

## **Annual Report from Cllr Alison Johnston, Mid Test, Test Valley Borough Council – May/June 2025**

I want to start by expressing my sincere thanks to Houghton Parish Council for all their help and support over the last 12 months and for everything they do to serve our communities. It's a significant undertaking for which I am sure we are all very grateful.

This past year has seen many changes in Local Government and I thought it would be helpful to provide an update on those matters, and as we approach the summer, where further news is likely soon.

### **Devolution and Local Government Reorganisation**

Last December the Government published their White Paper on Devolution; creating more directly elected Mayors and moving some powers with the money to enact them from Central Government to a new Mayoral Combined Authority. At the same time the Government is requiring wholesale reorganisation of Local Government. My view is that devolution is broadly positive (as a mechanism for attracting more inward investment both from Government and the private sector), but that Local Government reorganisation is an unwelcome distraction and will not deliver the promised objectives without a fundamental change in the way Local Government is funded.

One of my main concerns with ending the two-tier system is that district and borough councils like Test Valley have previously been protected from the huge cost pressures that affect upper tier authorities. That means Test Valley has been able to continue the magnificent work in front line services and supporting local community projects.

Hampshire County Council on the other hand suffers from the rising cost of adult social care and children's services (which are statutory services) currently making up around 85% of Hampshire County Council's budget. As a result, Hampshire are having to make significant cuts to the other services they provide (including highways maintenance and pothole repairs!). Without a fundamental change in Local Government funding, once unitarisation happens, it is likely that those cost pressures will only increase, with resultant cuts on a much wider range of local services including those previously provided by Test Valley.

Although I don't fully support reorganisation, the Government has been clear that we do not have a choice. I am, therefore, of the view that it is incumbent on all local decision makers to try and make the best of the situation for the benefit of all local residents. An interim submission on the future of Local Government in Hampshire (signed by all 15 Local Government leaders in Hampshire) was recently made to Government. Key for me is ensuring that any new local authority maintains strong local connections and avoids becoming too remote and less agile making for poorer local services and less local decision making. We should have a much better view on the likely shape of the number of new authorities in Hampshire (3, 4 or potentially 5) and their boundaries, in the fourth quarter of this year. Mayoral elections are likely to take place in May 2026.

### **Housing Numbers and Local Plan**

The new Government also confirmed that they've increased Test Valley's housing target by a staggering 78%. Rather than planning for 524 new homes a year, we now need to prepare a

Local Plan that delivers 934 dwellings per annum. 15,878 new homes over the next 17 years. This despite solid delivery over the past decade or more.

This overnight increase without any transitional arrangements means we no longer have a 5 year housing land supply and are therefore at risk of speculative development. Indeed, we are already seeing that across the borough in town, village and rural settings. The recent successful appeal in relation to Houghton House has provided an early test case where an inspector has overruled Test Valley Borough Council given lack of 5 year housing supply in the borough.

Government have also made clear they expect, and will support, development around commuter transport hubs.

Whilst I want to see this generation have the same opportunities as previous ones to get on the housing ladder or have access to affordable homes, my view is that new homes must be built in the right place, planned in consultation with local people and crucially include high levels of local infrastructure (schools, GP surgeries, roads, etc).

We have, therefore, been working at pace to amend our local plan to accommodate the increased housing numbers, and later this summer we will be consulting with residents to ask for your feedback on the draft. We will need to make some tough decisions, and include many more sites than we would like, to try and prevent even more new development coming forward from speculative applications and appeals in an ad hoc way. Our task has been made extremely difficult if not impossible by the new Government's approach.

### **Fly-Tipping**

Figures published by Government recently show that fly-tipping in Test Valley has decreased by 39.6% from 1,457 to 880 incidents over the past year. Any amount of fly-tipping is unacceptable but it's good to see that Defra figures show a large reduction in Test Valley. Our zero-tolerance approach, successfully prosecuting and publicising 65 cases between 2022 and 2024, ensures that any would-be fly-tipper thinks twice before dumping waste in our beautiful borough.

### **Food waste collection**

Test Valley has agreed to bring in weekly food waste collections from Monday 13 October 2025. Every household will be given a small kitchen caddy to help with the collection of food waste and scraps in the home. A new fleet of specialist collection vehicles will collect the food waste from larger kerbside caddies. All of the collected food waste will be processed at an anaerobic digestion facility where it will be broken down by micro-organisms in the absence of oxygen. The methane-rich biogas generated during this process can be used as a fuel and the remaining product can be used as a nutrient rich fertiliser. A communication plan for residents is currently being prepared.

### **Test Valley's Budget**

Against a backdrop of severe financial pressure for Local Government, Test Valley is in a relatively good position with our modest council tax rise of 3.05% protecting front line services. That means an average bill of £168.91 for an entire year of Test Valley Borough Council services. £44 (20%) lower than the average charge for the rest of England. Not only to have your bin collected every week but

to maintain the housing & homelessness, planning, licensing, countryside, parks & open spaces, environmental health, economic development and leisure services - as well as continuing with our ambitious plans to invest and improve our town centres and villages.

Finally, I would like to praise the work undertaken by the Pan Parish Group in raising the profile of pollution in our fragile chalk streams and taking direct steps to monitor and report on the health of the River Test and tributaries.

As always, do please get in touch if I can ever be of any help. I can be contacted on 01794 500610 or at [CllrAJohnston@testvalley.gov.uk](mailto:CllrAJohnston@testvalley.gov.uk)

With kind regards,  
Alison

**Cllr Alison Johnston Mid Test Ward, Test Valley Borough Council**