

District Councillor Annual Report 2025

Haseley Brook ward

CLlr Georgina Heritage



I hope that throughout the year I have captured all news and SODC activity in my monthly reports, which are available online via parish council websites and in some local newsletters. I very much encourage residents to contact me via georgina.heritage@southoxon.gov.uk if they have any questions, concerns or suggestions arising from my reports.

For this annual report I am highlighting some of the bigger news items from SODC from the past twelve months, and I do hope the following information will be of interest to residents:

Local Government Reorganisation

In 2024 the Government released a white paper on local government reorganisation which will mean that two-tier authorities (like we have in Oxfordshire) will end, and instead we must form Unitary authorities serving at least 500,000 residents. Unitaries must then combine to form a Combined authority serving a population of around 1.5 million, likely to be overseen by an elected mayor.

Government will make the decision on the direction South Oxfordshire will take, however an initial proposal for “Ridgeway Council” has been submitted on behalf of South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire Council, which would see the three areas combined. This has been developed due to the demographic and economic similarities and historic ties between the areas.

Following the government’s request that Oxfordshire authorities submit interim proposals together, the County Council has submitted an outline proposal for the Ridgeway Council and North Oxfordshire Council to the government, alongside two other options being developed in Oxfordshire which include a county-wide Oxfordshire proposal.

There will be opportunities in the coming months to hear the views of our communities before the final proposal is submitted, and the councils will also continue working positively and collaboratively with the other authorities in Oxfordshire.

SODC Budget 2025-26

The council met in February and approved its 2025-2026 Budget. Diligent financial management ensured that SODC could deliver a balanced budget and marks the first time in nine years that the council has not needed to transfer funds from reserves.

Major funding will be made available to support the purchase of more **affordable housing** across South Oxfordshire. Having already committed £10 million to provide more safe, secure and compliant housing, purchased under the Local Authority Housing Funding (LAHF) schemes, the district council has now

committed to make a further £10 million available to support the council's long-term ambitions to meet local housing need.

The budget also includes funding to secure the future of the council's **Community Hub** on an ongoing basis. This valued service provides practical support and advice for those with cost-of-living concerns or who are finding life difficult.

The **councillor grant** budget will increase by 50%, to £7,500 per councillor, while the Capital and Revenue grant schemes for voluntary organisations will continue. This is something we're particularly happy about at SODC, since many councils are not in a financial position to offer such grants programmes.

The council will continue to fund an ongoing programme to improve **leisure centres**, including major decarbonisation & refurbishment projects at Thame Leisure Centre, such as solar panels, a sauna and gym equipment replacement. TLC opening hours will be maintained despite the high cost of energy, which renewables will help with.

Council tax for services provided by South Oxfordshire District Council were set at £151.24 for a Band D property. This means just £2.91 per week for a wide range of services including waste and recycling collections, community support, leisure services, parks and play areas, housing and planning services, environmental health and licensing.

Joint Local Plan

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils worked together to produce a Joint Local Plan (JLP), which aims to help meet their local communities' need for affordable housing, jobs and infrastructure while tackling the climate emergency. Following a series of public consultations, the plan was submitted to Government in December 2024 for the examination stage.

If successfully adopted, the plan will replace the existing Local Plans for both councils.

In the new Plan, the councils have shown that there are enough new homes in the pipeline already. This means that there is no need to build on any extra new greenfield sites over the next 15 years, beyond what has already been allocated. Only one area of expansion has been earmarked, which is on the brownfield land owned by the Ministry of Defence at Dalton Barracks near Abingdon.

Crucially, the plan also sets out new firmer environment policies so that development is net zero carbon and delivers twice the national level of biodiversity net gain to help with the recovery of nature.

By completing and submitting the Joint Local Plan to an accelerated timetable, it will be tested against the previous housing numbers and government policies set in the National Planning Policy Framework 2023, rather than the new (higher) housing numbers and new policies of the new NPPF 2024. Although the Joint Local Plan was not required to meet the new higher housing numbers, and once adopted the housing numbers will be pinned to those in the Joint Local Plan for five years, the new NPPF does require us to calculate housing land supply differently, straight away. A key government change is that all authorities must now demonstrate a 5 year housing land supply, regardless the age of their local plan. This reversed the changes in the previous NPPF, which had withdrawn the 5 year land supply test for councils where their plan was less than five years old.

Haseley Trading Estate

For the Haseley Brook ward, one of the major topics over recent months has been the announcement from South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse councils that they are the new owners of Haseley Trading Estate and, subject to planning, the site will be used as a vehicle depot for waste and street cleaning fleet. This is something I was admittedly nervous about initially, particularly as I was concerned that local residents may assume the estate is intended to be a waste transfer station. It's very important to me that our residents can feel assured of transparency and our parish councils are fully informed. With this in mind, I contacted Andrew Busby, Head of Development and Corporate Landlord, who made direct contact with parish councils in Haseley Brook.

To clarify, the new site would be used as a depot for parking vehicles and for vehicle maintenance. There would be no storage or disposal of waste. The current vehicle depot in Culham is due to be redeveloped for new homes and the existing contract and lease expires in 2026, and the councils have spent a very long time searching for a suitable new location to ensure statutory waste collection services are not interrupted in any way.

The plan is to redevelop and retain one of the existing buildings and make improvements to the site, which will include improving the screening with planting, and managing the adjoining woodland which has suffered some neglect in recent years. They will also be reviewing their vehicle movements to keep the impact on the surrounding areas as minimal as possible.

The new owners intend to be good neighbours and show respect to the surrounding villages. I am nonetheless highly conscious of and sensitive to the concerns of our local communities, and I will work with residents to ensure their voices are heard and their concerns are responded to. If residents have any questions about the intentions for Haseley Trading Estate I am very happy to offer support and assist in getting them answered.

Other Highlights

- Almost 49,000 residents are now signed up to the new garden waste permit scheme in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse districts. This kind of scheme is offered successfully by many other local authorities, including in neighbouring West Oxfordshire. The permits help the waste collection crews identify which bins should be emptied. This will ensure that only households that have paid for the service have their garden waste bins emptied and the changes are part of the councils' ongoing work to improve the efficiency and value of public services.
- We were pleased to partner with Soha Housing, Thame Community Land Trust and Thame & District Housing Association to deliver 49 affordable homes in Thame and Wheatley, largely funded by Section 106 affordable housing grants from developer contributions.
- A strategy for the future of sports and leisure facilities was approved, and action plans will be created to work with sports clubs, town and parish councils, national governing bodies, leisure providers and other organisations to allocate funding and support projects going forward.
- Work has been ongoing to bring empty homes back into use, including working with owners and reviewing council tax on empty properties.