

District Councillor Report
Haseley Brook ward
07 November 2024

CLlr Georgina Heritage



Meetings and Council Activity

On 24th October a full council meeting saw members vote in favour of Neighbourhood Development Plans for four South Oxon villages (which I was pleased to propose to council on behalf of the Cabinet Member for Planning), and council also resolved four motions.

Perhaps the most impassioned and unifying motion of the evening was the vote of no confidence in Thames Water, with councillors of all parties unanimously calling for the water provider to be brought back under public control. Council members highlighted widespread concerns over Thames Water's environmental and financial mismanagement and their inability to meet key operational standards affecting residents and local ecosystems.

The motion emphasised the need for government intervention through the Water Industry Act 1991, which allows companies to be placed into Special Administration when they are in financial distress or fail to meet essential duties.

So far in 2024, untreated sewage has been discharged into the River Thames or its tributaries from sewage treatment works operated by Thames Water for more than 15,500 hours. This pollution is symptomatic of deeper issues within the company, with nearly two-thirds of Thames Water's sewage treatment facilities reportedly out of compliance with regulatory permits. Beyond pollution concerns, Thames Water's infrastructure challenges are also significant. The company loses about a quarter of the region's public drinking water supply due to its leaks. It is also struggling to manage an £18 billion debt that has led credit agencies Standard & Poor's and Moody's to downgrade Thames Water's debt rating to "junk" status.

The council's motion specifically calls on the government to end water industry privatisation, citing it as a "failed experiment" that has led to increased financial and environmental risks.

In addition to calling for Thames Water to be brought back under public ownership, SODC is backing amendments to the Water (Special Measures) Bill, now progressing through Parliament. These amendments include:

- Halting any public bailouts for the water industry as proposed under Section 10 of the Bill;
- Restructuring Ofwat's duties to prioritise public and environmental interests;
- Re-democratising water company boards to include employees, bill payers, and council representatives.

The council also resolved a motion on supporting communities in their efforts to retain pubs; a motion on the need for an urgent review of local government funding; and a motion on the importance of local government in delivering Net Zero

Councillor Grant Scheme

We want to benefit residents with fantastic community projects through the councillor grant scheme, so please don't forget applications close at midday on the 29 November 2024, and please share this information with any community groups which might benefit. The Haseley Brook pot is currently under subscribed! For more information please don't hesitate to get in touch, and you can find details via the SODC website:

[Councillor Community Grant Scheme 2024/25 - open - South Oxfordshire District Council](#)

Proposed changes to Council Tax premium on long term empty properties

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils have launched a public survey on proposals to reduce the minimum timeframe to charge a council tax premium on long-term empty properties.

Currently, the councils allow a maximum duration of up to two years for a domestic property to remain unoccupied and substantially unfurnished before an additional, long-term empty council tax 'premium' charge is incurred, on top of the normal full 100 per cent charge. Recent changes in council tax legislation now allow councils to reduce this minimum timeframe from two years to just one year. If this change is adopted, a new policy on long-term empty properties would come into effect from 1 April 2026 – to allow sufficient time for empty property owners to plan or adjust their plans accordingly.

The long-term aim of the proposal is to see as many homes brought back into use as soon as possible.

Residents can have their say via the online survey: [Proposed changes to the additional Council Tax charge for long-term empty properties - South Oxfordshire District Council - Join the conversation - South Oxfordshire & Vale of White Horse - Citizen Space](#)

This survey is open for six weeks and will close at 11.59pm on Tuesday 26 November

First Habitat Bank created in South Oxon

South Oxfordshire District Council is proud to announce it has helped create the first habitat bank in the district aiming to increase biodiversity and reduce river pollution while also allowing necessary development.

The council has worked with the environmental charity Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE) and a local landowner on plans to transform 16.5 acres off Windmill Lane, Towersey from intensively farmed arable land to a biodiverse mosaic of grassland, scrub, and woodland habitats. This will provide a haven for pollinators such as bees and butterflies, mammals including water voles and birds such as curlews and barn owls.

The new habitat bank will provide a stable income for the landowner through biodiversity net gain, making the rest of their farm business more resilient in the face of a changing climate.

The owner of the land at Towersey first heard about biodiversity net gain – where developers buy biodiversity credits from habitat banks to offset building works – when they attended the farm innovation show in 2022. They then worked with TOE to develop the project and liaise with the council as the local planning authority.

The site is next to the Thame Valley Conservation Target Area, a strategically valuable area for nature recovery. Over the coming decades, the land will be managed to allow wildflowers to bloom and set seed in the summer, with an annual hay cut in the autumn. This will create habitat and food for a host of wildlife species in an arable-dominated landscape.

By removing the land from intensive agricultural production, fewer chemicals from pesticides and fertiliser and less sediment will run into the Cuttle Brook that runs on the northern border of the site, improving the health of one of the River Thame's main tributaries.