

Annual Report District Councillor – Sam Casey-Rerhaye

Covid-19 – Councils leading the way

The Covid-19 crisis has dominated the Council's operations over the past 12 months with up to 40% of Council officers redeployed to the Covid response at any one time. Officers have distributed business grants, set up the Community Hub to support those in financial need (see more [here](#)) and have also been responsible for establishing the asymptomatic testing centre at the Beacon in Wantage.

In April 2020, we quickly decided to allocate a £2,000 Covid grant for each Councillor to use in their ward to help community groups and parish Councils set up to coordinate Covid-related support locally (help with shopping, medicines, dog walks etc) for vulnerable residents. This support has been further topped up via the Emergency Food and Essentials grant.

The Council has also been responsible for making thousands of out-bound calls to people on the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable list (also known as Shielded list). In some cases, these calls have resulted in providing further Council services (e.g. help with Council tax) or signposting to third party support (e.g. adult social care) or, more usually, a referral to a local voluntary support group.

SODC has also played an important part in local track and trace. Where the national system has failed to make contact, the county and the district Councils have stepped in to ensure gaps have been filled by making calls and visiting residents who have been impacted and are having to isolate. The district has also been responsible for allocating the self-isolation grant for people on low incomes who have to self-isolate.

As part of the Community Hub, the Council has made Cornerstone in Didcot the home for the distribution of emergency food boxes for those unable to access food. This new function has been a vital safety net for many residents facing multiple challenges.

Council has successfully adapted to home-working and remote meetings for all Committees and formal Council meetings, which has enabled much greater participation by members of the public, in line with our focus on "Openness and Transparency" in our Corporate Plan. All Council functions have been maintained with officers working from home. Many officers, like many other people, faced the dual challenge of full-time work with home-schooling for children and it is to their credit that the Council has continued to operate so successfully.

The Council has also played a role in NHS vaccination roll-out. As part of a systems approach, we provided logistical support and help with booking of appointments to aid health partners. The roll out locally has been a success story with above national average take-up rates.

The Economic Development team along with officers from the finance department took on the giant task of managing the multiple government grants available to businesses. To date, 11 schemes have paid out just short of £6million to business. Our businesses, to a large extent small and medium sized, with over half based outside towns, will be key to the recovery, and we will continue to do all we can to support them through this in the coming year. We continue to encourage businesses to sign up to updates from Business Support: www.svbs.co.uk for the latest news.

Other challenges have come from the closure of the District's leisure centres. Staff have been working closely with GLL, who run the centres for the Council, to ensure the continued operation of our leisure facilities for residents and the safe re-opening of all facilities when allowed.

Corporate Plan

The Council drafted and unveiled its new Corporate Plan 2020-24, following a hugely successful consultation exercise which attracted almost 1000 individual responses. The Corporate Plan will guide Council policy, projects and spending and defines the Council's priorities for the next four years. For the first time ever, the annual budget has been built to reflect the Corporate Plan priorities as endorsed by our residents. See <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/corporateplan>

The key themes of the Corporate Plan are:

1. Protect and restore our natural world;
2. Openness and accountability;
3. Action on the climate emergency;
4. Improved economic and community wellbeing;
5. Homes and infrastructure that meet local needs;
6. Investment that rebuilds our financial viability.

The Corporate Plan now creates the strategic framework for the work of the Council over the coming four years, over and above all of the "business as usual" activities. Delivery plans for each theme have been created and there will be regular performance reports to demonstrate progress made against each key project. The priority themes are often also reflected in the motions submitted to Council, which, if adopted, can lead to a change in Council policy or a specific plan of action.

For example, motions passed at the Full Council meeting on 25th March included ones to support the concept of "community wealth-building" in

regeneration programmes (such as in Didcot or Berinsfield), to reduce light pollution from new developments, to seek the under-grounding of high voltage power lines, to support local pubs as community facilities and to work more closely with Clinical Commissioning Groups to ensure the adequate provision of health facilities in growing parts of the district.

New Office Accommodation – Didcot not Crowmarsh!

One project that is gathering pace is the new joint South and Vale offices at Didcot, opposite the railway station. Here we will work in partnership with Homes England, which owns most of the rest of the site, to redevelop this flagship location. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for flexible, sustainable, value-for-money offices that are accessible by public transport and so it was decided to locate SODC's new main office hub at the Didcot Gateway, which is also on the border of the two Districts.

The building will be of the highest environmental standards (BREEAM Excellent) in line with our new DES10 building for carbon reduction policy in the Local Plan and may include space for other tenants such as Housing Associations, enabling a better return on investment (subject to viability assessments).

The move out of Milton Park will enable significant savings on rent and utilities and it is hoped we will be in the new premises in 2024.

Housing and Homelessness

SODC's new Housing and Homelessness strategy was published and we are proud that SODC was the first Council in Oxfordshire to adopt the "Housing First" approach. Working with Aspire Oxfordshire and SOHA Housing, SODC has successfully placed 12 homeless households into permanent accommodation, enabling them to have a stable home while they get the health and social support they need to get their lives on track. We are delighted the Housing First scheme has now been rolled out across Oxfordshire.

Social Housing

We have ringfenced more than £4m of developer funds to provide affordable and social housing to help meet the District's urgent need for affordable, sustainable homes for our key workers. A review of all SODC-owned property will enable us to identify potential sites for social housing across the District and we will also be working with partners on larger-scale projects, such as in Berinsfield.

Planning

Significant changes to the planning regime are being proposed by the government and last year, SODC filed a strong response to the “Planning for the Future” White Paper and the associated metrics for calculating housing need. We await the results of the consultation but have concerns that moves to “cut red tape” through the expansion of permitted development rights and the creation of planning “zones” could actually lead to a loss of local accountability and decision-making, even more centralisation and poor planning outcomes.

Local Plan 2035

After six years and much controversy, the Local Plan 2035 was adopted by Council in December. This followed the intervention of the Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick, in 2019, after the SODC Cabinet recommended withdrawal of the Plan from inspection and an order by Mr Jenrick to see the plan through inspection and adoption.

Following the first ever virtual inspection of a local plan, the independent inspector found the Plan sound, subject to main modifications including the addition of new policies we proposed on low-carbon housing (DES10 as mentioned above) and a policy on consultation with communities.

The Council has now agreed to develop a new joint Local Plan with the Vale of the White Horse Council (by law, Councils must have revised or new local development plans at least every 5 years and it takes 2-4 years usually to make a new one) with a view to sharing the costs of gathering evidence, drafting, inspection and adoption. This would also help to achieve uniformity across the two districts in terms of environmental and sustainability measures and would put climate, nature and affordability at the heart of planning across our two Districts. A new Plan would also enable the potential creation of new Green Belt to compensate for the loss of Green Belt in the ELP2035.

Enforcement

The Council has recruited an additional full-time staff member to the enforcement team alongside two new consultants to help build a more robust and responsive enforcement function at the Council as we recognise this is a crucial function of the Council and has had a backlog for too long.

Waste Management and Recycling

South Oxfordshire remains the 2nd best district at recycling, with 63% of waste being recycled thanks to our doorstep collection scheme and

support for county-wide waste management. We have taken action on fly-tipping where possible and our Corporate Plan calls for more action to reduce waste, not just to recycle it (e.g. through Repair Cafés).

Oxford to Cambridge Arc and Expressway

The government has published plans to turn the Oxford-Cambridge Arc into a “world-leader” in “growth and sustainability.” In her capacity as Leader of the Council, Sue issued a response welcoming the focus on community wellbeing and improved prosperity and productivity through a stronger knowledge economy, but called for strong local accountability and a prioritisation of nature restoration and environmental enhancement.

South Oxfordshire District Council policy remains against the building of an Expressway from Oxford to Cambridge and we will continue monitor the Arc activity from government very closely as we want to use all our influence to ensure it does not act as a means of requiring other new roads that would be the same or similar to an Expressway.

Budget

The last financial year saw the Council’s finances adversely affected by loss of income (for example, from car parks) in addition to increased costs arising from the pandemic. Against this backdrop, we still made sure there were no service reductions in our 2021/2022 budget.

So, the Council continues to face challenges in achieving a balanced budget over the medium term, as a result of long-term low Council Tax and lack of income diversification. However, we have decided to shore up revenue and reduce costs including increasing fees and charges (for example, planning pre-app fees, carpark charges), bringing grounds maintenance back in-house, continuing to extract ourselves from the Capita 5Cs outsourcing contract, taking the decision to locate the Council’s new offices in Didcot (which will save significant rental and other costs in the long-term) and properly stewarding our property portfolio (we have completed a full survey of all Council-owned property - no such survey had been done in the recent past) as well as staffing for climate change, project and programme implementation.

The Council is working on delivering the objectives in its corporate plan as far as possible in the Covid-19 period, including the development of a new ‘delivery vehicle’ (a type of business unit) to enable the Council to build its own low-carbon affordable and social housing.

We need a proper, long-term financial framework from government. Uncertainty makes future financial planning extremely difficult. However,

longer term, insourcing of services and investing to save, have set us up well for the future.

New Appointments: Cycling Champion, Thames Champion and Tree Champions

The Council has made a number of new appointments in line with its Corporate Plan priorities to protect and restore the natural world and protect and enhance the River Thames and its setting.

I was appointed South Oxfordshire's Cycling Champion in 2019 and have been working with other Cycle Champions in Oxfordshire councils to prioritise active travel and the good, safe infrastructure needed for this.

Cllr Jo Robb was appointed River Thames Champion in June 2020. The Thames Champion is responsible for improving access to and promoting sustainable use of the river and for working with Councillors, Thames Water, the Environment Agency and other groups to improve the cleanliness and biodiversity of the Thames and its tributaries in South Oxfordshire.

Jo set up the Thames Valley Rivers Network, a collective of more than a dozen parish, town, district, county and borough Councillors from along the length of the river to call with a united voice for an end to sewage pollution and improved access to the river. She has been working towards obtaining bathing quality water status for a stretch of the river in Wallingford as well as working with the Rivers Trust to water quality monitoring projects. A community river clean-up day is also planned for later in the year (Covid permitting) alongside a range of projects to improve access to the river for all.

In February 2021, in recognition of the importance of trees to our District, Council appointed two new "Tree Champions", Cllr Peter Dragonetti and Cllr Ian Snowdon, who will work towards the protection of trees across the district. Both Tree Champions will work with officers on the drafting of a new tree planting policy and policies to ensure the protection of trees and ensuring that new planting projects see the right trees planted in the right places.

Community Grants

Despite financial pressures the Council has made the decision to retain all community grants (capital grants, Councillor grants, and revenue grants to voluntary sector organisations) at their current level for the 21/22 financial year. This decision was taken on the basis that these grants are vital for the recovery of our communities.

Recognising the pressures on the voluntary sector and the vital role VCSOs (Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations) play in the Covid response and the recovery, Cabinet decided to extend the revenue grant to recipients for an additional year. Current VCSOs funded include Citizen's advice Bureau, SOFEA and Didcot TRAIN.

The Councillor grant which provides support for small community-based projects has also been retained and a further scheme is expected later in the year. In the last financial year, I was really delighted to be able to support the establishment of a pear orchard in Marsh Baldon, the planting of a hedgerow in Culham, new chairs for Sandford village hall, and a new picnic table in Long Wittenham.