

SODC ward councillor's report

– Shiplake – 8th June 2020

Covid-19

The newly established Community Hub at SODC has been extremely active in supporting vulnerable residents over the past couple of months. Activity levels have now started to reduce, and were much lower over the past couple of weeks; there were only 46 calls over the recent Bank Holiday weekend, which very much reflects the way that local groups have established strong support networks for their own communities. The Hub's new opening hours will be 9am to 6pm, Monday to Saturday and closed on Sundays.

As you can appreciate, these tasks are new to many of the staff at SODC, and some of the technical systems have had to be redeveloped to cope (e.g. the business rates system is set up to take money in from local businesses, not to send funds the other way!). All of these new tasks also had to be absorbed at the same time as Council staff were being moved to home-working, having to deal with their own personal situations (home-schooling, self-isolating etc.) and maintaining existing services such as waste collection. We can be very proud of the way SODC staff have stepped up to the challenge and have responded to the new demands being placed on them.

Planning Committees

SODC's first virtual planning meeting took place successfully on 28 May. Members of the public were able to watch online via a link on the SODC website, and a recording is available at <https://youtu.be/LMa7H8Lyr7c> if you are curious to see how it went! For future meetings, anyone wishing to take part will need to submit a written statement by email in advance, which will be shared with all the planning committee members. The aim is to introduce full online public participation in due course, as soon as the IT security issues around public speaking are resolved.

Local Plan

The Examination process is set to proceed via video-conferencing. Proposed modifications to the emerging Local Plan 2034 are being drafted for submission to the Inspector but it will be up to the Inspector to accept or reject these. It has now been confirmed that the Examination in Public (EIP) will be held virtually during July and August. Some local groups have written to express concerns that this will restrict public participation. Those who made representations on the plan when it was being submitted in early 2019 are eligible to actually participate but other members of the public will be able to watch proceedings online. The organisation of the EIP is not within the control of SODC and is organised by the Planning Inspectorate.

Adapting our roads to accommodate safe cycling and walking

Across the nation authorities are preparing for the easing of the lockdown restrictions and it has become patently clear that our narrow pavements and car-oriented roads are simply unsafe for an increase in bicycle traffic and social distancing. County Councillors have been collating proposals from across their wards to submit for consideration, since OCC is the Highways Authority. Much of the focus so far has been on the more urban areas, including Oxford City, but there is a good case to see this vision extended more widely to between our villages and towns and between villages.

Once public transport is being used again, there is a key opportunity to integrate it with cycling with plenty of safe cycle storage and buses which can carry bikes for onward use. The Statutory guidance, 'Traffic Management Act 2004: network management in response to COVID-19' can be read here <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reallocating-road-space-in-response-to->

[*covid-19-statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities/traffic-management-act-2004-network-management-in-response-to-covid-19*](#)

OCC are also exploring scope to improve bus services, but, as yet, this is focussed around the Oxford Bus Company and operators that seem to exclude Reading Buses and Whites.

Support for Local Businesses

The South and Vale Business Support Service has received a huge increase in visits to its website, particularly since it is responsible for administering the business support schemes announced by the Government. From 3rd June they have been processing applications for the new Discretionary grants fund, aiming to support small businesses which were not eligible for the earlier rounds of funding. However, they have warned that the funds available total only 5% of the amount available under previous programmes, so they will not be able to respond positively to all applications. Further information is available at <https://www.svbs.co.uk>

It is also worth noting that the SVBS website has an online database listing all businesses which are open and trading in the area, so it is worth checking this to add your own business or to check who is currently open for business locally.

Car Parking Charges to be re-introduced

With the gradual re-opening of shops and other facilities, car-parking charges have been reintroduced from 8th June in SODC-owned car parks. This will go some way to restore some of the Council's lost income, and will also free up spaces for shoppers, who are still discouraged from using public transport. NHS staff and care workers who display a national COVID-19 pass can continue to park for free. To claim a pass, staff should e-mail :-

carparks.southandvale.uk@sabagroup.com , including proof of their employment.

Celebrating our local Volunteers

Finally, in National Volunteers' Week, thanks are due to the many individuals who have stepped up over the past few months to support their fellow residents and vulnerable people in the community. The community spirit on show has been remarkable and it is to be hoped that the sense of community cohesion will continue long after this current pandemic is over.

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor