

SODC Report – 1 November 2021

Cllr Jo Robb

Budget Season

Over the next few months SODC Officers and Councillors will be grappling with the difficult business of setting a budget for the next calendar year, which starts in April 2022. When the current administration took over in May 2019, it inherited a situation where the Council was using around £3m a year (every year) of its reserves to plug a hole in the annual budget. The budget deficit was caused by a long period of zero or below-inflation increases to the SODC portion of the Council Tax, such that our levy is now the 8th lowest in the country and well below average. If the Council was able to levy the national average Council Tax, it would have no deficit at all. It is important to note that while SODC collects Council Tax, it hands most of it out to the County Council, local Town & Parish Councils and the Police & Crime Commissioner.

Over the course of the past year, costs have risen and Government support is not covering the gaps adequately. The Council is now likely to have to make some very hard choices about what to fund and what to cut. 11 years of austerity has cut funding to local councils by around 45%, so the choices are becoming harder and harder to make. Every new house built in South Oxfordshire increases the burden; the Council Tax payable does not cover the cost of providing services.

Garden waste service returns to fortnightly collections

The councils' garden waste service returned to its normal fortnightly collections from 1 November. Customers can now put their brown garden waste bins out on their normal collection day in their recycling week every fortnight.

As mentioned last month, to make up for the disruption to the service we are extending customers' current subscription to the service by three months.

The councils are emailing and writing to their garden waste customers this week letting them know the good news. There is more information on our **South** and **Vale** garden waste pages.

Waste and Bin Survey

The council-wide bin survey is ongoing. Should you have requests for new bins/a change of bin design etc, please let us know and we will feed through to the waste team. Bear in mind, however, that no new bins will be issued while the bin survey is happening.

Grants

Capital Grants:

SODC is launching a new round of its Capital Grant Scheme this week (1 November) with grants of up to £75,000 available for local voluntary and community organisations and town and parish councils. The grant can fund up to 50% of the total cost of capital projects such as contributing to the construction of a building, or replacing or making improvements to play equipment etc.

As part of their applications, organisations are asked to consider how they can enhance buildings and improve the environmental sustainability of community assets to meet local needs.

Applicants must also consider how their project will contribute to at least one of the council's Corporate Plan 2020-2024 priorities, such as 'protect and restore our natural world', 'action on the climate emergency' or 'improved economic and community well-being'.

Previous projects in the district that have been awarded funding from this grant include:

- Tetsworth Memorial Hall who were looking to use their grant towards funding for insulation and air source heat pumps to become even more energy efficient
- Cholsey Parish Council used the grant they were awarded for a purpose-built Happy Hub family centre
- Henley Rugby Football Club were awarded a grant to help with a community training facility upgrade

The Capital Grant Scheme launches on 1 November 2021 and will be open until noon on 17 December (2021). Applicants can find out more on the council's website, southoxon.gov.uk/grants.

Revenue Grants:

The next round of Councillor Community Grants opens on 22 November.

Two-year Revenue Funding:

This scheme provides for core revenue expenses for community groups and closes on 26 November.

Please check the SODC Grants page and feel free to get in touch with any questions – the officers are very supportive: [Grants - South Oxfordshire District Council \(southoxon.gov.uk\)](https://southoxon.gov.uk/grants)

New District Council Offices

The concept design for the new district council building (the new combined offices of South Oxfordshire District Council and the Vale of White Horse District Council) at Didcot Gateway has been approved, and the detailed design process is now getting underway.

The concept design for the building is available to view on the council's [website](#). The building will be located opposite the railway station in Didcot and was influenced by the town's industrial and railway heritage.

The building will be built to BREEAM Excellent standard and will feature solar panels on the roof.

It will also include commercial office space the councils can let to a third party.

The councils have been working in temporary rented offices at Milton Park since June 2015, five months after their shared headquarters in Crowmarsh Gifford were burnt down in an arson attack. The councils had been planning to build new offices at Crowmarsh but having adapted successfully to a mix of home and office working during the pandemic, are taking the opportunity to build smaller headquarters on land owned by South Oxfordshire District Council at Didcot Gateway. The site was already due for regeneration and is ideally placed next to public transport connections, making it an environmentally sustainable choice.

Residents, along with local businesses and other organisations, will have a chance to have their say on the proposals for the new building when the planning application is submitted.

