

District Councillor Report – Sam Casey-Rerhaye, February 2022

2022/23 South Oxfordshire District Council Budget

The 2022/23 budget will go to Council for debate on 17th February.

I am pleased to report that, thanks to bringing the Finance function back in-house from Capita, we have much better processes for budget-setting, scrutiny and approval.

This has helped us to identify savings in our base budget while not compromising on the services we offer to residents.

As a result of this, our update Medium-Term Financial Plan which takes us through to 2026/27 shows a much healthier reserves balance of £21m, whereas previously it was projected to be only £11.4m and falling.

Better accounting systems, our decision to create our new Local Plan jointly with the Vale, and savings in rent paid to Milton Park after the Council moves into the new office we are building in Didcot have all contributed to this.

It undoubtedly helps that at least three of the members of the Cabinet of the Council are qualified Accountants and are therefore able to provide a professional approach to the Council's finances.

Our current projections indicate that we have been successful in closing the gap between revenue and expenditure since being elected in 2019 (one of our Corporate Plan priorities) and that Council reserves are in a much stronger position than the predictions we inherited.

As a result, we have been able to put aside £500k for this year to further accelerate actions in our Climate Action Plan, nature recovery and community well-being projects – some of which are 'invest to save' for the future.

Unfortunately, we still only have a one-year financial settlement from the Government, which does pose challenges with long term planning for revenue spending.

We are proposing raising Council Tax by the maximum allowed, which is £5 per annum for a Band D home.

It was the decision in the past to freeze Council tax, while losing control of the finances by outsourcing so much to Capita, that gave rise to the previous alarming forecast.

However, despite the improving position, the Council's finances are not yet sufficiently robust to prevent an increase in Council Tax. There is no

point in making a political gesture by freezing council tax if the Council ends up, like Northamptonshire or Slough, completely bankrupt.

Infrastructure Funding Statements

SODC has published its Infrastructure Funding Statements for 2020/21 to provide an annual summary of developer contributions.

Through Community Infrastructure Levy and Section 106, we have secured just over £20.5m from local developments, which will go towards local infrastructure to support the building growth in our district.

We publish it on the website: <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/community-support/infrastructure-to-support-communities/>

As part of the budget-setting process for 2022/23, a prioritised list of projects which will use the SODC portion of these funds has been created; this new approach will ensure that 3rd party funds are used wherever possible for major projects, thus reducing the demand on the Council's reserves.

The majority of these projects relate to the District's leisure centres, the Riverside pool, campsite and other facilities in Wallingford, tree planting projects and to the purchase of housing for properly affordable rent.

Covid Support continues with the Community Hub

The Household Support Fund has vouchers available for fuel, food and other necessities if people are struggling. You do not need to be claiming benefit to be eligible.

People who are struggling to pay for food, energy, water bills and other related expenses can contact Citizens Advice on 0808 278 7907 / hsf@osavcab.org.uk to apply for support.

They will refer all successful applicants to receive vouchers from the councils' Community Hub. More details here: <http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/coronavirus-community-support/household-support-fund/>

Covid-19 Grants available for businesses in South Oxfordshire

Businesses based in South Oxfordshire in the hospitality, leisure and accommodation sectors are being urged to apply for support from the Omicron Hospitality and Leisure Grant fund.

The government has given just over £1.4m to South Oxfordshire to help support local businesses that have been struggling financially due to the recent Covid-19 Omicron variant.

The criteria for the grant are set by the government and rules of how the money is distributed cannot be changed by the council.

Successful applicants could receive between £2,667 and £6,000 depending on the rateable value of the property. Complete an online application form via the district councils' South and Vale Business Support website – <https://svbs.co.uk> *up until midday on 18 February.*

Community hub team support

On top of managing the household support fund above, our Community Hub team remains very busy supporting for residents who are self-isolating.

In January the Hub made 502 phone calls to people who've asked for help whilst self-isolating, contacted 105 residents who've received the £500 test and trace payment to offer them support, delivered 11 food parcels and handled 436 enquiries from residents, mostly on financial help.

Climate Action Plan for the District Council

We have approved our four-year Climate Action Plan this month. Each and every action is costed, budgeted and in each department's work plan. This means we are not making lofty statements but have worked through a series of 74 actions, big and small, over the next four years.

It is also a working document that will be updated if and when legislation changes and if the performance monitoring of the Plan requires change.

We will produce quarterly monitoring reports on the Plan which will go to the Climate & Ecological Crises Advisory Committee (CEEAC) for comment and feedback and be part of the wider Corporate Plan we created in 2020.

A lot of work on climate action and nature recovery is already ongoing in the Council, and this outlines our next steps.

It covers seven areas of actions: Our Ways of Working, Our Service Delivery, Our People, Our Land, Our Buildings, Our Communities, Our Partners.

I am very pleased with the Plan, and as Chair of the CEEAC, will be part of the monitoring of its implementation.

I also think it will help give momentum to other people and organisations around the District in changing how we live and work to reduce carbon and other greenhouse gas emissions substantially – this cannot be achieved without commitment to change from all of us.

The Plan will soon be put up on our Climate pages: [Action on climate and nature - South Oxfordshire District Council \(southoxon.gov.uk\)](#)

Design Guide Consultation

We have published a draft document known as a Design Guide that provides guidance on how new developments can be designed and constructed to the highest levels of quality and sustainability – and we want to hear what people think.

I am really pleased with it, it is as sustainable as we could make it within the law and is incredibly detailed, whilst being easy to understand.

It's a joint South and Vale guide, and it sets out a series of steps and design principles that will be considered when deciding on all future planning applications – whether it's a resident looking to build an extension or a developer building a large housing site.

To help make the draft Joint Design Guide easier to understand, we've created **an interactive website**:

<https://data.southoxon.gov.uk/JDG/Guide.html> - please have a look and then head to: <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/planning-and-development/urban-design/joint-design-guide-consultation/> to give your comments.

We've just extended the deadline for comments by two weeks, as one or two people had some technical difficulties accessing the interactive website when it was launched – the new deadline for comments is 11.59pm on Tuesday 15th March.

Joint Oxfordshire Councils Letter to Minister on the 'Five Year Housing Land Supply' Rule

The six council leaders in Oxfordshire have written to Michael Gove MP highlighting our severe concerns with the national Five-Year Housing Land Supply rules. You can read the letter at:

<https://www.southandvale.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Oxfordshire-Leaders-5-year-land-supply-letter-.pdf>

Sessions to help hair and beauty staff support victims of domestic abuse

The South and Vale Community Safety Partnership and Oxfordshire charity Reducing the Risk of Domestic Abuse are running a series of free online training sessions for people in the hair and beauty industry to help them understand domestic abuse.

The events entitled 'Transformations – changing our response to domestic abuse' will highlight what staff should do if they suspect that a client or colleague is at risk or suffering from domestic abuse.

The sessions are available for anyone working in South or Vale in hair and beauty, including, nail bars, tattooists and ear-piercing establishments.

Domestic abuse affects 1 in 3 women and 1 in 6 men in their lifetime, so it's very important that people know how they can support and signpost those affected.

If you know anyone working in the hair and beauty industry in our districts, please encourage them to sign up – more information is available on our Eventbrite page: **[southandvale.gov.uk/youcanhelp](https://www.eventbrite.com/organisers/south-and-vale-council)**

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