

District Councillor Report

Have your say on the SODC Housing Allocations Policy before 18th March SODC seeks your views on proposed changes to the Housing Allocations Policy. SODC maintains a housing register & advertises available social housing through a Choice Based Lettings Scheme. The Housing Allocations Policy sets out the criteria to join the housing register & the rules for how social housing is allocated. The policy needs updating to reflect current housing priorities in the district. Please offer your view: <https://theconversation.southandvale.gov.uk/housing-and-environment/review-housing-allocations-policy/>

Cemetery & Cemetery Lane resurfacing This work started in mid-February, & is due for completion by the end of March. Cemetery Lane will be closed during this resurfacing.

Advice for potential grant applicants – Thu 20th March Didcot We know the grant application process can seem daunting, so SODC are providing a funding advice session where you can discuss your project(s) with a member of the team. Details: <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/community-support/grants/>

Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) - share your views by 24th March We want to make walking, wheeling & cycling easier & more enjoyable for all around here. This 'LCWIP' seeks to put in place a plan to help achieve this, so that as funding becomes available, OCC know what infrastructure is needed to provide the Wallingford Area with an inclusive & more accessible active travel network. In order to make the LCWIP the best we possibly can share your thoughts & highlight the issues or improvements you would like to see addressed. Scroll down to "Active Travel including experimental traffic schemes" at <https://letstalk.oxfordshire.gov.uk/> & you'll find an link to an online Wallingford area map where you can drop pins at any local location & add comments. For an LCWIP explanation: <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/transport-and-travel/connecting-oxfordshire/active-travel>

Councillor Grants We are delighted to be able to support the work of the following organisations through our community grants: Wallingford Accessible Boat Club, Wallingford Family Centre, Wallingford Baby Bar, TRAIN, 2nd Wallingford Scout Group & Young Climate Warriors. Decision-making was very tough - we were 2.5 times oversubscribed. We worked in partnership with councillors in other wards to allow an 'over-spend' in Wallingford, making use of their under-subscribed monies. We are also exploring other funding options with some of those who we unfortunately weren't able to support this time around. There is clearly a need for these grants, & we are pleased to write that next year the funds available are increased by 50%.

SODC 2025-26 Budget The newly approved budget maintains investment in key areas including housing, community support & leisure provision, while ensuring that residents will continue to receive excellent value for money for services provided by the district council. For the first time in 9 years the council doesn't need to dip into its reserves to balance the budget – no mean feat at a time of rising costs, such as increased national insurance, & service provision needs. Highlights include a further £10m funding to support housing ambitions to provide access to more safe, secure & compliant housing provided directly by the council, & we are able to secure the future of the council's Community Hub on an ongoing basis. This valued service provides practical support & advice for those with cost-of-living concerns or who are finding life

difficult. More detail here: <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/budget/housing-investment-and-community-support-a-key-focus-of-south-oxfordshires-2025-26-budget/>

Local Government Reorganisation This is a moveable feast, it would seem, with the Westminster government changing its view as the process they've put in train progresses. The responsibility for leading the process falls to the upper tier authorities – in our case to the leader of Oxfordshire County Council. The district councils will have no say at all. And neither, it must be said, will local communities or parish councils. Amongst the many areas of concern, is the abolition of well-run, efficient district councils that are closer to their communities than the proposed 'unitary' councils can be. The reforms will also see a significant reduction in the number of councillors, creating a democratic deficit when we need democratic representative to increase at this delicate time, & when England already has fewer councillors per capita than anywhere in Europe. This may contribute to a loss of the sense of place, accountability & community. The introduction of mayors makes sense in large cities with a coherent culture, identity & geography, but how these will work in disparate rural areas such as ours is unclear. And, we note, mayors will be more powerful than MPs & could be totally undemocratic dependent on the electoral mechanism. This is, perhaps, more 'demolition' than devolution....

It's tempting to believe the "economies of scale" & efficiency argument. But recent academic research consistently shows that, when it comes to local democracy, accountability & delivering service for local people, bigger is NOT necessarily better.

Council staff remain committed to ensure the best possible outcomes for our community, in a system that appears sub-optimal at best. They are clear that our statutory duties, e.g. housing, car parks, emptying bins, licensing, planning, food safety inspections etc, remain fully resourced. And, we are already seeing staff getting tied up, exploring how to make this forced reorganisation work. Coupled with the crazy speed at which this change is being foisted upon us, this may unintentionally risk delivery of some of our discretionary services if the Westminster government doesn't fund the changes fully. We expect this to continue over the coming few years.

This is particularly concerning when we need to put every effort in to adapt to & mitigate the climate & ecological emergency. It seems, at best, that this reorganisation will delay our response to this metacrisis, &, at worst, derail it in pursuit of unrealistic & ungrounded 'statutory (financial) growth plans'. Indeed John Gummer, Lord Deben, ex- Climate Change Committee chair, note we need to be "on a war footing" when it comes to this metacrisis. We clearly aren't nationally – indeed the pace of change driven from the centre is in stark contrast to that for the local government 'reorganisation'! We will need to act, together, locally at community level. And indeed, talking to some residents at a recent flooding talk, it was good to hear the preparedness to muck in - time to roll our sleeves up together?

One small ray of sunlight though: county council elections will go ahead as planned in May. We requested this - we see it as essential to ensure that those councillors operating during this turbulent time have democratic legitimacy. Elections for the new 'local' authority will likely be in 2027. At a time when voters are increasingly disengaging from politics (turnout at the 2024 Thames Valley Police & Crime Commissioner elections was 30%, the 2024 General Election saw a 60% voter turnout – the lowest since 2001), these reforms risk further undermining faith in the political process.

Questions about Highcroft? If you have questions & comments about what is happening at the Highcroft development, the team there are very happy to hear from you directly. Email them at Wallingfordsiteb@stjosephhomes.co.uk

Local sustainable businesses or organisations map – from refill stores or car clubs, solar panel installers or upcyclers can add their details for free. We all can use it when looking to reduce our carbon footprint & live a more sustainable life. It's really easy to join, click 'Join the Map' at <https://mymap.eco/>. Also see <https://www.climateactionoxfordshire.org.uk/>.