

District Councillor Report – Cllr Sam Casey-Rerhaye, January 2025

New Homes for those who need them

The first of three new projects to provide 48 new, genuinely affordable and energy efficient homes in Thame and Wheatley to meet local needs is now finished and has welcomed new tenants.

The homes are a combination of new builds and conversions and will include one-bed houses and flats at affordable rent or under a shared ownership scheme, as well as independent living accommodation for over 55 and 60-year-olds.

Brought to life through South Oxfordshire District Council's partnership work with Soha Housing, Thame Community Land Trust and Thame & District Housing Association, the homes are largely funded by Section 106 affordable housing grants from developer contributions.

In Thame, the first residents have moved into their new homes and are enjoying energy saving solar roof panels and ground source heat pumps which will help keep energy bills low, as well as access to EV charging points. See what one resident, Tina, says about her home [in this video on YouTube](#).

A newly-built property in Wheatley of 12 one-bed apartments is also welcoming new tenants. The eco features mean the building will achieve zero carbon emissions when in use.

In addition, work is due to start on a third project of 31 affordable rent or shared ownership new-build houses and flats in Thame in 2025. The mix of new, affordable homes was established through a housing needs survey specific to Thame and will be available for people with a local connection to Thame.

Housing and homelessness

On 12th November 2024, South and Vale completed its annual rough sleeper count which is an estimate based upon the number of persons known to be rough sleeping on the night.

Nine individuals were recorded as rough sleeping at the end of November (S4/V5), a decrease of one on the previous month. When the count took place in November 2023, there were three persons rough sleeping in South Oxfordshire.

The number of housing register applicants in housing need at the end of November was 1,495 in South. The housing team work with people at

risk of homelessness, and just in November alone 21 households were prevented from becoming homeless.

The Council also assesses applications for grants for Disabled Facilities each month, and in November 2024, 13 households were awarded grants in the District. This helps people remain living in their own homes.

Council Tax relief change

We have extended the period of time that a new claim for council tax relief can be back dated from six to 12 months where good cause has been demonstrated. This is part of our commitment to assist residents wherever needed in a cost of living crisis.

Joint Local Plan

The draft development plan was submitted to the Planning Inspectorate on 9th December. This is within our revised timetable. We will hear more about the timetable for the inquiry and the matter and issues to be discussed there in due course.

Local Government Reform coming

Just before Christmas, the Labour Government published its proposals for reforming the structure and financing of local government, with an “English Devolution” White Paper.

There are lots of reasons to welcome reform of local government; our current District/County structure can be 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 could take decision-making further away from the communities they serve. District councils are not being consulted either.

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.

A decision on whether to postpone the county elections due in May will be taken by the County Council on Thursday.

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 other 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.

Performing Arts Grant now established

At the end of 2024, a new Performing Arts Grant Scheme was approved by the SODC 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.

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](#).

Leader's summary of 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/>

If you have any questions or issues you would like to contact me about: sam.casey-rerhaye@southoxon.gov.uk.
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