

Cllr Robin Bennett: District Councillor's Report,

Berinsfield Ward, March 2025.

Robin.bennett@southoxon.gov.uk

Bringing Empty Homes back into use

We are committed to bringing empty properties back into use - that's why we recently reduced the time property owners can keep a home empty before council tax increases (with sensible exceptions for construction work, moving house etc).

We are trying to increase the local supply of housing to tackle the affordable housing shortfall. Our Empty Homes Officer is here to support our [empty homes policy](#) by helping bring short and long-term empty properties back into use by working closely with owners and the local community.

If you would like to discuss the help available to bring an empty property back into use, please email our Empty Homes Officer at emptyhomes@southandvale.gov.uk.

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/housing/empty-homes/>

Social housing allocation policy changes

SODC's public consultation on proposed changes to the Joint Housing Allocations Policy is currently live.

Although the council only owns a few homes itself (although more are being purchased and built by the council), it is responsible for housing allocations in the District for the housing associations such as SOHA.

Last updated in 2019, the policy needs refreshing to reflect current housing priorities. There are four main proposed changes to the policy, including increases to the earnings threshold, and the policy on unacceptable behaviour.

[Details on how to take part are on Join The Conversation](#), our Community Engagement website and the consultation runs until Tuesday 18 March 2025.

New affordable housing funded by SODC opens in Wheatley

The Council's Affordable Housing Programme, providing energy-efficient general needs social housing, significantly funded the development of 12 high quality, spacious homes at Cullum House, Wheatley, replacing 12 unsuitable bedsits.

Solar panels conduct electricity to the communal indoor areas as well as to the twilight-activated lighting in the car park, which also has electric vehicle charging points linked to the individual supply to each flat. Each home has underfloor heating programmable separately for each room provided by an air source heat pump while mechanical ventilation with heat recovery in each home mitigates the airtight build quality. The flats are fitted with low energy lighting to reduce electricity usage.

Council building new affordable apartments

I'm also pleased that we've now submitted a planning application for 8 x 1-bedroom and 1x 2 bedroom affordable apartments to be built by SODC on council land on Broadway in Didcot, as well as a new community space. You can see the planning [application here](#). These are the first new homes to be built by the council since the 1990s!

Grant funding advice session

SODC officers are holding a grant funding advice session at Cornerstone Arts Centre in Didcot on **Thursday 20 March, appointments available from 12.30pm to 4pm**. Voluntary and community organisations will have the opportunity to discuss projects, ask questions about the application process including eligibility for any of the upcoming [grant schemes](#).

Unlike many councils, South Oxfordshire has **a number of grant schemes** for local community groups and projects – use them while you still can!

These currently include:

Everyone Active Grant £50,000 - Launch dates: 1 April – 26 May 2025

Capital Grant Scheme £320,000 - Launch dates: 2 June – 25 July 2025

Performing Arts Grant (2025) £60,000, 28 July – 5 September 2025

Councillor Community Grant Scheme, £270,000, August – December 2025

(this is divided by ward; the amount I can allocate has increased from £5K to £7.5K for the coming year)

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Grant Fund £750,000, Jan 2026.

Places for the grant advice session are limited, so please encourage organisations to book a time slot by emailing grants@southandvale.gov.uk or phone 01235 422405. Alternatively, if they are unable to attend, the team are happy to book a phone call or Teams meeting at a more convenient time. Please help us to spread the word!

We are one of the only councils that offers a grant using district CIL funds - I'm very pleased to hear that the Berinsfield community café project at The Berin Centre has been awarded an SODC CIL Grant towards construction costs of £200,000. This is a great achievement, as the rules around CIL eligibility are fairly complex.

Great British Railways

The government's Great British Railways consultation is now live for people to participate and share their views on new policies to be included in the forthcoming Railway Bill. The consultation closes on 15 April.

For more information about the consultation and how to get involved, please visit the [government's website](#).