

Covid-19 and Community Hub

Covid-19 continued to impact the District and play a major part in the Council's work. Staff returned to the office with most now mixing working from home with being in the office on a part-time basis.

The Community Hub, launched in 2020, remained open and continued to support residents isolating or struggling because of Covid. However, with the cost of living crisis and the Ukraine crisis both emerging, the Community Hub's work has shifted to support residents in these areas too, distributing the government's Household Support Fund. The hub is also leading the Council's response to the Ukraine crisis, working alongside our partners at OCC and with community groups. More than 200 families in the District have welcomed guests from Ukraine – South Oxfordshire is a leader nationally in this respect.

Budget

If the 2019 budget was about putting the Council's finances on an even footing and 2020 was dominated by Covid, this year's budget has been the first full expression of the administration's priorities. Ensuring financial sustainability remains the long-term goal as the Council seeks ways of saving money, increasing income, and delivering services more efficiently.

Some £1.5m of cost savings were identified, chiefly through bringing functions back in-house from Capita, agreeing to commence a Joint Local Plan and Joint Design Guide with the Vale of White Horse District Council, and adopting a corporate landlord approach to managing the Council's property assets.

The Medium Term Financial Plan, which looks ahead five years, has often presented a rather alarming picture, showing a deteriorating financial position. In May 2019, the Plan predicted that the General Fund Balance, ie the Council's reserves, would have fallen from £26 million to £5 million by 2022/23. Prudent financial management has improved the outlook considerably with reserves of £25million for 2022/23, and looking ahead the next 5 years the balance is £18 million. By scrapping the outsourcing contract with Capita, not only does the Council now have a better control over the accounting and book keeping processes, it has also made significant savings.

On the revenue side, fees and charges across the service areas have increased in order to cover costs. These include carpark charges in town centres, fees for dog waste bins and planning application fees. In addition, in line with government expectation, the Council has increased Council Tax by the maximum allowable without a referendum - £5 on a band-D property. SODC remains one of the lowest council tax shires in the country.

Up to £5m of funds secured from developers have been earmarked for providing houses for social rent to help address the crisis of housing affordability in the district. At the same time, the Council will jump-start priority aims that were impacted or delayed by Covid-19. A one-off investment of £500,000 will help fund projects such as tree and hedge planting, accelerating the home retrofit programme, promoting green skills, working towards bathing water status for Wallingford and other river clean-up initiatives, and addressing litter across the district with "deep cleans".

As part of the budget-setting process for 2022/23, for the first time, a prioritised list of projects which will use the SODC portion of these funds has been created; this new approach will ensure that

third party funds are used wherever possible for major projects, thus reducing the demand on the Council's reserves. The majority of these projects relate to decarbonising and upgrading the District's leisure centres, the Riverside pool, campsite and other facilities in Wallingford, tree planting projects and the purchase of emergency housing for those at risk of homelessness (previously, the council paid for hotel or B&B accommodation).

Planning and Housing

The Joint Local Plan and Joint Design Guides are in their draft stages. Both documents will prioritise climate and nature and affordable housing that meets local need. Work is continuing on the Oxfordshire Plan which will provide a large scale planning strategy for the whole county.

Following the adoption of the Housing First approach to homelessness, it was pleasing that over Christmas 2021, zero rough sleeping was recorded across both Districts, for the first time since 2013.

The Council is, for the first time in years, also investing in the construction of new housing for social rent. In conjunction with Henley and Housing Trust, SODC has invested nearly £500,000 of developer money in three new properties for social rent. The first two of these, in Rotherfield Greys, are completed and their residents have moved in. Now the systems are in place, we expect more of this type of joint working to deliver truly affordable housing for our residents.

The Dicot Gateway site, where the council is building its new offices, will also feature social housing.

