

SODC ward councillor's report

– Shiplake – 12th October 2020

Covid-19

Covid cases are now showing strong resurgence and impacts have been seen in Oxford and Reading. For now the south of England is faring better than the north, but there is no space for complacency. The government have today announced a new 3 tier approach to local restrictions.

Powers have been devolved to allow more local council input to track, trace and enforcement. SODC has adopted these and will work with the County council and others in a common endeavour. These powers are in place to enable response as local circumstances may develop.

SODC is involved in the financial measures announced for support to businesses and individuals affected by local lockdowns.

Local Plan 2035

The closing date for responses to the main modifications consultation is 2nd November.

Planning White Paper consultation

The first stage on shorter-term changes being the :-

- Standard Method
- First Homes (taken from affordable housing provision)
- 'Temporarily' raising the affordable housing threshold from 10 to 40 or 50, and
- Extending the Permission in Principle system to Major developments (10+ homes)

Closed on the 1st of October.

The consultation on the second much more radical stage closes on 29th October.

Determination of Planning applications in SODC

Earlier in the year SODC adopted changes to the routing of planning applications to help deal with the exceptional Covid situation, the refusal of the secretary of state to make any allowances in deadlines, and the backlog caused during lockdown.

It was intended to review this system in October. However the present reality is that there remains a backlog of 70 applications for planning committee and it is the case that, despite best endeavours, the virtual meetings are only able to clear about 4 cases per meeting.

Under these circumstances and with the current Covid situation not looking promising SODC's council agreed to extend a changed and temporary approach into 2021, to be reviewed no later than 31st July 2021, but hopefully sooner.

There are some small changes to the revised approach. The most significant being that if a district councillor calls in an application (and does not withdraw it, if subsequently satisfied by advice, changes or conditions imposed) then it will automatically go to committee without any other triage or review.

So under this system, objections by a town or parish to a Minor application (1-9 homes) would not send it to committee – unless supported by a district councillor call-in. (This was always the case

for small “Other” applications (incl householder ones). Major applications and large-scale major applications will continue as previously (that is Major ones (10+ homes) go to committee if contrary to the town or parish view, and large-scale majors (200+ homes) go automatically anyway.

It is regrettable that this extension is necessary, but given the intransigence (yet again) of the secretary of State it is the only option to avoid undue Appeal costs and at the extreme special measures arising from non-determinations.

District finance – revised budget

SODC has agreed a revised budget for 2020/21 with an increase in the budgeted deficit of £1.1 million. This mostly arises from covid-19 but also from some other unavoidable costs. Given the stretch on staffing during Covid – with the situation becoming more threatening – there is very limited scope to make offsetting savings. Reserves are held against such rare “rainy day” exceptions and they will be used accordingly in this year.

Of course, the situation for the autumn/winter part of the year until March 2021 remains uncertain with the current Covid risks. The revised budget is based on best estimates of what is known so far, but is based on the assumption of mild conditions; it does not seek to cover the risk of more extreme scenarios.

Corporate Plan

SODC has adopted the new Corporate Plan. It enjoyed the largest and most positive response ever known for one of these in South Oxfordshire. Details of work programmes and measures will now be refined.

Council constitution

SODC's council has reviewed its constitution and agreed a number of practical changes. Amongst these – via an amendment in council – it was agreed to let district councillors on the Planning Committee to debate and vote on applications in their own ward. I opposed that change since it could open up scope for challenges to decisions and to the extent that councillors might be more sympathetic to cases from their ward might introduce less confidence in the fairness of decisions.

Motions

SODC's council heard and supported motions on Neighbourhood Plans, action on foul river pollution, action in favour of diversity and contrary to ethnic discrimination and finally, action to improve the Cornerstone arts and cultural centre.

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor