

# **SODC Councillors Annual Report for Warborough & Shillingford Annual Parish Meeting, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2026**

## **Councillors Andrea Powell and Sue Cooper**

### **Leadership Changes at the District Council**

In May 2025 the majority Liberal Democrat group voted to dissolve the partnership with the Green Group and took over running the Council. The Green Group became the official opposition and took over the Charing of Scrutiny Committee. Cllr David Rouane continued as Leader until stepping down at the December 2025 Full Council meeting; at the same meeting Cllr Maggie Filipova-Rivers was elected as Leader. Cllr Filipova-Rivers appointed a new Cabinet shortly afterwards, and Sue was persuaded back to take up the Cabinet portfolio for Waste and Environment. Since May 2025 Andrea has been the Vice Chair of SODC and has represented the Council at several events when the Chair has been unavailable.

The Council also appointed a new Chief Executive Officer (jointly with Vale of White Horse Council) following the departure of Mark Stone. One of the two previous Deputy Chief Executives was then appointed as his successor after a competitive process and Adrianna Partridge took up her new role in January 2026.

We still expect that, in May 2027, elections will be held for the new Unitary Authority which is due to replace SODC and OCC, and that this new Council will come into existence in April 2028. However, we do not yet know what the geography of this new Council will be; we expect to learn the government's decision in summer 2026. The 2026/27 municipal year will therefore be the last for SODC, other than as a "holding" body while the new Statutory Authority takes shape. This means that we are only able to agree contract extensions with key suppliers rather than entering into new negotiations and are unable to initiate major new programmes that would incur expenditure beyond the life of the Council. The most obvious example of this is the shelving of the plans to build new Council offices at the Gateway regeneration site in Didcot, although planning permission has been granted and can be inherited by our successor authority.

### **Proposed "Greater Oxford Development Corporation"**

On 17<sup>th</sup> March all Oxfordshire Leaders received a letter from Housing Minister Matthew Pennycook signalling the Government's intent to create a "centrally-driven Urban Development Corporation" for "Greater Oxford". They will consult fully on this proposal later this year, with the key consultation questions being:

- The case for establishing a centrally-led Urban Development Corporation
- The proposed objectives and activities of the Development Corporation.
- The proposed geographical boundary in which the Development Corporation would operate.
- The proposed approach to powers that the Development Corporation would be granted.
- The proposed approach to governance of the Development Corporation, including the role of local democratic representation.

The letter takes pains to stress that this is entirely separate from the process of Local Government Reorganisation. Needless to say, we would be very concerned about the erosion of

local decision-making when it comes to major planning and development, since any new “DevCo” would assume responsibility for such matters. It would not be led by democratically elected local politicians but by centrally appointed bureaucrats. A similar proposal has already been the subject of consultation in Cambridge (covering Cambridge City and South Cambs) and has been met with strong opposition from locally elected representatives.

### **Thames Valley Devolution**

Alongside all of the work on Local Government Reorganisation, there are also proposals under way to create a strategic authority in the Thames Valley, which would sit above whichever new Unitary Authorities are determined through the LGR process. An expression of interest letter has been submitted to government, following detailed talks with Ministers, by local authorities in Berkshire and Oxfordshire, setting out a shared ambition towards the creation of a foundation strategic authority (FSA), which is a step along the path towards a Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA). The argument is that a strategic authority made up of a number of councils will enable them to plan and deliver more integrated and effective transport, infrastructure and the right type of housing – with an emphasis on social housing – creating the conditions for faster, more inclusive growth across the region. It is understood that the government has accepted the economic case for the region and we expect to receive feedback by May 2026.

