District Councillor Update

October / November 2026

Cllr Maggie Filipova-Rivers



Dear Clerks, Chairs and Councillors,

This update covers a number of important developments across the district, including two major changes to the future of local government that could have lasting implications for our services, investment, and communities. As Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, a considerable amount of my time in recent months has been devoted to Local Government Reorganisation and devolution. I appreciate your patience and understanding as I navigate these complex issues alongside my wider council responsibilities.

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1. Local Government Reorganisation: Government announces revised proposals

Following a pause in September, the Government announced on 29 October that it is minded to replace the seven existing councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire with three unitary authorities. A unitary council brings together services currently split between district and county councils, including planning, waste collection, highways, education and social care. This remains a proposed decision, with a further opportunity for council leaders and MPs to make representations over approximately three weeks and an update to Parliament expected before Christmas.

The proposed new councils are **Greater Oxford**, covering Oxford and surrounding areas; **North Oxfordshire**, covering most of Cherwell and West Oxfordshire; and **Ridgeway**, bringing together West Berkshire with most of South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse.

I remain disappointed that the proposal divides South Oxfordshire, moving some rural villages into Greater Oxford despite their connections to surrounding rural communities. We have consistently argued for an approach that better reflects local identity, service delivery and financial resilience. However, I welcome the fact that the revised boundaries would now retain Nuneham Courtenay, Culham, Clifton Hampden, Marsh Baldon, Great Milton, Wheatley, Waterstock and Holton within Ridgeway rather than Greater Oxford.

For parish councils, these boundaries matter because they determine the authority responsible for local planning, housing, waste services and, in future, functions now delivered by the county council. I want the final arrangements to respect the needs of rural settlements and provide clear, accessible local accountability.

The Government has indicated that representations can still be made and proposals refined. I am considering how best to use this opportunity, drawing on evidence about local identity, travel patterns, service relationships and infrastructure. Parish councils with specific concerns or evidence about the proposed boundaries are welcome to let me know.

Oxfordshire County Council issued a formal pre action protocol letter to Government in October, seeking the evidence and analysis underpinning its original decision to divide Oxfordshire into three unitary councils. It also lodged a protective claim with the court ahead of a potential judicial review.

Following the Government's new minded to decision on 29 October, the County Council has been advised that its previous legal action no longer applies. The Council remains opposed to the three unitary model, citing concerns about financial sustainability, service delivery and accountability. It intends to make further representations to Government and is considering whether to pursue a new legal challenge. No decision to launch a further challenge has yet been announced.

Under the current timetable, elections to the **new shadow councils would take place in May 2028**. Those shadow authorities would prepare for the transition but would not yet deliver services. The existing councils would continue until 1 April 2029, when the new councils are due to take over. The scheduled May 2027 local elections are expected to proceed on existing boundaries.

Read the council's LGR announcement and revised timetable

2. Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority: opportunity and questions about devolution

Separately from local government reorganisation, the Government is proposing a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA) for Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon. This would create a new regional level of decision making, led by an elected mayor, with potential powers and funding for strategic transport, infrastructure, housing, skills, economic development and investment. It would sit above the local councils rather than replace them.

I support the principle of devolution: decisions affecting our communities should be taken closer to them, and greater local control over investment could bring substantial benefits. But the geography and the way this proposal has been developed raise serious questions. Our preferred arrangement has been Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, reflecting existing economic and public service links across the Thames Valley.

The Government instead proposed including Swindon while Buckinghamshire is not currently participating. That could have implications for established partnerships and service boundaries, including policing, fire and rescue, health and other regional arrangements. The costs, disruption and practical benefits have not yet been adequately established.

Following a ministerial meeting on 21 October, leaders were effectively given just two working days to respond. That was insufficient time for a decision with such lasting consequences to be properly examined by councils or communities. I therefore wrote to Minister Jim McMahon on 26 October, setting out both our support for devolution in principle and our reservations about the proposed geography and process.

South Oxfordshire has agreed to participate in the next phase of developing the proposal, but this is not an endorsement of the final arrangements. We need a credible, evidence based assessment of the funding, powers, costs, governance and impacts on existing services, followed by meaningful public consultation. Any final proposal would still need to pass through the appropriate democratic processes.

For parish councils, the key question is whether a strategic authority would bring real improvements to transport connections, infrastructure and local economic opportunities, including in rural communities. I will continue to press for local voices to be heard and for any additional layer of government to demonstrate clear benefits and value for money.

Read my letter to Minister McMahon, 26 October 2026

Read the council's public explanation of the devolution proposals

3. Oxford Growth Commission and Proposed Development Corporation

Another significant strategic issue that has taken considerable time and attention is the Oxford Growth Commission's proposal for a Greater Oxford Development Corporation. While its direct impact on villages in the south of our district is likely to be limited, the wider implications for planning, housing and infrastructure are important.

Following conversations with the Chair of the Commission, I can share several developments:

- **Boundaries**: The proposed Development Corporation's area is likely to closely mirror that of the proposed Greater Oxford unitary council.
- **Planning powers**: The Corporation is expected to take responsibility for planning decisions above a certain threshold, focusing on major strategic development sites. The precise scope and thresholds still need to be defined.
- **Housing growth**: The interim report included some eye watering projections for future housing growth, including development in the Green Belt. However, the more immediate and realistic priority is likely to be unlocking existing allocated sites that have stalled because of economic conditions and infrastructure constraints
- **Infrastructure first**: One potentially positive development is the Commission's emphasis on delivering infrastructure before housing, alongside efforts to secure additional government funding. Under current planning arrangements, infrastructure is often delivered in stages as developments reach agreed housing numbers, rather than being provided at the outset.
- **Representation on governance board**: I have been reassured that district councils will be represented on the board until such time that LGR takes place.

I was critical of the interim report's rather negative portrayal of local authorities and have been assured that the final report will present a more balanced assessment. The final recommendations are expected in November, with consultation on the Development Corporation proposals to follow. I will continue to scrutinise the implications, particularly for local democratic accountability, planning powers and the delivery of infrastructure that our communities need.

4. Council Finances: Preparing for 2027 to 2029

The delay to Local Government Reorganisation means South Oxfordshire District Council will continue operating until April 2029. Our Medium-Term Financial Plan must therefore take a prudent approach to maintaining services and financial stability over the next two and a half years, rather than preparing for an earlier transition.

Local government finances nationally remain under considerable pressure. The Local Government Association estimates that councils in England face a **£7 billion funding gap by 2028/29**, driven by rising costs and demand for services. Its latest survey also found that 58 per cent of councils were struggling to balance their 2026/27 budgets.

South Oxfordshire is in a comparatively strong financial position, arguably the least challenging among Oxfordshire's councils. At present, we do not anticipate needing significant service cuts to balance our budget, although careful financial management remains essential.

The picture is more difficult elsewhere. Oxfordshire County Council is already forecasting substantial savings requirements, while our sister council, Vale of White Horse, is also likely to face a more challenging budget setting process.

My priority is to ensure that South Oxfordshire remains financially resilient, continues to protect valued local services and enters the transition to the new unitary arrangements in the strongest possible position.

5. Building Stronger Communities: £100,000 Secured

Following our Fair Treatment for All Residents motion in October 2025, South Oxfordshire District Council has been developing a programme of work to strengthen community relationships and bring people together.

Our new Be Together programme supports small community activities, including yoga, arts events, bicycle repairs, food skills courses and opportunities for residents to try something new. The aim is to reduce isolation, encourage participation and build stronger connections between neighbours.

We are also developing our first Community Cohesion Strategy, working with Belong, the Cohesion and Integration Network. I am particularly pleased that this partnership has secured £100,000 in external funding to support projects delivering the strategy.

Belong is gathering views from residents, community groups and local organisations during September to November. I would encourage parish councils to contribute their experiences and suggest local groups that should be involved. **Please let me know if there are organisations in your parish that would like to participate**.

6. Tackling Noisy Vehicles and Antisocial Driving

Following the council's recent motion on excessive vehicle noise and antisocial driving, I have continued to press **Matthew Barber, Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner**, for stronger enforcement and a more coordinated response to a problem affecting many of our communities.

I have now written to the Commissioner twice, asking particularly about identifying recurring hotspots, using police data to target enforcement and making it easier for residents to report incidents. In his latest response, the Commissioner confirmed that neighbourhood policing teams can use hotspot mapping and that residents' reports help inform enforcement priorities.

I have also written to the Department for Transport. Its response confirmed that police powers have recently been strengthened, allowing vehicles used antisocially to be seized without a prior warning in certain circumstances. The Department also acknowledged the potential of noise cameras, although technical and cost limitations mean they are not yet widely used for enforcement.

A meeting with Matthew Barber is now being arranged later this month, and I will continue to press for practical action, particularly better reporting, identification of persistent hotspots and targeted enforcement.

In the meantime, I encourage residents and parish councils to report recurring incidents to Thames Valley Police on **101 or through its online antisocial behaviour reporting service**. This information helps the police build a clearer picture of where enforcement is needed.

Further information: My correspondence with the Police and Crime Commissioner and the Department for Transport.

7. Decarbonisation and Improvements to Council Facilities

South Oxfordshire District Council continues to invest in improving public facilities, reducing carbon emissions and modernising leisure centres, with several major projects progressing.

Decarbonisation of leisure centres: Work at Park Sports Centre in Wheatley is nearing completion, while the next phase of our Public Sector Decarbonisation Scheme will upgrade Abbey Sports Centre in Berinsfield and Henley Leisure Centre. These projects involve substantial changes to heating and energy systems, with

completion currently anticipated by summer 2028. Decarbonisation works at Didcot Wave are also progressing through procurement, with a further £1.02 million identified for the project, subject to approval.

Cornerstone Arts Centre: The energy efficiency and decarbonisation works at Cornerstone in Didcot are expected to finish in December 2026, within the revised grant deadline and forecast budget. Alongside these improvements, we are progressing refurbishment of the toilets and cloakroom from January 2027, followed by improvements to the café and atrium in summer 2027.

Goring and Dorchester public toilets: Refurbishment plans are progressing for both facilities, with specifications being prepared and a construction tender anticipated towards the end of 2026.

Improving leisure provision: Plans for a new learner pool at Didcot Wave are moving through the early design stages. At Abbey Sports Centre, work is also progressing to replace the sports hall floor, which currently restricts some activities. The replacement will address underlying damp issues as well as improving the playing surface.

These projects represent continued investment in the facilities our communities rely on, while helping to reduce the council's energy consumption and reliance on fossil fuels.

8. Housing Delivery and Homelessness Prevention

Housing delivery and homelessness prevention remain major priorities for South Oxfordshire District Council. With demand for affordable housing continuing to grow, we are taking a more active role in providing homes ourselves, alongside established housing associations such as Soha.

Since adopting our Housing Delivery Strategy in 2022, we have expanded our role as a **Registered Provider of social housing**, building a portfolio of council-owned homes. We now own **57 properties**, with approximately **17 further purchases planned by spring 2027**, supported by government funding and our own capital investment.

We are also progressing the redevelopment of the **Broadway site in Didcot**, which will provide nine new homes, supported by Homes England funding. These are expected to be completed by the end of 2027 and allocated to households on the housing register.

Our focus is particularly on increasing the supply of suitable temporary accommodation, reducing reliance on expensive bed and breakfast accommodation and hotels, and helping households move into more secure housing.

Homelessness prevention is another area where our teams continue to achieve excellent results. In September, homelessness was successfully prevented in **83% of cases in South Oxfordshire**, compared with a national average of just over 50%. The team also helped three people sleeping rough secure accommodation during the month.

We have additionally secured **£122,859 in government funding** to provide targeted accommodation and support for people experiencing entrenched rough sleeping. Officers are developing the programme with the aim of having support available from December.

There is much to be proud of in the work of our housing teams, but significant challenges remain. At the end of September, **1,858 households were on South Oxfordshire's housing register**, illustrating the scale of local housing need.

My ambition is that, by the time local government reorganisation takes effect in 2029, we will have established a strong foundation for the successor authority to **scale up its own housing provision**, giving it greater control over housing delivery, reducing the costs of homelessness and providing more secure homes for residents who need them.

9. Community Grants: Make the Most of the Funding Available

South Oxfordshire District Council committed **£1.55 million to community grants in 2026/27**, supporting everything from village halls and playgrounds to community activities, climate action and local infrastructure.

These grants have made a real difference to our towns and villages. However, with Local Government Reorganisation approaching in April 2029, **we do not yet know which schemes or funding levels the successor authority will retain**. I would therefore strongly encourage parish councils and community organisations to make the most of the opportunities available now.

There are several schemes worth highlighting:

- **Councillor Community Grants:** £270,000 available district-wide, with each district councillor allocated £7,500 to support local projects. Grants start at £250, and parish councils and community groups are eligible. **Deadline: midday, 4 December 2026.** Apply here.
- **Nature and Climate Action Fund:** A new £100,000 fund offering grants of £250 to £10,000 for projects such as improving village hall energy efficiency, tree planting, biodiversity, flood resilience and sustainable transport. **Deadline: midday, 20 November 2026.** Apply here.
- **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Grants:** £750,000 is earmarked for community infrastructure projects, with the next application round provisionally scheduled to open on **15 February 2027**. This could be particularly valuable for parish councils planning improvements to local facilities.
- **Nature Recovery Fund:** A further £50,000 is available through the Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment, offering grants of £2,500 to £25,000 for projects such as hedgerows, ponds, meadows, community orchards and improving access to nature. Applications are considered quarterly. Further information.

Our Capital Grants, Performing Arts and other funding rounds have already closed for this year, but further opportunities may arise before reorganisation.

My advice to parish councils is to start identifying projects now, even where they are still at an early stage. Please do not assume these funding opportunities will continue unchanged under the new council. Our grants team can help assess eligibility and discuss proposals at grants@southandvale.gov.uk or on 01235 422405.

You can find all current schemes, guidance, and application details on the SODC Community Grants webpage.

10. Extra Garden Waste Collections in November

Residents with a valid garden waste permit can benefit from **free additional garden waste collections between 2 and 13 November 2026**, on their usual collection day.

Households can put out up to **four extra 60-litre sacks per permit**, alongside their brown bin. Sacks must be left untied and contain only natural garden waste, such as leaves, grass cuttings, plants and small branches. Larger bags, including builders' bags, will not be collected.

All collected garden waste is turned into compost at a facility near Wallingford and used by local farmers, helping to return nutrients to the soil.

For more information, including how to purchase a permit valid until March 2027, visit the South Oxfordshire garden waste webpage.