

District Councillor Report – Sam Casey-Rerhaye, March 2021

Council Budget

We passed the budget for 2021-22. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, we are starting to move forward on our priorities. Many of the projects in our corporate plan are either already being addressed or will be when officer time allows. – and the direct link to the corporate plan – which received record public feedback – will give transparency and confidence that spending is happening on the right things. Over the year we will also be introducing performance measures to monitor progress on these projects.

Of course, the response to the pandemic must come first, and many SODC officers are still taking on new and unfamiliar roles to help support residents and roll out the vaccine programme. Councils have proved their importance during this pandemic and it is time for a proper funding settlement and real devolved powers from Whitehall – at present, the central government grant goes down every year.

I am glad to say we avoided service reductions, and that many behind the scenes changes from the last budget and over the last year, such as better use of Community Infrastructure Levy monies, in-sourcing of services (which has given the Council much better control of our services) and investing-to-save, have set us up well for the future. We have increased SODC's share of Council Tax by the maximum allowed (which is £5 for a Band D home). The Council has had to use nearly £2m in reserves more than projected to cover costs arising from the pandemic as well to cover falls in normal income such as car parking. Obviously, reserves should be used in an emergency but unfortunately due to financial pressures built up over the last 10 years and previous choices made not to raise council tax in line with inflation, it is still necessary to use a further £2m for day-to-day expenses. This is unsustainable in the long term and we are working on ways to increase income to cover this shortfall.

We have Council Tax Reduction and other schemes in place to support those who may struggle to pay their Council Tax, with further discounts already applied to those who qualify for the reduction scheme. However, with personal circumstances changing in the pandemic, some people may have become eligible for a reduction now who were not previously, so please contact the council if you need help - call 0345 302 2313 or go to: southoxon.gov.uk/counciltax

Helping with Vaccine roll-out for Covid-19

Officers will be helping with this, including speaking to people who have not responded to their vaccine invitation and offering support.

Business Support

The Economic Development team have taken on, to date, 11 schemes paying out just short of £6m in total in funds to business. 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. If you run a business large or small, please sign up to the mailing list for the latest government grant availability via www.svbs.co.uk. There are a number of grant schemes currently open, and we are pressing for more support for those business types which have been overlooked so far.

Garden Waste

By the time you read this, garden waste collections should have resumed. We had to delay the restart of the service as many of Biffa's bin crews were off sick or are having to self-isolate due to COVID-19. We will continue to provide a weekly update on our [website](#), or I can personally recommend the council's 'Binzone' app for updates.

Motion at Council

I proposed a motion to council last week which was passed unanimously, for the Council to declare an ecological emergency. The motion had a whole raft of actions that the council will now take in relation to this, including creating a Local Nature Partnership for Oxfordshire with other groups and councils, and to work on developing nature recovery networks and a Nature Recovery Strategy for Oxfordshire. The Leader of the Council will also write to all Oxfordshire MPs asking for them to support the private members' Climate and Ecology Bill on its way through parliament.

Despite being a council of best value by the standards of efficiency, there have been some areas that we have had to spend a considerable amount of time and resources on bringing up to date – for example, we are conducting a council strategic property review, updating the record of where all the litter/dog mess bins in the District, writing a new financial strategy review, and writing a new strategic procurement policy etc. Some of this hasn't been done for a long time and some are being done to align with the Council's new Corporate Plan objectives – for example, restoring the natural world, improve economic and community well-being and ensure openness and accountability in council work.

Tree Policy

Planting and protecting trees is obviously of immense benefit to nature restoration, carbon absorption and improves the environment for wellbeing and enjoyment. It is really important to plant the right trees in the right place, ensure they are well cared for and also incorporate the latest evidence (for example, how tree roots do or do not affect foundations of building etc). We are writing a new policy which should be ready in the summer and ready to aid us and community groups/parishes for the tree planting season next winter.

Housing First

Following the information I gave you about our successful pilot in housing people who have been homeless under the 'Housing First' model, I am pleased to tell you that we will be providing more housing under this model and the County Council are following our example with their endorsement of Housing First.

As ever, please contact me for help with any District matters:

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