

District Councillor Report
Haseley Brook ward
03 March 2025

Cllr Georgina Heritage



Meetings and Council Activity

- ❖ The district council met on Thursday 13 February and approved its **2025-2026 Budget**.

Diligent financial management has ensured that South Oxfordshire District Council can deliver a balanced budget for 2025-26 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.

Since launching in 2020, the Community Hub has supported thousands of residents across the district and provided more than £800,000 in vouchers and grants to households experiencing financial hardship. This has ensured people were able to pay vital energy bills and afford household essentials and food. A further £200,000 has been awarded to local voluntary and community organisations, helping them continue their invaluable support provided to residents.

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.

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 will be 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.

- ❖ Other key items considered at the busy meeting included the council's new council plan. Councillors reviewed **The Way Ahead: Council Plan 2025-2029** and will adopt it going forward.

The Council also formally adopted four **neighbourhood plans**, marking a significant step forward for local placemaking. A new neighbourhood plan for Berinsfield was welcomed alongside updated plans for Thame, Wallingford, and Crowmarsh, ensuring they continue to carry full weight in planning decisions. The lack of clarity in Clifton Hampden's Neighbourhood Development Order meant this item was refused.

- ❖ An extraordinary district council meeting was then held on 20th February in order to discuss the government's white paper on **local government reorganisation**.

At the public meeting we discussed a wide range of matters related to the subject, including the two options for the creation of a new unitary authority, either incorporating the whole of Oxfordshire or combining South Oxfordshire with neighbouring Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire. The council has previously expressed the view that a unitary council which covers the whole of the county would be too large to respond to local need.

Earlier this month, councils across Oxfordshire were invited to submit initial proposals for unitary councils by 21 March, with final plans required by 28 November. As part of these discussions, SODC officers have been constructively and openly discussing potential unitary options alongside all councils in Oxfordshire. They have also been holding discussions with West Berkshire Council and the Vale about the possibility of a new unitary council combining the three areas.

- ❖ Back in **Haseley Brook**, I'm delighted that the second Capital Grants panel meeting resulted in a successful outcome for **Little Milton's** application towards solar panels; this is the second application for solar panel funding in the Haseley Brook ward and I look forward to seeing the completed work to both Lewknor's and Little Milton's halls. SODC's grants programmes are hugely popular and, as I've recently learned, becoming a rarer offering from many councils. There will be a useful SODC grants advice session on 20th May, and I'll list details of this below.
- ❖ I was really delighted to attend the opening of **Stadhampton's** fabulous new playground equipment on Friday 28th March. The ribbon was cut by our MP Freddie van Mierlo, but the hard work of getting to this stage was thanks to the parish council and in particular Cllr Jess Edwards, who sourced the funding and managed this exciting project. It was a pleasure to witness the children's excitement and a great example of a community pulling together to achieve something special. The old playground was very well loved but had reached the end of its life. The exciting new design is accessible, inclusive, and will no doubt be enjoyed by local families for many more years to come.

Over £1.4 million grants to be available

SODC confirmed that its budget for 2025/2026 includes continued financial support of organisations in the district that help residents, businesses and the environment, meaning South Oxfordshire will benefit from £1,450,000 over the next year through a range of grant schemes to support community projects.

To help organisations plan their applications the council is hosting an event at Cornerstone Arts Centre in Didcot on Thursday 20 March, with appointments available to book from 12.30-4pm.

Voluntary and community organisations will have the opportunity to discuss projects, ask questions about the application process including eligibility for any of the upcoming grant schemes. Places are limited, and you can book a time slot by emailing grants@southandvale.gov.uk or phone 01235 422405.

The following schemes will be launching over the next year:

- Everyone Active Grant: 1 April - 26 May
- Capital Grant: 2 June - July
- Performing Arts Grant: 28 July - 5 September
- Councillor Community Grants: 18 August - 5 December
- Community Infrastructure Levy Grant: January 2026

As Cabinet member for Communities, I'm so pleased we can continue this vital support for voluntary and community organisations and local businesses over the next financial year. We know how hard it is financially for organisations to do the work they do to help others in our communities and improve the environment that we all cherish so much.

SODC is also hoping to announce further support for businesses and communities through the UKSPF (UK Shared Prosperity Fund) in the coming months.

For more information on the eligibility requirements and the previous projects that SODC has funded, have a look at the [grants pages](#) on their website.

Bringing empty homes back into use

Property owners are being offered support to bring empty homes back into use, to help meet local housing needs. Financial assistance towards refurbishing properties where eligible, rent in advance and help with finding a tenant are some of the support options available to empty homeowners from South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils. Property owners could also benefit from reduced VAT for works on empty homes - if the owner is paying the Long-Term Empty Property Premium tax (payable if a property has been empty for more than two years). The council's team can talk property owners through the various benefits and options available for preparing a property for renting out or selling.

An estimated 1,092 properties (549 in South Oxfordshire, 543 in the Vale) are currently empty, but could once more become a home for those who need it most.

Some of these homes are unoccupied for a good reason – such as undergoing major refurbishment or awaiting sale. This initiative will target those properties that may need some extra help in being brought back into use.

Members of the public can also play a part in bringing empty homes back into use by reporting empty properties to the councils. Local residents have already reported 59 empty homes (19 in South Oxfordshire, 40 in the Vale) and 29 are now back in use.

Every empty property has the potential to become a home for someone who really needs it, and demand for affordable housing in our district is very high. It's hoped that the extra help SODC is offering offering property owners will be a real incentive to work with us on turning properties around so they can be a home once more.

Public consultation on charity collection policy

Residents, charities and businesses in South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse are encouraged to comment on a new policy for charity collections across the two districts. Aimed at safeguarding donors and beneficiaries, ensuring fair access to collection opportunities and preventing unlicensed fundraising, the proposed policy introduces key measures, including:

- A requirement for applicants to provide detailed supporting material about their charity.
- Restrictions on where collections can take place to prevent blanket district-wide collections.
- A minimum of 80 per cent of money donated during house-to-house collections to go to the charitable cause.
- A fairer allocation of street collection opportunities.
- Clear grounds for refusing applications and licence revocations.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils are keen to hear from local people and organisations to help shape the final version of the policy before it is implemented.

The consultation is open until 11.59pm on Wednesday 26 March 2025. For more information and to take part, visit southandvale.gov.uk/CharityCollectionsConsultation

As I was quoted in the recent press release on this policy, charity collections play a vital role in supporting good causes, but it's essential to ensure they are well-regulated and fair for everyone. This policy will help protect donors, ensure transparency and create a level playing field for all charities.