

January 2026

Many thanks for the continued welcome I have received at the various parish council meetings this month. It has been a pleasure to meet with you and listen to the activities going on in the various villages and start to help where I can. I can also now confirm that in addition to the Council, I sit on the Joint Audit and Governance Committee and a substitute as needed for the Appeals Panel, Planning Committee and the Scrutiny Committee.

Proposed reservoir consultation

Thames Water launched a public consultation in October 2025 on the proposed South East Strategic Reservoir Option (SESRO), which it ran until 13 January 2026. The feedback Thames Water gather will inform their Development Consent Order (DCO) application to the government, which they expect to submit in autumn 2026.

At the start of January I submitted an individual submission to the consultation. I raised the size, spiralling costs and irreversible damage to the local countryside and landscape as the main concerns. I also highlighted my concerns over the updated design that risks the Wilts & Berks Canal being practically unable to be restored fully if the reservoir goes ahead. I also noted some concerns with access to and around the reservoir particularly during construction and my disappointment at how little progress appears to have been made on the various assessments needed with regard to preliminary environmental information.

View the Vale of White Horse District Council's consultation response:

- [Council Responses to Consultations about Planning](#)
- [Thames Water South East Strategic Reservoir Option \(SESRO\)](#)

Joint Local Plan 2041

Local plans set out how development will be planned and delivered over time to meet the current and future needs of people living and working in a particular district. They identify where development should take place and where development should be restricted because of the area's value for nature or heritage, its flood risk, the sustainability of the location and so on. This allows all the sites that developers want to develop to be compared, weighed up carefully and the best possible sites chosen.

The South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils submitted their Joint Local Plan 2041 to the Secretary of State on Monday 9 December 2024 for independent Examination. A full timeline can be found on the Examination webpage southandvale.gov.uk/joint-local-plan-2041-examination/

Council officers will meet with government planning Inspectors in mid February to discuss the way forward for the Examination in light of recent announcements surrounding the Duty to Co-operate. Participation will be limited to the Inspectors and the Councils although interested parties are welcome to attend and observe should they wish to do so. The room will be limited in capacity, however it is intended that the meeting will be live streamed and these details will be released closer to the date on the Examination webpage (see above).

Neighbourhood Plans

Towards the end of January I attended an in-person Neighbourhood Planning event run by local council officers. It was lovely to see and chat to a few representatives from various parishes in the Ward. Currently in our Ward only East Challow has a recognised Neighbourhood Plan so it was good to see potential interest from other parishes. Neighbourhood Plans form part of the development plan in an area - they are a formal document used when making decisions and carry statutory weight. (Neighbourhood Plans are distinct from other plans such as Community Led Plans.)

The event covered an introduction to recent and proposed national planning changes and what they mean for neighbourhood plans, a brief update on Local Government Reorganisation, and a walk through of the new guidance and templates the officers have developed to help communities. Although the government no longer provides national grant funding or technical support for neighbourhood planning groups, the district council will continue to provide officer support, events and online resources. Neighbourhood Plans continue to be encouraged by the district council and the toolkit can be used to guide you through the process.

- [Neighbourhood Planning Toolkit](#)
- [Neighbourhood planning guidance, templates and resources](#)

Bus 68

OCC Cllr Emma Markham and I have been discussing and exploring options to increase capacity on the 68 at school times. In my last update I mentioned that a larger bus would require route changes in East Challow due to some of the tight junctions. Thank you for your feedback. I understand that a route change is not desirable as it would be detrimental for residents particularly for those with mobility issues so we are now exploring the possibility of running a second bus at these times, which could meet the demand. This has cost implications and so OCC Cllr Emma Markham is seeing what is possible.

Taxi Services

Particularly in rural communities, taxis and private hire vehicles are a lifeline for many. The council are reviewing the relevant policy and proposed updates include:

- Cashless convenience – all taxis and private hire vehicles to accept card and mobile payments.
- Cleaner, greener travel – moving the zero-emissions target from 2030 to 2045 – balancing environmental goals with affordability for drivers.
- Safety first – daily vehicle checks to keep passengers safe.
- Tinted windows – adjusting the rules to allow more flexibility while maintaining visibility.

Share your views by visiting – southandvale.gov.uk/taxi-licensing-policy

The survey is open until **Tuesday 10 March 2026**.

