

District Councillor Report January 2025

Happy New Year!

Cllr James Norman, Cllr Jo Robb

Local Government Reform Coming this Way!

Just before Christmas, the Labour Government published its proposals for reforming the structure and financing of local government, with a White Paper entitled “English Devolution”. There are lots of reasons to welcome reform of local government: our current multi-tier structure can be very confusing and any changes which improve local decision-making and accountability can only be a good thing. However, we have major concerns that the proposed changes could make local authorities less accountable to their residents and electorate and could take decision-making further away from the communities they serve.

District Councils to be Abolished (and possibly also County Councils)

One key proposal is to abolish District Councils completely and to create new Unitary Authorities covering much larger areas of population. (A Unitary Authority would replace the current two-tier structure we have now, where the County Council and the District Council sit at different levels and have responsibility for different matters).

At the time of writing, the Government is proposing that each Unitary Authority should cover an area with a population of around 500k people; as a comparison, the population of South Oxfordshire District Council is around 153k. Each new Unitary Authority would be a member of a new “Strategic Authority” covering approximately 1.5m people, possibly with an elected Mayor at its head (that would be known as a Mayoral Strategic Authority).

For us here in South Oxfordshire, that new Strategic Authority could cover, say, West Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, matching the structure of the Integrated Care Board, or it could mirror the area covered by Thames Valley Police, which includes all of Berkshire and Milton Keynes as well.

Although the White Paper is called “English Devolution” there are no proposals to devolve powers or funding to regions in the same way that they have been devolved to the Welsh or Scottish Governments; much of the detail

is still to be determined, but the Government is hoping to press ahead with the first tranche of reorganisations quickly.

Government is only interested in hearing from County Council leaders and so, we in the districts have limited influence. However, we are concerned at the possibility of postponing elections which could stymie democracy and are opposed to a single Oxfordshire-wide unitary which, we believe, would be too large, diffuse and remote from communities to be effective and representative. We have concerns about how the needs and unique character of a predominantly rural area will be represented in a large unitary authority and then in a combined unitary with an elected mayor.

We do not yet know what structure will be proposed by the leader of the County Council, though our preference is for a smaller unitary along the lines of South and Vale. We will aim to keep you informed as plans evolve.

Local Government reform doesn't usually generate a lot of interest among the general public whose main concern is that services are delivered effectively and in line with local need and priorities. At SODC we work hard to make sure that our funds are used wisely and in a way that reflects local concerns around housing affordability, waste and environmental management, nature protection and recovery, community well-being and planning policy. But if SODC ceases to exist and, as the Government is also proposing, local communities and elected Councillors lose their ability to object to major planning applications, the implications for our area could be significant. Watch this space.

Thermal imaging camera

A reminder that a thermal camera is available for town and parish councils and community groups to use to identify heat loss in buildings. The infrared thermal imaging equipment can show clearly 'cold spots' where insulation could improve energy efficiency and thereby reduce energy waste and costs. It can easily locate areas of significant heat loss without invasive techniques affecting the fabric of the building. With the colder weather now the camera could be used for multiple properties in the village.

If Parish Councils or other community organisations would like to borrow the equipment (free of charge) please let us know and we can put you in touch with the Climate Action team or just email:

climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk

There is huge scope for insulating many of our older village halls, for example. The camera is only effective during cold weather when the heating is on (so that thermal images can be captured) and is available on a first come, first served basis.

Christmas tree collections

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/recycling-rubbish-and-waste/christmaswaste/christmas-tree-collections/>

This lists various drop off points for unwanted Christmas trees. Among the nearer drop-off points for our ward are Toad Hall Garden Centre near Henley, Root One Garden Centre in Wallingford and the Tree Barn at Christmas Common (all 11 January) and Goring Heath Parish Hall (9 January).

Joint Local Plan

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils submitted their Joint Local Plan 2041 to the Secretary of State for independent examination on 9 December. Planning Inspectors R A Bust and C Mulloy have since been appointed.

Their task is to consider the **soundness** of the submitted plan, based on the criteria set out in paragraph 35 of the National Planning Policy Framework.

The plan must be:

- **positively prepared**, “providing a strategy which, as a minimum, seeks to meet the area’s objectively assessed needs; and is informed by agreements with other authorities, so that unmet need from neighbouring areas is accommodated where it is practical to do so and is consistent with achieving sustainable development” (paragraph 35(a))
- **justified**, “an appropriate strategy, taking into account the reasonable alternatives, and based on proportionate evidence” (paragraph 35(b))
- **effective**, “deliverable over the plan period and based on effective joint working on cross-boundary strategic matters that have been dealt with rather than deferred, as evidenced by the statement of common ground” (paragraph 35(c)).
- **consistent with national policy**, “enabling the delivery of sustainable development in accordance with the policies in this Framework and other statements of national planning policy, where relevant.” (paragraph 35(d)).

The Inspectors will take into account the representations submitted in the Joint Local Plan at the Regulation 19 Publication stage as far as they relate to soundness and legal compliance considerations. A number of informal debates will take place on the principal matters identified by the Inspectors, which are termed Hearing Sessions.

At the end of the Examination, the Inspectors will prepare a report to the councils with precise recommendations. We will keep you updated on the progress of the plan which is groundbreaking in its sustainability policies.

2024

If you would like a brief review of what South Oxfordshire District Council was doing during 2024 then see the Leader's summary at <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/a-statement-from-cllr-david-rouane-leader-of-south-oxfordshire-district-council-3/>

Performing Arts Grant now established

At the end of 2024, a new Performing Arts Grant Scheme was approved by the Cabinet, which will enable community and voluntary organisations to apply for up to £5,000 to support projects that enhance the cultural landscape and improve the quality of life for local residents and communities. The scheme will open for applications on 5th February; applicants must show how their projects meet the community values and priorities of fostering a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable performing arts scene in South Oxfordshire. More details can be found at www.southoxon.gov.uk/grants

New season on sale at Cornerstone

The Cornerstone Theatre in Didcot has unveiled its new spring which includes The Elton John Show, The Magic of The Bee Gees, comedy from the "Funny Mummy" Alyssa Kyria. Parents can also enjoy Bring Your Own Baby, a daytime comedy show for new parents: infants and children welcome. Visit the Cornerstone website to see the full list of shows and to book tickets.

www.cornerstone-arts.org