

SODC ward councillor's report

Shiplake – 7th June 2021

Local Elections – 6th May 2021

In the election for the Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley Police, Matthew Barber (Conservative) was elected on the second round.

In the County elections, there was one result where it is generally admitted that the result was misdeclared. In Banbury and Ruscote, a safe Labour seat was misdeclared as a Conservative gain - due to a mix up causing a reversal of the ballots; it will now have to go to the High Court to be corrected. There are a total of 63 seats and there were sweeping changes at the election with Ian Hudspeth, the Conservative leader who had championed high growth, losing his seat to the LibDems. Amongst a number of issues the most influential one was about what level of growth, inward migration and housing development is desirable. Adjusting for the error at Banbury Ruscote, the Conservatives lost 10 seats and associated Independents lost a further 2 seats, with gains for the LibDems – 8 seats, the Greens – 2 seats and Labour – 2 seats. Adjusting for Banbury Ruscote, in the new council there are 21 LibDems, 3 Greens (jointly 24), 21 Conservatives, 16 Labour, 1 Henley Residents Group and 1 Independent. (There were some echoes of this result across the Ox-Cam Arc.) The LibDems and Greens will work as one group on the county council. Arrangements were needed to form an administration. Accordingly an arrangement has been forged between LibDem, Green and Labour county councillors – under the LibDem leader Liz Leffman. The new administration's press release focuses on the environment and climate change together with the shared elements of respective election commitments and principles. It has agreed a set of goals for an "Oxfordshire Fair Deal" programme. (In the local county division of 'Sonning Common', David Bartholomew was returned – so congratulations to him!)

In South Oxfordshire there were two bye-elections. One in Didcot NE which went from independent to Conservative and one in Forest Hill & Holton which went from Independent to LibDem. The council has 36 seats – now split as follows:- LibDem 13, Greens 5, Independents 2, HRG 3, Labour 3 and Conservatives 10.

A number of Neighbourhood Plan referendums were also held – all with strongly positive "Yes" votes. (Chinnor, Cuddesdon & Denton, Ewelme, Sydenham, Tetsworth, Wallingford and Wheatley.)

Covid-19

Covid cases are low, but have increased sharply over the last two weeks.

At 01/6, Oxford City was at a weekly rate of 36 per 100k population. By comparison, Cherwell DC was 16, West Oxon DC at 24, SODC at **42** and Vale of WH DC at 46. Reading BC (to 1st June) was at 95. There is a particular increase in Reading with lesser echoes in SODC and Vale.

It appears that we are beginning to see some impact from the "Indian" variant (B.1.617.2). This variant has much higher transmissibility. However, early evidence suggests that the current vaccines still have a material effect on its scope to cause hospitalisations and deaths.

The vaccine programme continues apace.

All adults are expected to have a first dose by end July. The programme will continue with 2nd doses with the aim of reaching all adults before the end of September. In some areas facing a challenge from new variants, and where supplies allow, the second dose may now be accelerated to 8 weeks after the first one – rather than 12 weeks. It may be that there will need to be booster vaccinations for new strains and to maintain antibody levels in the autumn.

Increased testing is being provided in centres and with at home testing to be provided via pharmacies. As yet it is believed that having had a vaccination is no guarantee against being infected by the virus or indeed against passing the virus to others – though it is expected to improve matters.

It may be that the suggestion of a complete relaxation of national lockdown constraints will need to be deferred to allow more progress with vaccinations.

In-person meetings

Unfortunately the Government and Communities ministry failed to renew special Covid legislation enabling virtual meetings. Furthermore, a legal initiative to the High Court to argue that existing powers could support virtual meetings was refused by the court – despite the ministry belatedly supporting it to the court. Wherever meetings are decision-making they must therefore be in person with members present. It is thought possible to include members of the public by virtual means.

New Chair and vice-Chair at SODC

SODC's new Chair is Cllr Jo Robb who represents Woodcote & Rotherfield for the Greens and the new Vice-Chair is David Turner who represents Chalgrove for the LibDems. They succeed Cllrs David Bretherton and Elizabeth Gillespie respectively.

Purdah

In the recent past there have been limited new decisions and changes – due in part to the “purdah” period in the approach to elections.

Keep safe!

Leigh Rawlins
District Councillor