SODC ward councillor's report

Shiplake – 14th February 2022

Covid-19

Following the national pattern Covid cases have fallen back somewhat.

At 08/02/2022, Oxford City was at a weekly rate of 1,228 per 100k population (it peaked at 1,504 on 6th Jan.). By comparison, Cherwell DC was 955 (peak was 18,826 on 3rd Jan.), West Oxon DC at 843 (peak was 1,565 on 3rd Jan.), **SODC at 919 (peak was 1,522 on 3rd Jan.)** and Vale of WH DC at 854 (peak was 1,565 on 3rd Jan.). Reading BC (to 8th February 2022) was at 1,116 having peaked at 1,780 on 4th Jan.

These levels are still quite high; by way of comparison at 4th November SODC was at 363 and by the 3rd December was at 764 – now at 8th February at 919 weekly per 100k of population! That said, they are falling and incidences are mostly mild for those with boosted vaccinations and those with antibodies.

It is clear that the vaccinations and natural antibodies are reducing the hospitalisation rate and death rate of Omicron. Happily hospitalisations have fallen back, but are still significant at a time when the NHS faces strong demand from the previous backlog of conditions and other seasonal pressures.

The government has now withdrawn legal restrictions - except the requirement to isolate. Government have now amended the requirement to self-isolate with a positive Covid test to be only be 5 days – subject to clear LFT tests on days 5 and 6 (in advance of re-emerging). Indeed there is now the prospect that even this may be withdrawn in the near future.

Some transport operators and businesses still require use of masks.

Boosters and vaccinations continue.

Whatever the rules may be, the advice must still be to proceed with caution and to protect the more vulnerable.

Climate Action Plan

SODC are set to adopt its first Climate Action Plan. The plan is intended to be a living and evolving one. It focuses on the actions that the council can take directly, but also on encouraging and enabling action by residents and others.

SODC Budget

As noted previously, a host of poor decisions in the past had eroded SODC's reserves by many millions of pounds and built an ongoing annual deficit that was set to grow to the point that usable revenue reserves would have been exhausted. It was also the case that the Crowmarsh fire of January 2015 created new capital and revenue pressures – without a sufficiently swift response.

Since 2019 a series of steps have been taken to seek to improve matters and to restore a philosophy plus an action programme towards sound finance.

In 2019/20 the forecast for 2023/24 was for a deficit of £(6.1)m closing General revenue reserves of £4.0m (less than a year's worth) and an empty capital receipts reserve (forcing routine capital renewal to fall against the inadequate revenue reserve. (SODC did of course hold other funds that were earmarked for CIL/s106 projects etc). This was not a good situation.

The programme of action has of course been somewhat disrupted by the impact of Covid. However the draft 2022/23 budget forecast for 2023/24 is for a deficit of £(1.8)m and a revenue reserve of £23.8m. Unfortunately because it has the 8th lowest Band D Council Tax charge for a Shire District in England (despite being in the expensive South East) SODC incurs more cost than income for extra dwellings (and associated population); albeit that this effect is temporarily offset by "New Homes Bonus" (NHB) – which is overtly subject to a government review. So, this effect increases net costs over time; together with the propensity for government to impose ever more statutory obligations and associated costs. This year the draft 2022-23 budget forecasts a deficit of £(3.0)m for 2026-27, closing that year with £18.4m of General revenue reserves and also £4.3m of capital receipts reserve.

The budget includes appropriate increases in charges and fees and curtailment of expenditure. Much of the benefits come from the sound decisions that have been made. These include the costs-saving of a JLP, correcting some outsourcing problems and investing in assets that save costs.

The budget provides an outline envelope to address SODC's office problem after the Crowmarsh fire and thus reduce the deficit effect from the use of the temporary and highly expensive Milton Park offices.

Using savings the budget also provides for a programme of action in the wake of Covid delays and impacts. Community well-being, deep cleans, litter and children's activity. Tree planting and supporting the nature of our district. Climate change support for skills and initiatives. All directed to the high value of our district in what will of course be the Jubilee year.

The government have further deferred a promised "Fair Funding Framework" whereby Local Government can plan ahead for their finances with less uncertainty. There are risks that reviews of funding may cut the levels of central government grant and NHB to councils like SODC in favour of "levelling up" and deprivation. If so they would cause difficulties for the council.

The draft budget proposes an increase of £5 for a Band D property – in line with government guidance.

Clearly SODC continues to run a deficit in the draft budget – but a much reduced one. There is more to do in the future but there is also a clear direction of travel towards a return to sound finance.

Leigh Rawlins
District Councillor