when the General Election was over.

It seems Labour were fairly confident that they would win, so we were delighted when Nasreen Majeed, for IOA, came second with 596 votes (just 44 votes behind the winning Green candidate) while Labour were 101 votes behind us and relegated to third place.

## **Our City Councillors**

Since their election, our four city councillors have all been very busy. First there were many training sessions for them to complete, so that they were briefed on the things they needed to know to be effective councillors. Then it was straight down to business.

All the IOA councillors are focusing, as promised, on local issues, and already they have had significant success.

Our councillors have arranged several public meetings about topics of concern, including drug trafficking (which has become worse since the introduction of LTNs); lack of play facilities, safety and other issues at the new Armstrong Road development in Littlemore; and anti-social behaviour of residents in Alice Smith House (now used as temporary accommodation for Oxford's homeless).

Following a meeting in May, organised by Cllr Anne Stares (Littlemore), with residents, TVP neighbourhood police and other IOA councillors, TVP have now become aware of the issues in Littlemore and residents were encouraged to report activity, resulting in the arrest of a drug dealer just a month later, in June. This demonstrates the difference councillors can make when they listen to residents and seek ways to find solutions to problems by engaging the right people and pressing for action.

IOA councillors continue to hold a monthly surgery in Cowley centre – a practice that began with our candidates during our election campaign.

In addition, our councillors are busy with personal issues raised by individual residents, or affecting groups of residents. Examples include raising awareness of plans to introduce new Controlled Parking Zones (CPZs) and conducting surveys to understand residents' views in Rosehill, Littlemore and Iffley Borders; supporting residents in Maureen Christian House, where there are very significant and long-standing damp and mould issues - Cllr David Henwood (Rose Hill & Iffley) has been researching the problems and is pursuing Green Square for solutions; picking up on public transport issues - Cllr Ian Yeatman (Cowley) has been questioning and challenging the impact on local bus services of the weight restrictions placed at short notice on Donnington Bridge and Herschel Crescent; and clarifying plans for removal of parking outside shops in Hollow Way and seeking the views of both residents and businesses.

These are just a few examples of specific issues now being pursued on behalf of residents.

Just as significant, though, are the discoveries being made by our councillors regarding how things work at the City Council – or, more importantly, where they don't seem to be working well. There are things which we feel need to be addressed and improved, so our councillors will be

working to shine a light on what is happening, and putting pressure on both councillors and council officers to work harder for the benefit of the city and its residents and businesses.

When it comes to votes in the council chamber, our councillors have already shown that they have a mind of their own. On several occasions since May, IOA councillors have been the only ones to vote against a motion or abstain, drawing gasps from the rest of the Chamber. They are, as promised, each voting in line with their conscience and to accurately reflect the majority views of their constituents.

Soon after their election, IOA councillors reached out to other independents, as a result of which the IOA group and the other three independent groups of councillors (eleven councillors in all) are cooperating informally around shared objectives.

In committee meetings our councillors are asking pointed questions, to get clarity on what is happening and to challenge assumptions where appropriate. For example, Cllr Judith Harley (Lye Valley), at the Climate and Environment Panel, asked how discretely and in what locations the air is sampled for pollution monitoring, which resulted in a council officer responding that the council has limitations on its monitoring techniques because it does not always use the best quality monitors. In the areas in question, the council uses diffusion tubes which are not as accurate as automatic monitors. This means they get monthly readings which they then average, and they then apply a 'bias adjustment factor' ... 'to reduce as much as possible the uncertainty associated with that measurement technique'. As the officer himself said 'That's a big limitation'. We will be pursuing this further.

When they discover something interesting, our councillors draw public attention to it – as, for example, with regard to Labour sanctioning funding of the proposed CPZs (referenced earlier), while they now claim to be fighting against them.

## **Evolving our approach**

Just as we reviewed how our City of Oxford election campaign went, so we are continuously reviewing our overall approach to things, and we have recently revised our mission to more closely reflect who we are.

### **OUR MISSION**

- **Introduce policies that improve the lives of all residents and businesses in Oxfordshire.**
- **Undo policies that are currently damaging our city, our county, and ourselves.**
- **Instigate a return to genuine democracy, putting the majority public voice front and centre in all decision-making.**
- **Ensure that, with our shared values, our councillors are free to vote independently and truly represent their communities.**
- **Spend your money wisely on actions that meet the needs of the wider community.**

In line with the first statement above, we are actively seeking to develop alternative solutions in a number of areas, so that we have clear proposals to replace current damaging policies, or to address current issues and problems.

The fourth bullet point has been added to make it really clear that our councillors are genuinely free to vote as best reflects the needs of their ward or division. It is entirely possible that on a specific issue the needs of one ward/division may be very different from another, so our councillors may vote differently on the same issue. In any case, it will be the views and needs of their community, not the IOA, that determines how they vote.

### **Planning our next Campaign**

As always planned, our next and very significant objective is to win seats on the County Council in the county elections in May 2025.

Following recent boundary changes made by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, there have been a number of changes to the divisions (the voting areas for county council). The Commission has made its final recommendations (published 30 July 2024) and they have been laid in Parliament for final approval (a rubber-stamping exercise), so these new boundaries will apply to the 2025 elections. We have been analysing these changes\*.

There have been some significant changes, so we have had to revise our plans accordingly.

Getting seats on the County Council is a strategic priority, given that it is the Liberal Democrat-led County Council that is driving the damaging decisions on roads and traffic restrictions. These restrictions are currently the most significant indicator of the lack of democracy in Oxford and Oxfordshire, and are therefore a particular focus of our campaign. However, there are many other issues in different divisions, and we will be standing candidates in some divisions where the focus is on entirely different matters – such as flooding or the Oxpens bridge. The key thing is for us to offer voters an alternative option – an Independent councillor who will actively listen to them and represent their views.

Against this context, we are looking strategically at which divisions we should target, with a broad goal of standing around 30 candidates.

### **This is the moment for us to push ahead**

The County Council elections next May provide a unique opportunity for the IOA to make a difference to what happens across our county.

Oxfordshire County Council is responsible for so many things that are in a mess, including: our roads and transport planning, major road maintenance, on-street parking and residents' parking permits, special educational needs, carers' support, waste recycling centres and waste disposal.

They hold consultations and then ignore the results, ploughing ahead with their plans despite significant public objections.

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*\* There will be 69 divisions in the county of Oxfordshire, each with one councillor, including 13 divisions within the city of Oxford. This is an increase from 61 divisions and 63 councillors across the county (2 divisions: Grove & Wantage and Thame & Chinnor currently have 2 councillors), while the number of divisions within the city of Oxford is decreasing from 14.*

They spend hundreds of thousands of pounds on things that the majority of residents don't want, and they neglect services that are in dire need of improvement.

They take actions that make life for residents and workers worse, not better, and that damage local businesses. This, in turn, impacts badly on communities and the local economy. Everyone is affected.

If we don't achieve significant numbers of seats on the County Council in 2025, we won't have another opportunity until 2029. We would have another four years of a council that has no concern for the majority of residents and businesses; four years for more damage to occur.

We need to act now. We need to run a strong campaign for the May 2025 elections, and we have no time to lose.

This is a mammoth task – much bigger in scale than our City Council campaign, and so we need everyone in the IOA to help. We need human resources to spread the word, leaflet drop, and campaign on doorsteps. We need good candidates with courage and stamina. We need funding to help with costs, and we need people with a wide range of skills to help us create and deliver our messages effectively.

If many people share the load we can achieve so much more.

So please speak to us about ways in which you can get involved – be it a little or a lot, it will help.

We need to win in these next elections!

*Dr Anne Gwinnett*

Chair, Independent Oxford Alliance

18 October 2024