

# District Councillors' Annual Report 2020/21

Cllrs Bethia Thomas & David Grant

Faringdon Ward councillors for Vale of White Horse District Council

It has obviously been a tough year for us all, but we are proud of the way our council has stepped forward to keep services running and, at the same time, work hand in hand with community groups such as Faringdon Viral Kindness to provide additional support for our most vulnerable residents.

Since the first lockdown, the Vale Council has been running a community hub to point anyone in need towards the right support and to administer grants from central government. That wouldn't have been possible without the hard work of local residents, who have helped their neighbours and volunteered for the community groups that sprang up overnight. Bethia's work in setting up Faringdon Viral Kindness with Al Sylvester has been a truly rewarding experience and we would like to thank all of the people who volunteered to deliver food and prescriptions. Each of them richly deserves their High Sherriff Award.

We were also pleased to provide support through our personal Councillor COVID Emergency Grants, including paying for new laptops for school children to learn remotely and helping those who had been shielding get active again at the Bromsgrove Day Centre.

The wheels of local government turn slowly, but we are also now starting to see the fruits of some of our longer-term plans and deliver on our election pledges, including fighting for infrastructure for Faringdon. We have secured the return of over £200,000 of developer contributions from homes built in Faringdon which had been promised to Wantage by a previous administration. We are currently consulting with the local community and sports groups to understand where the greatest needs are, and we have had a great deal of interest, ranging from those who would like to see improvements in existing facilities like the Rugby Club and Skate Park to those who would like to see something entirely new, like a running track or pump track for bikes and wheelchairs.

As a council we also remain committed to doing our part for getting to net-zero carbon as soon as possible. As part of our commitment to slash our own emissions by 75% by 2025 we are delighted to be changing Faringdon Leisure Centre's outdated gas boilers that were due to be replaced with energy-efficient air source heat pumps – powered by brand-new solar panels – having won over £400,000 from the Public Sector Decarbonisation Fund scheme.

As we promised before we were elected in 2019, we continue to push for infrastructure to match any new development and to make sure that infrastructure contributions made by developers are sustainable. As a result, 125 new houses over and above those included in the local plan were rejected by the Vale's planning committee due to the lack of such contributions. At the time of writing this report, the case is going to appeal with the Planning Inspectorate and should be heard by the time of the town meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> May.

We also promised to take dangerous and illegal parking seriously. We want to ensure fair parking rules for all and continue to provide two hours' free parking at both our district council-run car parks at Southampton St and Gloucester St. However, it is clear that illegal parking continues to be a real hazard, causing an obstruction to drivers, cyclists and bus users and potentially obstructing emergency services. We are therefore working in partnership with neighbouring councils to bring in

civil parking enforcement, so that rules can be enforced by the councils rather than overstretched police forces. It is expected that this service will break even and we plan to have it up and running by the end of 2021.

When we took control in 2019, the council was scheduled to run out of money in 2022; however, we have managed to steady the ship while maintaining services during the most difficult of times. We continue to lobby central government for appropriate financial support.

With this in mind, we remain optimistic that, by working together with the town council and the local community, we can make a better, greener recovery from the pandemic. Our ambition is shown in our agreement to develop a new local plan against which future developments will be judged, so that we can create healthier, greener communities and the affordable housing our residents need. We are working in partnership with South Oxfordshire District Council on the new plan to streamline the process and increase value for money for the taxpayer.

COVID has put a great deal of pressure on all of us, and we know we are not out of the woods yet and must all continue to follow the health guidelines and play our part in keeping everyone safe. Nonetheless, we are cautiously looking forward to a brighter and more stable year ahead.

*We would like to offer our sincere condolences to the family of Roger Cox, who represented the community of Faringdon ably for many years as a councillor and leader of the Vale of White Horse District Council. It is clear from the tributes that continue to be made that he will be sorely missed by so many at our council and in Faringdon.*