Cllr Robin Bennett: District Councillor’s Report,

Berinsfield Ward, April 2024

**Empty Homes Policy**

The council’s commitment to tackling our social housing waiting list and to making sure local families have somewhere to live has led to the approval of a new Empty Homes Policy.

The focus will be on working positively with the owners of empty homes to bring homes back into occupation, in particular for those in most need.

There are reasons why a property might be empty in the short-term but long-term empty properties are not a good use of a valuable resource and may have a negative impact on their local area.

The empty homes policy sets out the incentives available to home owners to bring homes back into use to the benefit of the owner, potential tenants, and the wider community. Enforcement action will normally only be considered as a last resort when empty home owners are unwilling to engage and the property is causing problems for the community.

If you are the owner of an empty property and would like to discuss the incentives available to bring your property back into use, please email our private sector housing team at [psh@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:psh@southandvale.gov.uk)

You can also email our private sector housing team at the address above to report any issues concerning empty homes in your area. Please provide us with both your details and the details of the property.

You can read the new policy here: <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/03/Empty-Homes-Policy.pdf>

**Earn Extra Cash – Be a Polling Station Clerk!**

We are still looking for people to work as poll clerks and presiding officers on Thursday 2 May for the Police and Crime Commissioner election.

Please do encourage residents to register their interest – they could earn up to £233 for a day’s work and though tiring, it is fun and interesting to be at the coalface of the democratic process. Just search “poll clerks” on the SODC website.

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/local-democracy-and-elections/elections-and-voting/working-elections-2/>

**Police and Crime Commissioner election**

Many people don’t realise the Police and Crime Commissioner even exists, others believe it shouldn’t. The post is democratically elected and pays £86,700 a year. The job of the PCC is to make sure Thames Valley Police is an effective police force that delivers on the priorities of local residents.

A large chunk of your council tax goes to Thames Valley Police so do have your say in the PCC elections!

The election takes place on 2 May, full details on the SODC elections webpage.

• To vote in this election, you must be registered at your current address by 16 April - visit the national voter registration page - [www.gov.uk/registertovote](http://www.gov.uk/registertovote)

• To vote at a polling station you must bring photo ID - a wide range of photo ID will be accepted, including passports, driving licences and cards with a PASS Mark.

• Anyone who doesn’t have the accepted photo ID should apply NOW for a free voter ID document known as a Voter Authority Certificate. The deadline for this election is 5pm on 24 April – just visit the Electoral Commission website.

You can find out more here:

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/local-democracy-and-elections/elections-and-voting/current-and-upcoming-elections/pcc-election-2024/>

**Some council car park fees to change from April 1**

New fees for car parks in South Oxfordshire are being introduced from April 1.

The car park fees are being simplified and rounded to the nearest whole pound while all car parks will continue to have a period of free parking. This means some of the fees are being reduced by up to 16 percent while other will see modest increases. Parking permits rates have also been frozen.

The additional parking income from the rises means we can match the cost of managing and running our car parks, otherwise we’d have to divert funding from other council services to subsidise car parking.

All funds from car parking fees and permits are invested back into providing the service and making improvements to car parks, highways, public conveniences and public open spaces, as well as developing infrastructure to encourage active travel – such as cycle paths and bike storage. Parking for the first hour remains free in all Didcot, Thame and Henley public car parks.

There is a growing body of evidence that shows that while business owners believe that as cost increases, footfall decreases, in fact, the towns/cities with the highest footfall generally have higher than average parking charges. Furthermore, fair car park charges can help ensure that parking spaces frequently turn over, increasing overall footfall. You can see the full fees on our parking policy webpage:

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/parking-roads-and-streets/parking/parking-policy/>

**Waste Satisfaction Survey**

We are inviting residents to take part in our latest survey to tell us what they think of our waste services – that includes waste and recycling, food waste collections and street cleaning services.

<https://theconversation.southandvale.gov.uk/housing-and-environment/waste-survey-2024/>

The survey closes on 24 April, please do take a few minutes to share your views.

We’re taking a snapshot of opinion on a regular basis to monitor how satisfaction levels change over time and identify areas for improvement – our most recent check-in was in the summer last year when we received over 2,000 responses – view the report here.

<https://www.southandvale.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Waste-Satisfaction-Survey-2023-Summary-Report.pdf>

**Council signs up to Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership Charter (and your business can too!)**

South Oxfordshire District Council have pledged their commitment to Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership’s (OIEP) charter.

It means when the council agrees contracts, they will assess what support the supplier can offer the local community, as well as the value for money of the contract. The council will look wherever possible to buy goods and services from local organisations, including SMEs, social enterprises, and cooperatives.

By looking to buy from local organisations first, we aim to reduce our carbon footprint while better supporting suppliers in the area to bid for council contracts and boosting the local economy.

We’ll also be supporting our staff to volunteer at local community projects, which we hope will enable them to build new skills and links with their communities, benefitting all involved.

We’d like to encourage our many fantastic local businesses of all sizes to follow suit and make their own pledges.

Find out more about the charter at <https://www.oiep.org.uk>

One of the OIEP’s highlighted projects is Growing Minds, a project supporting children and parents which has been piloted successfully at The Berin Centre: <https://www.oiep.org.uk/actions/growing-minds>

**Berinsfield Garden Village Steering Group**

The next meeting of this group is on Wednesday 10th April and will look at the options for spending funding from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and receive updates from the various members of the group.

You can see the delivery plan and sign up to the newsletter here:

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/berinsfield>