

District Councillor Update
April 2025

Cllr Jo Robb, Cllr James Norman

Apologies for the lateness of this update – spring is a busy time! Please do get in touch with any questions you might have!

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Local Government Reorganisation Update

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Council cabinets and the West Berkshire Executive Committee agreed to support the Ridgeway Council proposal for submission to the government.

The proposal outlines the initial case for a new unitary council that would see South and Vale combined with West Berkshire.

The proposal forms one half of a two-unitary council proposal for Oxfordshire, with the other half made up from the district council areas of West Oxfordshire, Oxford City and Cherwell. West Oxfordshire District Council and Cherwell District Council have [confirmed they will be developing the North Oxfordshire Council](#) half of the proposal, strongly complementing the Ridgeway Council work we're carrying out.

The wholesale reorganisation of local government at this time is not something that we welcome. It is a time-intensive and costly process that is diverting local government attention and resource away from work of serving our residents. We have been clear in previous updates about our concerns around the creation of huge new unitaries, the loss of well-run district councils, and the introduction of Mayoral authorities, which could undermine democratic accountability and take councils further away from the communities they serve. In planning especially, removing local expertise and input is an appalling idea.

Ridgeway is, we believe, the least-worst option, offering sufficient size to afford economies of scale while also being small enough to maintain a local connection.

As required by government, Oxfordshire County Council submitted the interim proposal on our behalf. The County Council's submission to the government also included its own initial proposal for a single unitary council for Oxfordshire. If this is successful, One Oxfordshire will be the third largest unitary council in the country.

A third option from Oxford City Council has also been submitted, proposing the county area is divided up into three small unitary councils based around an expansion of the city's borders that hasn't yet been defined.

The government has set a deadline for final submissions for unitary council proposals of no later than 28 November 2025. In the meantime, we will continue to develop the proposals. This will be supported by a programme of communication

and engagement to ensure local voices and community needs are reflected in the proposal. South and Vale have committed to continue working positively with the other authorities in Oxfordshire. We will keep you updated as our plans for engagement develop. A big concern for us is that much of our work is non-statutory but important nonetheless. Our Community Hub and our community grants on which a great number of excellent local organisations rely, could disappear under unitarisation.

To find out more, here is the link to the [new website](#) that will act as the home base for the development of our Ridgeway Council proposal. It will be developed and added to as time goes by.

Free and Low-Cost Holiday Activities

Please do let your communities know about the free and low-cost activities available over the Easter holidays. A selection includes:

Wednesday 9 April – Didcot Leisure Centre FREE FUN DAY

Wednesday 9 April – Cornerstone Arts Centre Didcot FREE Make Your Own Cardboard Creature

Monday 14 April – Cholsey Pavillion FREE FUN DAY

Full details are available here:

southandvale.gov.uk/holidayactivities

Waste and Recycling Update

The councils' new garden waste permit system went live at the end of February and starts on 1 April.

Nearly 40,000 households across South and Vale have bought their new permits so far, with most doing this online.

However, some residents quite understandably struggle with online systems. The councils put on extra staff to help residents to do the standing order over the phone. Please assure residents that we are always here to help and that they can simply call the waste team who will be happy to guide them through the process.

To test the system, Jo personally called at a busy time and was offered a “ringback” which happened within five minutes. She was then guided through the process and there was no need to use a computer to set up the payment.

At times our phone lines are extremely busy, and we are suggesting people call back later. We are also asking people, if possible, to only call if they really need to so we can help those who cannot access online services. Please help us share this message.

For more information and to buy a permit visit: www.southoxon.gov.uk/gardenwaste or www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/gardenwaste

The switch to the standing order system has happened because, under the previous system, there were many garden waste customers who were (unbeknownst to them) not paying for their service. The new system is fairer for everyone and enables the councils and Biffa to have clear information so that, in the event of a unforeseen crisis (as happened during Covid), the team can communicate with clearly and easily with customers.

Litter

Many communities have had their litter picks and villages are looking sparkling. Well done to everyone who has worked so hard to organise and participate in the annual spring litter picks.

We have some ongoing issues with litter on verges. If you see verges looking particularly bad, please let us know the precise location, and we can chase Biffa who are responsible for verge cleaning under our contract.

A reminder: please do remember to report missed bin collections! These form an important part of our monitoring of Biffa. If you report your collection as having been missed, Biffa will come back within 48 hours to take the bin and the information will be stored so that we can consider it when conducting our annual review of the contract.

Admin.southoxford@biffa.co.uk

Gigaclear

Gigaclear are rolling out high speed broadband in Bix and Nettlebed. All of the new cable will be either blown through existing Openreach infrastructure or dug in. They are not flying cable in this area. Some issues in Cookley Green have been ironed out thanks to excellent community engagement.

Their project lead was a district councillor in a rural area so understands the needs of rural parishes! Parish Councils are in direct touch with the Gigaclear team, but should you have any concerns, feel free to get in touch and we can liaise with Gigaclear too.

North Wessex Downs National Landscape survey

The North Wessex Downs National Landscape (formerly the AONB) has launched a consultation on proposed changes to its management plan, which focus on changed legislation and guidance as well as an increased emphasis on nature recovery, climate adaptation, equality, diversity and inclusion.

Of course, our area is within the Chilterns National Landscape, though some parishes which are near the NWD National Landscape might like to see and feed back into this consultation.

Everyone can have their say on the proposed management plan here. The Climate and Biodiversity Team will be compiling a corporate response to the consultation and if you want your views to be considered for inclusion then please email them to climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk by Tuesday 15 April.

Solar for our Leisure Centres

Out of our area but I thought people might be interested to hear that work has begun this week at Thame Leisure Centre to install just over 150 solar panels, reducing the site's reliance on fossil fuels and lowering its carbon emissions.

The solar panels will cover large areas of the roof space at the centre including the gym and the sports hall. It is estimated the panels will produce 69,000KWh of renewable electricity for the centre. This project follows other work carried out at the site to improve energy efficiency including the installation of LED lighting.

It is anticipated the work to install the solar panels should be completed by early summer 2025. As most of the work will take place outside, it is expected that users will experience minimum disruption.

The project has been made possible thanks to a successful bid by South Oxfordshire District Council for just over £160,000 from Sport England with the Swimming Pool Support Fund – which invests National Lottery and government money each year. Winning this funding was a big achievement for small councils like ours and is testament to our decision some years ago to employ dedicated staff to apply for government funding. They have paid for their own salaries many times over in successful grant bids!

Elections