

SODC ward councillor's report

– Shiplake – 14th September 2020

Covid-19

After a summer of growing relaxation, Covid cases are now showing some resurgence. Schools have returned and pubs and restaurants have resumed – benefiting from the “eat out to help out” support.

It remains to be seen how much Covid cases will grow, in the short-term it appears that hospitalisations and deaths are not spiking sharply, but of course continued vigilance and care is called for. As the autumn winter season of flu and viruses develops there are reasons for concern and for expectations of new challenges.

More powers are being devolved to local government to effect “local lockdowns” where necessary.

Government is beginning to revise guidance – including the “rule of six” to limit the scale of gatherings.

The Covid support structure across Oxfordshire remains in place with South Oxfordshire council ready to respond as may be required.

Local Plan 2035

The Inspector has issued an interim letter following the Examination in Public. He has agreed that the plan period should extend to 2035 – with an additional year of housing requirements for SODC. He has approved the housing requirements as submitted – including the high SHMA numbers both for SODC and its obligations to meet unmet housing need from Oxford City. He did not choose to take account of the much lower household projections now released by ONS based on the 2018 base which show much lower numbers – particularly for Oxford. In addition he has shockingly approved ALL the strategic sites, mostly in the Green Belt but also including the Chalgrove site with its isolation, safety issues and real questions concerning its availability. The result is a very high requirement for housing and a plan supply with a vast amount of “headroom” above that requirement – both in terms of numbers and site areas; if built this must mean a sharp increase in the number of households – which the housing formula approach will then use to project even more housing “need”. The Inspector is indicating support for stronger policy on Climate Change, revisions to the submitted policy on density and more emphasis on special housing for the elderly – including extra care. He did not support demands for more development around Reading or in the market towns and villages but is making policy for infills and windfalls more permissive. In due course, after some drafting exchanges with the district planning policy team, a further consultation will take place over a six-week period on the “Main Modifications” proposed by the Inspector; these will include those changes which he judges of greatest materiality – rather than simply details of drafting. Under the Secretary of State’s diktat or “direction” he seeks to have a local Plan adopted by the end of December 2020.

3rd Reading Bridge and Reading Transport Strategy

The consultation period has now closed. Oxfordshire councils and local parishes have strongly challenged the draft strategy but indicated a willingness to engage on finding proportionate measures for mutual benefit.

Consultation on South Oxfordshire Corporate Plan, 2020-2024

The consultation on this has closed. The response levels were higher than in the past and overall very positive. They are now being analysed.

National Planning changes

The government have announced proposals for the most radical change in planning since the 1947.

Local Plans would be “simplified” and planning policy be set by Whitehall. Plans would include zones for Growth, Renewal and Protected areas. In Growth areas developers would already enjoy effective “outline” planning permission automatically. In Renewal areas developers could assume rights to demolition and development up to a “gentle densification” limit by area, but widely suggested to be at least 4 storeys in urban/suburban areas, In Protected areas developers would face constraints – unless particular needs apply. It is suggested that these new simple plans could get done in 30 months rather than 60 months.

It is suggested that planning applications would in future be determined according to black and white “decision rules” – without democratic interpretation. It is suggested that this would make life simpler and less costly for developers, simplify workloads for local government and reduce or remove the input of aging councillors and their Nimby residents. Whoopee! Any input to review of a planning application would be digital and the intent is that rules would be crisp and simple. There is also a promise that enforcement of breaches of these easy rules would be firmer to increase public confidence!

The above is for consultation under the Government’s “Planning for the Future” document :-

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907956/Planning_for_the_Future_web_accessible_version.pdf

Before then more Permitted Development is proposed to make it easier to change uses from commercial property and shops to homes.

A radical change of Planning Use classes came into effect on 1st September :-

https://www.planningportal.co.uk/info/200130/common_projects/9/change_of_use

Use classes A, B1 and D are revoked and replaced with changed new classes E and F with a changed “Sui Generis” group.

The “Standard Method” formula for calculating “Local Housing Need” has been radically changed. It will now use the most recent ONS household projections (presently those on the 2018 base) but these will also be subject to uplifts according to the median house-price earnings ratio and how that have increased in the Local Planning authority over the past 10 years. These latter uplifts provide a very strong uplift in areas with high house prices – like the South East. In the rare event such as in Oxford City where household projections actually fall there is a default based on a percentage of the housing stock – but this is still subject to uplifts for the earnings ratio.

Under the old method the figure for SODC would have been **608 per annum** (using the ONS 2014-base household projections). Using the more current 2018 base household projections that would have fallen to **522 per annum**. But the new formula forces that up to **723** (whilst using the 2018 base household projections. This great increase is because of the uplift factor for the earnings ratio. In future – as the effects of the Local Plan 2035 cut in and vastly increase the SODC household numbers then this figure is likely to go sharply higher yet. It is questionable whether such increased housing will in fact reduce house prices in this district; rather they are simply likely

to attract more people moving out of the infinite demand represented by London. So it would appear that the new formula will dramatically increase development in South Oxfordshire in future.

District finance

The government have announced further support for local government as regards certain types of losses of income. They will not compensate for lost commercial or investment income. However, they will make a contribution to other losses. For such 5% of loss is disregarded and then the government will compensate 75% of the rest. This, together with other compensation for Covid-related costs, has helped to staunch district losses. However there remain risks to come in autumn/winter.

Car parking charges

After a very long period without increase (2007 and some minor changes in 2012) the charges in SODC car parks are set to increase by 20p for 2 and three hours. From February 2021, to give 1 hour's free parking in Henley - in line with other SODC car parks in other towns and to start charging on a Sunday.

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor