

District Councillor Report

4 January 2021

Happy New Year!

We both sincerely hope that you were all able to enjoy a healthy and happy Christmas and New Year break; no doubt most of us are rather glad to see the back of 2020, and we look forward to more positive and productive initiatives during the coming twelve months. We would once again like to thank all those on the Parish Council and within the local community who have provided support, advice and often just a friendly chat to those who have felt more vulnerable over the past difficult year. The community support and spirit shown across the District has been remarkable, and gives us great confidence when planning future projects and programmes designed to sustain the well-being, prosperity and social cohesion of our towns and villages.

Local Plan 2035

Now that the controversial South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 has been adopted by Council, it carries full weight in the Planning Policy framework. Some key improvements were made to the Plan during the Inspection phase, including some on community involvement in master-planning, the introduction of the new DES10 zero-carbon housing policy (where there was no such policy at all before) and the prioritisation of cycling and walking. However, disappointingly, the Inspector did not remove any of the strategic sites, nor reduce the housing delivery requirement. We expect major new applications to be progressed in the coming months for sites such as Chalgrove Airfield, Culham, Grenoble Road and Berinsfield. Each application will still have to satisfy normal planning conditions, but once a site is allocated in a Local Plan there is an assumption that planning permission will be granted.

The government's abandonment of the "mutant" algorithm for calculating housing need and its replacement with the Standard Method will not and cannot apply retrospectively to Local Plans already found sound by an inspector and adopted. The high housing numbers in South Oxfordshire's Local Plan were based on the SHMA and commitments already made under the Growth Deal (including Oxford's unmet need) and the HIF.

Strategic Planning activity never stops, however, and we are already engaged in discussions across Oxfordshire and the broader Ox-Cam Arc initiative to create a longer-term strategic vision for the region, prioritising the protection and enhancement of nature, sustainability, employment opportunities (particularly in the area of green technology and innovation), digital infrastructure and community. And we are also investigating the feasibility of a joint Local Plan with the Vale of the White Horse.

District Councillor Grants

There is only one month left to apply for a Councillor Grant, and we have both already allocated funds from our total pot of £5k each.

Application forms and guidelines can be found here:

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/community-support/grants/councillor-community-grants/>

Covid Vaccination Programme

Although the nationwide programme is underway, it will still take several months for the whole population to be vaccinated, The key messages to all local residents are as follows::

- The vaccination programme is being phased in across the county following the national guidance on prioritising patients. Some people have already been vaccinated and others are waiting to be invited.
- Please do not contact your GP or another NHS service to seek a vaccine – GP practices are still open for providing care to patients and their phones could become swamped, so please wait until the NHS contacts you.
- When the NHS does contact you, please be ready and attend your booked appointments.
- Please continue to follow all the public health guidance to control the spread of the virus, protect the NHS and save lives.

Our SODC Communications Team remains an active part of this system-wide communication approach.

Latest Covid Statistics for South Oxfordshire

To underline the importance of the vaccination programme and the need to follow public health guidance, the most recently available statistics for the increase in positive Covid-19 tests in our area are quite stark. In the week leading up to 23rd December, there were 417 new cases, compared to 199 in the previous week. The 16-29 and 30-44 age groups are currently the most affected, and as of 30th December our hospitals had 185 in-patients, of whom 21 were in ICU. The hospitals also reported that 947 staff were absent, of whom 485 are self-isolating or have Covid-19 themselves.

Civil Parking Enforcement

The Council approved a recommendation at a special meeting on 22nd December to move ahead with taking responsibility for managing on-street civil parking enforcement in collaboration with Oxfordshire County Council. We now expect this to move forward without delay and for powers to be transferred during 2021. This will work alongside our existing off-street parking enforcement powers.

New CIL Spending Strategy

Cabinet also approved a new CIL and s106 spending strategy last month, which will take effect from April 2021. Most of the changes affect how SODC and OCC can spend their allocation of CIL funds; the Parish allocation will remain at 25% for those parishes with a Neighbourhood Plan. This means that OCC will now be able to claim funds to spend on libraries and SEN provision as well as on education and transport, while SODC will be able to invest in improvements to cycle networks, provision of electric charging points and access to nature. The new, more flexible, rules should release funds more rapidly and enable larger projects to be commissioned across the District rather than being spent piecemeal on small initiatives.

Thames Valley Rivers Network

The inaugural meeting of this newly created group (set up by Cllr Jo Robb), took place in early December with nearly two dozen representatives from Parish, District, Town, City, Borough and County Councils as well as representatives from Thames Water, the Rivers Trust, the Environment Agency and others. It was agreed that the group would work collaboratively for the protection of the cleanliness and biodiversity of the River Thames its tributaries and their setting and for an end to sewage pollution. The group will also work together to promote sustainable use of and access to the River. There are plans underway for a river-wide clean-up day this year and work with Thames Water and the EA is ongoing.