

## **South Oxfordshire District Councillor Report – Sam Casey-Rerhaye, March 2022**

### **Covid-19 and the Council offices**

Following the government lifting all its Covid restrictions last week we're making plans for how members and staff will use the council offices from now on.

We plan to follow the advice from Oxfordshire's Director of Public Health to take a cautious and considerate approach to relaxing restrictions, particularly given that local case rates remain high.

We will carry out a detailed review of all the measures and restrictions currently in place before making gradual changes. Currently the reception area at the Milton Park offices is open to the public and staff can book hot desks on the ground floor.

Factors other than Covid also need to be considered with our plans, including clearing the building in preparation for moving out of the rented office premises in Milton Park and moving into other temporary accommodation while the plans move on to build the permanent offices in Didcot opposite the railway station.

Formal council meetings will continue in Milton Park as they have been until further notice.

### **Office Reception Open to the Public**

The reception to our offices at Milton Park re-opened to the public the week of Monday 21<sup>st</sup> February. A reminder that they are open with slightly reduced hours: Open 9.30am to 12.30pm, closed for lunch and then open again from 1.30pm to 4pm.

### **Household Support Fund**

In South Oxfordshire we have £117,856 of vouchers still available to help residents afford essentials. The scheme closes at the end of this month (March). Anyone who is struggling to afford basics can contact Citizens Advice on 0808 278 7907 or [hsf@osavcab.org.uk](mailto:hsf@osavcab.org.uk) to apply for support

We will continue to support residents through the Community Hub, including taking calls and signposting people for further help if needed, until 31<sup>st</sup> March 2023.

However, as the situation improves locally its focus will shift towards supporting our communities' health and wellbeing in recovering from the pandemic.

## **Council Houses – making a comeback!**

We have allocated £5m of developer funds (called Section 106 funds) to buying houses to rent out at properly affordable rates.

We live in an ever increasingly expensive area (despite the large number of homes being built) and the ‘affordable’ criteria for new housing is 80% of market value – this is clearly unaffordable for many people in the district.

I have written previously about the flats we are building in Didcot, so these new houses are part of a growing number of homes we are committed to providing to residents.

We are also using a capital fund to buy homes for temporary accommodation instead of using unsuitable bed and breakfast accommodation. This will lead to a saving of around £65,000 per year!

## **Changing and Increasing Community Infrastructure Levy criteria**

We are proposing to increase this and to remove the current exemption for housing specifically for older people. This seems to have been exploited by developers.

The increase would bring a substantial additional funding for the district. The consultation runs until 22<sup>nd</sup> March:

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/cilchargingschedule>

## **First Trees Planted on District Council Land**

Since we finalised our tree policy last year for planting on council-owned land, I was delighted to visit Radnor Road in Wallingford on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> where a local group have planted out an orchard plus other trees on a piece of council-owned land there.

An amazing 60 people turned out to plant these trees and it was all finished by lunchtime.

Fantastic to see community groups and the council working together to achieve this, and another area in Wallingford will have more trees planted before the end of the tree planting season.

I was also very pleased to see trees planted in Abingdon – over the border in The Vale but close to where I live and a product of the same policy which is for both district councils

## **Ukraine Situation**

Like everyone, we are very concerned about the escalating situation in Ukraine and want to support in any way that we can. We’ve not yet had any calls for help as a council but just as we did with the Afghan crisis,

we will do everything possible to respond quickly when asked for support from the government.

### **Council Legal Team**

The Council's Legal team have once again achieved an excellent outcome in their assessment against the Lexcel standard – the Law Society's quality accreditation for legal practices. To quote their Head of Service, Patrick Arran, the team has "passed with flying colours".

The assessment involved a two-day grilling of senior management and team members, and considered factors like client care, financial management, information management, people management and file and case management.

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