

District Councillor Report

7 December 2022

Cllr Jo Robb, Cllr Lorraine Hillier

2023/24 Budget setting

Officers and Cabinet members at SODC are working through the budget-setting process, taking into account any changes introduced by the Chancellor in his recent autumn statement and assessing our likely future income streams. You may have seen recent reports in the press about a couple of two-tier authorities writing to HMG to warn that they are close to financial collapse, as well as OCC communicating their budget shortfall of c.£50m for next year. SODC is in a better financial position than many local authorities, and we have been able to reduce the annual deficit substantially over the past three years, thanks to improved management of resources and improved collection of fees.

One successful exercise we initiated was to match data held by the Council in different systems to ensure that businesses in South Oxfordshire were paying the correct business rates. During the Covid pandemic many such businesses had applied for grants while not actually paying any business rates in the first place. Amazingly, this exercise netted £2.6m of back tax, of which £500k has been retained by SODC and there will be an additional £200k per annum now due to the Council. Such good housekeeping demonstrates our commitment to returning the Council to financial stability.

Revised CIL Charging Schedule

SODC first introduced the Community Infrastructure Levy in 2016 but the rates charged had not been reviewed recently, nor the policies which determined how the fees should be charged. Over the past 12 months, a team of officers and Councillors has reviewed all of the current arrangements, going out to public consultation and finally submitting the proposed new schedule to an independent examiner. As a result, the Cabinet is now recommending to Full Council on 8th December that it adopts the new CIL Charging Schedule, which will go some way towards filling the gap in funding for infrastructure which has grown substantially over the past few years.

The new schedule differentiates between the financial viability of new houses in the different parts of the district (e.g. between Berinsfield and the rural parishes in the south of the district), and also separately categorises the more built-up areas of Didcot and Berinsfield. For the first time, CIL will now be payable on housing for older residents in most of the district, and the actual rates charged per square metre will also increase to bring them more in line with those charged in neighbouring districts. Our projections indicate that the new schedule, if adopted, will generate around 70% more in CIL payments, which of course benefits Parishes as well. As a reminder, CIL is not payable on strategic sites in the Local Plan 2035, since these are subject to s106 agreements instead.

New Housing Delivery Strategy Agreed

The terms "Affordable housing" and "Social housing" are often used interchangeably in the media and elsewhere. They generally mean the same thing, which is sub-market rent level housing, most usually provided by councils or housing associations (Registered Providers). However "Affordable Rents" and "Social Rents" do have specific meanings. Affordable Rent is defined by national planning guidance as being up to 80 per cent of prevailing market rents in each area. Social Rents (also defined by planning guidance) are calculated according to government rent regime guidance, and typically fall between 45 and 60 per cent of market rents.

In South Oxfordshire, the high cost of housing has meant that new homes and homes built for "affordable rent" remain unaffordable locally to those on lower incomes. Although over 8,000 new homes have been delivered in South Oxfordshire in the past ten years, they are still unaffordable to many, with the average house price now equalling over 12 times the average salary. 40% of employees in South Oxfordshire earn £25k or less.

A new Housing Delivery Strategy was agreed by the Cabinet in November which sets out the framework within which we can start to address this problem and gives us the flexibility to work with a range of partners to ensure that we start to deliver the houses that people need. The full strategy and action plan can be found on the SODC website in the Cabinet papers for the meeting of 10th November (pages 183-221)

<http://democratic.southoxon.gov.uk/documents/g3140/Public%20reports%20pack%20Thursday%2010-Nov-2022%2018.00%20Cabinet.pdf?T=10>

This new strategy will help to achieve our corporate plan priorities relating to the climate emergency, delivering affordable housing and improving community well-being.

At its meeting in December, SODC Full Council will be asked to approve the allocation of £2m towards the purchase of houses for conversion to social rent properties.

Diversity and Inclusion Strategy Approved

At its meeting on 1st December, Cabinet approved a new Diversity and Inclusion strategy, which is designed to ensure that all services provided by the Council are accessible to all, as well as recognising certain protected characteristics within our communities and ensuring equality of treatment for all. The strategy has as its statement of intent: "We strive to create an environment where everybody feels that they belong and has a voice which will be heard. We will embrace our differences, the unique talents, beliefs, backgrounds, and abilities of all our staff and residents. Together we will make a positive difference."

The full strategy and its accompanying Action Plan can be found in the Cabinet papers for the 1st December meeting:

<http://democratic.southoxon.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=121&MId=3141>

Oxfordshire Food Strategy

At the same Cabinet meeting, a new Oxfordshire Food Strategy, commissioned by OCC from Good Food Oxfordshire, was adopted. Covid-19 brought the issues of food insecurity, access to healthy, affordable food and the impact of these on health into sharp focus. Oxfordshire food banks saw a three to four-fold increase in use, with a conservative estimate that around 6,000 people a week required support to access food.

Since the strategy was commissioned, its importance has been highlighted by the cost-of-living crisis, Brexit and the war in Ukraine, which have created additional strain on the food system. At the time of writing the strategy it was estimated that eight to ten per cent of all households in Oxfordshire experience food insecurity. This equated to 20,000-25,000 households and 55,000-69,000 people. It is estimated that six to seven per cent of all households were experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity and given the current cost of living crisis it is reasonable to assume that this picture will have worsened in the intervening months.

Poor diets, exacerbated by food insecurity is evident in growing obesity rates. Ensuring access to healthy food and education around its use is a key intervention to counteract a range of health conditions from Covid-19 to heart disease and type 2 diabetes.

The environmental effects of our food system are also a matter of concern as identified in the council's corporate objectives. According to the IPCC, food systems currently account for between 21 and 37 per cent of total greenhouse gases and contribute to biodiversity loss. The need to build resilience into our local food systems to ensure better access to food has never been greater and it is these issues which the Oxfordshire Food Strategy aims to address. This strategy will be integrated into existing work programmes across SODC in line with our priorities and resources, and outcomes will be monitored using our quarterly performance management reports (see www.southoxon.gov.uk/corporateplan).