### **Delivering the Council’s Priorities in 2025/26**

In February 2025 the Council adopted its current strategic plan, called “The Way Ahead”, which has five key priorities:

- Action on climate change and nature recovery
- Financial stability and innovative transformation
- Participation, accessibility and accountability
- Homes and infrastructure that meet local needs
- Thriving, healthy and inclusive communities

Despite the pending changes to local government structure, this past year has been focused on working through the annual delivery plan which supports these objectives; this can be found on the SODC website [here](#)

Some good examples of how the plan is being delivered include bringing 163 empty homes back into use across both Councils, creating new grant schemes to support nature recovery and community resilience (i.e. adapting to climate change), creating Neighbourhood Planning guidance and templates following the withdrawal of funding from national government, upgrading facilities at arts and leisure centres, launching a new **Visit Southern Oxfordshire** website to promote local small and independent businesses, working with the Community Safety Partnership to reduce anti-social behaviour and reducing homelessness and rough sleeping in our district.

### **Joint Local Plan 2041**

The long-running story of the Joint Local Plan has continued over the past year, with interventions from the Planning Inspectorate and the Housing Minister, first pausing progress on the examination and then restarting it in February 2026. This has been taking place with the backdrop of new national Planning legislation, a new NPPF (December 2024) and a consultation on a completely new NPPF which closed on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2026. At the time of writing, we await a timetable for the examination in public, but we expect this to happen over the summer of 2026,

which would enable us to adopt the JLP early in 2027. As soon as we do this, however, work will have to start on a new plan which uses the revised Standard Method to calculate housing numbers. By this time, we may have discovered who will actually be responsible for strategic planning in local government in the new structure.

In the meantime, we were very pleased to be able to “make” the Warborough & Shillingford Neighbourhood Plan review in February this year, since having an up-to-date NP is more important than ever given the loss of the Council’s 5 year Housing Land Supply. Recent appeal decisions have reflected this situation; in Benson an appeal was dismissed largely due to the up-to-date NP and sufficient allocation of housing sites, whereas an appeal for 160 dwellings was allowed in Chalgrove partly because there is no allocation for new housing in their NP (made Nov 2025).

### **SODC Grant Schemes**

As in previous years, SODC has continued to provide much-needed financial support to local non-profit and community-based organisations. We were pleased to be able to increase the revenue grant funding available this past year due to a budget underspend in the previous year; this meant that vital local organisations received their full “ask” rather than only 40% of what they had requested. The Councillor Grant scheme was increased from £5k per Member to £7.5k in 2025/26, so that we were able to make more awards than previously. In the past year, we have provided Councillor Grant funding to:

- Wallingford Accessible Boat Club
- Millstream Day Centre
- Wallingford Rowing Club
- Style Acre
- 1<sup>st</sup> Crowmarsh Scout Group
- TONIBOBANDLOU CIC
- Henley squash & racketball club
- Benson Community Shed
- Earth Trust
- Chiltern Society Ewelme Watercress Beds
- Friends of Benson Library
- Oxfordshire Discovery College
- Cycling Without Age Wallingford
- Young Climate Warriors
- Wallingford Baptist Church toddler group

The CIL Grant Fund has been extended for a further year, and Council recently awarded £500k to Earth Trust from this scheme to help them to deliver more accessible facilities and to strengthen the active travel routes between Didcot and their visitor centre.

### **Reducing our Carbon Emissions**

As a Council we have a very ambitious target to achieve Net Zero, but this is challenging as we have only limited levers to pull. We have achieved great progress in decarbonising our leisure and arts centres, but the largest source of emissions for us is our waste management service. We have agreed a new contract with Biffa and have a new strategy for the purchase of waste management vehicles. Our most recent addition to the fleet is an IVECO eDaily caged tipper,

which is being used throughout both districts by crews as part of their work on street cleansing, emptying litter bins, picking up waste collected on litter picks and clearing rubbish left as fly tips. It replaces a diesel tipper truck which covered approximately 33,000 miles per year. By changing to an electric tipper waste vehicle, the councils expect to save more than 13 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent a year, with this one vehicle alone. This is a 70 per cent reduction on the previous diesel truck.

### **Recycling Champions**

We were very pleased to be announced once again as the country's top recycling district in DEFRA's latest tables! In addition to maintaining our high levels of recycling, our teams have been working on waste-reduction campaigns, promotion Repair Cafes and taking our waste management roadshow around the District to raise awareness.