

SODC Councillors Annual Report May 2026

Councillors Jo Robb and James Norman

Leadership Changes at the District Council

In May 2025 the majority Liberal Democrat group voted to dissolve the partnership with the Green Group and took over running the Council. The Green Group became the official opposition and took over the Chairing of the Scrutiny and Joint Scrutiny Committees. Jo was co-chair of Joint Scrutiny, while James continued his work on the Planning Committee.

Cllr David Rouane continued as Leader until stepping down at the December 2025 Full Council meeting; at the same meeting Cllr Maggie Filipova-Rivers was elected as Leader. Cllr Filipova-Rivers appointed a new Cabinet shortly afterwards.

The Council also appointed a new Chief Executive Officer (jointly with Vale of White Horse Council) following the departure of Mark Stone. One of the two previous Deputy Chief Executives was then appointed as his successor after a competitive process and Adrianna Partridge took up her new role in January 2026.

We still expect that elections for the new Unitary Authority will be held next year. This new Council is expected to come into existence in April 2028. We do not know what the geography of the new Council will be and the government's decision is expected this summer.

The 2026/27 municipal year will therefore be the last for SODC, other than as a "holding" body while the new Statutory Authority takes shape. This means that we are only able to agree contract extensions with key suppliers rather than entering into major new procurements and are unable to initiate major new programmes that would incur expenditure beyond the life of the Council.

The most obvious example of this is the shelving of the plans to build new Council offices at the Gateway regeneration site in Didcot, although planning permission has been granted and can be inherited by the successor authority.

Proposed "Greater Oxford Development Corporation"

On 17th March all Oxfordshire Leaders received a letter from Housing Minister Matthew Pennycook signalling the Government's intent to create a "centrally-driven Urban Development Corporation" for "Greater Oxford". They will consult fully on this proposal later this year, with the key consultation questions being:

- The case for establishing a centrally-led Urban Development Corporation;
- The proposed objectives and activities of the Development Corporation;
- The proposed geographical boundary in which the Development Corporation would operate;

- The proposed approach to powers that the Development Corporation would be granted;
- The proposed approach to governance of the Development Corporation, including the role of local democratic representation.

The letter stresses that this is separate from the process of Local Government Reorganisation. Needless to say, we would be very concerned about the erosion of local decision-making when it comes to major planning and development, since any new Development Corporation would assume responsibility for such matters. It would not be led by democratically elected local politicians but by centrally appointed bureaucrats. A similar proposal has already been the subject of consultation in Cambridge (covering Cambridge City and South Cambs) and has been met with strong opposition from locally elected representatives.

Thames Valley Devolution

Alongside all of the work on Local Government Reorganisation, there are also proposals under way to create a **strategic authority in the Thames Valley**, which would sit above the new Unitary Authorities. Local Authorities in Berkshire and Oxfordshire have sent an expression of interest letter to government. This sets out a shared ambition to create a foundation strategic authority (FSA), which is a step along the path towards a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). It is understood that the government has accepted the economic case for the region and we expect to receive feedback by May 2026.

Delivering the Council's Priorities in 2025/26

In February 2025 the Council adopted its current strategic plan, called "The Way Ahead", which has five key priorities:

- Action on climate change and nature recovery
- Financial stability and innovative transformation
- Participation, accessibility and accountability
- Homes and infrastructure that meet local needs
- Thriving, healthy and inclusive communities

Despite the pending changes to local government structure, this past year has been focused on working through the annual delivery plan which supports these objectives; this can be found on the SODC website [here](#)

Some good examples of how the plan is being delivered include bringing 163 empty homes back into use across both Councils, creating new grant schemes to support nature recovery and community resilience (i.e. adapting to climate change), creating Neighbourhood Planning guidance and templates following the withdrawal of funding from national government, upgrading facilities at arts and leisure centres, launching a new **Visit Southern Oxfordshire** website to promote local small and independent businesses, working with the Community Safety Partnership to reduce anti-social behaviour and reducing homelessness and rough sleeping in our district.

Joint Local Plan 2041

The long-running story of the Joint Local Plan has continued over the past year, with interventions from the Planning Inspectorate and the Housing Minister, first pausing progress on the examination and then restarting it in February 2026. This has been taking place with the backdrop of new national Planning legislation, a new NPPF (December 2024) and a consultation on a completely new NPPF which closed on 10th March 2026.

We await a timetable for the examination in public, but we expect this to happen over the summer of 2026, which would enable us to adopt the JLP early in 2027. As soon as we do this, however, work will have to start on a **new plan** which uses the revised Standard Method to calculate housing numbers – this will necessarily involve many more houses than have already been planned and which still aren't being built.

Following a key Planning Committee decision to refuse an application for 70 houses on the old Reading Golf Course, chiefly because the proposal conflicted with the Kidmore End Neighbourhood Plan, James has been active in supporting our villages to make Neighbourhood Plans as a means of providing additional protection against unplanned development.

SODC Grant Schemes

As in previous years, SODC has continued to provide financial support to local non-profit and community-based organisations. We were pleased to be able to increase the revenue grant funding available this past year due to a budget underspend in the previous year; this meant that vital local organisations received their full “ask” rather than only 40% of what they had requested. The Councillor Grant scheme was increased from £5k per Member to £7.5k in 2025/26, so that we were able to make more awards than previously. In the past year, we have provided Councillor Grant funding to:

- Cycling Without Age
- Young Climate Warriors
- Wallingford Rowing Club
- Shedquarters
- Nettlebed Parish Council (for restoration of the allotments)
- Maharaja's Well Trust

Another round of Community Grants opens in August. We encourage our community groups to apply: it is unlikely that community grants (at this scale at least) will survive local government reorganisation.

Budget

With Greens in opposition, amendments to the Budget were proposed for the first time in many years. Green councillors proposed several amendments to the budget whilst ensuring a balanced budget for the council.

The budget was broadly welcomed but Greens suggested some amendments to put some of the budget surplus back in to our communities.

Among the amendments, Greens proposed a £55,000 Direct Action Work Fund to help protect South Oxfordshire's built heritage by acting on powers the council has to protect listed buildings that are falling into disrepair and to take enforcement action against landowners, a Community Housing Grant to cover start-up costs and legal fees for small-scale housing charities and Community Land Trusts to develop their plans, a Community Asset Fund to support local groups wanting to acquire assets for their communities and a Community Nature Fund to support local nature groups and projects that improve access to blue and green nature spaces.

Of these, the proposal for a new fund to support Community Housing Trusts and the proposal for a new Community Nature Fund were both accepted and are being implemented.

Planning Reforms

The government's ambition to build a million homes by the end of this parliamentary period has entailed a raft of reforms to the planning system, aimed at "streamlining" the process by removing local decision-making in planning. Under new rules outlined in March, more decisions will be made by officers under delegated powers with ward member or parish council call-ins to be abolished. Call-ins to Committee are to be permitted in limited circumstances. Householder schemes, minor commercial development and minor residential development of up to 9 dwellings will be decided by officers, not by Committees. Where councils intend to refuse schemes for 150 houses or more, the council must inform the Secretary of State before issuing a refusal, to give the SoS the opportunity to review the decision.

At the same time, the ability of councils to make their own policies when it comes to Local Plans is being eroded. Councils are no longer permitted to exceed government guidance on matters like carbon reduction, dark skies or biodiversity net gain. This means that the Joint Local Plan will be superseded by a new Plan which will necessarily row back on many of the ambitious policies in the Joint Local Plan in order to comply with the government's new guidance.

Taken together, these proposals represent a major attack on local decision making in planning and, we believe, are misguided. Good policy does not deter development but ensures that the development that does happen is the best it can be.

Your Councillors

James continues on the Planning Committee where he has been instrumental in persuading the Committee to refuse some egregious applications, including at the Old Reading Golf Course, in the parish of Kidmore End.

Jo has co-chaired the Joint Scrutiny Committee, leading scrutiny of the proposal for the Two Councils as part of Local Government Reorganisation and the procurement of new waste vehicles.

With a new head of planning and a new cabinet member for planning, Article 4 directives are back on the table, and Green councillors, led by James, Peter Dragonetti and Jo, have been pushing for Article 4 to add extra protection for ancient woodland in our ward.

Jo has asked questions of the cabinet member regarding the council tax collection service to ensure the work of outsourced debt collection agencies is properly monitored and that families and the vulnerable are not being harmed by unscrupulous practices.

Green councillors are also leading on the scrutiny of the Disabled Facilities Grants, to ensure these are administered in the simplest, fairest and most effective way for the residents who need them.