

SODC ward councillors' report

Shiplake – 10th February 2025

Local Government re-organisation and “devolution” - update

The first step in the process is to agree the areas and authorities to include in the strategic or “Combined Authority”. A meeting was held on 31st January for our local council leaders to discuss and agree the relevant area. The main proposal was for Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire (excluding Milton Keynes who seek to be part of the Northamptonshire grouping). However Buckinghamshire have not fully engaged and as yet are still considering their view. The leader of Swindon (part of Wiltshire) has also pressed to be included with Oxfordshire. However with the exception of Labour-led Oxford City and Labour-led Reading this is not agreed.

(There is also a “Heart of Wessex” grouping of Dorset, Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole, Somerset, North Somerset and Wiltshire councils. Whilst Swindon has pursued a different view it is widely thought that Swindon belongs in the Heart of Wessex grouping. Indeed the Secretary of State did not allow that grouping to progress in the early fast-lane group because of the Swindon question.)

If the answer were to be Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire (excl MK), then by 2031 its population may be **c2.4 million** people. It would be ruled by an elected Mayor sitting with the leaders of the unitary councils within it. There has been quite a lot of debate about whether Mayors are an appropriate solution for broad rural areas with numerous centres.

Our “local” Combined Authority has not yet been agreed so it is not one in which elections will be delayed and so the Oxfordshire County elections for May 2025 are to go ahead.

Once the Combined Authority has been agreed, then unitary councils, sitting under the Combined Authority will be selected and formed; the guidelines suggest that they should be of 0.5 million people or more.

Options could be:-

- The whole of Oxfordshire – by 2031 that may be over c0.8 million people
- Oxfordshire plus West Berkshire together (c1.0m people by 2031) or split into 2 – say
 - o SODC, VoWH and West Berks with c0.5m people
 - o West Oxon, Oxford City and Cherwell – with c0.5m people
- A carve-up (see below).

The Labour-led Oxford City, Reading and Swindon councils are proposing a carve-up of Oxfordshire for what look like partisan gerrymandering reasons. The proposal would see a “Greater Oxford” unitary council taking in say Witney, Eynsham, Kidlington, Bicester, Wheatley, Thame and a northern slice of SODC plus Abingdon and Cumnor. These would include urban areas where Labour might hope to get votes and make up the numbers to c0.5m people. Then the rest of Oxfordshire would be dismembered. The South of SODC, possibly including Didcot and Wallingford and Goring to Henley including the villages of this Sonning Common ward would be passed off to a Reading/Wokingham unitary straddling the River Thames. The south of Vale of White Horse would be passed off to a “Greater Swindon” unitary.

Such a wheeze might be expected to be severely challenged according to normal Boundary Commission logic and if supported by MHCLG would potentially leave the Secretary of State in the position of supporting a partisan party manoeuvre that may likely look like craven gerrymandering?

Whatever the outcome, there will be a benefit of simplicity in that all council services of the former District and County levels will be delivered by one “unitary” council. The downside as proposed is that these unitaries will be very large – in some cases up to 1 million people; how that fits with “local” government, the local knowledge of officers and engagement with towns, parishes and residents remains to be seen.

Budget 2025-26

SODC's Band D charge for 2025-26 is proposed to be £151.24 – an increase of £5 as set by government guidelines; it remains one of the very lowest amongst all the English shire districts.

In the last year of their rule at SODC the Conservatives set a budget for 2019-20 with a deficit of £(3.3)m that was projected to rise to £(6.1)m by 2023-24 and by extrapolation one might have expected a deficit of some £(8)m by 2025-26. Instead the budget proposed is for a surplus of £0.4m; quite a turn-around!

By 2024-25 the Conservatives had projected to have exhausted SODC's "General Reserves" and would have been looking at a s114 notice signalling a form of Local Government distress/need to go into administration. Instead of burning through reserves, more interest and return has been earned on the balances and the 2025-26 year is budgeted to close with £38.1m of "General Reserves".

The government has not compensated SODC fully for the cost of the NI changes. However SODC do benefit from a new source of income for pEPR – packaging Extended Producer Responsibility whereby producers must pay to waste collection authorities a share of a new levy for the packaging they output with their production. This is budgeted to be worth £1.3m in 2025-26.

Grants funding is budgeted to continue for Arts, Everyone Active and councillor grants are to be enhanced. The Capita outsource contract ceases in 2025-26 with the exception of "Revenues & Benefits" services which have been extended; that is a volume activity where a contractor can add value.

SODC continues to put s106, CIL and other capital (including grant bid-for and won from central government) funds to work – investing in community infrastructure and needs. Provision has been made for investing – with government support – into refugee housing (e.g. Ukraine) that will in due course in future be available for wider council housing use. A further £10m has been earmarked for further housing purchase opportunities.

Government revenue budget funding is not confirmed beyond 2025-26. (Of course Local Government Re-organisation will apply at some point in the future years – perhaps 2027-28.)

The budget will be considered by SODC's council meeting on 13th February.

Garden Waste changes

As you may recall from last year's reports and communications, SODC are introducing a new permit scheme for garden waste collections this year.

This permit scheme is like the one successfully operated in West Oxon, and a key benefit of the new system is that it prevents people who have not paid for the service from having their garden waste collected.

To receive garden waste collections from 1 April 2025, residents must purchase an annual permit – digitally or by phone. (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 us on [01235 422422](tel:01235422422) for support.

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

Oxfordshire's Local Nature Recovery Strategy

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 mammoth 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](#).

GLL Sport foundation

SODC's partners at 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 spread the word.

[Mike Giles & Leigh Rawlins](#)

District Councillors

Councillors