

Cllr Robin Bennett: District Councillor's Report,

Berinsfield Ward, February 2025.

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Local Government Reform - no news yet.

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", requiring all areas to form "combined authorities" with populations of 1.5 million, most likely with elected regional mayors. The County Council wrote to the government last month and we are waiting to hear the next steps for South Oxfordshire; so far, our leader has expressed a preference to work with Oxfordshire and Berkshire as part of any large combined authority, but not with Swindon.

"The Way Ahead" council plan

In the meantime, we are pressing on with running South Oxfordshire District Council effectively. In the coming weeks we will be signing off the council's new operations plan, "The Way Ahead", and passing a budget for 2025-6.

'The Way Ahead' outlines our five key priorities for the future. It builds on what we have achieved over the last four years, using our previous plan as a foundation and overcoming significant challenges along the way.

Action on climate change and nature recovery is at the forefront of everything we do; We have made strong and positive progress in our goal to achieve net zero and have nearly halved the council's carbon emissions since 2010.

We will continue to strive for genuinely affordable homes and good local infrastructure and We're incredibly proud of our work to become social landlords for the first time in over 20 years, helping us to help those in most need.

We continue to invest in quality, cost-effective local services and facilities – with leisure, arts and community projects supporting our 'Thriving and healthy communities.' Our services, such as waste and recycling and prevention of homelessness, rank highly in national league tables.

Thanks to our careful budgeting and targeted investment in recent years, our financial position remains positive. We do not take this for granted, nor will we take the eye off the ball – we continually seek to improve how we do things to ensure we offer the best possible customer service for the communities we serve.

Our budget, to be agreed this month, includes use of **£10m** of the council's reserves to fund the council share of the costs of council-owned housing purchased under the Local Authority Housing Funding (LAHF) scheme.

We've also been able to increase the Councillor Grants scheme, and continue the popular Everyone Active grants scheme. Our capital budget includes a continuation of the CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) grants scheme, and a number of substantial direct CIL allocations to local projects, including funding for a Multi Use Games Area and signage improvements for Berinsfield, and work to improve the energy performance of Abbey sports centre.

Garden waste changes

The council are introducing a new permit scheme for garden waste collections this year.

This permit scheme is like the one successfully operated in West Oxon. To receive garden waste collections from 1 April 2025, residents must purchase an annual permit. This will replace direct debits.

What residents need to do:

- From late February, visit www.southandvale.gov.uk/GardenWastePermit to make a one-off, annual payment for garden waste collections.
- When customers get the permit in the post, they need to stick it to the lid of their brown bin.

Garden waste customers can also sign up for an online account on our website to make things easier when they purchase the next permit in 2026. Anyone who cannot easily sign up for a permit online can call 01235 422422 for support.

New Performing Arts grant

Our new £60,000 Performing Arts grant scheme will open for applications on **3 February 2025**.

The scheme is open to town and parish councils and voluntary and community organisations in South Oxfordshire, who will be able to apply for a minimum of £500 and up to a maximum £5,000 in funding for projects that improve community wellbeing across the district.

The grant scheme closes at midday on **3 March 2025**.

Please do help share our social media messages and this information with your voluntary and community contacts. See [our grants web page](#) for full details including a preview of the application form and guidance document.

Organisations can contact the Community Arts team by emailing performingartsgrants@southandvale.gov.uk for support.

GLL Sport foundation

Better Leisure, who run our leisure centres, are launching this year's Sports Foundation scheme, and applications for this fund are now open.

GLL Sports Foundation provides support to athletes across all ages, disciplines and backgrounds. Providing access to free gym memberships, monetary funding and other athletes services including mental health support and physiotherapy.

More information including how to apply and eligibility can be found on the [GLL Sports Foundation application page](#) and applications must be submitted by **20 February 2025** - please help us spread the word.