

SODC ward councillor's report

– Shiplake – 27th April 2020

Covid-19

In effect SODC's officers – along with those of all other primary and secondary tier councils - has been placed under a Local Resilience Forum structure as part of the national response to Covid-19. Normal committees and councillor processes are largely suspended.

Whilst Covid-19 cases in London and the Midlands have been very significant those in South Oxfordshire have been very much less so – as yet. We must prepare for things to get worse whilst hoping for the best.

Officers are mostly working from home and busy with normal basic processes or those exceptionally driven by Covid-19. These include support to the “shielded” individuals – those on the national list who have asked for direct help, rather than from family or friends. There is also telephone support to residents asking for help and consideration as to whether these relate to the “shielded” group or should be passed to local volunteer groups if about isolation, shopping and prescription collection. Such telephone support continues outside normal working hours and at weekends. In addition there is all the work to support businesses – including the special grants and rates relief programmes announced by UK Gov, but reliant on district councils to administer.

The overall result is that SODC staff have more work to do than hours available and the manning level is very much stretched.

National changes now enable remote meetings – including for town and parish councils.

The government have as yet failed to make any changes to the planning system. Thus applications still have to be accepted and determination or decision deadlines still apply. As yet site visits are not possible – either for officers, consultants providing evidence or indeed inspectors. Presently public appeal hearing are suspended, but there is consideration of how much can be done remotely. All across local government there is concern that that large and contentious applications cannot be resolved at this time - if proper democratic processes are to be respected.

Council Finances

Covid-19 is having major impacts on the district council's finances. Some facilities like leisure centres are closed – with loss of income. There will be more claims for council tax reduction and housing benefits reduced business rates and loss of income from car parks etc. There are extra software and IT costs to support home-working and conferencing. There will be less receipts from planning applications and building control fees. There are impacts from employment costs and may be more with efforts to catch up after the lockdown. For SODC there are estimates of an overall net extra cost of £1 million per month of lockdown (including losses of income) – there may also be ongoing costs after strict lockdown - as lockdown is gradually eased. In principle central government have generally promised to meet the necessary costs – however as yet there are very many unknowns.

Waste collection

As you will know the OCC recycling waste centres are closed to the public during Covid. Otherwise SODC have been able to maintain all collections of bins – including brown bins. (Other areas stopped with brown bins fearing reduction of overall bin-men due to isolation/infection etc. Clearly brown bins are desirable but not essential.) The payable services to collect bulk waste – such as sofas or beds etc – were suspended, but have now resumed; they do not however DIY waste or commercial waste, (never have done).

Local Plan

Work on the Local Plan examination continues and responses to inspectors' questions have been made by the planning team. Under the plan direction the council has had to provide separate structure for that part putting the Local Plan forward in examination and that part seeking changes. (Note some changes to address errors or accepted issues will be made in the normal way by the planning team.)

As part of the above process a number of councillors – including me were registered to speak to the examination-in-public process to oppose aspects of the Local Plan. To avoid conflicts of interest I have therefore changed my cabinet role to take on Finance and Anne-Marie Simpson has joined the cabinet to represent planning including the policy team who will be supporting the plan. Those of us opposing the Local Plan will be separately organised with separate professional support.

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor