

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

Proposed Local Government Reform

While still at the White Paper stage, and so not yet even a draft law, local government reform is taking up a lot of time and energy across Oxfordshire and the wider area.

The two proposals are for a new ‘higher tier’, a strategic authority with perhaps an elected Mayor heading this, covering an area with around 1.5m inhabitants. Mayors could have some powers that currently sit with the Secretary of State.

Also proposed is the abolishment of district councils and the bringing of all council services into ‘unitary’ councils with newly designated boundaries, not yet specified or agreed but with a minimum population (currently 500,000 but this already seems to be questioned).

Where the boundaries should go is already being hotly debated. As a Green Party Councillor, I have always been of the view that considering we have the most centralised governing structure in all of Europe, further growth in the size of councils is not at all desirable and risks local people having even less say in what happens in their area than we have already.

There is little to no evidence that people prefer unitary councils or that they offer any financial or other advantages.

In my opinion, any changes should follow principles of ‘subsidiarity’ – i.e. every decision should be taken at the lowest possible level.

After the LibDem leader of Oxfordshire County Council (Cllr Liz Leffman) enthusiastically threw their hat in the ring for government to make our area one of the first to be considered for re-organisation, last week the leader of the South Oxfordshire, Cllr David Rouane, explained his view that Oxfordshire should “work together in a Strategic Authority with those councils in Berkshire and Buckinghamshire who wish to join with us.

“This is because these areas all have vibrant economies that will contribute to the sustainable growth the government is looking for; we have a record of working together in the police and health authorities; we have a shared identity as part of the South-East Region; and we have historical connections in that much of South Oxfordshire was in Berkshire prior to the previous local government reorganisation.”

The Leader of Swindon Borough Council, Cllr Jim Robbins, has expressed a preference for the Wiltshire town to “look east” towards Oxfordshire for a possible Strategic Authority. Cllr Rouane has explained that, having listened to the arguments, he does not support this idea.

Cllr Rouane said that Swindon doesn't meet the relevant conditions for joining with parts of Oxfordshire as “they are in different health and police geographies, their long-term identity is one of being the ‘Gateway to the West Country’ not part of the South East, we have no historical ties, and they are at a very different stage in the economic cycle.”

The debate over the boundaries of any unitary councils that sit under this strategic authority continues.

The local Green Party has for many years advocated for unitaries about the size of South and Vale combined, rather than a whole Oxfordshire which has a population of about 740,000 and is predicted to grow to around 800,000 in the coming years – so extremely large for a unitary council.

2025-26 Budget

No matter what happens in the re-organisation of local government, we have to create a budget for our work next year. The budget has been approved by Cabinet and will be going to the full council meeting on 13th February. Some key highlights in the budget are:

- There is a revenue surplus for the first time in many years, helped by the windfall from interest earned on the reserves (not by any improvement in government grant to cover services; in fact, the increase in National Insurance payments for employees has not been covered by government, despite what the Chancellor indicated and we need to cover around £100,000 of the increase, just under 50% of the total)
- The Community Hub continues to be funded, with its offer of guidance and support to residents
- Everyone Active grants continue
- Councillor community grants are increased by 50% and the new Performing Arts grants are funded
- The Climate team continue to be funded
- There are no service or staff cuts
- Further monies are put aside for council house build/purchase

Insourcing IT services from Capita

This programme is a key one for the Council and we continue to work towards the exit of the Capita contract. We've made significant changes this month with the launch of a new inhouse IT Service Desk for staff and councillors.

The new service desk will initially only deal with certain things and will run alongside the usual Capita IT Helpdesk, with more and more services added as the weeks progress.

The deadline for all IT to be insourced is September of this year, and we are on track for this date with the many smaller projects underlying the whole programme

Changes to our Garden Waste Collection service

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

This permit scheme is like the one successfully operated in West Oxfordshire. It ensures that everyone who benefits from the service is paying the right amount at the right time.

To receive garden waste collections from 1 April 2025, residents need to purchase an annual permit. This will replace direct debits system that currently runs.

So, residents who wish to carry on receiving the garden waste service from April 2025 need to:

(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 us on 01235 422422 for support.

Visit the New Garden Waste FAQ page for more information ([South FAQ](#))

Oxfordshire Nature Recovery

More than 2,100 Oxfordshire residents, landowners and organisations took part in last year's public consultation on the county's draft Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS).

Using an interactive map, people sent in comments on the nature areas already mapped and lots of suggestions for additional areas to be included.

The LNRS team (a partnership of organisations including South and Vale) now has the task of compiling the responses into a public report and the final version of the strategy is due to be published in autumn this year.

For more information about the LNRS and the nature groups involved see the [LNRS webpage](#).

Opportunities in Sports

Our partners at Better Leisure who run South and Vale leisure centres are launching this year's Sports Foundation scheme and applications for this fund are now open.

The 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 **20th February 2025**

If you have any questions or issues you would like to contact me about:

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Or leave a message for me on 01235 635566.