

SODC ward councillor's report

– Shiplake – 8th February 2021

Covid-19

Happily there is now clear evidence that the lockdown is working and that new cases are diminishing. However, they remain higher than they were in December and pressure on hospitals remains very high; although starting to ease slightly.

At 2/2 Oxford City was at a weekly rate of 228 per 100k population. By comparison Cherwell DC was 185, West Oxon DC at 122, SODC at **121** and Vale of WH DC at 124. Reading BC (to 2nd Feb) was at 292. Note that Reading remains comparatively high by reference to Oxfordshire numbers.

(By comparison see per my December report when I noted:-

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.

In my January report I noted:-

At 5/1, Oxford City was at a weekly rate of 571 per 100k population. By comparison Cherwell DC was 997, West Oxon DC at 428, SODC at **520** and Vale of WH DC at 442. Reading BC (to 5th Jan) was at 627. These numbers have been surging.

There is however some concern that more variants have emerged and that the “South African” and “Brazilian” mutations seem rather less impacted by the current vaccines. Happily the Kent “B117” variant is well addressed by the current vaccines; it having now become the dominant strain in the UK. Because of the way that the vaccines have been designed there is high confidence that adaptations to deal with the variants that seemed to first emerge in the southern hemisphere can be fast-tracked - within a matter of 2-3 months. However this may imply a need for extra “booster” vaccine shots in the autumn.

We know that the southern hemisphere variants are already present in the UK to some degree, the concern being to contain their spread.

Overall, the advice must still to proceed with the utmost caution.

The vaccine programme is in full swing and mass vaccination centres are opening in Oxfordshire – supported, in part, by local council staff. The first was at the Kassam stadium in Oxford – focussing first on frontline health workers; all appointments being *by invitation only*.

The national intent is to get all of the first 4 priority groups first dose done by mid-February (over 70s, clinically highly vulnerable people and healthcare plus social care staff - *around 15m people*) and the first dose for the next 5 groups (down to age 50 - *around 17m people*) by end of May. The programme will continue with 2nd doses with the aim of reaching all (of age 16+) by end of September. As noted above there may need then to be booster vaccinations for new strains and to maintain antibody levels.

As yet it is believed that having had a vaccination is not a guarantee against being infected by the virus or indeed against passing the virus to others – though it is expected to improve matters.

Testing centres are being opened with a view to improve tracking of the virus and with support from local councils.

Covid Support

The Council support lines remain OPEN:

The Community Hub at the District Council remains a valuable point of contact for residents who need support - and so if you're contacted by any members of the public who are worried or need help, please point them towards the hub on 01235 422600 or email communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk.

The Community Hub team is currently available from: 8.30am-5pm Monday to Thursday; 8.30am-4.30pm Friday. The message to anybody who is unsure if they need help, or if they're unsure if the council can help, is - if in doubt – please get in touch!

The dedicated Business Support Team is on hand with advice and guidance for businesses in our communities to help understand what the lockdown might mean to them, and what support is available. There's lots of information already at www.svbs.co.uk and this page will be updated all the time.

If local Covid community groups find they have significant pressures, they can contact the Hub to get advice and support.

The government's "Test and Trace Support Payment" scheme is being extended to 31 March 2021. It had been due to end on the 31 January. This is the scheme that provides a £500 grant to eligible recipients if they lose out financially from having to self-isolate through the national Test and Trace system.

The cut-off time for applications has been increased to 28 days after the first day of self-isolation. This makes it easier for the council to administer and verify and it also provides a bit more time for people to submit their application.

Additional Restrictions Grants for businesses

The latest Additional Restrictions Grant scheme for businesses is now open for applications. This is the discretionary scheme to provide financial support to businesses who have been excluded or unsuccessful from other government grant schemes. SODC are processing applications on a first come, first served basis, so please encourage businesses to apply immediately. To find out if they're eligible and to apply for the grant, local business owners should visit the [Additional Restrictions Grant](#) page of the business support website.

