

Title	District Councillors' Report
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Parish	Warborough & Shillingford Parish Council
Date	3 rd September 2025

Local Government Reorganisation

“The BBC has learned that the Government did not conduct its own cost analysis of England's largest council reorganisation in decades, instead relying on a 2020 report by the County Councils Network (CCN) and PwC. That report estimated £2.9bn of savings over five years by merging some councils into single authorities. However, the CCN has since revised its findings, warning that in some scenarios the changes could cost £850m and deliver no savings. Deputy Prime Minister Angela Rayner has argued that merging councils will improve accountability and release funds for frontline services, but critics say the absence of updated government analysis is concerning. The District Councils' Network (DCN) warns that the creation of 'mega councils' could produce poor results in light of the funding pressures already facing local government.”

This quote comes from a recent Local Government Information Unit report. If one was cynical one might suggest that this story may have been planted by the CCN to support the push for single county-wide unitary authorities..... The final submission of the “Two Unitaries” proposal supported by SODC, Vale of White Horse, West Berkshire, West Oxfordshire and Cherwell is due to be completed in mid September in order to meet the government's deadline. MHCLG will determine which proposals meet their validity criteria and will then carry out formal consultations in 2026. There were 2,135 responses to the public engagement exercise carried out by the five authorities supporting the Two Unitaries proposal, with the most frequently referenced issues being Value for Money and the importance of maintaining local decision-making and representation. We will continue to provide updates as and when we have anything new to report!

Grants

The Councillor Grant scheme opened on 18th August (£15k between us), the Performing Arts Grant Fund (£60k) opened on 28th July and the CIL Grant fund (£750k) in January 2026. As of today, there have been no applications yet in our ward for the Councillor Grant, so if the Parish Council would like to make a submission, we would definitely encourage it.

At its last full meeting, SODC's Council agreed to increase the amount of funding available for the Revenue Grants scheme for 2025-27 using an underspend from the previous financial year. At the Community Grants Panel meeting in February, the Committee had asked for this to be explored because we had received applications far in excess of the funds available and were only able to award 40% funding to 15 of the applicants. The increase of some £521k means that all 17 applicants will receive 100% of their requested amount.

The grantees include organisations that provide exceptionally valuable services to their local communities, many of which have become essential due to cuts in funding to local authorities from central government. These include the Berin Centre, Wallingford Family Centre, SOFEA, Be Free Young Carers, River Thame Conservation Trust, Didcot TRAIN and MyVision Oxfordshire. Full details of the grants to be received can be found in the Cabinet papers for the meeting of 10th July.

Didcot Gateway Office

The Council received planning permission to build a new office accommodation at the Didcot Gateway regeneration site opposite Didcot station at the Planning Committee earlier this month. However, because of Local Government Reorganisation the project has now been formally closed in recognition that SODC no longer has the justification to build it due to SODC's imminent demise. The site will ultimately transfer to the newly constituted authority which will make its own decision about how to use it. The Council does have planning permission to continue using the site as a temporary car park for a further two years and work is ongoing to install a new electricity substation so that a suitable electricity supply will be available if and when development does take place. The Council has therefore maximised the value of the site for the time being.

At July's Council meeting it was agreed that £10 million which would have gone into building the new offices will now be spent on buying more, much needed, houses for social rent (probably some 30 properties). This means that a total of £20m has now been allocated for social housing, so the Property Team has its work cut out for it, but they are already making very good progress in purchasing and identifying suitable homes that can be made available for those on the Housing Register.

Incidentally, another planning application has been submitted by the Councils for a new refuse vehicle depot near Great Haseley - <https://www.southandvale.gov.uk/haseley-trading-estate/>.

WOW – the walk to school challenge

WOW is a walk to school challenge. Run by Living Streets, is a pupil-led initiative that encourages active travel. It's been helping to reduce congestion and pollution at thousands of schools for 20 years. By taking part, WOW encourages parents to swap the school run for an active travel journey and each day children self-report how they get to school. Oxfordshire already has 25 schools taking part in WOW. We would very much like our local schools to take part in this. All the school needs to do is fill out this simple form: livingstreets.org.uk/FreeWOW or email: walktoschool@livingstreets.org.uk

Community Energy Benefit Options

There was only one motion debated at the recent Council meeting, proposed by Green Councillor Ali Gordon-Creed and seconded by Lib Dem Councillor Ed Sadler. This motion proposed that new renewable energy infrastructure should contribute positively to the wellbeing and prosperity of the communities hosting them through a local shared ownership or benefit schemes. It proposed that these schemes should be a standard feature of all major renewable developments, with South Oxfordshire taking the opportunity to lead by example in supporting fair, community-led energy. The motion was passed unanimously.

Councils' Letting Service, White Horse Lettings

We have been asked to remind everyone that the Councils run a not-for-profit lettings agency in SODC and Vale of White Horse, which has since 2007 successfully created an average of 50 new tenancies each year. The Housing Team works with private landlords to match them with tenants and to support both parties throughout the tenancy. The service is completely free to landlords, and they are able to keep 100% of the rent paid. If you are aware of any landlords or prospective renters, please put them in touch with White Horse Lettings through <https://southoxon.gov.uk/whitehorselettings>.

Planning Update

The Planning and Infrastructure Bill continues to make its way through the legislative process (it is currently at Committee Stage in the House of Lords). It is a complex Bill dealing with proposed new nature restoration levy scheme, compulsory purchase powers and the general process surrounding town and country planning, in order to remove any obstacles to meeting the ambitious housing targets set out by the Government. The proposed reforms to the planning system, should they be approved, will remove the ability of local councillors to “call in” any controversial applications, and only the larger developments of 10 or more houses would be decided by Committee, with all other applications being decided by the planning officers. Our Planning officers are extremely capable and professional, of course, but they sometimes don’t have the local insights that a Parish Council or local ward member would bring to the debate, so there are some concerns that taking away the right of local representatives to raise concerns about certain applications is a retrograde step. We shall see how this aspect of the new legislation evolves.

In the meantime, the Joint Local Plan 2041 remains at the examination stage – all of the latest information can be found here - <https://www.southandvale.gov.uk/joint-local-plan-2041-examination/>

SODC’s Planning Committee on 13th August refused permission for a Battery Energy Storage System (BESS) near Garsington, on a site which currently sits wholly within the Green Belt. The Committee determined that the site could not be considered as grey belt as it would result in an isolated development in close proximity to Oxford which would be harmful in terms of openness. The planning officer concluded in his report to Committee that the proposed development’s benefits were outweighed by the substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt, both spatially and visually, as well as undermining Purpose A of the Green Belt and causing significant adverse effects to the open landscape. As such the proposal was recommended for refusal and after debate, the Planning Committee agreed.