

District Councillor Update – March 2025
Cllr Jo Robb, Cllr James Norman

Jo.robbs@southandvale.gov.uk

James.norman@southandvale.gov.uk

Budget 2025-2026: Financial Prudence and Ongoing Investment

Prudent financial management means that South Oxfordshire District Council delivered a balanced budget for 2025-2026. For the first time in nine years, the council has not needed to dip into its reserves.

In the context of a crisis in local authority finances, it is a remarkable achievement to have delivered a budget surplus without any cuts to services. South Oxfordshire remains one of the lowest taxing of any shire district in the country.

South Oxfordshire District Council receives just six per cent of the total council tax that its residents pay each year, though we are responsible for collecting the council tax. The rest is divided between Oxfordshire County Council (77 per cent), Thames Valley's Police and Crime Commissioner (12 per cent) and local town/parish councils (five per cent).

South Oxfordshire's council tax is currently the 10th lowest among all shire district councils nationally and is less than half the equivalent charge in neighbouring Oxford City.

Addressing Housing Need in our Local Area

As part of our long term strategy to address our social housing waiting list, £10m of funding will be released from reserves for the purchase of more social housing across the district, to match the £10m already committed from the government's Local Authority Housing Fund.

Community Hub – Continued Support for Residents who are Struggling

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.

Grants for Community Groups

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 and refurbishment projects. These will also help with the cost of heating and running the leisure centres.

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 (where we remain the number 1 recyclers in the country), community support, leisure services, parks and play areas, housing and planning services, environmental health and licensing.

Councillor Grants Awarded

The SODC councillor grants for 2024-25 have now all been awarded. James and Jo made the decisions jointly and once again, our grants were heavily (more than three times) oversubscribed. Thank you to all the community groups who applied. We had some very difficult decisions to make but are extremely pleased that the new budget increases our Community Grants pot by 50%.

We have helped the following projects and organisations in our ward:

1	CGS24-25/178	St Bartholomew's Nettlebed Parochial Church Council	Churchyard path upgrade & refurbishment	£2,000
2	CGS24-25/180	Bix and Assendon Parish Council	Purchase of a bench to be situated near Bix Church grounds	£500
3	CGS24-25/47	Peppard War Memorial Hall	Outside space improvements including disabled ramps	£1,500
4	CGS24-25/53	River & Rowing Museum Foundation	All Aboard: Joint Educational Partnership - Pilot Project	£500
5	CGS24-25/200	Springwater Church	Springwater Church Maintenance needs for multiple projects	£3,000
	CGS24-25/76	Friend of Bix Church	All weather access path	£1,500

7	CGS24-25/179	Young Climate Warriors	Young Climate Warriors - growing climate engagement in local schools	£1,000
---	--------------	------------------------	--	--------

The grant for Springwater Church's roof repairs were expedited to enable the project to be completed quickly, ahead of the wet winter weather.

Grant funding advice session

SODC officers are holding a grant funding advice session at Cornerstone Arts Centre in Didcot on Thursday 20 March, appointments available from 12.30pm to 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.

Unlike many councils, South Oxfordshire has a number of grant schemes for local community groups and projects – use them while you still can!

These currently include:

Everyone Active Grant £50,000 - Launch dates: 1 April – 26 May 2025

Capital Grant Scheme £320,000 - Launch dates: 2 June – 25 July 2025

Performing Arts Grant (2025) £60,000, 28 July – 5 September 2025

Councillor Community Grant Scheme, £270,000, August – December 2025

(this is divided by ward; the amount we can allocate has increased from £5K to £7.5K for the coming year)

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Grant Fund £750,000, Jan 2026.

Places for the grant advice session are limited, so please encourage organisations to book a time slot by emailing grants@southandvale.gov.uk or phone 01235 422405.

Alternatively, if they are unable to attend, the team are happy to book a phone call or Teams meeting at a more convenient time. Please help us to spread the word!

We are one of very few councils that offers a grant using district CIL funds.

Latest on new Local Plan 2026-2041

The new Local Plan has successfully completed all consultation stages and is now with a Planning Inspector. A list of 75 initial questions has been sent to SODC and later this year public hearings will be held.

Local Government Reorganisation

As we have previously reported, the Labour Government plans to abolish all county and district councils and replace them with new unitary councils comprising populations of at least 500,000 and mayoral authorities covering 1.5m people.

Green councillors called for a Full Council meeting to give members a chance discuss the proposals in public and to hear from the leader of the council and the chief executive about what is happening. This took place on 20 February, some 66 days after the publication of the white paper on local government reform.

Greens (unsuccessfully) put forward a motion calling for more democratic oversight of any mayor and a fairer voting system. A key concern around the reorganisation is the introduction of distant mayors with vast powers but little democratic accountability. The turnout for the Police and Crime Commissioner elections, for example, was just 30%.

SODC is exploring two options – a single council for Oxfordshire and a combined council with Vale of White Horse and West Berkshire.

The chief executive described how the local government reorganisation is taking up a large amount of time for senior staff at the councils and the efforts that are being made to ensure that areas where our council is a national leader (waste and recycling where we are number 1 in the country, homelessness prevention where we are also national leaders, efficiency, staff satisfaction and the acquisition of social housing and our community hub) are not compromised.

We have a very well-run council – financially stable, close to its communities and innovative - and the key will be to ensure the services we offer are not compromised or lost in this reshuffle.

Bringing Empty Homes Back into Use

We are committed to bringing empty properties back into use - that's why we recently reduced the time property owners can keep a home empty before council tax increases (with sensible exceptions for construction work, moving house etc).

We are trying to increase the local supply of housing to tackle the affordable housing shortfall. Our Empty Homes Officer is here to support our empty homes policy by helping bring short and long-term empty properties back into use by working closely with owners and the local community.

If you would like to discuss the help available to bring an empty property back into use, please email our Empty Homes Officer at emptyhomes@southandvale.gov.uk.
<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/housing/empty-homes/>

Social housing allocation policy changes

SODC's public consultation on proposed changes to the Joint Housing Allocations Policy is currently live.

Although the council only owns a few homes itself (although more are being purchased and built by the council), it is responsible for housing allocations in the District for the housing associations such as SOHA.

Last updated in 2019, the policy needs refreshing to reflect current housing priorities. There are four main proposed changes to the policy, including increases to the earnings threshold, and the policy on unacceptable behaviour.

Details on how to take part are on Join The Conversation, our Community Engagement website and the consultation runs until Tuesday 18 March 2025.

New affordable housing funded by SODC opens in Wheatley

The Council's Affordable Housing Programme, providing energy-efficient general needs social housing, significantly funded the development of 12 high quality, spacious homes at Cullum House, Wheatley, replacing 12 unsuitable bedsits.

Solar panels conduct electricity to the communal indoor areas as well as to the twilight-activated lighting in the car park, which also has electric vehicle charging points linked to the individual supply to each flat. Each home has underfloor heating programmable separately for each room provided by an air source heat pump while mechanical ventilation with heat recovery in each home mitigates the airtight build quality. The flats are fitted with low energy lighting to reduce electricity usage.

Council building new affordable apartments

I'm also pleased that we've now submitted a planning application for 8 x 1-bedroom and 1x 2 bedroom affordable apartments to be built by SODC on council land on Broadway in Didcot, as well as a new community space. You can see the planning application [here](#). These are the first new homes to be built by the council since the 1990s!