Cllr Robin Bennett: District Councillor’s Report,

Berinsfield Ward, December 2024. Robin.bennett@southoxon.gov.uk

**Local Government Reform coming this way!**

Just before Christmas, the Labour Government published its proposals for reforming the structure and financing of local government, with a White Paper entitled “English Devolution”. There are lots of reasons to welcome reform of local government; our current multi-tier structure can be very confusing and any changes which improve local decision-making and accountability can only be a good thing. However, we have major concerns that the proposed changes could make local authorities ***less*** accountable to their residents and electorate and could take decision-making further away from the communities they serve.

**District Councils to be Abolished (and possibly also County Councils)**

One key proposal is to abolish District Councils completely and to create new Unitary Authorities covering much larger areas of population. (A Unitary Authority would replace the current two-tier structure we have now, where the County Council and the District Council sit at different levels and have responsibility for different matters).

At the time of writing, the Government is proposing that each Unitary Authority should cover an area with a population of around 500k people; as a comparison, the population of South Oxfordshire District Council is around 153k. Each new Unitary Authority would be a member of a new “Strategic Authority” covering approximately 1.5m people, possibly with an elected Mayor at its head (that would be known as a Mayoral Strategic Authority).

For us here in South Oxfordshire, that new Strategic Authority could cover, say, West Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, matching the structure of the Integrated Care Board, or it could mirror the area covered by Thames Valley Police, which includes all of Berkshire and Milton Keynes as well.

Although the White Paper is called “English Devolution” there are no proposals to devolve powers or funding to regions in the same way that they have been devolved to the Welsh or Scottish Governments; much of the detail is still to be determined, but the Government is hoping to press ahead with the first tranche of reorganisations quickly. This may result in the postponement of County Council elections, due in May. We do not yet know what structure will be proposed for Oxfordshire, so we will aim to keep you informed as plans evolve!

Local Government reform doesn’t usually generate a lot of interest among the general public, whose main concern is that services are delivered effectively and in line with local need and priorities. At SODC we work hard to make sure that our funds are used wisely and in a way that reflects local concerns around housing affordability, waste and environmental management, nature protection and recovery, community well-being and planning policy. But if SODC ceases to exist and, as the Government is also proposing, local communities and elected Councillors lose their ability to object to major planning applications, the implications for our area could be significant. Watch this space!

**Thermal imaging camera**

A reminder that a thermal camera is available for town and parish councils and community groups to use to identify heat loss in buildings. The infrared thermal imaging equipment can show clearly ‘cold spots’ where insulation could improve energy efficiency and thereby reduce energy waste and costs. It can easily locate areas of significant heat loss without invasive techniques affecting the fabric of the building. With the colder weather now the camera could be used for multiple properties in the village.

If the Parish Council or another local organisation would like to borrow the equipment (free of charge) please contact the Climate Action team. The camera is only effective during cold weather when the heating is on and is available on a first come, first served basis.

**Christmas tree collections**

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/recycling-rubbish-and-waste/christmaswaste/christmas-tree-collections/>

This lists various drop off points for unwanted Christmas trees. Some parishes are listed as well as garden centres etc (our nearest one is Notcutts).

**Joint Local Plan**

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils submitted their Joint Local Plan 2041 to the Secretary of State on Monday 9 December 2024 for independent examination.  On 31st December 2 inspectors were appointed; Planning Inspectors R A Bust and C Mulloy.

The Inspectors’ task is to consider the soundness of the submitted plan, based on the criteria set out in the National Planning Policy Framework (December 2023 edition).

The Inspector(s) will take into account the representations submitted at the Regulation 19 Publication stage as far as they relate to soundness and legal compliance. A number of Hearing Sessions will take place to debate the principal matters identified by the Inspectors.

At the end of the Examination, the Inspectors will prepare a report to the councils with precise recommendations; these recommendations may include modifications to the plan if such a request is formally made by the Councils.

**2024**

If you would like a brief review of what South Oxfordshire District Council was doing during 2024 then see the Leader’s summary at <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/a-statement-from-cllr-david-rouane-leader-of-south-oxfordshire-district-council-3/>

**Performing Arts Grant now established**

At the end of 2024, a new Performing Arts Grant Scheme was approved by the Cabinet, which will enable community and voluntary organisations to apply for up to £5,000 to support projects that enhance the cultural landscape and improve the quality of life for local residents and communities. The scheme will open for applications on 5th February; applicants must show how their projects meet the community values and priorities of fostering a vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable performing arts scene in South Oxfordshire. More details can be found at [www.southoxon.gov.uk/grants](http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/grants).

**Changes to custom and self-build register**

At SODC we keep a register to find out what the demand is for self-build or custom-build plots in the area. We use the information to support negotiation with developers for self-build provision on larger housing sites and to guide future policy making. We’ve recently made some changes to our custom and self-build register following criteria set by the Government.

As well as basic age and residency, there are now two categories:

* Part 1 – People or groups of individuals who meet the local connection test.
* Part 2 – Individuals or associations who meet the basic eligibility criteria but do not meet the local connection test.

There is also a nominal £5 annual fee to join the register. This applies to people applying for part 1 or part 2. You can find more information on our Custom and Self Build Register [page](https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/planning-and-development/planning-registers/self-and-custom-build-register/)