

District Councillor Report  
Haseley Brook ward  
06 March 2024

Cllr Georgina Heritage



**Meetings and activity**

Since my last report I have attended the following SODC meetings and committees:

6<sup>th</sup> February – Budget briefing

8<sup>th</sup> February – General Licensing Committee (Joint Air Quality Action Plan)

20<sup>th</sup> February – Planning Committee

22<sup>nd</sup> February – Full Council (budget setting)

29<sup>th</sup> February – Community Grants Panel

**The Council meeting on 22<sup>nd</sup> February** was extremely positive, with the focus on setting the budget. At such a difficult time for councils across the UK, with so many at a financial crisis point, SODC's financial position remains positive and no reductions to services were considered. Since 2019 the progressive partnership administration has worked tirelessly to improve and then maintain the council's position through careful budgeting work and targeted investment in council operations. It was especially encouraging that the Community Hub (originally a covid lockdown initiative) will continue to provide support, and there will be increased funding for homelessness prevention, as well as an expansion of the housing team. I spoke at council about the vital work carried out in homelessness prevention and the statistics to support this.

The budget also includes £500,000 to support community projects, such as to help improve residents' quality of life, to improve local facilities and increase action on climate change. £60,000 will be made available to support the arts across South Oxfordshire and £405,000 to improve the facilities at Cornerstone Arts Centre.

The council's capital budget includes significant planned investment in social housing and decarbonisation of leisure centres to reduce energy usage and ongoing costs.

The council tax for 2024/25 has been set at £146.24 for the year for a Band D property, meaning residents in South Oxfordshire will continue to pay one of the lowest rates in the country for services provided by a district council.

As well as setting and voting through the budget, council also marked two years of Russia's invasion of Ukraine by passing a motion to call on the Minister for Immigration to remove uncertainty around the ability for Ukrainians to remain in the country beyond the three-year temporary visas, many of which are due to expire in 2025. Council also resolved to continue to collaborate with Oxfordshire councils and statutory and voluntary sector partners in the development of a strategic approach for supporting people seeking sanctuary from any background.

As noted above, I also sat on the **Community Grants Panel** in February, in which applicants could apply for up to £75,000 for community-based projects. A wide range of applications were approved for funding – from children’s play areas to community shops to shed-based hobby/repair projects. There was a great deal to study in the applications, but I thoroughly enjoyed learning about the creative and meaningful ways in which community groups work to enrich quality of life for residents. It’s also great that a Haseley Brook application is in line to receive a large percentage of the funding applied for, for a new improved playground surface which improves accessibility and safety.

## **Bathing Water Status Update**

Defra have given feedback on the two applications for Bathing Water Status made by the charity Thames21, supported by SODC and the relevant town councils.

The application for Wallingford beach has been successful and moves to a public consultation phase, which is already open and runs until 10 March.

The application for Mill Meadows in Henley was unsuccessful, with Defra arguing that bather numbers recorded during an organised event should not count towards the numbers required.

It’s pleasing that the sites selected across the country includes more in-land sites, even if we’re disappointed about the Henley result. To date Bathing Water status has been mostly used for coastal sites. An advantage of Bathing Water status is that it requires improvements to water quality to be made, and for monitoring by the Environment Agency.

## **CIL Grant Fund**

SODC is now inviting town and parish councils and not-for-profit community groups to submit Expressions of Interest for the pilot program, the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Grant Fund. This is to fund infrastructure projects required as a direct result of development in South Oxfordshire, with between £75,000 to £250,000 of funding available per project. The EOI phase will be open for six weeks, with submissions closing at 5pm on 5 April.

### **Eligibility:**

You can find more information about the [Grant Fund and view the full eligibility criteria online](#), but here are the points to note:

- The fund is available to town and parish councils and not for profit community groups and organisations only.
- Proposed projects need to have a genuine focus on providing the infrastructure needed as a result of development and must be delivered in the South Oxfordshire District Council area.
- Proposed projects must adhere to the CIL spending requirements as set out in the regulations – the fund may only be used to support the actual delivery of physical infrastructure. It can be new infrastructure or improve or expand the reach of existing infrastructure. It is not able to cover costs for scoping or pre-planning of projects.
- We will prioritise projects that support our corporate priorities and other key criteria to ensure deliverability, sustainability, inclusivity and consideration towards the climate and ecological impacts.

More about the pilot grant fund and guidance documents for the Expression of Interest process can be found here: [Community Infrastructure Levy Grant Fund webpage](#).

## **Changes to Garden Waste Services in 2025**

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils have agreed the introduction of a permit scheme from April 2025 which will include a sticker for subscribers' bins to identify them as fully paid-up garden waste customers. This kind of scheme is offered successfully by many other local authorities, including in neighbouring West Oxfordshire.

When customers sign up and pay for the scheme in 2025, they will be sent a garden waste permit sticker to put on their bin(s), which will help the waste collection crews identify which bins should be emptied. The permits will act in a similar way to a parking permit as a proof of subscription payment. All subscribers will receive a new sticker annually each time they renew.

This will help to ensure that only households that have paid for the service have their brown garden waste bins emptied. The changes are part of the councils' ongoing work to improve the efficiency and value of public services.

The garden waste subscriptions currently run via annual direct debit payments from the date people signed up for the scheme. Next year, the councils will stop taking direct debit payments for the service. Customers will instead make a single annual payment by debit or credit card - so that everyone's payment year will be the same and will run from 1 April to 31 March each year. The council will directly contact all customers, via letters and email, in plenty of time to remind them to renew.

Benefits to customers include an all-new online system so they can manage their account and change their details much more easily. This will also mean the councils can contact people quickly if there are any disruptions to the service, such as during adverse weather.

Current subscribers will receive notification of the changes with this year's invoices.

## **Storm Henk Support**

Residents and businesses whose homes were internally flooded as a result of Storm Henk in January can now formally apply for financial support. Eligibility for support also includes if the flooding meant they had to leave their home or close their business for a period of 48 hours or more.

There's a range of possible options, from grants to discounts on council tax or business rates. There is more information on the website, where affected residents and businesses will also find a link to the relevant application forms:

- [www.southoxon.gov.uk/henk](http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/henk)

Eligibility criteria apply to all of these support options, so anybody who believes they are entitled to funding should read the details carefully before applying.

**The deadline for all applications is 1pm on Monday 18 March**, and any flooding events also need to have been reported via [the Oxfordshire Flooding Report form](#).