

District Councillor Update: Sam Casey-Rerhaye February 2020

Firstly, apologies for missing reports in December and January, I had to take unscheduled leave, and then had a nasty cough and cold for over two weeks.

Local Plan

As I write, we are waiting for the County Council to debate a motion on whether to accept the responsibility of the emerging Local Plan (eLP2034) if the Minister (Rt Hon Robert Jenrick) offers it to them which he has indicated he is minded to do, stripping it away from the District Council. The County Council has been recommended to accept it pending financial arrangements, which could mean SODC are forced to transfer money and officers/resources as well. We have already requested a face to face meeting with the Secretary of State (as has Layla Moran MP in the House of Commons) but have heard nothing. We cannot discuss options and compromises with ourselves! It seems that the Minister is prepared to do the exceptional act of passing the Plan to the County but not that of signing off the funding for the new Thames crossing and fly-over in Didcot and pausing our Growth Deal commitment which would allow us to create a new Plan without affecting others. Thank you for all your efforts in writing to the Minister and copying in your MP. There seems to be little respect from government for the obvious democratic mandate we received, I'm afraid, but there is a determination to force through this plan whatever opposition exists. So much for 'respecting democracy'. I will keep you updated as events happen.

Minerals and Waste Local Plan site allocations consultation

This runs until 4th March if you wish to respond.

https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/file/planning-minerals-and-waste/OMWLP_SiteAllocationsFINALPLAN.pdf

The only quarry site in South Oxfordshire to be proposed in this Plan is one in Nuneham Courtenay/Sandford border. This is in the Nuneham Park area, a Grade 1 listed building and park and with a Grade 1 listed view which this quarry will interrupt. There are major problems with the site itself – archaeological remains going back to Roman times and earlier, ancient burial sites, and it is also very close to some houses in Lower Farm Road. Of course, the traffic generated could be extremely disruptive to Sandford and Nuneham Courtenay village where the houses do not have foundations. I am working with both parishes to help object to this site which I think is highly unsuitable and could cause permanent damage.

Climate Emergency – One-year Work Plan

The newly created Climate Emergency Advisory Committee has recommended a one-year programme of priorities be approved by Council as a start to our aims of becoming a carbon neutral council by 2025 and a carbon neutral district by 2030.

CEAC members went through the programme on how the council might begin to embed sustainability in policies and start some feasibility studies on energy savings in council buildings and leisure centres, including identifying opportunities to introduce solar energy and heat pumps.

The report also looked at how the council could develop a sustainable travel plan for officers and councillors, an action plan to reduce single use plastic and help to promote walking and cycling to reduce vehicle emissions.

Cllr Sue Roberts, Chair of CEAC said, "We've worked hard to produce this one-year programme to help us tackle the climate catastrophe and, if the Council agrees, this programme will kickstart our journey towards becoming a carbon neutral council by 2025 and district by 2030. We are inviting our parish councils and community organisations to get involved and to work with us to help us make a difference at a local level."

Residents, parish councillors and community groups are welcome to attend the next meeting to hear the committee's discussions and/or speak to the committee. To request to speak at the meeting, please contact democratic.services@southandvale.gov.uk.

Finance

A draft budget for 2020-21 has been presented to Cabinet and Scrutiny. It will be presented to Full Council on Thursday 13th February where there will/will have been (depending when you are reading this) a debate and vote on whether to approve it. There are council tax rises proposed in this budget, a substantial amount of savings identified (partly due to the insourcing of the accounting function from Capita, which has allowed officers to work in much more detail than before- a big advantage) and a plan to work on a longer-term changes in the Council to address the very large deficit which the previous administration created.

I need to emphasise the precarity of local government finances across the country at the moment. We have been waiting for a long-term review of local government finance for a number of years now, and hope this will be a priority with the new government in Westminster. But to share with you something of what other councils are feeling and planning too:

A recent survey of local Councils has found that:

- *Nearly all councils (97%) plan to increase council tax in 2020/21, with most (93%) planning to raise it by more than 1.5%*
- *Nearly all councils (97%) plan to increase fees and charges in 2020/21, with some being forced to raise them 'by the maximum possible amount' (14%)*
- *Confidence in the sustainability of local government finance remains very low, with three quarters (74%) of councils saying they do not feel confident*
- *1 in 10 councils (12%) say they are in danger of being unable to fulfil statutory duties this year and 1 in 7 councils (14%) said they anticipate an increase in judicial challenges to the level of service provision this year*

We have created a 5-year plan for addressing the deficit and will be reviewing it at least annually but more often as needs arise. I am glad to say I am confident that it has been thoroughly prepared.

Corporate Plan

Not the most interesting of topics in itself but this is actually the crucial place where we set out our values and priorities as administration. This is different from the Local Plan as it covers everything the District does, not just housing and development. We

will complete this by the beginning of the new financial year in April and it will influence (and is already influencing in its draft form) how we focus our work and responsibilities. I will let you know when it is published. Our aims are in line with the climate emergency and the ecological risks we face, including ward councillors and their communities being more involved in day to day decision-making, and finding ways to create real & permanently affordable housing.

Waste Enforcement Efforts

You may have seen recent publicity about fly-tippers being prosecuted by SODC. Now we are launching a new campaign to highlight the anti-social blight of littering. A waste enforcement team will be attending a number of local events to explain the laws around littering and fly-tipping, & to answer questions.

Anti-Idling

The anti-idling campaign is continuing throughout the next few months, with posters distributed widely, adverts placed on petrol pumps and flyers included with Council Tax bills. This is a major initiative to address the problems we have with Air Quality in many of our towns, including Henley, Watlington and Wallingford.

Changes to how SODC will support Neighbourhood Development Plans

At its meeting on 30th January, the Cabinet considered and approved a proposal to change the way the Council supports Neighbourhood Development Plan teams, following changes in the way that central government grants operate. From 1st April 2020, the Council will continue to be responsible for any Referendums or Inspections that are required by law, and will provide a wide range of advice at all stages of the process (including reviews), but will no longer provide grant support.

The background to this decision is that the funding provided by central Government to the district council has changed in the following ways:

- It has reduced by £10,000 per plan.
- In most cases the council only becomes eligible to receive grant funding if a plan successfully reaches the referendum stage rather than at different stages throughout the process.
- Revised arrangements limit the number of claims that can be made in a neighbourhood area when progressing a neighbourhood plan review. Only one claim may be submitted per neighbourhood area in a five-year period.

Historically, we have been one of a very limited number of councils that have passed on part of the grant funding we receive from central Government to cover our costs in supporting neighbourhood planning directly to neighbourhood planning groups.

At the same time, the grant support from the government directly to neighbourhood planning groups has increased over the years - it includes up to £17,000 financial support, additional financial support up to £10,000 on a pilot scheme for those seeking to promote affordable housing, and technical support.

Officers will continue to help Neighbourhood Planning groups to identify and apply for alternative grant funding, and will offer expert advice and technical support

As ever, please contact me at sam.casey-rerhaye@southoxon.gov.uk or call and leave a message on 01235 799489