

District Councillor Report: Lorraine Hillier and Jo Robb

Local Plan Examination in Public

We have now received a letter from the Inspector, Mr Jonathan Bore, with his preliminary findings set out. The Inspector is not inviting comments on his preliminary findings, instead there will be an opportunity this autumn for the public to comment on the main modifications that will be finalised following the Inspector's instructions.

Cllr Anne-Marie Simpson, Cabinet Member for Planning at the district council, added, "We will encourage our residents to provide feedback on the main modifications – so many people have been involved in the process so far, and it's important that they continue to make their voices heard in such an important process for our communities."

The Inspector's letter is available on the council's website at www.southoxon.gov.uk/examination

As anticipated, the Inspector is not proposing any reduction in the number of houses required by the Plan, and he has raised no objections to the inclusion of all seven strategic sites, six of which are currently in the Green Belt. He suggests some modifications to design standards to improve the environmental sustainability of housing, and prioritising active travel over car use, but essentially his view is that the Plan is "sound" and "legal".

The Council will respond to his requests to make these modifications, and these modifications will then be subject to public consultation (but only the modifications). As it stands, we remain under the Legal Directive from the Secretary of State to adopt the Local Plan by the end of this year.

Reading Transport Strategy Consultation

SODC has submitted its response to the Reading Transport Strategy Consultation. This has been sent to all Parish Clerks. In essence, the Council rejects Reading's proposals for a Third Reading Bridge, an Orbital and Park and Rides, citing a lack of evidence, the fact that these car-based measures are inconsistent with our Councils' declarations of climate emergency and will cause environmental harm in South Oxfordshire and in particular, in the Chilterns AONB. It is most welcome to see widespread agreement between County, District and Parish Councils on these proposals and their impact on our District, the climate and our natural environment.

Changes to "Use Class Order Groups" rushed through for 1st September

New legislation has been fast-tracked in order to permit changes to town centre use classes, allowing far greater flexibility to change uses within town centres without the need to obtain planning permission. They will make current shop frontage planning policies obsolete or toothless, restricting the ability of local planning authorities to control the mix of uses. The new approach aims to promote the vitality and viability of town centres by allowing more diversification in a way that can respond to rapid changes in the retail and leisure sectors. The increased flexibility will be welcomed by many landlords and fund managers with vacant premises, although there may be unintended consequences over which SODC will now have no control. In many ways this new legislation supports our stated aim of "reimagining our

high streets”, but the concern is that we will have no control over what developments take place.

Planning White Paper

We have previously reported that the Government is consulting on wide-ranging changes to the current planning system, and this issue has received much press coverage. SODC is preparing its response to the consultation, and all Parish Councils are encouraged to submit their responses too (closing date 29th October 2020).

The White Paper can be found at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907273/Planning_for_the_Future_web_accessible_version.pdf

The website for more information and submissions can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future>

One key concern we have is that, overall, there is a clear shift of power. Local residents and elected councillors (including parish and town councils) will have far less power in the new system while planners, developers and central government will have more.

Reform of the s106/CIL system is welcome, as there is so much complexity and confusion surrounding the current one. However, there is a shift of burden from the developer to the taxpayer being proposed, since developers will be able to delay their payments and Councils will have to borrow at risk to build necessary infrastructure.

Other groups have already provided their responses. The following might be of interest:

Planning Oxfordshire’s Environment and Transport Sustainably (POETS):

<https://www.poetsplanningoxon.uk/poets-planning-white-paper-centralising-power-while-decentralising-blame-010920.pdf>

Town and Country Planning Association:

<https://www.tcpa.org.uk/planning-white-paper-faqs>

Campaign to Protect Rural England:

<https://www.cpre.org.uk/news/major-planning-reforms-criticism/>

Local Government Reorganisation (aka Devolution)

The Government is also shortly to be consulting on its Devolution White Paper, which essentially intends to restructure local government to create large unitary authorities, possibly with elected Mayors across the country. This could lead to the abolition of South Oxfordshire District Council completely, and the creation of a county-wide unitary or possibly a smaller unitary authority as a merger between SODC and Vale of White Horse – and potentially one other council. We expect the White Paper in October, so watch this space!

