

District Councillor's Report

Cllr Jo Robb

1 March 2023

SODC Budget for 2023/24 passed on 16th February, but future funding still unclear

The budget approved by SODC Council for 2023/4 shows a financial position in a healthier state than previously forecast thanks to the careful budgeting work of the council in recent years. It also means the council needs to draw over a million pounds less from its reserves to balance the budget than it had prepared for a year ago. £643,673 will be drawn from reserves this year, compared to a budgeted draw on reserves in 2022/23 of £2.108 million, and to the estimated draw of £1.752 million for 2023/24 when the 2022/23 budget was set.

A reminder that the deficit was £3.3m when the Green/Lib Dem administration took over in 2019.

£1m will be invested over the next two years to drive the council's corporate plan priorities, including 'Everyone Active', an active communities grant scheme, and the continuation of the Community Hub to support the district's most vulnerable residents and to improve community wellbeing.

The Community Hub plays an important role supporting the council's ongoing response work for refugees and asylum seekers and works with partners to lead and deliver programmes to address inequalities. As well as providing wide-ranging support and advice for residents, the Community Hub delivers cost-of-living help for those in most financial need, such as distributing the Household Support Fund.

The budget also recognises the housing pressures within the district and allocates ongoing support for the council's dedicated homelessness prevention work across the district. The budget identifies £4.6 million of capital growth linked to the government's Local Authority Housing Fund, responding to the UK's humanitarian duties to assist those fleeing war. The £4.6 million represents the council's share of the cost towards providing a supply of 'move-on' and settled accommodation initially for refugees and asylum seekers. This all complements £2 million of funding to secure homes for people in need that was formally agreed in December having been allocated in last year's budget.

The capital budget will be used to improve South Oxfordshire's infrastructure, including flood prevention, leisure centre improvements and resurfacing and lighting replacement at the council's car parks. Decarbonisation funding, including some Government support, will contribute to retrofitting energy saving measures at Cornerstone Arts Centre.

Retaining its investment in climate action, the budget includes funds to progress some significant outcomes from priority projects already begun, including tree planting and meadow creation, an evolution of last year's No Mow May called 'Let it Bee' and supporting water quality work including an application for Bathing Water Status for a stretch of River Thames.

This year the council proposes to increase its share of the council tax by £5 a year for an average Band D property, so for 2023/24 residents will pay a Band D rate of £141.24 per household for the vital services provided by the district council. This represents a below inflation increase of 3.6 per cent. **In 2022/23 the Band D rate was the ninth lowest in the country for a shire district council.**

Whilst the short-term position is more positive, there is uncertainty around future local government funding, especially from 2025/26 onwards. The council has set its medium-term financial plan to 2027/28 to help deliver its corporate priorities and continue to provide high-quality frontline services in the meantime. Financial pressures in that medium-term

timeframe predicted to affect all councils are the state of the national economy and the lack of clarity on local authority funding.

Litter

The verges have been in a disgraceful state over the past few weeks and I have received many emails from residents and parish councils expressing their disgust. While the council has set aside additional funds for deep cleans in parishes (and many of you are taking up these deep cleans), Biffa retains responsibility for street and verge cleansing under the waste contract. I absolutely share the horror of residents and have raised the issue of roadside litter with the cabinet member, leader of the council and the deputy chief executive. The issue is being taken up at the highest level and as part of reviewing the contract with Biffa (the contract is over five years old), we are taking an “open book” approach. The roadside cleaning service is a key area we are examining in detail to make sure we are getting the service we are paying for.

I note that teams have been out cleaning verges but some patches of litter remain.

If you see litter or a fly-tip, please report to: waste.team@southandvale.gov.uk and let me know so that I can also follow up. It's important that precise locations are recorded so that the cleaning teams can find the right location.

Great British Spring Clean

This year we'll again be supporting the Keep Britain Tidy Great British Spring Clean by loaning litter pickers, high-viz jackets and bags to community litter picking groups and individuals. The event runs from Monday 17 March to Sunday 2 April. Equipment can be booked by completing and returning the booking form and declaration document to waste.team@southandvale.gov.uk. The forms are available on our [South](#) litter picking pages.

Equipment is limited so to avoid disappointment bookings should be made as soon as possible. Bookings for litter picking equipment can be made at any point during the year, not just during The Great British Spring Clean!

Joint Local Plan - Issues Consultation Results

You may have already seen the launch of our Consultation Results document and updated interactive website which summarises the findings from last year's Joint Local Plan Issues consultation. The feedback process, including the new interactive website, was very well received – when asked about the feedback process, about 70 per cent of respondents said they were satisfied or very satisfied. When asked, 85 per cent of people supported the emerging vision for our districts in the Joint Local Plan.

The results help us focus on what matters to our residents and will help guide the next stage of the process, when we launch a consultation on the preferred options for the Plan in summer 2023.

You can view the Joint Local Plan Issues Consultation Results document and updated interactive website on both the [South Oxfordshire](#) website. Keep an eye on our social media channels where we'll be posting video summaries of the results, you can view and share the first video from [South](#) social media channel.

Government Consultation on Planning Reforms

Don't forget that the government is currently consulting on proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework; this consultation closes on 2nd March and full details

can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/levelling-up-and-regeneration-bill-reforms-to-national-planning-policy>

Leisure needs survey

The Council will shortly be undertaking two studies to support the work on our local plan, namely the Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS) and the Leisure Facilities Assessment and Strategy (LFAS). The two studies will help provide updated guidance and evidence of leisure needs in both South and Vale and will be important in helping to determine the capital investment priorities identified in the Joint Local Plan.

As part of this work, **Stuart Todd Associates** and the **National Governing Bodies** are writing to sports clubs, parish councils and local organisations to find out more about the leisure provision in the districts, so do please respond to them if approached.

Housing Support Fund Now Closed

On Monday 13 Feb we opened the Household Support Fund for anyone who hasn't received support since May last year and can't afford life's essentials such as paying for food and energy bills. There was an overwhelming response and the Fund has now closed. We are waiting to hear news of further government initiatives to support those in need.

Thank you for sharing the information and our social media messages with people and please continue to direct people to our SODC website for details on how to apply, email our Community Hub (communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk) or call them on 01235 422600 (select option 1).

Be our "eyes and ears"!

While officers at SODC try their best to keep on top of what's going on around the district, they cannot be everywhere and their resources are very stretched following years of austerity. It is really helpful when town and parish councillors, clerks and members of the public get in touch to let us know of an issue that needs resolving, whether it's a fly-tipping incident, a planning breach or an environmental health matter. Even though most officers are working from home or are using hybrid working patterns, the Council's email addresses and telephone numbers are continually monitored and will be picked up by the most appropriate team. All of the relevant contact details can be found at:

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/about-the-council/get-in-touch/contact-us/>

But in all cases, the general enquiries number is **01235 422422** or **422410** for out-of-hours help.

APPENDIX – Litter Management (extracts from an email exchange from the Environmental Services Manager at SODC to a resident)

If you have occasions when Biffa have not actioned a request please let my team know waste.team@southandvale.gov.uk and one of my Technical officers will investigate. I have a team of four Technical Officers that directly monitor the Biffa contract, they cover both South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse and deal with all aspects of the contract, not just street cleansing but also the collection of waste from the 120,000 properties across the two districts.

The targets for street cleansing are set out in the Performance Review and relate to the levels of litter and detritus, this is assessed independently by inspectors from Keep Britain Tidy who come and do quarterly inspection. The contract does allow for penalties to be imposed on Biffa if the level of performance falls below the required standard and they do not bring it up to the standard within the time frames set out in the Code of Practice for Litter and Refuse.

(N.B. The most recent Biffa Performance Report was on the agenda at the 20th October 2022 meeting of the Joint Scrutiny Committee (covering South and Vale), and can be downloaded as part of the meeting pack for that meeting.)

As I have mentioned the district council is the Principal Litter Authority and any concerns should be reported to the waste team email above. We do very much appreciate the volunteers who undertake litter picking and we are pleased to be able to support them by providing equipment and arranging for the litter to be collected. As you can imagine the scale of the work across the district is immense and is extremely frustrating that the majority of the litter is from passing vehicles.

You also raised some further questions in your email that I have responded to below in red

- Does Biffa only respond to complaints from members of the public or is there a proactive “litter monitor”? (Reporting of litter in the SODC area is no longer made public as cannot be reported on FixMyStreet and one can never be sure whether an email or a phone call will be acted upon - or whether an issue has been reported multiple times, thereby wasting everyone’s time). **This is a self monitoring contract so Biffa supervisors do proactively inspect relevant land in the districts and arrange litter picking/sweeping as necessary. In addition my Technical Officers are also out monitoring. Please continue to report issues to Biffa in the first instance and if you do not see any action contact the waste team**
- Who monitors Biffa’s performance of litter clearance? What happens when it hasn’t been done in the designated time or to the required standard? Does SODC/Biffa follow the grading and zoning systems as described in the attached DEFRA 2019 Code of Practice for Litter and Refuse? (The grading system is described on pages 14-15; the Zoning system of land on pages 18-26; recommended timings for litter clearance on page 20). **As mentioned above we do follow the guidance for grades and time frames as set out in the Code of Practice**
- Devising and publishing a Zoning plan is the responsibility of the Principle Litter Authority so who would that be and where am I able to view the said plan? (I assumed that for Oxfordshire this would be Oxfordshire County Council with South Oxfordshire District Council as the Duty Body responsible for managing litter clearance within the District. However, the only mention of Litter on the OCC website is to point people to the District Councils to report a problem). **Yes as part of the contract letting Zonings were provided to Biffa, this is based on road names rather than a plan, as you can imagine this is a large document but the basic principle is that villages fall into the medium intensity zones and the roads between villages would be considered low intensity. If you have specific sites that you would like to know please let me know and I will confirm them with you.**
- Are there published targets for litter clearance in the same vein as for fly-tipping? Is fly-tipping (which is commendably picked up within a few days of it being reported) given higher priority due to targets imposed on the contractors? **No there are no**

specific targets for litter clearance, we have a dedicated fly tipping crew and there are targets for this set out in the Performance Review. The target for Litter relates to the level of cleanliness rather than clearance times.

- Who promotes SODC's litter patrols (as mentioned in the May 2022 Strategic Performance Report, Q4 2021/22 (<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/05/Quarterly-Report-South-Q4-V4-fOR-WEBSITE-1.pdf> pages 23, 26 & 31)? Or devises a litter strategy - for collection as well as an education/campaign programme? My Enforcement team works closely with the Councils Communications team to promote litter patrols and also the successes we have around prosecutions for waste related crimes. The patrols are very much focussed on education rather than enforcement, they will however take action if it is appropriate.