

District Councillor Report – Sam Casey-Rerhaye, January 2022

Local Government Finance Settlement

The government announced its provisional local government finance settlement on 16th December, the fourth consecutive one-year settlement. It amounts to a real-term cut in council funding for SODC and for many other councils around the country.

While government has claimed the settlement amounts to a 4% increase in funding, just 1% of this is government funding, the rest requires local authorities to increase Council Tax by the maximum allowable without a referendum and with the impact of inflation, this is actually worth less than last year.

Cllr David Rouane, leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, expressed disappointment at the settlement. “Despite the government’s claims of an overall increase in spending, this amounts to a real-terms cut in our finances. Councils like ours around the country are working hard to balance the books – a job that is made significantly more difficult by government cuts and by the lack of any long-term clarity.”

“It’s really not clear how the government expects councils to make medium or long-term financial plans when it repeatedly provides one-year settlements – something it began doing long before the pandemic.”

The New Homes Bonus will continue though it is unclear what will replace it, adding to the uncertainty around budget setting in future years. The New Homes Bonus is worth around £2m per year in South Oxfordshire.

The council will be responding to the government’s consultation on the settlement proposals and intends to publish its response shortly.

Vouchers for residents struggling

With the cost-of-living escalating, a reminder that the Council is supporting residents struggling to afford household essentials. Using money from the Government’s Household Support Fund, we are helping pay for vulnerable households’ food, energy, and water bills and other essential household costs.

The funds are not restricted to people who receive benefits, and a lot of different factors are taken into consideration when assessing applications. The scheme ends in March 2022. Please see details on our website: [Household Support Fund - South Oxfordshire District Council \(southoxon.gov.uk\)](https://southoxon.gov.uk)

Please guide your parishioners towards these funds!

Homelessness in South Oxfordshire

The Council's housing team worked intensively in the weeks up to Christmas to ensure households at risk of homelessness had sustainable accommodation. Two placements were made over the Christmas period for people with a connection to the Vale of White Horse.

It is pleasing to report that the number of rough sleepers recorded as of 31st December 2021 was **zero** for both South and Vale. This is the first time since 2013 there has been no rough sleeping recorded across both Districts and is testament to the success of the Councils' new strategy of preventing homelessness.

South Oxfordshire was the first council in Oxfordshire to adopt the ground-breaking Housing First approach to preventing homelessness, a system that has since been adopted across the county.

Garden Waste Collections

A reminder that we are now able to start taking on new customers for the garden waste service. Anyone interested should go to <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/recycling-rubbish-and-waste/garden-waste/>

Parental Leave Policy

Following similar moves by councils across the country, South Oxfordshire District Council has adopted a new policy on parental leave for councillors.

The policy aims to provide a positive and supportive environment for members with family responsibilities.

It will help to ensure members are representative of our community, contribute towards increasing the diversity of experience, age and background of councillors, and also help us to retain experienced councillors.

The new policy was agreed by council at the Full Council meeting on 9th December and can be viewed here:

democratic.southoxon.gov.uk/ecCatDisplay.aspx?sch=doc&cat=13195&path=0

CCTV

The Council's CCTV reports have been published, detailing how CCTV is used in our town centres. In South Oxfordshire, CCTV was used to review 554 incidents, producing 59 evidence packs for possible court

proceedings and supporting 54 arrests. You can view the report here: [Microsoft Word - South First Half 21-22 \(southoxon.gov.uk\)](https://southoxon.gov.uk)

Planning Enforcement

The updated **Planning Enforcement Statement** has been approved by Council. The statement sets out the new approach to the triage and handling of complaints to improve efficiency and transparency and to help address the large backlog of complaints that has built up since the start of the pandemic. The team currently has some 700 live investigations with 241 matters still unallocated across the two Councils.

The Planning Enforcement Statement was previously been updated in 2016. The new Enforcement Statement and approach will be subject to quarterly appraisal as part of the Council's ongoing performance review process and the Statement itself will be reviewed after 12 months.

[Microsoft Word - 2021-12-17- Enforcement Statement Final \(southandvale.gov.uk\)](https://southandvale.gov.uk)

New Gambling Policy

At Full Council on 6th December, Council also agreed a new gambling policy. A key change is the passing of a "No Casino" resolution meaning that applications for casinos will not be considered in the district.

This was agreed on the basis that the district is not a suitable location for a casino, that casinos bring the potential for criminal exploitation and money laundering and that casinos expose the vulnerable to the risk of gambling harm and problem gambling.

Petition for Councils to make their own decisions on meeting remotely or in person

<https://www.change.org/p/uk-government-and-parliament-for-councils-in-england-to-have-the-choice-to-meet-remotely>

We are supporting this campaign as we believe this should be a local decision made by locally elected representatives and should not be centralised.

Sewage Spills into The River Thames

These spills continue to increase in number and volume. SODC Thames Champion, Councillor Jo Robb, has made an Environmental Information Request to Thames Water asking for the data from their Electronic Duration Monitors – this is a legal request that must be responded to.

These spillages have been happening even in periods when there hasn't been storms or extremely heavy rain.

We are maintaining the pressure on Thames Water and the government, alongside many other organisations and pressure groups, such as Windrush WASP, Surfers Against Sewage and Sewage Free Thames.

Raw sewage was spilled into the Thames for 50,000 hours in 2020. I have recently seen a resident's photos of a swan coming out of the water with a brown, sewage tide mark around it – horrendous!

There is a **plan for a protest on Port Meadow in Oxford on 23rd January at 10.30am** to get Thames Water to properly invest to prevent these increasing spillages. This is being organised by Sewage Free Thames – website: endsewagepollutionthames.wordpress.com

South Oxfordshire Lottery

The SO Charitable Lottery will be giving an additional £15,000 to good causes in South Oxfordshire this year through money raised in its community fund.

There are currently 75 organisations and charities across the district that have joined the lottery, which provides them with vital income to support our communities, this has proved especially important for them during the pandemic.

This month the £15,000 will be shared between all organisations selling 20 tickets or more a week. These organisations will receive funding based on the number of tickets they have sold.

Oxfordshire Animal Sanctuary is one of the causes benefitting from the lottery with a donation of £2,689 from the community fund. Ian Atkin, the manager, said that they often look after 70 to 100 animals a day.

“Many of our animals come to us from difficult backgrounds. Some arrive with acute behavioural needs, and some have immediate medical needs. We deal with each case individually and start by earning their trust and understanding their needs. The money raised from the additional award will help us continue this work.”

When participants take part in the lottery, they can either support a charity or group of their choice or donate to the central community fund which is administered by South Oxfordshire District Council and distributed annually to multiple good causes.

The lottery is free to join, and organisations are invited to get in touch with the Community Enablement team at the council to find out how they

can also benefit. Tickets can be bought online for just £1, with a chance to win a top prize of £25,000.

[SO Charitable Lottery - South Oxfordshire District Council](https://www.southoxon.gov.uk)
([southoxon.gov.uk](https://www.southoxon.gov.uk))

As ever, contact me on 01235 635566 or sam.casey-rerhaye@southoxon.gov.uk on anything to do with District Council matters.