Recent SODC Communications

Recent communications from SODC to Parishes have covered a wide range of topics, including:

- New parking charges and proposed changes to the parking order
- New SODC website soft launch
- Safety Advisory Group advice for events to be held locally
- Oxfordshire Investment Plan (from OxLEP)
- Electoral roll – yellow letters
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Rather than repeating the detail, we would direct you to these messages, but we're very happy to answer any questions you may have.

Cycling in September (and beyond!)

Some of the staff at SODC are taking part in Cycle September – a global event with a friendly competitive element, to help more people realise the benefits of riding a bike.

We know that there are many keen cyclists out there so we thought that you might like to get involved as well, and encourage others to do the same.

Throughout the month you can earn points by riding and encouraging others to ride too by logging on to this website <https://www.lovetoride.net/uk>

During September, we will also be encouraging residents to get out on their bikes via our social media platforms.

On the subject of cycling, here is a reminder of the Active Travel plans the County are working on across Oxfordshire that will benefit many cyclists in our districts:

<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/roads-and-transport/active-travel>

Corporate Plan

We had an incredible response to the survey on our draft Corporate Plan– with 930 people filling in the survey.

We are currently analysing the comments, which will help us finalise the plans. The plans will then be approved through our democratic processes (Cabinet vote, Scrutiny Committee and Council vote) this autumn.

Big response to the lockdown leisure survey

We have already received a great response to the lockdown lifestyle survey which launched 11th Aug. So far, nearly 950 people have completed the online form.

This is great news as a high feedback rate will provide us with a much better understanding of the impact of Covid-19 on our residents and a really good basis to work on new initiatives to keep residents active, healthy and happy.

If you haven't already done so, please go here:

https://survey.southandvale.gov.uk/s/LockdownLifestyle_HowActiveAreYou/

The closing date is Tuesday 8 September.

'No more raw sewage in the River Thames'

SODC's recently appointed Thames Champion, Cllr Jo Robb, has written a letter to neighbouring councils and user groups inviting them to work together to stop raw sewage from being dumped in the River Thames and its tributaries.

The council is investigating ways to obtain Bathing Quality Water status for stretches of the Thames in South Oxfordshire, a status which requires regular testing of water quality during bathing season and imposes a higher standard on water companies to eliminate sewage overflows and to provide the public with accurate and publicly available information about when storm and sewage overflows take place.

New Emergency Assistance Grant funding

We have £45,373 to distribute to voluntary and community groups to help people who are struggling to afford food and other essential provisions as a result of Covid-19.

From today, groups can apply for grants of up to £5,000 to go to:

- projects directly helping vulnerable people affected by the effects of COVID-19, such as providing access to food and other essentials e.g. toiletries;
- existing schemes supporting people struggling to afford food and other essentials, and where the need is greatest;
- projects advising and providing information to people to help them access longer term support they might need, such as benefits;
- projects that provide targeted support in areas of greatest need and deprivation, including rural areas.

We will be assessing applications on a rolling fortnightly basis. The first deadline for applications is therefore midnight on Tuesday 15 September.

There's more information on our website.

The cash comes from £63 million of emergency assistance funding from the government for local authorities to support people who are affected by Covid-19.

Business Grants

Across both districts we've given out well over £1.5 million in Discretionary Business Grants.

The deadline for applications has passed and we're pleased to say we've now paid out to all of the successful applicants.

The fund was provided to us by the government to help support small and micro-businesses affected by Covid-19, particularly those not eligible for other business grants.

Over the last four months colleagues in Economic Development and a number of other departments have worked incredibly hard to process the applications and make the final payments quickly.

In South Oxfordshire 107 micro and small businesses each received a £10,000 grant, making it a total of £1,070,000 that we were able to give out.

In the Vale of White Horse - 55 micro and small businesses each received a £10,000 grant – a total of £550,000.

We're now looking into what options there are to distribute the remaining funds.