Climate Action Plan

The Council agreed its new Climate Action Plan, which outlines the ways in which SODC will become carbon neutral by 2025: <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/02/South-Climate-Action-plan-2022-2024.pdf>

Almost half of our emissions come from our seven leisure centres and waste collection is also a large emitter for the Councils so we have included focusing on reducing emissions from our contractors such as Biffa (our waste collection contractor) and from our buildings such as leisure centres as priorities. Biffa itself trialled an electric vehicle for recycling collections in March.

We published our Tree Planting Policy for community groups wanting to plant trees and hedging on council owned land, and two pieces of Council land in Wallingford have already had trees planted this March.

New Offices

Plans to invest in new offices have continued to develop and SODC has served notice on its temporary offices in Milton Park. Those offices are earmarked for demolition. The site of the new offices, opposite Didcot Railway Station, forms a key part of the Didcot Gateway regeneration scheme in the town, which will see the development of some 16,000 new homes between now and 2035. The new offices, which are still in the design phase, are designed to be flexible and low-carbon. The move will save the Councils a considerable sum annually in rent and utilities as well as supporting the regeneration of this important site and providing council-owned social housing.

Bins and Waste

In December, the Council was hugely proud when South Oxfordshire was recognised as one of the top recycling districts in the country. According to government figures, South Oxfordshire had the second highest recycling rate in England with 64% of its waste being recycled.

We also faced challenges when a national shortage of bin lorry drivers impacted on the waste collection service. Not wanting to limit the collection of general or food waste, it was decided that given the strain on resources, the garden waste service would have to be suspended. The service was suspended for several weeks, with customers getting additional collections added to make up for those missed. The legacy contract with Capita meant that the Council was unable to communicate directly with customers because no customer relationship management database had been purchased and the data held by Capita was poor and patchy. This caused huge frustration for residents but happily, the situation has now been rectified and the Council is able to communicate directly with garden waste customers should problems arise in the future.

Welcoming Refugees

Council work with refugees was focused on finding the right housing for the Afghan families who fled here. GLL, who run the District's leisure centres, have provided free swimming lessons for some of the children who are at school in the district at Didcot Wave.

We are now working closely with the County Council and government to settle Ukrainian refugees here in South Oxfordshire. We are mobilising a joint system wide team based on our previous COVID model, which includes the county, other district and city councils and our health partners. The only route for people to enter the UK is through the visa process administered by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Home Office. It is this system, and only this system, that will trigger requests to local authorities for support. Our involvement, and that of all councils, is therefore limited to the timing of that activation and to those individuals successfully registering through that route.

Planning Enforcement

A new enforcement triage system was agreed with the aim of reducing the large backlog that built over the period of the various lockdowns and ensuring a more efficient and cost-effective process. The new system was modelled on similar ways of working at other Councils and will be reviewed after 12 months.

Ox-Cam Arc

The Council welcomed the announcement by the Secretary of State for Transport on 18 March 2021, of the cancellation of the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway. The announcement followed SODC's own motion in 2019, calling for the cancellation of the project.

Green councillors then achieved unanimous support for a second motion, calling on the Secretary of State to pause the Ox-Cam Arc, a large-scale centrally driven plan for some 1m homes, 700,000 new jobs and associated infrastructure in the countryside between the two cities.

Government has now shelved the scheme in favour of levelling up the north of England.

Thames Champion Update

The District's Thames Champion, Cllr Jo Robb, has continued working alongside the Thames Valley Rivers Network and river campaign groups to raise awareness of sewage pollution in the Thames. A key achievement was securing real-time alerts on sewage discharges. These will be rolled out by Thames Water at all its sewage outlets, THIS YEAR.

With Port Meadow in Oxford winning Bathing Water status, work is about to begin on an application for Wallingford. Jo is also working with local community groups and river charities to roll out enhanced water quality monitoring and public information about water quality even where there is no designated bathing area. A River Clean-Up Day was organised to coincide with World Rivers Day in September and was a success. It is to become an annual event and will be rolled out more widely this year.

