

District Councillor Report: January

Lorraine Hillier and Jo Robb

Local Plan

The Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick MP, wrote to Sue Cooper, leader of the Council last week (7 January) regarding the Local Plan and the SoS's holding order. You can read the letter here:

[file:///C:/Users/sav_robj/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Windows/INetCache/Content.Outlook/9G0DFROH/20200107%20Letter%20from%20the%20Secretary%20of%20State%20South%20Oxfordshire%20eLP2034%20\(003\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/sav_robj/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Windows/INetCache/Content.Outlook/9G0DFROH/20200107%20Letter%20from%20the%20Secretary%20of%20State%20South%20Oxfordshire%20eLP2034%20(003).pdf)

The SoS is inviting the Leader of the Council to respond, outlining her and the Cabinet's position on the Local Plan. He indicates a range of options including giving control of the Local Plan 2034 to the OCC.

In the meantime, Mark Stone, the Council's Chief Executive, has written a response from officers:

[file:///C:/Users/sav_robj/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Windows/INetCache/Content.Outlook/9G0DFROH/2020-01-10-MS%20Ltr%20to%20Emran%20M%20-%20SDOC%20local%20plan%20Final%20\(002\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/sav_robj/AppData/Local/Microsoft/Windows/INetCache/Content.Outlook/9G0DFROH/2020-01-10-MS%20Ltr%20to%20Emran%20M%20-%20SDOC%20local%20plan%20Final%20(002).pdf)

The Cabinet and the Leader are formulating their response now. We will keep you updated.

December Council Meeting – motions passed

The last meeting of 2019 was a busy one, with several motions being debated and passed as well as some more "business as usual" items.

Local Government Structure

Four motions related to the most appropriate governance models and structures for our local authorities, taking into account both the importance of local democracy and decision-making and the need to be financially sustainable and cost-effective. The previous administration at SODC had supported the concept of "One Oxfordshire" – a single unitary authority for the whole country – but more recent thinking indicates that this would be too large an area to provide effective governance and would lose the close connection that SODC has with its residents. The data upon which the previous position was approved is now out-of-date, and so Council approved a motion which would effectively withdraw our support for the concept of a single Oxfordshire Unitary Authority and ask our officers to explore alternative governance structures that protect and enhance the democratic link to local communities.

Secondly, it has become very clear since the elections last May that the Council is in a poor financial position. This is the result of a combination of factors, including an over-reliance on one-off New Homes bonus payments, central Government cuts, the decision of the previous administration not to increase the SODC portion of the Council Tax in line with inflation, and the lack of any commercialisation plans to generate revenue in new and innovative ways.

As a result, our Band D Council tax charge is some £60 lower than that in comparable authorities, and there is a gap of about £3m between our income and our expenditure every year. This is unsustainable. In addition to working very hard to create a responsible and sustainable budget for the coming few years, Council has now also asked officers to explore the implications of a full merger with the Vale of the White Horse and to bring their findings back to a future meeting. Any decision would take into account both future financial sustainability and the need to protect local democracy and decision-making.

Thirdly, a motion was passed to emphasise that, while we support the concept of regional – and county - planning for biodiversity and environmental sustainability matters, as well as for public transport infrastructure, we believe that all decisions relating to site selection for employment and housing developments should be made by the local Planning Authority (i.e. SODC).

Finally, a motion was passed to ask the Constitutional Review Group to consider if a move to a committee-based structure (as opposed to the “strong cabinet” one) would be a more effective and inclusive system of governance for the Council.

Supporting votes for 16 and 17 year-olds

Council passed a motion expressing its support for the enfranchisement of 16 and 17 year olds, and asked that the Leader write to Ministers and local MPs expressing this view (as it is clearly not in our gift to implement this change). Should the Votes at 16 campaign succeed, this would bring England into line with Scotland and Wales.

Improving Cycling and Walking Infrastructure

The last motion of the meeting, passed unanimously, related to the need for a much more strategic and joined-up approach to the planning of healthy transport alternatives to the private car, recognising the wide range of benefits to health, well-being and the environment. In partnership with other local authorities, the Council is now required to develop a Strategic Active Travel Network and to prioritise cycling and walking in all planning policy.

Council Tax Base for 2020/21

Council is required by law to agree the Council Tax base for the 2020/21 year; this is the calculation based on the number of dwellings in the District and the various discounts or surcharges levied according to a range of factors (single occupancy, disability entitlements etc). The dwellings are then converted to “Band D equivalents” to reflect the range of property sizes in each community, which gives the Council the number of dwellings per settlement on which to base its tax budget.

Chair's charity concert

Parish Councillors and residents may be interested to know that the Chair of SODC, Cllr David Bretherton, is hosting a charity concert on Friday 7 February to help raise funds for his two chosen charities - Earth Trust and Red Kite Family Centre in Thame.

Taking place at Cornerstone, the evening will be full of variety and plans to showcase local talented people including singers and dancers, as well as a few surprises for an evening of fun.

Tickets cost £12 per person, £10 for concessions and are available from [Cornerstone's website](#).

PopUp Business School, Didcot

The PopUp Business School will return to Didcot to run a FREE five-day course to help anyone thinking about setting up their own business and to advise existing small businesses on how to increase profits. From Monday 27 January, the course will run daily Monday-Friday at Didcot Civil Hall, 10am-3pm. It will include tips on how to create a website, marketing, how to attract customers through social media and how to shape a business.

During the informal sessions, trainers help build people's confidence to kick-start their new venture by teaching them the vital skills on how to set goals and what they can do when faced by new or unexpected challenges.

Last time the PopUp Business School visited Didcot in 2018, 53 people attended, and 15 brand new businesses were created including a wedding photographer, a vegan fast food retailer and an entertainment hire company. www.popupbusinessschool.co.uk/didcot

Better Broadband

OCC is nearing the close of its current superfast broadband contract with BT and there are still some 53 broadband structures that need completing with some 790 further premises dependent on the completion of these works before they may be able to order superfast broadband. Bix is not one of the Parishes affected though residents and business owners with any concerns may contact Craig Bower from OCC to discuss. Craig.bower@oxfordshire.gov.uk
www.betterbroadbandoxfordshire.org.uk