

District Councillor Report – Sam Casey-Rerhaye, March-April 2020

Covid-19 and emergency/resilience planning

All Councils in Oxfordshire are part of a Local Resilience Forum and are working closely with other organisations such as the police, NHS and fire service to deal with all the issues that are arising as a result of this pandemic. Councils are also working with all contracted services on their Business Continuity Plans to ensure as good as service as possible and the Council will update its website and send out regular communications with press etc to try and keep everyone as up to date as possible. I know many local communities and Parish Councils are getting together to offer help and support to those in isolation or who are unwell. It is encouraging to see and hear of all the focused efforts to help each other, many in small but really significant ways.

For up to date advice, check the Gov.uk website (www.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response>) and the NHS: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

For business support and information, check <https://www.svbs.co.uk/coronavirus-guidance-and-support/>

Local Plan

As many of you will already know, we have been forced by a direction from the Secretary of State, Rt Hon Robert Jenrick to keep the emerging Local Plan 2034 at Inspection and take it through to adoption by December 2020, whether the Council likes it or not. This means the Plan will be examined in public by the independent Inspectors exactly as it was written back in March 2019 before the local elections. If we had not complied with this direction, he would have taken all planning powers away from South Oxfordshire and either handed to the County Council or taken them into the Ministry. We may, as ward councillors, argue for changes in the Plan, but these will be within the 'minor' category, as the Inspectors already wrote to the Council expressly telling us that this was all that was possible within the guidance (in contrast with one letter from the Ministry which suggested that more major modifications could be made at Inspection (make of that what you will).

It is likely the Examination in Public for the Plan will be spring or early summer. Of course, recent events with the pandemic could well change this. If you registered to speak in the consultation back in 2018, you should have the chance to speak at this. I recommend you start to think about what you want to say. At some point soon the Inspectors will issue a series of 'Matters' that they wish to address.

Didcot Garden Town

Work on Didcot Garden Town continues, and we are expanding governance arrangements to include Parish Councils in Sounding Boards. There is an event to launch this and showcase what has been done and plans for the future – it will be at The Cornerstone in Didcot on 2nd May (please check nearer the time to see if is still running)

New Council Building

We have set up a project website at <https://southoxfordshirehq.wordpress.com/> which will be updated as the project rolls out. Some frequently asked questions:

1. High cost – what is the justification for raising the budget?

The budget should still be confidential for procurement reasons (there seems to have been a leak). The previous budget was a rough calculation set in 2017 and based on the old building's footprint and specification. It had no environmental aspects taken into account, so would have produced a "box" which would have been expensive to run and not a good place to work. This has impact on recruitment of quality staff. Also, construction costs have gone up significantly since then. The budget covers demolition, legal costs, project management, fit-out and contingency as well as build.

2. Insurance – why does the insurance not cover the cost?

We got a lump sum from the insurance cover plus a further sum to cover rental costs for three years (now spent). We still have the lump sum in the bank to cover some of the costs of the new building.

3. Access – lots of car parking suggests all staff and visitors are encouraged to drive.

We do need to provide car parking for staff as one of their contractual terms. However, the car park will also be able to provide parking for local events (e.g. park & ride into Wallingford). We will be putting in place incentives for staff to cycle, walk and use public transport (also in collaboration with other local employers) but we have to accept the need for a certain level of car parking for now. The main car park is already there, and we will use materials for the additional spaces that could be repurposed later if no longer needed.

4. Community – what is the benefit to local community (what was the input from Crowmarsh parish?)

The onsite café will be open to the public and the Council Chamber and catering areas will be available for hire. First and foremost, we are building office accommodation, not an entertainment venue, but if we can generate some income from rental opportunities, we will do so. Crowmarsh Parish Council is very keen on having a larger hall in the community and the parking spaces.

At present Milton Park costs the council almost £1million a year in rent, services and maintenance.

Motions passed at Council Meeting on 20th February

Four motions were passed at the most recent Council meeting, covering the rules on five-year housing land supply, safety for people hiring taxis, the rules on permitted development (i.e. conversion of office buildings into residential accommodation) and a motion to condemn all racially or religiously motivated hate crimes and to adopt accepted definitions of anti-Semitism and islamophobia. For further details see <http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/news/2020/2020-02/motions-agreed-south-oxfordshire-district-council>

Work to develop properly affordable housing in the District

We have been exploring ways to have a long-term solution to the high cost of housing. We hope to bring a final proposal to the Council in April. It also links with

the need to be more commercial in the Council to plug the inherited deficit of an annual £3.3m. I will give you more details when this is finalised.

Winter Homeless Shelter

We have had a winter homeless shelter in South Oxfordshire this winter for the first time. This keeps people local and close to where their support networks are, instead of moving them to Oxford or other central area.