

SODC ward councillor's report – Shiplake - 13th January 2020

Local Plan

On the 7th of Jan 2020 Sue Cooper, leader of SODC received a letter from the Secretary of State (SoS) Robert Jenrick regarding his temporary holding direction on the emerging Local Plan. Though there is no new direction or removal of the current temporary direction, the SoS has given a strong indication of the action he may take should the emerging local plan not remain in inspection.

The letter can be found here:

www.southoxon.gov.uk/sites/default/files/20200107%20Letter%20from%20the%20Secretary%20of%20State%20South%20Oxfordshire.pdf

Sue Cooper is asked to reply by the 31st January.

Council Finances

SODC's financial situation is difficult, following years of holding down council tax to levels well below the national average. (SODC has £121 for a Band D property, the national average is at £180 and that average includes many in much lower-cost areas for staffing etc.) The council has a revenue deficit of about £3.3 million and this is expected to grow to around £6m over a 5 year period. The council raises some £7m from council tax.

Comparative statistics show that SODC is already a very efficient and low-spending council compared with its peers and has relatively low staffing numbers.

In the past UK Gov has encouraged councils to increase delivery of new housing and provided a "New Homes Bonus" with payments per new home completed over 6 years. In initially the bonus was worth around £9k per home but then the government reneged and reduced payments to over 4 years with a value reduced to c£6k; it also excluded a "baseline %" of new homes from counting! In part it was offered as a help against cuts in past central "rate support grants" from central government. Now UK Gov says that the year 20/21 will be the last with only the year one payment being made for new homes in that year. After that the bonus payments will cease. A different and possibly much less valuable scheme is being mooted to succeed it, but the details of that are very vague and unclear. In the longer past SODC prudently put NHB receipts into reserves in more recent years SODC has been using all of current year bonuses AND then funding a growing deficit – as current NHB fell – from reserves.

Another financial pressure faced is that the 5 Councils outsourcing contract with Capita has not delivered the savings promised when it was announced with a fanfare many years ago. Indeed through mutual exigency by SODC and Capita many services are now having to be brought back in house at the council.

December Council Meeting – motions passed

The last meeting of 2019 was a very busy one, with several motions being debated and passed as well as some more "business as usual" items.

Local Government Structure

Four motions related to the most appropriate governance models and structures for our local authorities, taking into account both the importance of local democracy and decision-making and the need to be financially sustainable and cost-effective. The previous administration at SODC had supported the concept of “One Oxfordshire” – a single unitary authority for the whole county. However there is now recognition that this would be far too large an area to provide effective governance and would lose the close connection and knowledge that SODC has with its residents. The data upon which the previous position was approved is now out-of-date, and so Council approved a motion which would effectively withdraw our support for the concept of a single Oxfordshire Unitary Authority and ask our officers to explore alternative governance structures that protect and enhance the democratic link to local communities. Previously the suggestion was that many staff positions could be “saved” with more distant and with broad-brush decision-making less focussed on local detail. Whilst this might seem to work in a spreadsheet, it increasingly seems obvious that it would not work in real life and would simply centralise power in distant Oxford.

Secondly, it has become very clear to us since the elections last May that the Council is in a poor financial position. Our Band D Council tax charge is some £60 lower than that in comparable authorities, and there is a gap of about £3m between our income and our expenditure every year.

It should be noted that the “One Oxfordshire” proposition to centralise power in Oxford was based on the presumption of sharp increases in council tax for South Oxfordshire to equalise across the county and to secure SODC’s financial reserves.

In addition to working very hard to create a responsible and sustainable budget for the coming few years, Council has now also asked officers to explore the implications of a full merger with the Vale of the White Horse and to bring their findings back to a future meeting. Since South Oxon and Vale already share an administration team and offices this approach is likely to provide savings from reduced duplication without significantly reducing local knowledge and focus. Both districts are of a rural character. Any decision would take into account both future financial sustainability and the need to protect local democracy and decision-making.

