

## **District Councillor Annual Report 2024-2025**

### **Cllr Jo Robb, Cllr James Norman**

#### **Local Government Reorganisation**

The biggest single shake-up in local government for 50 years has cast a long shadow over the District Council this year.

Despite the very short notice given by the government, SODC was able to work up a viable option of a unitary council comprising South, Vale and West Berkshire. We already had a commitment that any unitary should be small enough to be close to the communities it serves, but large enough to be financially viable and effective.

Oxfordshire County Council submitted an option for an Oxfordshire unitary while Oxford City submitted an application for an enlarged Oxford City which would take in large chunks of South Oxfordshire.

We do not think that at this time of deteriorating services and infrastructure in the country that local government reorganisation should be a priority, but we need to respond to the government's requirements.

#### **Cleaner, greener technologies at Leisure centres**

Over the last year we have continued our successful bidding for funds to invest in cleaner, greener technologies at our leisure centres in Didcot, Thame, Henley and Wheatley. This means there are more solar panels, and energy saving systems like fans that push heat downwards to keep heat where it is needed.

#### **Homes that people need**

We have worked on changing our empty homes policy to bring more empty homes into use (there are just under 600 in the District), increasing council tax liability on empty homes (while recognising, for example, the lengthy delays of the probate process) but also offering support and guidance to carry out the work needed to bring empty homes back into use.

We have delivered 48 affordable homes, and progressed work to buy and build more social homes for rent. We have done this using developer contributions and grants from central government, further example of our creative approach to finding funding for our priorities. We are also supporting other organisations such as Community Land Trusts and Almshouse charities to build new affordable and social homes.

#### **Joint Local Plan submitted for examination by the Planning Inspectorate**

We submitted this somewhat earlier than we initially planned to, in December. We included some of the most progressive policies that we could in relation to carbon, nature and community inclusion in this plan. We did not add any more homes to the total expected to be built over the period to 2041, and in fact removed strategic sites at Chalgrove and

Nettlebed, as the evidence showed these sites were undeliverable, were not needed and/or conflicted with our policies on protecting the Chilterns National Landscape. We expect the examination to happen in June. This was the culmination of 4 years of extensive work to make it the best plan for our District, while being legally compliant and sound.

### **Grants for communities**

We had fantastic demand for our councillor community grants, and the council has increased this grant by 50% for next year, since they are so popular.

Jo and James have been able to award money to help fund essential repairs to the roof at the Springwater Church in Rotherfield Peppard, wheelchair access to the Shedquarters in Peppard, new footpath accesses at St Bartholomew's Nettlebed and funding for Young Climate Warriors, among other local projects. As ever, our grants were heavily oversubscribed.

We do encourage community groups to come forward with requests for funds – our excellent community grants team can signpost organisations to the funding that is available, irrespective of whether an official grant scheme is open.

We've introduced a new performing arts grant, adding to the grants for communities including the capital and revenue grants and the newly established and very popular Everyone Active grant.

### **Launched our new 4-year Council Plan**

Building on our last strategic plan, we are focusing on climate action, supporting community action, providing homes people need, and being innovative but careful with council finances. We will be delivering our first annual action plan this coming year, because even though there are local government reorganisation proposals, these will take at least two years to be finalised.

### **Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership Charter**

We have committed to supporting the county, along with other councils, by pledging our commitment to OIEP. It means when the council agrees contracts with external providers, it will assess the support the supplier can offer the local community, as well as the value for money of the contract.

### **New Garden Waste Permit scheme launched**

This should work better for householders and the Council after the initial teething period. It means we will spend less money and time chasing payments. A large number of brown bins were being collected that were not being paid for (because residents moved away etc). The initial transition period was difficult for many residents but the council put on additional staff who guided residents through the process over the phone with no need for computer literacy. Should residents ever have difficulty accessing any of the council's services, please do let us know, we are committed to making sure everyone can access services fairly,

including those who do not have access to the internet or who are not computer literate (understandably so!).

We remain the Number 1 district in the country for recycling. Congratulations and thanks to all our residents who are so diligent in ensuring that we minimise our waste and maximise what goes to our recycling centres.

### **Flooding prevention work with parishes and the County**

We collaborated with other councils to implement more prevention measures after some really horrendous flooding in people's homes last winter. As weather patterns becomes less predictable and more severe, we are doing what we can to help people and communities adapt.

### **Your Local Councillors**

Jo and James continued to attend parish council meetings wherever possible and have worked on residents' behalf on issues relating to unsatisfactory social and private housing, residents at risk of homelessness, planning and enforcement, issues with high-speed broadband rollout, statutory nuisance (noise, animals/vermin and bonfire smoke), litter and fly tipping, residents struggling with the cost of living and concerns relating to Thames Water.

Jo has continued her role on the Oxfordshire Pension Fund Committee where she is now the longest serving member. She sits on the Police and Crime Panel where she pushed for stronger action on speeding and raised concerns about dangerous custody arrangements which pose a risk to minors and persons in custody. Jo also sits on the Planning and Joint Scrutiny Committees and is Chair of the Licensing Panel.

James has continued his work as a Nettlebed Conservator and his role as SODC representative on the Chilterns Conservation Board, where he brings his expertise as a nature conservationist and organic farmer of four decades. He worked with the Nettlebed Conservators and Peppard Parish Council to restore a wheelchair accessible path at Kingwood Common. There are so few places where wheelchair users can access the beauty of nature, this restored path is an excellent step forward. James also sits on the Planning Committee.

As ever, please do get in touch if you have any questions. We always work constructively with our officers and County Councillors (with responsibility for roads, schools and social care) to ensure the best outcomes for our residents and our local area.