

## **Woodcote & Rotherfield Ward**

### **District Councillor Update**

**February 2025**

**Cllr Jo Robb, Cllr James Norman**

### **Latest News on Local Government Reorganisation – WARNING: ANOTHER LONG ONE**

The government's White Paper published on 17 December constitutes the most radical reform of local government since 1972. It includes so-called "devolution" – the creation of new Mayoral Strategic Authorities covering around 1.5m people, and reorganisation – the abolition of district councils and the creation of new large unitaries of around 500,000 people.

Debate and speculation continues. As it stands these plans will serve central government and its growth agenda more than local communities. There are many local councillors attempting to make the best of this, but the government has been clear that districts will have no part to play in the process and it is not consulting on the reforms.

The government has a keen eye on Oxfordshire – the Oxford-Cambridge Arc (or the "Growth Corridor" as it's now known) has been resurrected as a key driver of economic growth in the South East, and the Prime Minister referenced Culham Science Centre in his speech on AI innovation and the creation of a new "Silicon Valley" in England.

There are many areas of concern, not least the abolition of well-run, efficient district councils that are close to their communities and the reduction in the number of councillors when England already has fewer councillors per capita than anywhere in Europe. Added to this, the process of electing mayors for combined authorities, including the prohibitive cost of running large mayoral campaigns, combined with the archaic first past the post system, benefits the larger parties and creates the potential for billionaire funded puppet candidates with little interest in local communities.

At a time when politics is facing a crisis of legitimacy, and with voters increasingly disengaged from the political process (turnout at the 2024 Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner elections was 30%, the 2024 General Election saw a 60% voter turnout – the lowest since 2001), this is yet another threat to democracy.

We have concerns about:

- the total lack of engagement/consultation with District, Town & Parish Councils (let alone with the general public);
- the fact that Mayors will be more powerful than MPs and could be totally undemocratic given the electoral mechanism;
- the speed at which this change is being foisted upon us and the risk to on-going services;

- the democratic deficit likely to be created with fewer councillors and loss of the sense of place, accountability and community;
- the shift from democracy to feudalism that this represents.

The instinct is to believe the arguments around “economies of scale” and efficiency. But the preponderance of academic research from the last several decades points strongly to the fact that, when it comes to local democracy, accountability and delivering service for local people, bigger is NOT necessarily better.

Given the lack of agreement (at the time of writing) on the boundaries of the new Mayoral Strategic Authority, it is almost certain that the OCC elections scheduled for 1<sup>st</sup> May, based on the new electoral boundaries, will go ahead as planned. It is essential to ensure that those councillors defining the new structure have democratic legitimacy.

Elections for the new strategic authority will likely happen in 2027.

The district ward of Woodcote & Rotherfield is already split into four different county divisions. Under the new boundaries, Rotherfield Greys will fall in with the new division of Henley North, while Nettlebed, Bix and Assendon, Highmoor, Stoke Row, Ipsden, Checkendon and Rotherfield Peppard will form the bulk of the large rural division of Watlington and Rotherfield. Woodcote will remain in the Goring division while Nuffield will remain with the slightly rejigged Benson and Crowmarsh division.

The shape of these reforms is still to be determined. We will keep you updated.

Press releases from SODC can be found here:

- [Councils should seek to influence Local Government Reorganisation for the benefit of communities](#)
- [Oxfordshire should be working with Berkshire and Buckinghamshire](#)

## **SODC 2025/26 Budget**

On Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> February SODC will (hopefully) approve its capital expenditure and revenue budget for 2025/26 and the Medium Term Financial Plan for the next 5 years. While we are confident that nothing is going to change substantially over the next year in terms of service delivery, the later years are still something of a mystery, so our MTFP is necessarily cautious. There is NO drawing on reserves to balance the budget. Much more detail on the budget will be provided next month, following the Council meeting in February, although the full papers are already in the public domain on the SODC Cabinet webpage. There are no proposals to reduce any of our services.

## **5 Year Housing Land Supply**

In January SODC updated its latest 5 Year Housing Land Supply Statement – see <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/planning-and->

[development/local-plan-and-planning-policies/our-development-plan/five-year-land-supply/](#)

The headline figure is **4.5 years**, which now incorporates the 5% buffer required by Government policy. This compares to the figure published in September 2023, which was 4.2 years. It is worth noting that SODC has won a large number of major appeals over the past 18 months, indicating that the 5 YR HLS is not the only factor taken into account by Inspectors. Having an up to date Local Plan is key. Neighbourhood Plans continue to be very important to protect communities from unwelcome applications, but paragraph 14 of the new NPPF makes it clear that NPs without any site allocations for new housing will be less well protected. The Neighbourhood Planning team at SODC is always happy to provide advice and guidance on such matters.

### **Performing Arts Grant now open for applications**

At the end of 2024, a new Performing Arts Grant Scheme (total value of £60,000) 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](http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/grants).

### **Garden Waste Changes – starting in April**

As you may recall from last year's communications, we are introducing a new permit scheme for garden waste collections this year. This permit scheme is like the one successfully operated in West Oxon (and many other parts of the country), and a key benefit of the new system is that it prevents people who have not paid for the service from having their garden waste collected.

To receive garden waste collections from 1 April 2025, residents must purchase an annual permit. This will replace direct debits, which are surprisingly troublesome to collect each year.

What residents need to do:

- **From late February**, visit [www.southandvale.gov.uk/GardenWastePermit](http://www.southandvale.gov.uk/GardenWastePermit) to make a one-off, annual payment for garden waste collections.
- When you receive the permit in the post, you must stick it to the lid of your brown bin.

Garden waste customers can also sign up for an online account on our website to make things easier when they purchase the next permit in 2026. Anyone who cannot easily sign up for a permit online can call us on 01235 422422 for support. Visit the New [Garden Waste FAQ](#) page for more information and PLEASE let us know what you think of this process so that we can make suggestions for improvements.

### **Oxfordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy**

More than 2,100 Oxfordshire residents, landowners and organisations took part in last year's public consultation on the county's draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS). Using an interactive map, people sent in comments on the nature areas already mapped and lots of suggestions for additional areas to be included. The LNRS team (a partnership of organisations including South and Vale) now has the mammoth task of compiling the responses into a public report and the final version of the strategy is due to be published in autumn this year. For more information about the LNRS and the nature groups involved see the [LNRS webpage](#).

### **GLL Sport foundation**

Our partners at Better Leisure who run our leisure centres are launching this year's Sports Foundation scheme and applications for this fund are now open. GLL Sports Foundation provides support to athletes across all ages, disciplines and backgrounds. Providing access to free gym memberships, monetary funding and other athletes services including mental health support and physiotherapy. More information including how to apply and eligibility can be found on the [GLL Sports Foundation application page](#) and applications must be submitted by **20 February 2025** - please help us spread the word!

### **Wild Weather in Satwell**

Finally, residents might be interested to hear about the mini tornado that whirled through Satwell and down to Rocky Lane on Monday 27 February, leaving destruction in its wake. The twister snapped trees at their trunks, tore down fences and demolished at least one shed. Landowners have been excellent at clearing the trees to enable walkers to use the footpaths, but there are still down in the local area, particularly on lesser used paths, so be aware if you are walking. I have contacted the footpaths officer at OCC to let them know. The Bureau of Meteorology have been out to have a look – let me know if you want to learn more and I can forward any correspondence I get from them!