Fibre broadband

Fast, reliable broadband connections benefit residents and are increasingly essential to many. Mid January I met with West Challow and Childrey Councillors and relevant officers at Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) to understand the options and timescales for bringing Fibre To The Premise (FTTP) to their respective parishes. I am also working with the officers to understand where there are issues in other parishes in the Ridgeway Ward.

The government still aims to achieve nationwide gigabit capable coverage (99% by 2032). Although I appreciate I am not the first to be asking about this, I will continue to help where I can to try and push things along. I am currently interested in understanding where demand is across our communities. I am awaiting the information that I understand OCC holds on existing coverage.

In the meantime, if you would sign up to FTTP but cannot find a broadband provider that will deliver to your property, please feel free to email me. Understanding the level of interest on a road-by-road (even property-by-property) basis will help me try to encourage providers to put in the appropriate infrastructure right across our rural communities and not just the easy-to-reach spots. (Of course, if you haven't already, you can also check coverage and register your interest directly with broadband providers via their websites.)

Keep using just one recycling bin

Residents will be able to continue using a single wheelie bin for almost all their recycling, following confirmation that both districts won't need to change their services to meet a new national policy.

Flooding

This month I also discussed the challenges of flooding in our area with volunteers from [Future Flood Resilience Group](#). The group is small but doing important work now and with lots of good ideas for increasing awareness and preparedness. If you are keen to get involved you can find their contact details on their website.

Myself, other local District Councillors, OCC Cllr Jenny Hannaby, Olly Glover MP continue to raise the issues we see at flooding hotspots. Although I've seen and had reports of flooding throughout the month at Mellor's it seemed particularly bad in the last week of the month. As many of you who have been following this for years now will know, solutions are not straightforward because they involve many parties. Landowners playing their part in clearing ditches they are responsible for and projects with relevant organisations all help. We need multiple solutions. There isn't a single fix. Also, earlier in the month the canal trust had issues with their sluice gate being vandalised which was disappointing.

More information can be found in the [Oxfordshire Flood Toolkit](#)

Funding for community flood prevention projects

Thames Water is offering local organisations funds to install small scale SuDS (Sustainable Drainage Systems) schemes e.g. planting, paving removal, water butts etc like the rain gardens installed at Portway car park in Wantage. The funding will prioritise areas that are known flooding hotspots - [see this map](#). The hotspot most relevant to the Ridgeway Ward appears to be near Wantage and although it says these known flooding hotspots will be prioritised it still might be worth a try. I am also happy to help where I can if any parishes or groups want to apply. Applications are open until **Tuesday 31 March 2026**. Interested parties should get in touch with swmp.applications@thameswater.co.uk.

Nature Recovery

As part of the [Oxfordshire Local Nature Recovery Strategy](#) that was launched at the end of last year there is a [Local habitat map](#) that may be of interest if you are looking where best to give nature a helping hand in your community.

Leisure Facilities

The leisure contract has been extended for a further three years, unlocking savings, and securing fresh investment in facilities until 31 August 2029. With the government planning to reorganise councils in Oxfordshire in the coming years, this short-term contract extension - rather than a new long-term deal - provides the greatest flexibility for the new unitary council that will be replacing the two districts in the next few years, whichever form it takes.

Wantage Leisure Centre is going to see some big refurbishment projects this year. The existing gym will be extended to increase it to twice its current size. The gym will also have new floors, lighting, be freshly decorated and then new state of the art gym equipment will be installed. The wet change area is also going to have an upgrade including a change in layout to improve safeguarding and privacy for users particularly of note given the number of schools who use the baths. New toilets will be installed and LED lighting fitted throughout the area. There will also be new vanity areas with back lit mirrors and hairdryers.

The decarbonisation work at Wantage Leisure Centre, to install air source heat pumps and solar panels, which started in March 2025, is still ongoing and expected to be completed in the coming months. With extra funding from Oxfordshire County Council, additional refurbishments to the roof to improve the

thermal performance of the building will help to save money on energy costs and help the council become carbon neutral in its own operations by 2030.

Half term activities

Starting on 15 February, families across South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse can enjoy a fun-filled half-term with a range of free and low-cost activities, from sports and games to theatre and arts and crafts. The activities are expected to be very popular so people are encouraged to book early at southandvale.gov.uk/holidayactivities to avoid disappointment.

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(8 February 2026)