Businesses can register an e-mail address and get updates to advise of any updates or new grants in regard to current or future restrictions at our business support website: www.svbs.co.uk

Garden Waste Collections

Unfortunately, it is still not possible to resume the brown bin garden waste collections, as the number of Biffa staff off sick or self-isolating has remained too high. The situation is being kept under regular review and it is hoped to get the service back on track as soon as possible. Although this is a paid-for service, the contract with residents is that they will receive 20 collections per year and in some years without heavy snow etc they actually get 26 with extra collections made during the busier times of the year. Once the service starts again we will be ensuring that all contractual collections are made - and hopefully more when they're most needed in the growing season. Christmas trees will be collected eventually, but in the meantime they can be taken to the County Council's waste disposal sites.

Councillor Community Grants – deadline extended

Please note that the extended the deadline for you to apply for community funding under the district councillor scheme from your local district councillor.

As last year, each councillor has £5k to allocate within our ward to community 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 parish**. 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/>

Judicial Review on the Local Plan

You may have seen in the media that a local Community Interest Company (CIC) called Bioabundance has launched a Judicial Review of the decision to adopt the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035. The grounds for challenge are that:

- the worsening effect on climate change of excessive housing numbers is not given adequate attention
- the calculation of housing numbers is not coherent
- at the adoption vote, councillors unlawfully took account of threatened consequences of government intervention, and the vote was dictated by MHCLG

The Council will respond to the claim, and of course due process requires the right of any member of the public or organisation to launch a legal process of this kind. However many such bids do not pass the screening stage – so developments are awaited.

2021/2022 Budget

At its meeting on 11th February, SODC's Council will consider the proposed revenue budget for 2021/22 in line with our statutory duties to set the Council Tax and to determine the level of deficit that will need to be covered by reserve funds. Despite being a low-cost council and significant efforts to improve the district's financial position, deficits continue. Principally this is because income levels are not high enough – largely due to past failures to set a proper level of council tax. SODC's council tax level (20-21 was £126.24 for a Band D property) is some £70 less than the average for England. That difference causes a difference in excess of £4m per annum.

The average cost per property unit (Band D) in SODC is about £328. That is £200 more than the level of council tax! This therefore indicates the extent to which SODC is subject to needs for funding from business rates, investment and property income, and other government funding such as the New Homes Bonus – which ends in 21-22. Government have announced that it will be replaced with something else but with both the amount and basis of what follows being unknown! SODC face the problem of being forced into excessive growth and yet not enabled to finance services to support such growth!

Despite past promises to provide a sound and secure financial framework to allow proper planning of Local Government finance in fact there has only been a 1-year settlement this year with future key funding regarding Business Rates, New Homes Bonus, Council Tax-setting rules and government grants all being profoundly unclear. To be fair Covid has of course complicated the situation for government!

This particular budget is overshadowed by major likely impacts from Covid – both in terms of extra costs and losses of income. Moreover, because of the extent that officers across the council are stretched by the complications and extraordinary support required for Covid there is currently limited resources to staff more than a basic budget process.

Major Covid provisions will be made in the budget, but with lack of clarity if there will be government compensation for such impacts that are beyond the council's control. Everything will then be kept under review and, probably, be subject to a budget revision during the year. Many of the projects identified in the new Corporate Plan for the district are underway. Others will be scoped and developed during the year as Covid pressures permit. Contingent funding has been budgeted to support these with the intent to invest for future benefits.

2021 Elections

At the time of writing, the government have confirmed that local elections will take place in early May – despite the challenges of Covid. Officers are working on the logistics planning needed to accommodate both voting and vote-counting. Counting would be more risky if done under current arrangements where all votes are counted overnight in a single centre and session with an army of specially recruited tellers. It may be that counting will not be done centrally for these elections. Social distancing is much easier for small scale events. It is also quicker to count smaller numbers of votes! But our polling stations could have different numbers of elections. Both the Police & Crime Commissioner and a County Council elections are due. But some areas could also have by-elections or a Neighbourhood Plan referendum. As with a lot of things at the moment there is much uncertainty around the detail – assuming that government's decision holds!

I would strongly encourage people to consider applying for a postal vote if they are concerned about voting in person – see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/apply-for-a-postal-vote>

Keep safe!

Leigh Rawlins
District Councillor