

District Councillor Report – Sam Casey-Rerhaye, May-June 2020

Parish clerks now receive weekly updates from the Communications team at SODC on every Wednesday. These have far more up to date information than I can provide in my monthly reports, so I ask clerks to disseminate widely and put relevant parts up on websites if they can.

As a council we would like to ensure that the local mobilisation and neighbourliness isn't lost once the emergency subsides, and we will be working to see what the District Council can do to support such volunteer groups in the future.

I still have some grant money for Covid-19 uses, so do get in touch if any of the groups need some financial support.

Planning & other Council business

We are pleased to report that many normal council-run operations are continuing to operate, **including waste collections, taxi licensing (renewals only), payment of benefits and housing services. All known homeless people in the district have been housed safely.** Bulk waste collections have now resumed, as has the doorstep collection of small electricals, linen and batteries, which should help anyone who has taken advantage of lockdown to have a bit of a clear-out! We can also take on new brown bin customers again. I have lots of praise for the way Biffa have worked during this crisis to keep the waste collections going while looking after their staff. Please call the Biffa number if you have any issues or a missed collection – some staff are on different routes than their usual. Biffa: 0300 061 0610.

Routine planning applications have been processed throughout the lockdown period, and there has been no significant drop in the number of applications in South Oxfordshire. Virtual Planning Committees are likely to resume in the coming week, although it is still not always possible to conduct site visits. This is necessary as there is a large back-log of applications that need decisions. Public contributions will need to be submitted in advance. Please check with the Planning department for information 01235 422600 or check the website: www.southoxon.gov.uk/services-and-advice/planning-and-building/find-application

A letter has been sent by the Leaders of both South Oxfordshire and Vale Councils to ask the Secretary of State to consider suspending the targets for the length of time to determine applications and also to readjust the five-year Housing Land Supply calculation, given that a) major applications cannot be considered fairly and b) many local construction sites have effectively closed down during the emergency and therefore risks us being forced into accepting speculative planning applications as a result of the Covid-19 stoppage. We await a response, but we know that other planning authorities across the country are also lobbying on these issues.

Local Plan

Officers are having monthly progress meetings with MHCLG (although the one in March was cancelled). Proposed modifications to the eLP2034 are being drafted for submission to the Inspectors (e.g. on improving the environmental performance of all new buildings, both residential and commercial), but it will be up to the inspectors to accept or reject these. It has been suggested that the Examination in Public could take place in the summer and could be as early as June as an online event. This

process is being overseen by SODC's new Cabinet member for Planning, Cllr Anne-Marie Simpson.

Planning Reform

Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government is consulting on how to reform the current planning process (we suspect in an attempt to remove barriers to development in the post-COVID and post-Brexit world). It is possible that District Local Plans will become less significant as spatial planning is elevated to the regional level (e.g. at the Oxfordshire Growth Board/Oxfordshire 2050 level), and that Neighbourhood Plans will be even more important as a way to identify specific sites for development. It's crucial for SODC Councillors and Officers to engage actively and constructively with our regional counterparts and for us to demonstrate leadership in the need for a wholesale reduction in carbon emissions from construction and transport. It is clear that we will not be returning to the way we used to live, work and travel before the coronavirus pandemic and we need to set a vision for renewal and future prosperity within the means of the planet. And this leads on nicely to the next item:

Adapting our roads to accommodate safe cycling and walking

Across the nation authorities are preparing for the easing of the lockdown restrictions and it has become patently clear that our narrow pavements and car-oriented roads are simply unsafe for an increase in bicycle traffic and social distancing. We are trying to get wider support for making roads more pedestrian and cyclist friendly, and through the network of Cycling Champions across the County, are suggesting that OCC takes this opportunity to consider road closures (even if only on a temporary basis) or reallocation of road "real estate" to prioritise bicycles. The Green Party is also lobbying for a reduction in the national default speed limit to 50mph, for widescale "bikeability" training and for bike racks to be added to buses (amongst other things).

The Dept of Transport has given some money to local highways authorities to implement these changes. Officers at SODC have suggested that Parish Councils go straight to OCC (Cllr Liam Walker is the Cabinet members responsible for Highways) to propose roads which could be adapted in this way or simply to support the principle of safer active travel e.g a 20 mph limit through villages, some temporary extension for pavements/cycle lanes.

Local Transport and Connectivity Plan 5 from the County Council

I have replied to this initial consultation as Cycling Champion for South Oxfordshire. It contains a very long set of detailed documents but it is an important first stage of devising their new strategy for the coming years. Strategically I think it still works on the assumption that the road network is first and foremost for cars, and as such is not ambitious enough for healthy, safe, active travel and good reliable public transport.

Council Finances

We were very glad to hear that SODC had been allocated an additional £1.4m in funding from the latest round of support from central Government. This brings the total reimbursement for what has been paid out by SODC so far to £1.45m. While

this is very welcome, our officers have calculated that a full year's losses under the current circumstances would amount to £4m, which is a combination of the additional costs incurred plus the loss of income from services. The Government has committed to recompensing Councils for the additional expenditure, but has not been clear on how it will fill the gap in lost income (if at all). We can only wait to hear more on this from the Minister, but in the meantime our finance team is providing regular feedback to him on how much the crisis is costing and how it is being spent. We are certainly very proud of the way SODC staff have stepped up to the challenge and have responded to the new demands being placed on them while mostly working from home and, like so many people, organising schooling for children or caring for other family members.

Covid-19 essential information:

If you or someone you know has been identified as extremely vulnerable by the NHS and have nobody around to help with day to day tasks, like shopping please call 01865 897820 or email shield@oxfordshire.gov.uk.

Anyone that is in this situation but is not considered high risk can check to see if there are any volunteer groups nearby to help them at www.oxfordshireallin.org/local-support-groups or they can call 01235 422600 or email communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk

These support lines are open 8.30am to 8pm Monday to Friday and 9am to 5pm on Saturday and Sundays.

For local updates on District council activities such as waste collections and help for households and business, please see:

www.southoxon.gov.uk/news-events/coronavirus-covid-19-information

For up to date national advice, check the Gov.uk website (www.gov.uk) (<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/>

Please do not hesitate to call me or email for any information or concerns you have about any District council or Covid19 related issues:

01235 799489, or email me at sam.casey-rerhaye@southoxon.gov.uk