SODC ward councillor's report

Shiplake – 8th November 2021

Covid-19

Covid cases are fluctuating around a similar range. A bit lower overall than last month but much higher than at the equivalent time last year - as the Delta (Indian - B1.617.2) variant continues to make its mark. Overall not a drama, but UK rates are higher than many elsewhere.

At 2/11, Oxford City was at a weekly rate of 232 per 100k population. By comparison, Cherwell DC was 368, West Oxon DC at 401, **SODC at 414** and Vale of WH DC at 438. Reading BC (to 2nd November) was at 361. These rates are mostly a bit higher than when I reported to you in October.

The vaccine programme continues – with particular focus on completing the younger groups down to age 16, completing 2nd doses and boosters. Some younger recipients seem hesitant – perhaps influenced by scares on social media.

The booster programme is prioritising the top 4 vulnerable groups but is set to continue on to over 50s. A broad-based flu inoculation programme is underway to try to protect the NHS during the winter.

Government are hopeful that we may have seen the worst from known Covid variants. The key seems to be to maintain antibody levels and to protect against flu. The risks of co-infection or twin infection with both flu and Covid are troubling virologists.

Refuse collection

The national shortage of HGV drivers continues. The Government have made tweaks to their proposals and temporary changes.

Managers at BIFFA are doing their best to recruit more. In the meantime the brown bin garden waste collections have been on temporary stop.

The Brown Bin "Garden Waste" service resumed on 4th October but initially was on a four-weekly cycle. At each collection Biffa will take a full bin and as much again in garden side-waste.

Subsequently, the fortnightly collection of the Brown bins resumed from 1st November – starting with a "double" week of a full bin and as much again in garden side-waste.

Biffa are working hard – including weekend working.

Users' annual subscriptions will be extended by 3 months before a new start-of-year DD payment is taken.

New offices for SODC

Progress is being made on new offices for SODC following the fire that destroyed the Crowmarsh offices in January 2015. The previous administration did all too little to progress matters causing all the insurance money and millions more to be eaten up by the expensive temporary costs of Milton Park. Decisions to progress with more detail are proceeding with a view to utilise the Didcot Gateway site efficiently. The council owns this site within a wider Homes England owned site right opposite the Didcot railway station. In the wake of Covid and changed home-working patterns the council is planning for some 200 desk spaces for the shared council administration (rather than c. 400 before) and for 100 desks of commercial space on a floor above. The Gateway site is about 6 miles from the fast-growing Milton Park office park. (In 2019 in their prospectus, MEPC the owners of the MP site forecast expansion from 9 thousand jobs to 20 thousand by 2040.)

Henley & District Housing Trust

At its council meeting on 7th October SODC agreed award grant funding of more than £450,000 towards the cost of creating new affordable housing in Henley. The funding came from commuted s106 contributions from developers across the district and has gone to the Henley and District Housing Trust to develop properties for Social Rent. The plan is to develop two two-bedroomed properties and convert a third property into two one-bedroomed flats. This award will fund 50 per cent of the cost of creating these new homes, which will also be fitted with solar panels to reduce their carbon footprint.

Planning consent has been obtained by the trust. The two properties are situated next to five existing cottages within the trust's ownership. These are at School Cottages, Greys Green. A third property in Henley – also owned by the trust - will be converted to two flats. This results in a net gain of three new affordable properties.

Rents on all the properties will be charged at Social Rent levels – these are calculated using a government formula based on relative property values and relative local earnings. They normally fall significantly below Affordable Rent levels, which can be up to 80 per cent of prevailing market rents in a given area. Social Rent ensures that rents are as affordable as possible in an area of very high market values.

There is significant demand for affordable housing in the Henley on Thames area, with 338 households on the council's housing register stating Henley as their first preference (As at August 2021). It should be noted that many of those registered are seeking 1 bedroom properties, although many such don't rank highly for social priority; some however with particular needs do.

SODC Finances

When the current administration SODC took over in 2019 it inherited a situation where SODC had a deficit of around £3m per annum. Deficits can only be funded from revenue reserves. Many factors contributed to this. These included past unjustified decisions to not increase or indeed to reduce the Council Tax level. In the period from April 2012 to date the cumulative effect of which are to worsen each current year's deficit by more than £2m! Those decisions were made against officers' advice and were not made in the context of revenue surpluses. The council now has the 8th lowest council tax charge amongst shire district councils in England. Overall SODC has a very low operating cost, despite operating in the high-cost South East and its problems are certainly not because of excess expenditure. However other issues have contributed to a significant reduction of its revenue reserves. These include an extremely slow response to provide new permanent office accommodation after the arson attack of January 2015 and other flawed decisions including a badly conceived and effected outsourcing arrangement that has largely had to be reversed and a complacent failure to review fees and charges. Overall these inappropriate past decisions have depleted SODC revenue reserves by some £20m (by March 2022).

The new administration has reviewed and acted on many areas of neglect and sought to stem future deficits. Unfortunately legislation prevents SODC from increasing Council Tax by more than £5 per annum for a Band D property yet past mistakes have left the charge £35 below what it should have been. For the average Band D property this £35 difference would represent about £0.70 per week – but for the council it makes large difference.

Over the years since 2010, government austerity has reduced funding to local councils by some 45%. Clearly Covid has also brought additional challenges.

Many local councils have deficits and very limited reserves such that in future years central government will either have to provide more central funding or to allow councils more scope to increase their Council Tax charge.

SODC's problem is rather different from many in that our problem has been largely created locally in the past. There are some limited opportunities to increase charges and fees. There are however very limited opportunities to reduce costs. There are some areas of discretionary provision – such as Leisure Centres and there could also be opportunity to provide a lesser "minimum" statutory service – such as in planning or waste and recycling. However any such cost reductions would affect the service outcomes and cause residents to ask why their council services were worse than the standards expected elsewhere.

Past poor decisions are at real risk of constraining future options for SODC.

IT Strategy

SODC is updating its IT Strategy with a view to addressing the neglect of past years, bringing hardware, comms and software up-to-date and addressing areas previously not properly covered. New and improved areas include customer relationship management and property.

Grants

The capital grants scheme is now open for applications from voluntary and community sector organisations and town and parish councils until mid-December.

This vital funding offers capital grants to improve community facilities to help build and support thriving communities and improve the quality of life for the residents of South Oxfordshire. The total budget is £320,000 and organisations can apply for up to £75,000, and a maximum of 50 per cent of their total project cost – so matching funds are required.

For further information about the grants scheme and scoring criteria please take a look at the website **southoxon.gov.uk/grants**. The Community Enablement Team on **communityenablement@southandvale.gov.uk** will welcome enquiries for help and advice. This is expected to be a very competitive funding round.

The Councillor grants scheme (round 2 of 2) will re-open on 22nd November.

Keep safe!

Leigh Rawlins
District Councillor