

**Address to Woolhampton Parish Assembly
District Councillor Chris Read
May 2026.**

I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on the 3 years I have been District Councillor. Back in 2023 I rather tongue in cheek suggested it was my wife's plan to get me out of the kitchen. Well, I have to say her plan has been very successful as I certainly have been very busy out and about: potholes, verges, adult and children's social care, housing... PLANNING... amongst many other topics.

I sit on the Resources Scrutiny Committee chaired by the formidable Cllr Carolyn Culver – looking at process and decision making. I have chaired a cross-bench sub-committee “task and finish” group on Project and Programme management, key for the transformative approach the council services need to be improved and delivered all with less money. We submitted over 20 recommendations for improvement to the Council Corporative Board on this topic.

Transformation is a key to how councils in the south of England will survive. We have to live with the hand that providence and Westminster deals us. Westminster used to take 70p in the pound of local business rates up to last year, now from this year they take 87p in the pound and in 3 years time Westminster will provide no grants at all to West Berkshire. Its tough now and will get tougher.

It has also been another year of education for me. In addition to the day-to-day case work:

- I have continued the District Councillor Surgeries (3 per month in the ward)
- Hosted a public meeting on Thames Water issues at Woolhampton
- Members Bid on delivered on the Children's Trim Trail at Bucklebury Primary School and supported Bucklebury PC on the BMX track behind this hall.
- Continue to write Councillor Reports to Parish Councils that I send to all Parish Councillors and Clerk prior to parish meeting
- I am supporting Midgham Parish on their Neighbourhood Development Plan to defend against NE Thatcham further expansion (32 acres)
- I sit on the Local Access Forum – reviewing changes and improvements to public rights of way
- I am Secretary the Bucklebury Common Interest Group
- I continued the local Freepost surveys for communities, the results of which I take back to portfolio holders and departmental managers for improvements to council services.
- I am supporting parishes on the approach they want to take on vehicle speeds where I can.
- Finally, I sit on the “Viable Villages” Policy Advisory Group, to help officers define policies that support village communities to thrive in West Berkshire.

Council Services and Transformation

There have been key themes around support for vulnerable residents, investing in young people and schools, public facilities and environment - and the efficiency and effectiveness of the council. Among the achievements acknowledged were:

- Opening a **new family unity in Walnut House**, Thatcham to provide a family-friendly environment for families to meet and receive help from the Council

- Repurposing Walnut Close to provide **temporary accommodation** - helping to reduce to zero the number of children in B&B accommodation from 36 in January
- Providing 469 new **affordable accommodation homes**
- Providing **new classrooms** for Castle School and Willink School, approving the rebuild of a classroom at Falkland Primary School and building a new iCollege in Calcot.
- Recruiting **six new foster carers**, with another seven joining soon
- Providing **an additional 72 charging points** for electric vehicles (EVs)
- **Re-opening Faraday Road football pitch** - with a new 3G pitch coming soon at Cotswold Leisure Centre in Calcot, adding a modular dance studio at Hungerford leisure centre, re-furbishing the Kennet sports centre - and delivering an almost £5m improvement programme for Northcroft Leisure Centre
- **Protecting the environment** - investing £2.5m to safeguard chalk streams, adding solar panels to council buildings as well as those of our partners, increasing our overall recycling rates and reaffirming a commitment to achieving carbon neutrality for the Council by 2030
- **Improving the Council's recruitment rate** by 29% and reducing the number of people dropping out of the process by 40%
- Changing criteria to enable **an extra 600 potholes a year to be repaired** - bringing the annual total to more than 3,000 pothole repairs

Any finally when you see a pothole please don't forget to report on the council "Report a Problem" website (or send me an email...).

Finally the "possible" datelines on local government "**devolution**" – I have a few slides I would like to share on the matter to allow you to put into context.

Last year I mentioned it looked likely we would all be voting for a new major for the region. That is not going to happen now.

The timeline on whether we will be part of "Ridgeway Council" (Vale of Whitehorse PLUS South Oxfordshire PLUS West Berkshire) is:

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| • Likely decision on Oxfordshire LGR | July 2026 |
| • Shadow arrangements commence | July 2026 |
| • Elections to new Council(s) | May 2027 |
| • Budget set for new Council(s) | Feb 2028 |
| • Go live for new Council(s) | April 2028 |
| • Dissolution of West Berkshire | May 2028? |

If "Ridgeway" does **not** go ahead West Berkshire could be merged with Reading, Wokingham or even Swindon. Personally, I think true "devolution" would be for the council to retain all its business rates rather than send them to Westminster – it would solve our financial issues with a stroke of the pen.

As always, if anyone one would like to discuss this or any other point, I am happy to talk one-to-one.

Stay safe everyone.

Chris