South and Vale respond to Arc Consultation

The government's recent consultation on the Vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc has now finished. You can read the submissions made by South here: [Council Responses to Consultations about Planning - South Oxfordshire District Council \(southoxon.gov.uk\)](https://southoxon.gov.uk/council-responses-to-consultations-about-planning-south-oxfordshire-district-council)

At last month's Full Council meeting, Council unanimously agreed a motion brought by Cllr Robin Bennett and seconded by Cllr Andrea Powell, calling for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc project to be paused.

Strategic Property Review

The Council's strategic property review is now complete and for the first time since the fire of 2015, we have a full record of all council land holdings. The next step is to manage each asset in the most appropriate way in line with our corporate priorities. An Asset Management group has been established to go through each of the land holdings using officer reports and analysis. Some pieces of land will be sold, some will be used for nature recovery and tree planting, other sites may be suitable for social housing or other uses. Decisions relating to assets worth over £75,000 are subject to either cabinet or Council approval (depending on value) and ward members – and where appropriate, parish/town councils - will be consulted on sites in their ward to ensure our property is managed in the best interests of communities as a whole.

And finally... Rural Broadband

A number of broadband projects are happening at once. Councillors were given an update and summary on these and I will pass this on to parishes for interest.

Businesses in Rural Oxfordshire Project: This is the Defra funded (£6.3m) project focussed on delivering full fibre broadband (FTTP) to businesses in rural Oxfordshire, but also delivering to adjacent residential premises. Contracts are split between Openreach (mainly in Cherwell and West Oxon), and Airband in South Oxfordshire – it overlaps in a central belt around Ewelme. The project is in final phases of completion with Openreach very nearly done, but Airband are struggling and will probably not complete until early next year. Our map shows contracted premises as yellow: [Coverage map | Digital Infrastructure Programme \(digitalinfrastructureoxfordshire.co.uk\)](https://digitalinfrastructureoxfordshire.co.uk/coverage-map/)

Rural Gigabit Hubs Project: This project is part-funded by DCMS and part-funded by Oxfordshire County Council. The county council expects to contract in the next couple of weeks with delivery of FTTP infrastructure by Openreach, Virgin Media, Gigaclear, and Neos Networks to 240+ public sector buildings and community centres/village halls. The county council will also pay (subject to final cabinet approval) the initial contract term for a 100Mb/s service such that sustainable funding models can be developed once they understand the benefits. The project is also delivering FTTP to a range of GP practices which currently have 20Mb/s services, as well as schools (including some in disadvantaged areas).

Project Gigabit: This is the main DCMS intervention project for delivery of FTTP to areas which are not planned for delivery by commercial operators. Oxfordshire is combined with West Berkshire under a Lot valued at c £114m and will target some 80,000 premises.

Gigabit Vouchers: Oxfordshire County Council have some 40 community schemes in play across the county where the county council is working with communities and suppliers to use DCMS vouchers

for funding FTTP delivery. After long administrative delays these are motoring now and are a good tool for enabling communities to 'help themselves'.

Commercial Rollout: There is much investment of private sector capital underway and planned in Oxfordshire, and the county council maintain close working relationships with all commercial Operators. The rules of engagement are of course different – the county council cannot have any contractual leverage, but by agreeing a partnership approach, there is benefit for all stakeholders. Openreach in particular have made big investment decisions which will deliver around 70,000 Oxfordshire homes and businesses with FTTP over the next four years. You can see these areas mapped at [Where and when we're building Ultrafast Full Fibre broadband | Openreach](#)

Some residents have expressed concerns around the erection of unsightly poles for super-fast broadband. In 90% of delivery, existing Openreach ducts are used by all telecoms operators for blowing fibre through. However, there are areas where the legacy Openreach (Post Office) network was built by simply burying telephone lines. This is mostly in rural areas but also in some suburban locations. The cost difference between arranging road closures, digging in new ducts then blowing fibre through them is in the order of four times the cost of standing poles and "flying fibre".

Ofcom has granted Code Powers to Operators to stand new poles without planning consent so the default will always be overhead delivery, typically on a highway verge where there is no requirement even for a wayleave.

If an Operator wants/needs to use private land, they must request permission from the landowner, but ultimately if that permission is 'unreasonably withheld' (i.e. they just don't want the pole), then the Operator can use Code powers to trump the landowner anyway.