

## 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/>

### **Local Government Reform coming this way!**

Just before Christmas, the Labour Government published its proposals for reforming the structure and financing of local government, with a White Paper entitled "English Devolution". There are lots of reasons to welcome reform of local government; our current multi-tier structure can be very 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 electorate and could take decision-making further away from the communities they serve.

### **District Councils to be Abolished (and possibly also County Councils)**

One key proposal is to abolish District Councils completely and to create new Unitary Authorities covering much larger areas of population. (A Unitary Authority would replace the current two-tier structure we have now, where the County Council and the District Council sit at different levels and have responsibility for different matters).

At the time of writing, the Government is proposing that each Unitary Authority should cover an area with a population of around 500k people; as a comparison, the population of South Oxfordshire District Council is around 153k. Each new Unitary Authority would be a member of a new "Strategic Authority" covering approximately 1.5m people, possibly with an elected Mayor at its head (that would be known as a Mayoral Strategic Authority).

For us here in South Oxfordshire, that new Strategic Authority could cover, say, West Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, matching the structure of the Integrated Care Board, or it could mirror the area covered by Thames Valley Police, which includes all of Berkshire and Milton Keynes as well.

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. This may result in the postponement of County Council elections, due in May. We do not yet know what structure will be proposed for Oxfordshire, so we will aim to keep you informed as plans evolve!

Local Government reform doesn't usually generate a lot of interest among the general public, whose main concern is that services are delivered effectively and in line with local need and priorities. At SODC we work hard to make sure that our funds are used wisely and in a way that reflects local concerns around housing affordability, waste and environmental management, nature protection and recovery, community well-being and planning policy. But if SODC ceases to exist and, as the Government is also proposing, local communities and elected Councillors lose their ability to object to major planning applications, the implications for our area could be significant. Watch this space!

### **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](#)

### **New season on sale at Cornerstone!**

Have you checked out Cornerstone's Spring Season yet? Take your pick from rib-tickling comedy, thrilling live theatre, iconic tribute acts and more, with a range of shows to be enjoyed by all ages. Here are some highlights:

☒ [The Elton John Show](#) brings young Elton back to the stage at his energetic best, or why not experience [The Magic of The Bee Gees](#), whether you're a brother, or whether you're a mother!

☒ Alyssa Kyria is bringing her hilarious stand-up show [The Funny Mummy](#) to Didcot, all about the bonkers world of parenting. Parents can also enjoy [Bring Your Own Baby](#), a daytime comedy show for new parents, without the need for childcare. Screaming and crying allowed; the comics won't mind being heckled by the younger guests!

☒ If you have a penchant for the dramatic, [Sherlock Holmes: The Last Act](#) and [The Picture of Dorian Gray](#) will be up your street.

Visit the [Cornerstone website](#) to see the full list of shows and to book your tickets.

Happy New Year Everybody 🙌

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