

SODC ward councillor's report

– Shiplake – 14th December 2020

Covid-19

Covid cases have been reduced as a result of the national lockdown that ended on 2nd December. However the concern is that they will now resume growth going into and through the Christmas holiday season.

At 4/12, Oxford City was at a weekly rate of 132 per 100k population. By comparison Cherwell DC was 84, West Oxon DC at 41, SODC at 74 and Vale of WH DC at 66. Reading BC (to 8th Dec) was at 198 – rather higher.

There have been positive announcements on the progress of potential vaccines – notably from Pfizer, Moderna and Oxford/AstraZeneca. However a full roll-out of a vaccination programme through the UK population is likely to take a considerable time – perhaps to autumn of 2021, albeit that the summer period is less conducive to the spread of infection.

However despite promising news on vaccines it remains important to minimise the number of infections and to continue to apply restraint. Legal restrictions are to be released over Christmas, but the advice remains to proceed with caution – especially with regards to vulnerable friends and family members.

Plans for Mass Testing and Mass Vaccination

SODC officers are working intensively with other public sector colleagues from the County Council, Public Health England and the NHS to plan for mass testing and mass vaccination of the local population. The situation remains fluid with news about vaccines hitting our screens every day, but there is no scenario which does NOT involve local Council staff playing a key role. Venues must be identified and secured, supply chain logistics resolved and resources engaged in order to carry out this huge effort if we are to meet the Government's targets. This includes the support of council staff in ancillary roles at vaccination centres. When this preparatory work is added to the responsibilities of the Community Hub (see below), it is inevitable that some of the "business as usual" activities of the Council will be compromised. All these new tasks are being absorbed by the existing staff at SODC, so we ask for your patience, please, if you have a query or a problem to discuss with the Council as it may take longer than usual to respond or resolve.

Covid-19 support for individuals and families

A reminder that the message to residents is to contact the Community Hub if as result of Covid-19, they or their neighbours need help with access to food, or need to claim the £500 grant if they are instructed to self-isolate.

The SODC Community Hub team is available from:

- 8.30am-5pm Monday to Thursday
- 8.30am-4.30pm on Fridays

Call our Community Hub on 01235 422600 or email communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk.

District Councillor Grants

The individual Councillor grant programme has now opened, with a deadline of early February (I suggest think end January!), and a key adjustment to the scheme is that it no longer excludes Parish Councils with their own grant-giving programmes. As last year, each councillor has £5k to allocate within our ward to projects which need a bit of seed funding or complete financing and which can be completed within a year.

David and I will work together on this area and between us can offer up to £2,400 to Shiplake. Just to re-emphasize, happily the complications over grant-awarding parishes have now been set aside this year.

This year the grants have a linkage to the SODC Corporate Plan, so any applications should align with the priority objectives described here: <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/uncategorised/council-outlines-priorities-in-new-plan/>

Application forms and guidelines can be found here:

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

Town and Parish Forum

The SODC Communications Team sends very regular updates to Town & Parish Clerks, but there is also much to be gained by meeting together to discuss issues of common interest or concern. The next Forum, which will inevitably have to be a virtual affair, is planned for the early Spring of 2021, so look out for an announcement in the New Year.

Brexit Preparations

As if life weren't interesting enough, SODC are also working on a county-wide communications plan to provide advice for businesses and residents on Brexit. This will include a campaign to remind EU citizens wishing to stay in the UK that they need to register for settled status by the end of June 2021. Unfortunately the trading situation has not yet been resolved with full clarity!

Local Plan Latest

The consultation on the Main Modifications closed on 2nd November, and there were several hundred responses, all of which have been sent to the Inspector for his consideration. The largest number of responses related to one of the strategic sites – Land North of Bayswater Brook – currently situated in the Oxford Greenbelt. Chalgrove Airfield also received many individual comments, and we now await the Inspector's final report around the end of the month. According to the Direction of the Secretary of State, the plan had to be adopted by the end of the year.

At the end of November the final report was received from the Inspector. This confirmed the many improvements made in the final plan over the one that was submitted; these included policies on density, Climate Change and the environment/biodiversity together with a lot of important clarifications and redrafting. There was also some helpful recognition on the subject of housing mix – which has been going badly wrong previously.

However sadly the Inspector insisted on setting the very high housing requirements level submitted. This despite evidence that the 2014 SHMA was out of date – using as it did data from 2011/2012, despite much lower household numbers and projections than previously assumed and based on overtly ignoring radically different and less propitious economic factors arising from Covid

in particular amongst others. The housing requirement from April 2011 to March 2035 was set at 23,550 – including 4,950 in respect of “unmet housing need” from Oxford City.

Moreover once the housing requirement is set it is normal for an Inspector to include about 10% of extra supply to provide some headroom against any slippage. In our case a lot of the supply has either been built or committed in terms of permissions and previous allocations for some time. Evidence was also put forward that the strategic sites may offer more housing numbers than those set and that windfalls were understated. However despite all of that the Inspector decided to allow a formal supply which was 27% higher than the housing requirements that he had set. This is quite exceptional. On that basis the stated supply was 30,056 new dwellings by 2035. Accordingly the Inspector decided to leave in the controversial and flawed strategic sites at Bayswater Brook and Chalgrove Airfield. Bayswater is Green Belt, has two SSSIs at close quarters and has hydrology risks and other sensitivities; it faces challenges to provide good access to Oxford and it came out worst in SODC's evaluations. Chalgrove is isolated without much local employment and with poor transport links. It has water run-off challenges, a long-term lease to Martin Baker (jet ejector seats) and runway safety challenges. Unexpectedly the Inspector went to some lengths to include them.

My personal opinion is that these make no sense and are not even terribly helpful in supporting supply since the sites are problematic and are highly unlikely to come on-stream anytime soon – if ever. However the Chalgrove site is ex MOD land now transferred by the government to Homes England and Bayswater Brook has ownership interests from Christ Church college in Oxford.

A huge and rather absurd set of threats were made that if councillors did not adopt this local Plan then reprisals might be made against the council and against councillors personally. Finally on 10th December Local Plan 2035 was adopted at full council.

My concerns are the influences at play and the likelihood that these vast numbers agreed in LP2035 presage further pressures in the upcoming strategic plan to 2050. Milton Keynes is set to double and there are growth zealots who wish to see Oxford and Oxfordshire follow suit. With a number of areas having been heavily hit by LP2035 the risks are that new areas will now be at risk of becoming targeted.

Oxford-Cambridge Arc and a Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire

A recent public webinar on the Ox-Cam Arc gives a really good overview of the Arc (a strategic priority for the Government), what it actually is and what it hopes to achieve. Well worth a watch, if you have the time.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZeO-MKy0CA&t=1219s>

There is (yet) another consultation underway on the Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire, this time on behalf of the Oxfordshire Growth Board (OGB). The Vision focuses very strongly on nature and biodiversity recovery, as well as on carbon neutrality, green innovation and digital connectivity. The consultation can be found at <https://www.oxfordshireopenthought.org/strategic-vision> and it closes on Sunday 3rd January.

With Season's greetings and best wishes for 2021 !

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor