

Report to Whitchurch Parish Council

The Comms team at SODC are issuing weekly reports of COVID issues every Wednesday. It appears that most support is being given by local groups rather than directly by SODC officers.

It seems that the larger built up areas of Didcot and Abingdon appear to have the least community support

We want to ensure that this local mobilisation and neighbourliness isn't lost once the emergency subsidies, and we will be working hard to see what the District Council can do to support such volunteer groups in the future.

Grants to Businesses

Officers are working hard to dispense grants of £10,000 to local businesses that pay business rates. Most applications where the application was completed correctly have been paid, but where people have, for example, given personal bank details rather than the business bank details, that can hold things up.

Some councillors have been contacted by businesses in their wards about problems and delays with this grant, but I have not had any such contacts.

Council Operations

We are pleased to report that many normal council-run operations are continuing to operate, including waste collections, taxi licensing (renewals only), payment of benefits and housing services. All known homeless people in the district have been housed safely. Bulk waste collections have now resumed, as has the doorstep collection of small electricals, linen and batteries, which should help anyone who has taken advantage of lockdown to have a bit of a clear-out! We can also take on new brown bin customers again. OCC has decided not to reopen the Household Waste Recycling Centres yet, but we are hoping this will change soon once they are happy they can be operated safely.

Council meetings are also returning to our calendars – we had our first virtual Cabinet briefing on 1st May – and Parish Councils will be receiving detailed information about how we propose the planning system can be reinstated in full. Routine applications have been processed throughout the lockdown period, and there has been no significant drop in the number of applications from South Oxfordshire. The first Virtual Planning Committees will be on 28th May. It is still not possible to conduct site visits.

A letter has been sent by the Leaders of both South Oxfordshire and Vale Councils to ask the Secretary of State to consider suspending the targets for the length of time to determine applications and also to readjust the 5-year Housing Land Supply calculation, given that a) major applications cannot be considered fairly and b) many local construction sites have

effectively closed down during the emergency. We await a response, but we know that other planning authorities across the country are also lobbying on these issues.

Local Woods

You may be aware that some areas of woodland locally are being sold off in small plots of about 1-3 acres. Some new owners are using them for unlawful purposes, which has caused much concern in Woodcote and Goring Heath. I am pressing for Article 4 directives to be applied, which removes permitted development rights for such things as fencing to be erected without planning permission, normally not a problem but becoming a problem in some situations.

Local Plan

We are on track with the Examination process, and officers are having monthly progress meetings with MHCLG. Proposed modifications to the eLP2034 are being drafted for submission to the Inspectors (e.g. on improving the environmental performance of all new buildings, both residential and commercial), but it will be up to the inspectors to accept or reject these. It is likely that the Examination in Public (EIP) will end up being a virtual process if restrictions on public gatherings are still in place. This process is being overseen by SODC's new Cabinet member for Planning, Cllr Anne-Marie Simpson.

As I was one of the people who objected to the Local Plan proposals submitted by the previous administration, I am entitled to speak at the EIP to the Inspector. Along with other newly elected councillors, we are being supported by a former senior planning officer from another Oxfordshire District. My particular issues are the number of homes proposed in the Emerging Local Plan 2034 and the failure in that Plan to properly consider the AONB. The more one looks at the plan, the more weaknesses become apparent.

Planning Reform

MHCLG is consulting on how to reform the current planning process (we suspect in an attempt to remove barriers to development in the post-COVID and post-Brexit world). It is possible that District Local Plans will become less significant as spatial planning is elevated to the regional level (e.g. at the Oxfordshire Growth Board/Oxfordshire 2050 level), and that Neighbourhood Plans will be even more important as a way to identify specific sites for development. It is therefore crucial for SODC Councillors and Officers to engage actively and constructively with our regional counterparts and for us to demonstrate leadership in the need for a wholesale reduction in carbon emissions from construction and transport. It is clear that we will not be returning to the way we used to live, work and travel before the coronavirus pandemic and we need to set a vision for renewal and future prosperity within the means of the planet.

Adapting our roads to accommodate safe cycling and walking

Across the nation authorities are preparing for the easing of the lockdown restrictions and it has become patently clear that our narrow pavements and car-oriented roads are simply unsafe for an increase in bicycle traffic and social distancing. We are trying to get wider support for making roads more pedestrian and cyclist friendly, and through the network of Cycling Champions across the County, are suggesting that OCC takes this opportunity to consider road closures (even if only on a temporary basis) or reallocation of road “real estate” to prioritise bicycles. The Green Party is also lobbying for a reduction in the national default speed limit to 50mph, for widescale “bikeability” training and for bike racks to be added to buses (amongst other things).

Council Finances

We were very pleased to hear that SODC had been allocated an additional £1.4m in funding from the latest round of support from central Government. This brings the total awarded so far to £1.45m. While this is very welcome, our officers have calculated that a full year’s losses under the current circumstances would amount to £4m, which is a combination of the additional costs incurred plus the loss of income from services. The Government has committed to recompensing Councils for the additional expenditure, but has not been clear on how it will fill the gap in lost income (if at all). We can only wait to hear more on this from MHCLG, but in the meantime our finance team is providing regular feedback to them on how much the crisis is costing and how it is being spent.

The higher allocation in this latest tranche of funding emphasises the important role being played by District Councils in the current emergency; we are certainly very proud of the way SODC staff have stepped up to the challenge and have responded to the new demands being placed on them.

Peter Dragonetti