

Report from Abingdon Vale Councillors to Abingdon Town Council, 12 March 2025 Updated 11.3.25

All the updates from the latest Vale Council meeting

The budget was the focus at the first full Vale of White Horse District Council meeting of 2025, alongside investment in housing and approval of a new council plan.

The district council met on Wednesday 12 February 2025 and approved its 2025-2026 budget. The budget maintains investment in key areas including community support, housing and leisure facilities, while ensuring that residents will continue to receive excellent value for money for services provided by the district council.

Highlights include securing funding to ensure the council's Community Hub will remain available through to April 2027. This important service provides practical support and advice for those with cost-of-living concerns or who are finding life difficult. More information is available on the budget on the council's website and the [budget news release](#).

Housing also featured significantly at the meeting, with a proposed change to the long-term empty property premium approved, as part of a longer-term strategy to tackle the issue of empty homes. The investment in the purchase of one/two-bedroom homes for use as temporary accommodation was also approved.

Other key items considered at the busy meeting included the council's new council plan. Councillors reviewed At the Heart of the Vale, the Council Plan 2025-2029. One motion was debated on the subject of devolution, which wasn't passed. Topics covered by questions included the council's proposed new headquarters, Didcot Gateway

From **Cllr Andy Foulsham**

Council Plan 2025-2029

At the District Council meeting on 12th February, the Council adopted its new Council Plan for the years 2025-2029, "At the Heart of the Vale".

Our vision is for Vale of White Horse to be a vibrant and sustainable district where residents, communities, and businesses thrive. Placing climate action and nature recovery at the heart of everything we do, we will support our businesses and communities to adapt to the impacts of climate change and foster climate resilience. We will focus on delivering the homes people need, prioritising affordability and high-quality, sustainable development, while working with partners to enhance or provide infrastructure which integrates seamlessly with existing communities. In collaboration with key partners, our local services will promote community resilience and public health, champion inclusivity, and deliver value for money. Our district will

be a place that people of all ages are proud to live, work, learn, and play in, where visitors are met with a warm welcome.

The work to develop the new Plan has taken over a year and has included consulting local residents and town and parish councils, as well as receiving input from councillors and council staff at every stage of its preparation.

Therefore, we have developed a plan with four themes:

1. Action on climate change and nature recovery.
2. Promoting healthy, sustainable, and inclusive communities.
3. Providing the homes and infrastructure people need.
4. Financial stability and innovative transformation.

With the prospect of Local Government Reorganisation, it is now very likely that “at the Heart of the Vale” will be the final Council Plan, I believe that it is one of which we can all be proud, and will be a fitting finale for the Vale of White Horse as a District Council.

Local government reorganisation

This has been a major focus of District Council thinking and discussion ever since the Deputy Prime Minister announced her plans in December 2024. Much of the information and early discussions have been based on the shape of the new Mayoral combined authorities under an elected Mayor, which are intended to cover multiple counties, with less attention being paid to the structure of the new Unitary Councils which are intended to replace the existing County and District Councils.

Strategic / Mayoral authority

The emerging thoughts are that the Mayoral combined authority will be based on Oxfordshire and Berkshire (possibly with the addition of Buckinghamshire), as it already shares a Police force and is under the same Health ICB. District councils across Oxfordshire have stated their opposition to including Swindon in this authority (which they have been interested in pursuing) as it is covered by a different Police force and is in another health ICB and would more naturally look to the rest of Wiltshire, Dorset and Gloucestershire.

Unitary Council

The District Council is consulting in depth with our neighbouring District Councils and with the County Council to determine what proposal we will bring forward by the deadline for interim proposals. In developing these, we are very much guided by our principle that powers should be devolved to the lowest feasible level rather than centralised either regionally or nationally. Cabinet will consider which interim proposals it wishes to support the submission of, and the best route for submitting them, at its meeting on 19th March 2025, ahead of the final submission date for these proposals by 21st March 2025. A further paper will be brought to Full Council before the “long stop” deadline of 28th November 2025 to set out our final position.

Town & Parish Councils

There has been a lot of speculation about the roles of Town and Parish councils under the new arrangements, and certainly my own view (and those of commentators far more knowledgeable than I) is that there should be more of a role for these councils rather than less. Town and parish councils enjoy the closest possible connections with their residents and are best placed to advocate for their needs and desires. However, the exact nature of these changes is still unknown, as central government has been noticeably silent on the matter. The arrangements for local government reorganisation are changing rapidly (we're seeing guidance and ministerial statements almost weekly, or sometimes multiple times per week), so it is hard to give any definitive guidance. As soon as we have more information available, I will make sure that it is communicated to the Town Council without delay.

From **Cllr Oliver Forder**

Unitary Council

To build on Cllr Andy Foulsham's comments above, the LibDem Group's preference is for a unitary comprising the Vale, South and West Berks. This is considered to be the option that would be closest to local residents, build on existing local structures, encompass areas with similar characteristics and, very importantly for me, would probably result in a smaller decrease in the number of councillors available to service the needs of local residents. However, our local MPs have indicated they are in favour of a whole Oxfordshire unitary, while there is also talk of a Greater Oxford unitary. In the end, the government will decide.

Abbey Buildings Project

Members will recall that I pressed for the vale to make a financial contribution to the project. In the end, this proved impossible, because of both budgetary constraints and the new situation produced by forthcoming reorganisation, but they are in discussions about other ways to support the project.

Upper Reaches

You will be informed of the current position regarding this longstanding blot on the landscape of Abingdon, But I have been doing my best to add to the pressure to move this issue forward at the Vale.

Oliver Forder
March 2025