

## **District Councillor Report – Cllr Sam Casey-Rerhaye, November 2023**

### **SODC strategic plan for 2024-29**

We are starting work on our next “corporate” plan which sets out our priorities and strategic themes until 2029.

There will be formal consultations in the future, but if you, your community group or organisation would like to share views informally, please do get in touch.

The current plan is here: <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/11/SODC-Corporate-Plan-2020-2024.pdf>

### **SODC pledges its ongoing commitment for paying staff at least the Real Living Wage**

All directly employed council staff have received at least the Real Living Wage for several years, to help to reduce in-work poverty.

The Real Living Wage (currently £10.90 an hour) is based on the cost of living – considering the current cost of household goods and services. In October, councillors unanimously passed a cross-party motion on the Real Living Wage.

SODC will now work towards accreditation as a Living Wage employer with the Living Wage Foundation. This includes ensuring all future companies seeking to win council contracts are committed to paying, as a minimum, the Real Living Wage.

Whilst it is not in our power to change existing contracts, we will urge our current suppliers and contractors to follow our example and commit to the Real Living Wage.

### **UK Government climate target U-turns will impact us all**

In 2019 SODC declared a ‘climate emergency’ with the ambition of becoming a net zero council by 2025, and a net zero district by 2030, in anticipation of a concerted national response to the climate emergency.

In 2021 SODC declared an ‘ecological emergency’, following ongoing global heating and drastic declines in biodiversity, concerns which seriously harm the natural environment and place additional burdens on local communities.

The 2021 Pathways to a Zero Carbon Oxfordshire report stated that ‘all net-zero pathways will involve [...] a major programme of retrofit for existing homes and non-domestic buildings [...] and the phase out of gas boilers and fossil-fuelled modes of transport’.

Chris Skidmore MP's independent review of net zero found that "net zero is the growth opportunity of the 21st century" and "the economy and climate change are intertwined".

In July 2023, the Office for Budget Responsibility found that continuing our dependence on gas at the current levels would cost at least as much as acting on climate change.

In other words, tackling climate change would be **at worst cost neutral, but probably save the country money**. And that's not even counting the other benefits to health from making the green transition.

However, the UK Government has now regrettably reduced its climate targets, ignoring its own Committee on Climate Change's advice.

It has delayed the ban on installing oil, liquefied petroleum gas and solid fuel boilers by nine years, delayed the phase out of sales of new internal combustion engine cars by five, and abandoned the energy efficiency requirements on private landlords. These measures will make it incredibly difficult for the district to become net zero by 2030.

- Net zero initiatives can save residents money, for instance the upfront costs of home insulation can be covered by lower energy bills within a very short timeframe, especially when grants are used.
- Delaying net zero targets harms business and industry certainty, and therefore impacts investment in green technology, skills, and infrastructure.

As a result, SODC needs to consider the impact of the UK Government's U-turn on net zero on the council and district, our net zero ambitions and the production of our next Climate and Nature Recovery Action Plan in 2024.

SODC's Leader has also written to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, requesting a regulatory impact assessment of the outcome of their policy changes, and to seek an assurance and rationale for how they consider these policy changes to be compliant with their statutory obligations to meet current and future carbon budgets.

### **Thermal Imaging Camera for loan and online forum to support home energy efficiency upgrades**

As the weather gets colder, SODC will be lending out our thermal imaging camera to community groups and parishes.

The camera can be used to identify spots in buildings where heat is escaping and where energy-saving measures could help make a place more comfortable and reduce fuel bills at the same time.

**On Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> November at 6-7.15pm there will be free online forum** to help councils and community groups support residents to reduce energy use and costs.

Speakers will highlight the support that is available and share inspiring local projects to help residents. There will be an opportunity to ask questions. For more information on both, email [climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk).

### **Grants to help towards energy saving measures for the home**

As the cold weather starts to set in, we are promoting Welcome the Warmth – which offers a variety of fully funded energy efficiency measures including insulation, solar panels and heat pumps for those on a lower household income.

The good news is that the income eligibility cap for the Oxfordshire scheme, including South and Vale residents, is now £39,000 (up from £31,000) which should mean that many more people are eligible to receive the help. Please help spread the word – **for more details, see the Welcome the Warmth website.**

### **New grant to help people stay warm and fed this winter**

We have launched a new food and warmth grant will help support people in our communities this winter who may otherwise struggle to afford essential things.

The grant is aimed at local voluntary and community groups, and town and parish councils, who can use it to support those most in need in the districts.

Organisations can apply for grants between £2,000 to £5,000, or up to £10,000 for collaborative projects between groups of two or more organisations.

The grant can fund projects providing food and warmth to people who may otherwise struggle to access these crucial essentials over the winter.

The grant can cover capital and revenue costs for projects that support people with food and warmth, such as buying food and essential supplies such as household cleaning products, toiletries, hot water bottles and blankets and cooking equipment such as saucepans and slow cookers.

Projects might also include cooking clubs, gardening clubs and educational activities that promote healthy food choices and saving energy.

The grant scheme opened week commencing 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2023 and closes at midday 27<sup>th</sup> November 2023. Decisions are expected to be made within four weeks.

Support is also available through the councils' Community Hub. If you need support, call our friendly Community Hub Team during office hours on 01235 422600 (option 3) or email [communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk)

### **Free Carbon Emissions Calculator Tool**

We've launched a free simple-to-use carbon emissions calculator tool for town and parish councils to measure their current carbon emissions using energy and fuel bills. It makes it easy to work out where carbon and cost savings can be made.

For more information, email [climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk](mailto:climateaction@southandvale.gov.uk)

### **Funding available for rural businesses and organisations via the Council**

A new grant scheme has launched for rural businesses and organisations based in South Oxfordshire.

The fund is designed to support capital projects for small businesses and community infrastructure that help to improve productivity and strengthen the rural economy and rural communities.

Grant funding is available for small scale investment in micro and small enterprises in rural areas, growing the local social economy and supporting innovation, investment in capacity building and infrastructure support for local civil society and community groups.

Example projects include the diversification of farm buildings outside of agriculture, establishment of rural community businesses and net-zero infrastructure.

The Council have secured this funding through the government's Rural England Prosperity Fund.

Town and Parish Councils, public sector organisations, higher and further education institutions, private sector companies, registered charities, constituted community-based organisations, social enterprises (like Community Interest Companies) are all eligible to apply.

Interested parties are encouraged to submit their application **before midday on Friday 24<sup>th</sup> November 2023** by visiting the [South Oxfordshire District Council](#)

## **Affordable housing grant to help address urgent need**

As part of the district council's work to help meet the urgent need for genuinely affordable housing in the region, local developers, Community Land Trusts and self-builders can apply for a Section 106 affordable housing grant to build affordable homes that meet the councils' climate criteria.

We have approved an improvement to the existing affordable housing policy to enable funds from Section 106 developer contributions to be used as a grant to build affordable homes that are energy efficient and cheaper for residents to live in and heat.

The new application form now includes questions which determine how projects will minimise energy use and carbon emissions, as well as how they have identified locally appropriate species and set up long term management plans if they are adding tree planting and biodiversity improvements.

These are necessary to help achieve the Corporate Plan objectives of the council to take action to tackle the climate emergency to 'protect and restore our natural world'.

In South Oxfordshire, Section 106 developer contributions have previously been provided to the Henley and District Housing Trust to develop properties for social rent and to fit solar panels to reduce their carbon footprint.

## **Celebrate Christmas at Cornerstone**

Cornerstone Arts Centre in Didcot has a busy Christmas programme, starting on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> December as part of the Play2Give Didcot Festive Market in the Market Place next door to Cornerstone.

Thames Con and Cornerstone present a fun and festive afternoon, showing one of the greatest Christmas movies of all time, [A Muppets Christmas Carol](#) from 3pm. Shows and music carry on right up to Christmas Eve.

All the details about the Christmas Shows can be found on the [Cornerstone website](#) or pop into the centre and speak to the Box Office Team.

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