District Councillor Update
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Local Government Reorganisation – Paused Indefinitely

As residents and parish councils will have heard, the Local Government Reorganisation announced in December 2024 which saw three competing bids for reorganisation across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, is being paused and is undergoing review following legal challenges. It is believed that the legal challenges relate to decisions that did not accord with the government's own stated requirements for unitary proposals. You will recall that the government approved Oxford City's proposal which would have absorbed much of the Green Belt around Oxford (including vast swathes of South Oxfordshire) into a "Greater Oxford," and seen the creation of two smaller and much more financially precarious rural unitary authorities.

Ours is among 16 council areas that had been preparing for a reorganisation that is now off the table. This means that District Council elections will go ahead in May 2027 on existing ward boundaries.

Few believe that the new Prime Minister will be pursuing this messy, expensive process in this parliamentary period, though many are predicting that the government might crack on with the creation of regional mayors as a first step.

Changes to Planning Committees and Local Democracy

Residents and Parish Councils will be aware of the changes to the Scheme of Delegation which will result in far fewer planning applications coming to Planning Committee for oversight and decision-making.

At a special council meeting on 24 September, members voted to approve changes to the constitution to ensure compliance with the new regulations. Green councillors proposed several amendments, including one stating:

"That Council deeply regrets having to approve the above changes to the Constitution and asks the Leader to write to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to express its deep concerns about the likely negative impact of the new National Scheme of Delegation on local democracy and accountability."

Greens also proposed amendments to the wording of the new rules – these were aimed at ensuring the protection of local democracy as far as possible within the new regulations.

The new rules are summarised below:

- ***Effective Date:*** *The rules become legally binding on* ***31 October 2026****.*

- ***Schedule 1 (Mandatory Officer Delegation):*** *Routine applications—including householder extensions, minor commercial developments, minor residential developments (up to 9 dwellings), prior approvals, discharge of conditions, and certificates of lawfulness—****must*** *be delegated to officers.*

- ***Schedule 2 (Complex/Major Applications):*** *Larger developments or complex cases also presume officer determination. They can only go to a planning committee if a* ***nominated planning officer and a nominated committee member (Chair of Planning) explicitly agree*** *to refer it, and it passes a statutory "gateway test" (raising a significant local economic, social, environmental, or planning issues).*

- ***Abolition of Call-Ins and Objections:*** *Individual ward councillor call-ins and parish council call-ins which operate in South Oxfordshire are* ***eliminated*** *as automatic routes to committee.*

- **Committee Size Cap:** Planning committees are restricted to a **maximum of 13 members**.

- **Transparency Requirements:** Local authorities must formally log and publish all referral and delegation decisions.

Please note: As our villages are all within the Chilterns National Landscape and we have a great many heritage buildings, there are arguments to suggest that quite a few proposed developments could fall within Schedule 2 and be subject to the Gateway Test. Please do be in touch if you have concerns about an application.

This new scheme of delegation has prompted us to reflect on applications where the Planning Inspectorate has endorsed our Planning Committee's decision to refuse permission. In many of these cases, communities worked very hard to be heard and to ensure bad development was stopped.

These include: Glamping pods in the Stonor Valley, poorly designed and overbearing self-build house in Stoke Row, new dwelling in the beer garden of the Three Horseshoes in Towersey, destruction of 100m of native hedgerow and the construction of a driveway cutting across agricultural fields in the Chilterns National Landscape in Highmoor and 70 houses on the Old Reading Golf Course (see below).

SODC's Planning Committee is a responsible Committee and has a strong track record of "getting it right" where we go against officer recommendation!

Old Reading Golf Course – Vindication for Local Democracy

In the context of the government's attack on the role of Planning Committees, it might be of interest to residents to learn that the High Court has dismissed an appeal by the applicants for 70 houses on the old Reading Golf Course in Kidmore End, on the South Oxfordshire side of the boundary with Reading. South Oxfordshire District Council's Planning Committee refused the application, overturning the recommendation of the planning officers. The Committee cited conflict with the Kidmore End Neighbourhood Plan and the South Oxfordshire Local Plan. That decision was upheld by the Planning Inspectorate which endorsed the reasoning put forward by the Planning Committee. It is hugely gratifying to see that the High Court has sided with us too.

Grants:

New £100,000 grant to help communities tackle climate change and support nature recovery

A new £100,000 council grant scheme to help tackle climate change and support nature recovery has opened.

The new Nature and Climate Action Fund is the latest community grant scheme from South Oxfordshire District Council and will be open to voluntary and community organisations.

Grants of between £250 and £10,000 will be available to support climate and nature focused projects of all sizes.

Projects could include making a village hall more energy efficient, restoring natural habitats such as floodplain meadows, planting trees for shade and to reduce flooding, organising a community learning event on home renewable energy options or installing bike racks at a community venue to encourage cycling.

The fund is the result of a budget amendment brought by the Green Group on the District Council.

The fund will support projects that:

- Address climate change and avoid or reduce the emission of greenhouse gases (mitigation projects)
- Adjust to the current and future effects of climate change (adaptation projects)
- Support nature recovery and biodiversity

Groups do not need to be experts in climate change or nature recovery to apply. The council welcomes applications from organisations that are just getting started, as well as those with more experience.

Full details including how to apply, is available on the council's website and organisations can also contact our Climate and Biodiversity Team by emailing climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk with questions about any projects they would like support with.

Councillor Community Grants

Our Community Grants are still open – please encourage your local groups and parish councils to apply. James and Jo each have £7500 to support projects and activities that offer community benefit in our ward area. We want to use these funds!

We can fund up to 100 per cent of the total cost of a project and it must be completed within 12 months of the award decision. If your project is for a capital project, the total project cost must be £15,000 or less. Revenue projects have no such maximum.

Please do get in touch to find out more – the scheme close at midday on 4 December.

Councils work towards stronger community connections

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Council have launched a project to help build stronger communities, develop connections and foster neighbourhood togetherness across the districts.

Between now and November, representatives an organisation called Belong will be out and about in the districts gathering evidence for the creation of a community cohesion strategy. People can take part in an online survey and share their views and experiences within their own communities.

In February 2026, as a result of Green budget amendments, both Councils agreed to dedicate a budget towards community cohesion. The first step is the creation of a strategy – this process is being funded by government grants, council funding and the National Lottery. Do have your say in the survey.