

SODC ward councillor's report

– Shiplake - 9th March 2020

Local Plan

On 3rd March, after 5 months of a temporary direction, the Secretary of State (SoS) Robert Jenrick removed that direction with immediate effect. Following discussions between council representatives and officials from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the Secretary of State's letter to Cllr Sue Cooper, Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, stated that he is using government powers in Section 27 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 directing the council to progress the local plan through examination, to be adopted by December this year, and for senior council officers to provide reporting to MHCLG on progress of the plan. The letter can be found here:

<http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/news/2020/2020-03/south-oxfordshire-local-plan-update>

Cllr Cooper, said: "It's disappointing the Secretary of State has felt it necessary to intervene, however the council remains committed to working constructively with the MHCLG and the Secretary of State as well as engaging productively with our partnerships across Oxfordshire."

The effect is that SODC's powers are restored to it, but that the submitted Local Plan 2034 must remain in examination. However, the direction permits scope for the council to recommend changes to the Inspectors at examination.

On 5th March both the cabinet and council of SODC recognised the direction and agreed to progress the submitted local Plan on these terms.

Council Finances

SODC's budget process has been completed. As noted previously because of the financial situation that was left, difficult decisions are having to be made.

SODC has, together with Vale of White Horse, with whom it shares officers and offices, the lowest costs by some margin of the Oxfordshire district (and City) councils.

As noted before, confirmation of changes to the New Homes Bonus aspect of council receipts from central government will make things even more difficult going forwards after 2020-21.

Given statutory obligations and restraints on council tax increases, there is limited scope. However proposals are coming forward, SODC's own budget was agreed on 13th February and the overall council tax for the new fiscal year confirmed at an SODC council meeting on 20th February.

As noted previously, amongst the budget items are proposed changes ending Neighbourhood Plan grants from SODC, although SODC will continue to provide strong support from officers in the dedicated NP planning team and of course fund examination and referendum costs. UK government has cut and restricted grants to SODC and the future for 2020-21 onwards is unclear. SODC have been an exception in giving NP grants. However, government have increased funding for Neighbourhood Plans to claim directly; these grants provide more funds than the outgoing SODC scheme used to do and also provide scope for technical grants via Locality. Officers will help with claims for these and overall the belief is that NP groups will be able to access the funds that are needed. SODC will continue to bear the costs of examination and referendum. SODC has taken the opportunity to increase fees and charges – including for brown garden bins and for parish dog bins. A review of car parking charges is coming forwards.

It was noted that past Council Tax reductions and missed increases now had the cumulative effect of costing SODC some £2m every single year. This creates an ongoing burn on reserves which –

since SODC already has very low operating costs - cannot be met from further cost-cutting without major impacts. Further action to explore new sources of revenue are to be undertaken.

The total average Band D council tax across South Oxfordshire for 2020-21 will be £1,965.45 – an increase of 4.16%. Of that SODC represents £126.24, some 6.4% of the total – which also includes the OCC tax charge, TV Police and of course the parish precepts. Only the town and parish (Band D) rates vary by local area. In Shiplake the total Band D charge will be £65.72 lower as the SPC precept of £29.77 is lower than the average town and parish rate of £95.49. The average town and parish rate is of course affected by the large number of properties in the towns and also in the larger villages.

Council Motions

On the 20th February council motions were passed calling for a UK Gov review of the planning Housing Land Supply rules such that LPAs would only be responsible for approvals and not for failure of developers to build out or other matters beyond the control of LPAs. Likewise a review of Permitted Development was called for. A review of Taxi Licensing legislation was called for with particular reference to unlicensed agents booking journeys for Hackney carriages. Finally, jointly, standard (IHRA and APPG) definitions were approved against Anti-semitism and Islamophobia.

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor