

Wednesday 11th November, 2026

Monthly Update

Cllr Hayleigh Gascoigne

Vale of White Horse District Council

Lest we forget

On Sunday 8th November, I had the privilege of laying a wreath at the Harwell Remembrance Parade, on behalf of Vale of White Horse District Council. The event was well organised, and it was great to join others in the church service afterwards. This year, I also had the additional duty of laying a wreath on Armistice Day on behalf of Olly Glover MP as part of the Poppies to Paddington event.

Local Government Reorganisation

The Government has been flipflopping on its decisions regarding local government reorganisation. At the start of the summer, we were told by the Minister, we would be three unitary councils across Oxfordshire and West Berkshire. Despite that not being the proposal supported by the majority of councils across that geography. We feel that the three councils will be too small to be viable.

At the end of the summer, the decisions across much of England were paused. A number of these (including our area) was unpaused during Budget Week. The proposal is still subject to a short period of consultation with council leaders and MPs before a final decision is confirmed. Residents should be reassured that existing council services will continue throughout the transition.

Frustratingly, the pause/unpause to the decision means that the elections for the new council are being delayed a year, and so next year, elections will be run for the current councils – ie, Vale of White Horse District Council.

Devolution

Devolution is slightly different to Local Government Reorganisation, and it's purpose is giving additional powers to regions, headed up by Mayors.

As part of the Budget announcement, the government has confirmed its intention to pursue a new Thames Valley Mayoral Strategic Authority covering Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Swindon, with the 13 local councils across the area agreeing to work together on developing detailed proposal. The new authority should be established in time for mayoral elections in 2028. The proposed authority would have responsibility for strategic issues such as transport, housing, skills and economic development, whilst the new unitary councils would continue to deliver day-to-day services, including waste collection, planning, schools and social care.

The issues are:

- The proposal excludes Buckinghamshire despite longstanding cross-border ties, leaving unanswered questions about how it would operate effectively outside the arrangement.
- Matching public services to the new boundaries could mean significant changes to policing, NHS and fire service structures.
- Combined with Local Government Reorganisation, this represents a huge amount of organisational change to deliver at the same time.
- Councils had very little time to respond and faced a difficult choice between accepting the proposal or potentially missing out on significant future investment for their communities.

I write these updates to keep you updated on what I am up to, what is happening at the District Council and other relevant local matters.

You can follow me and the Vale of White Horse District Council on facebook:
www.facebook.com/CllrHayleigh & www.facebook.com/whitehorsedc

The best way to get a direct response is to email me and my ward colleague, Cllr Debra Dewhurst.
hayleigh.gascoigne@whitehorsedc.gov.uk
debra.dewhurst@whitehorsedc.gov.uk

Our Community Hub is here to help you

If you need help because you are struggling financially or if you are just finding life difficult, the council can help. Whether it's practical support or just advice, get in touch:

- Tel: 01235 422600 (option 3)
- Email: communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk

Our opening hours are Monday to Thursday 8.30am – 5pm and Friday 8.30am – 4.30pm.
Not open at the weekend or bank holidays.

Cost-of-living support

Here is a handy leaflet that explains what cost-of-living support you can get from our councils and advice on other local and national organisations that may also be able to help.

Mental Health Support

ChatHealth, launched by Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust, provides confidential mental health support via text message, offering immediate access to advice and support for individuals experiencing a range of mental health challenges, including low mood, anxiety and stress, loneliness, relationship difficulties, panic attacks, self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

For more information, visit the Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust webpage below.
oxfordhealth.nhs.uk/news/new-24-7-text-message-mental-health-support-service-launches-across-oxfordshire-and-buckinghamshire

Local News

Great Western Park GP surgery

The Integrated Care Board (ICB) confirmed on Friday 6th November:

- The land for the new surgery on Greenwood Way has now been transferred

- Planning conditions have been submitted to move the project forward

- A building contractor has been selected and detailed design work is progressing

- Legal and funding agreements are being finalised

Most importantly, the project remains on track for construction to begin before the end of March 2027. Finally, a tangible, real thing that we will be able to see in the next few months! This is a significant but I'll continue holding to account those delivering the surgery, the Thames Valley ICB, until there are spades in the ground and residents have access to the healthcare services. I have written to the ICB to ask for a project timeline, and what their plans are to staff the facility.

Link to NHS site where updates are posted: thamesvalley.icb.nhs.uk/about-us/improving-our-estates-within-the-thames-valley-icb

Valley Park

The Section 106 Agreement for Valley Park, Didcot requires the developers to offer 0.25ha of land to the NHS for the delivery of a health centre. The offer of land has been made and, according to the terms of the Section 106 Agreement, there are 12 weeks in which to accept the offer. If they accept the offer, there will also be £2.5million to build out the facility. If they do not accept the offer, then there will be £3million to put towards healthcare in the Didcot area.

The Vale of White Horse council will work with NHS in the coming weeks to ensure they are considering the offer, and they have all the information they need.

Didcot Garden Town meeting

New infrastructure, community funding and nature installations – just a few of the long-term visions for Didcot on display at the event I attended in Harwell, on 30th September.

Around 50 people came to the event with presentations and information on display from the Didcot Garden Town team, and other partnership organisations, these included:

- National Grid with details about their £530,000 Community Fund
- Didcot Powerhouse
- Oxfordshire County Council's Didcot and surrounding areas major infrastructure (HIF1) team

Climate & Environment News

Top tips on local climate and nature opportunities

If you are looking for top tips on local climate and nature opportunities, visit The Climate Action Oxfordshire website. The site has recently undergone a transformation. It has stacks of interesting ideas including advice on plug-in solar panels and how to get involved in monitoring our rivers.

£100,000 awarded to climate projects in the Vale

Solar panels, heat pumps and habitat restoration projects are among 15 projects to receive a total of £100,000 in grant funding through the 2026/27 Vale Nature and Climate Action Fund.
Vale of White Horse District Council recently offered funding to charities, community groups and other local organisations through the sixth round of grant funding to help projects that support climate action and nature recovery across the district.

This year's projects include community woodland recovery coordinated by Faringdon Folly Tower Trust, a nature recovery action plan for Wantage and Grove by Sustainable Wantage, reusing and repurposing equipment by 30th Abingdon Scouts and installation of a heat pump at Stonehill Barn.

Vale celebrates a year of climate action and nature recovery achievements

Vale of White Horse District Council is celebrating a year of significant progress in tackling climate change, restoring nature and supporting communities to build a greener future.

The council has successfully delivered the first year of its joint Nature and Climate Action Plan (with South Oxfordshire District Council) and has now approved a programme of further action for the year ahead following cabinet meetings last month. The ambitious plan is helping to reduce carbon emissions, enhance biodiversity, improve green spaces and prepare local communities for the impacts of climate change.

Beyond its own operations, the council has continued to inspire action across the district through the launch of new Sustainability Stories webpages, highlighting local organisations that are leading the way on climate action and nature recovery.

Among the organisations featured are Sustainable Blewbury, which has created a new woodland to help restore nature and tackle climate change; and the Harwellian Club, which has invested in solar panels, battery storage and air source heat pumps.

Leisure Centre helps council achieve major milestone

Vale of White Horse District Council is celebrating the completion of a landmark decarbonisation project at its leisure centre in Abingdon, marking a major step forward in its ambition towards becoming a net zero council by 2030. As a result of the work, the leisure centre will no longer rely on fossil fuel for its heating or lighting, significantly reducing carbon emissions while creating a more sustainable and resilient facility for residents

Cearn solar farm proposal: increase in major developments decided by central government in the Vale causing concern

A detailed Council discussion about the Cearn solar farm has highlighted ongoing and widespread concerns about the growing number of large-scale infrastructure plans that are decided centrally by the government rather than locally by councils who are more able to assess the effects of these on their communities.

Council News

Full Council meetings

The Vale held a Special full council meeting on 23rd September, to approve changes to the way the council deals with planning applications, and in particular, how the planning committee works. This was necessary, as the government have changed the rules, which came into force on 31st October. The details are outlined below. On 21st October, Vale held their regular Full Council meeting, in which decisions were signed off to extend the council's car park management contract until 2030, approve £256,526 of Section 106 funding for new padel and pickleball courts at Wantage Lawn Tennis Club, and reviewing political balance across our committees following the formation of a new political group on the council – Conservatives and independents. There was a lengthy debate about the proposed Cearn Solar Farm, and its impact to local residents as well as the benefits of generating renewable energy. The application itself is so large, that it will be decided by the National Planning Inspectorate, and not the local council.

Councils work towards stronger community connections

An ambitious undertaking with the aim of strengthening community connections gets underway this month across southern Oxfordshire.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Council have launched a project to help build stronger communities, develop connections and foster neighbourhood togetherness across the districts.

Earlier this year the Councils launched a series of community-led initiatives, under the theme of 'Be Together', ranging from yoga, 'have a go' days and community arts events to bike repairs and food skills courses.

Its core aim is to foster integration by encouraging social participation, cultural understanding, and mutual support. It also aims to build long-term independence and resilience among the communities it supports.

Linked to these smaller community initiatives, the Councils' longer-term ambition is to develop a new, evidence-based Community Cohesion Strategy.

The Councils have also secured £100,000 each as part of a major new national programme designed to strengthen community connections, increase participation and help build resilient communities.

The funding forms part of **Common Ground**, a £14 million initiative delivered by **Belong** and funded by **The National Lottery Community Fund** and **Lloyds Bank Foundation for England and Wales.**

Free community event supports wellbeing and employment

Community groups and public organisations are coming together next month to support wellbeing and employment opportunities in Didcot and surrounding areas. The Wellbeing and Employment Fair is a collaboration of organisations including South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Council's Healthy Didcot programme, the Department of Work and Pensions, Sustainable Didcot, Abingdon and Witney College, National Careers Service, Talking Therapies and more.

Residents are encouraged to come along to the event which takes place at the District Community Centre, on Great Western Park in Didcot on Monday 16 November from 10am to 2pm. The event is free and attendees can pop in at any time. Those requiring a more relaxed and quiet environment can book an appointment during the quiet hour from 1pm to 2pm by emailing **be.together@southandvale.gov.uk**

Councils reluctantly approve constitution changes for new planning process

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councillors discussed significant changes coming to the world of planning from the end of October, including a new standard national system that will see more applications determined by council officers.

Government reforms to planning committees came into force on 31 October 2026, with big changes in the way the planning process works locally.

Key changes include:

- A mandatory national scheme of delegation. Where previously, every local council created its own rules, the new system creates one standard rulebook for the whole country – with the aim of speeding up and streamlining the planning approval process.

- Most everyday planning applications will automatically be handed to professional planning officers to decide. Only very large, complex, or highly controversial projects are allowed to be decided by a planning committee.
- A smaller project can only be pushed up to the committee if it passes a strict "gateway test" to demonstrate that the proposal has significant impacts affecting the wider community, and that request will need to be agreed by a nominated officer.
- A cap on committee sizes at a maximum of 13 members and enforcement of strict planning training and certification requirements.

At two special council meetings on 23 and 24 September, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils met to discuss the impact of the planning changes and consider the necessary constitution changes needed.

After a lengthy debate, the necessary changes were approved.

Following the meetings, both Councils' constitutions will now be amended to take effect from 31 October to ensure decision-making arrangements follow the law.

The agreed changes seek to make the minimum amendments necessary while retaining the maximum level of member involvement permitted under the new legislation.

Preventing Homelessness – the South and Vale Story

Saturday 10 October was World Homelessness Day – which aims to raise awareness of the needs of people experiencing homelessness and highlight the work being done to prevent it. In South and Vale this includes working with partner agencies to help support people and purchasing properties for people to live in.

The councils' housing team has a remarkable record on homelessness prevention rates*. Over the past five years the team has secured accommodation for around 78 per cent of all people at risk of becoming homeless (within the two-month deadline). This is much higher than the national average of around 55 per cent of cases. By developing partnerships with other local agencies such as healthcare providers, the councils have been able to support households to avoid potential homelessness.

Vale among nation's top three councils for affordable housing delivery

Vale of White Horse District Council has been recognised as among the top-performing local authorities in England for affordable housing delivery through the planning system, according to leading planning publication *Planning Resource*.

The recognition highlights the council's success in securing affordable homes for local people through a combination of ambitious planning policies, strong partnerships and a proactive approach to working with housing providers and developers.

From April 2021 to April 2026 Vale of White Horse District Council has delivered a total of 2,021 affordable homes.

Local government reorganisation (LGR) announcement

The government has announced the outcome of its review into local government reorganisation (LGR).

It has made a new minded-to decision to replace the seven existing councils in Oxfordshire and West Berkshire with three new unitary councils.

Government has said it is minded-to proceed with decisions in five areas, including ours, but this will be open to further representation and views from council leaders and MPs for approximately three weeks. Following this, an update will be made to parliament on these decisions before Christmas.

In Oxfordshire and West Berkshire, the three new councils will be:

- **Greater Oxford Council** – covering Oxford and its immediate surroundings.
- **North Oxfordshire Council** – covering most of the existing Cherwell and West Oxfordshire districts.
- **Ridgeway Council** – covering most of the existing South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse districts, combined with West Berkshire.

The new councils are due to go live on 1 April 2029, with elections to the new shadow authorities taking place in May 2028.