

South Oxfordshire District Council Annual Report 2014-2015

Local Housing

Despite it only be just over two years since the current Local Plan was adopted, work is well underway on the next version. A Strategic Housing Market study suggested that as many as 5,000 extra homes were needed in the district (above the 11,000 already planned) by 2031. The council believes that this figure is high and so is currently consulting residents on a lower number.

However, whatever the outcome of that consultation more homes will be needed.

The good news is that new houses have helped keep the council tax down. In the year to October 2014 1,355 new houses were built in South and Vale, leading to the government giving the two councils nearly £6m in extra funding. This money goes directly to funding new infrastructure projects in the districts and keeping council tax down.

Encouragingly, there is strong support for new house building in our area. A recent MORI poll of South Oxfordshire residents reported that 68% of residents supported or strongly supported new house building within the district. That figure dropped slightly (to 54%) when the same people were asked if they supported that building in their own village or town, but that is still a high number.

Support was higher still if those homes could be affordable to local people, were well designed, had good car parking or were provided as a priority for people with a local connection. These are all policies that the council will be seeking to deliver in the new local plan.

Neighbourhood Planning

Localising planning decisions has been a key focus of the year with Woodcote became the second parish to adopt a neighbourhood plan (following Thame). 11 other parishes have started planning for their area so more plans will be adopted next year. Neighbourhood plans give local people a strong voice in the type and location of new housing in their area and SODC will be looking to further develop these ideas in the coming months.

Leisure

The repercussions of the 2012 Olympics continue to be felt in the district. Extra cash was made available to councils to encourage participation in sports and healthy activities. SODC has laid on new sports such as nordic walking, pickleball and roller skiing to entice people to lead more active lives. And there was a good take up of over-55's table tennis at Thame Leisure Centre.

Investment in the district's leisure centres continues with money being spent on pool improvements, gym equipment and maintenance.

Residents have also benefited from the ability to use their leisure passes at centres in Vale of the White Horse as part of our further combining of services.

Corporate Services Project

SODC has spent several years reducing its costs (our council tax is down by over 10% since the last election). That process had further impetus this year with a new project looking at joining forces with other councils to award larger, most cost-effective contracts for some of the services we provide and tasks we carry out. Five councils - ourselves, Vale, Hart and Havant in Hampshire and Mendip in Somerset are seeking to jointly award contracts on within the next two years. If the project goes ahead – there are several legal and process issues to resolve first – we are looking to

save at least a further half a million pounds a year and potentially much more. The sorts of activities involved include accountancy, debt recovery, car park administration, data capture, human resources, IT applications and helpdesk support and buildings management/maintenance.

Didcot progress

Two major schemes in Didcot made some forward progress this year. The Orchard Shopping Centre became a key retail destination for many in the area as soon as it first opened. SODC always intended to have a second phase, but those plans were put on hold due to the recession.

Now, however, Hammerson plc (the centre owners – they also own the Oracle in Reading, Birmingham's Bullring and Brent Cross Shopping centres) are moving forward with a number of new stores, including a Marks & Spencer. It is expected that the new shops will be open in time for Christmas shopping 2016.

In addition to the new shops, work has begun in earnest on the redevelopment of the area in front of Didcot railway station. Although the plans are more long term than the shopping centre ones, it all adds up to an exciting future for the town.

Fuel Poverty Grants

The council launched its first grant scheme aimed at helping those households living in fuel poverty. The grants will enable householders struggling with heating bills to make essential energy efficiency repairs and improvements to their homes. Residents can apply for a grant through the free Oxfordshire Affordable Warmth Helpline (0800 107 0044) where applicants will be guided through the process.

Budgets

South Oxfordshire remains a financially sound council. Having cut our council tax by 2% last year, we've followed up with a further 3% this year – likely to be the biggest cut in the country. And yet our sound and prudent approach to money has still allowed us to add over a million pounds on new money to the budget this year, including money for extra street cleaning, community safety, better planning enforcement and more recycling.

Broadband

The council has added £2million to the County Council's broadband project so that 4,000 extra households can benefit from superfast broadband within the next 2 years. In total, 95% of South Oxfordshire's residents will have access to speeds of 24Mbps by 2017.

SODC Fire

Not the sort of highlight we wanted, but 2014/15 will now be remembered for the fire that destroyed a significant part of the council building at Crowmarsh. The fire was caused by a car full of gas canisters being driven through the front doors. Fortunately – since it was the middle of the night – no one was injured. However, the building is destroyed beyond use in the short-term and it will be at least 2 – 3 years before it is re-occupied. There is a possibility that it will never be reused, but that is a matter for the insurers and the new council in May 2015 to make decisions on.

The good news is that the councils (the building was home to both SODC and Vale of White Horse staff) had a sound recovery plan which kicked in before the fire had even been put out. Key services such as housing were provided on day 1, with staff working in cramped conditions from Vale of

White Horse offices in Abingdon. Within a week, all services were being provided again in some form.

Temporary offices have been leased near Didcot to house the council whilst the rebuilding work proceeds.

Cllr Ann Ducker and Cllr Mike Welply

The council lost two dedicated servants during the civic year. Cllr Ducker was Leader of Council for over 10 years and was instrumental in creating the current shape of South Oxfordshire DC. Cllr Welply represented Thame with vigour for a number of years. Both are greatly missed.

An SODC Year in Numbers

£82.9million of council tax collected (includes County, Parish and Police precepts)

6,415,598 wheelie bins emptied

380,000 swimming sessions

106,927 voters registered

10,832 postal votes issued

6,765 benefit claimants helped

2,619 planning applications registered

2,042 incidents monitored on CCTV

745 miles of road "deep cleaned"

658 restaurants & pubs inspected for food hygiene

589 taxi licences issued

387 families housed from the housing register

10 Benefit fraud prosecutions