Thirdly, a motion was passed to emphasise that, while we support the concept of regional – and county - planning for biodiversity and environmental sustainability matters, as well as for public transport infrastructure, we believe that all decisions relating to site selection for employment and housing developments should be made by the local Planning Authority (i.e. SODC). They should be made at an all-Oxfordshire Oxon 2050 or OCC level.

Finally, a motion was passed to ask the Constitutional Review Group to consider if a move to a committee-based structure (as opposed to the “strong cabinet” one) would be a more effective system of governance for the Council.

Supporting votes for 16 and 17 year-olds

Council passed a motion expressing its support for the enfranchisement of 16 and 17 year olds, and asked that the Leader write to Ministers and local MPs expressing this view (as it is clearly not in our gift to implement this change). Should the Votes at 16 campaign succeed, this would bring England into line with Scotland and Wales and would empower young people to better engage in society and influence decisions that will define their future. ***Improving Cycling and Walking Infrastructure***

The last motion of the meeting, passed unanimously, related to the need for a much more strategic and joined-up approach to the planning of healthy transport alternatives to the private car, recognising the wide range of benefits to health, well-being and the environment. In partnership with other local authorities, the Council is now required to develop a Strategic Active Travel Network and to prioritise cycling and walking in all planning policy.

Council Tax Base for 2020/21

Council is required by law to agree the Council Tax base for the 2020/21 year; this is the calculation based on the number of dwellings in the District and the various discounts or surcharges levied according to a range of factors (single occupancy, disability entitlements, council tax rebates etc). The dwellings are then converted to "Band D equivalents" to reflect the range of property sizes in each community, which gives the Council the number of dwellings per settlement on which to base its tax budget. Across SODC for 2020/21 there are 61,432 dwellings forming a "Band D equivalent tax base of 57,848.5. In Shiplake, for example, there are 707 dwellings which convert to a tax base of 975.5; this reflects the fact that many dwellings in Shiplake are above band D and that there are relatively few rebates. The tax base is the figure at parish and district level that will now be used when setting the revenue budget and for calculating the various component parts of the Council Tax for other elements such as OCC and TVP.

As a simplified illustration, if the tax base were 60k (rather than 57.8k) and council tax on a band D were £50 higher, this would yield an extra £3m of receipts.

Economic Development Team receive Impact award

The South and Vale Economic Development team have received the Institute of Economic Development (IED) 2019 Impact Award. This national award recognised the team's "Stronger Economy – Start-Up project", which resulted in more than 87 new businesses start over an 18-month period. This followed the work of the team in providing support to people who wish to start a business and/or be more productive.

A number of week-long, free, pop-up business schools were held to support new and existing businesses, including one in Berinsfield. The Pop-up Business School returns 27th-31st January at Didcot Civic Hall. It's free and you can attend any or all of the days, just register at www.popupbusinessschool.co.uk/didcot

Chair's charity concert

Parish Councillors and residents may be interested to know that the Chair of SODC, Cllr David Bretherton, is hosting a charity concert on Friday 7 February to help raise funds for his two chosen charities - Earth Trust and Red Kite Family Centre in Thame.

Taking place at Cornerstone, the evening will be full of variety and plans to showcase local talented people including singers and dancers, as well as a few surprises for an evening of fun. Tickets cost £12 per person, £10 for concessions and are available from Cornerstone's website.

South Oxfordshire Community Lottery

The SOCL lottery operates on the principle of raising money in the community, for the community – empowering local groups to generate vital funds in an effective way, while enabling players to support the causes they want.

Tickets cost £1, with 60p going to good causes and the local community. Players can choose which local good cause/s they support when they purchase tickets and prizes range from free prize draw entries to a £25,000 jackpot.

Our district council set up the lottery as we give around £1 million through grants to the district's voluntary and community groups each year and know that there's great demand for financial support.

SODC does not receive any of the proceeds and from every ticket sold:-

- 50p goes to registered good causes and 10p into a general fund, which supports the voluntary sector in South Oxfordshire
- 20p to the prize fund
- 17p to Gatherwell, the external lottery management operator that runs the lottery on our behalf
- 3p to VAT

With the lottery now well established the next steps are to promote its growth and local roots. A review is looking at linking awards to the localities who provide most support.

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor