

## **District Councillor Report – March**

**Lorraine Hillier and Jo Robb**

### **Local Plan**

Last week, the Secretary of State ordered SODC to take the Local Plan 2034 through to inspection, with a view to the Plan being adopted by December 2020. Council agreed at Thursday's Full Council meeting to accept the direction - there was a recognition that to refuse would mean the Plan would be taken over by OCC and that SODC would lose all of its influence over the Plan.

The administration always wanted to be able to make significant changes to the Plan during the inspection process, but last year was advised that this wasn't possible. This was why Cabinet recommend its withdrawal. Cabinet and officers have been advised that some changes – including adding improved environmental criteria and removing sensitive green belt sites from the Plan – may be possible. This may be the most pragmatic option which also ensures SODC is advancing the Plan.

### **Council Budget and Council Tax**

Council has met twice during February to approve the budget for 2020/21 and to set the Council Tax (this latter process was delayed by the Police & Crime Commissioners not setting their rates in time, once again due to a delay from central Government). This has been a very thorough and challenging process, going through all departments and areas of discretionary expenditure to identify cost savings, while also seeking ways to increase revenue through fees and charges (many of which have not increased in some time). While we cannot balance the budget in a single year, we believe we have taken significant steps towards reducing our reliance on transfers from the Council's usable reserves, as well as giving ourselves some room to invest in new initiatives, particularly around affordable housing and the climate emergency. Longer term, we await news from the Government on the proposed replacement for the New Homes Bonus and so are unable to be certain about future cuts or investments.

Young care-leavers up to the age of 25 will now receive a 100% discount on Council Tax to help them adjust to independent living.

### **New Crowmarsh building - exhibition and feedback day**

We had a great turnout for the exhibition at Milton Park on 13<sup>th</sup> February, and lots of useful feedback on the proposed design, features and name for the new building. We have set up a project website at <https://southoxfordshirehq.wordpress.com/> which will be updated as the project rolls out.

Some frequently asked questions:

1. High cost – what is the justification for raising the budget?  
The budget should still be confidential. The previous budget was a rough calculation set in 2017 and based on the old building's footprint and specification. It had no environmental aspects taken into account, so would have produced a "box" which would have been expensive to run and not a nice place to work. Also, construction costs have gone up

significantly since then. The budget covers demolition, legal costs, project management, fit-out, contingency as well as build.

2. Insurance – why does the insurance not cover the cost?  
We got a lump sum from the insurance cover plus a further sum to cover rental costs for 3 years (now spent). We still have the lump sum in the bank to cover some of the costs of the new building.
3. Access – lots of car parking suggests all staff and visitors are encouraged to drive.  
We do need to provide car parking for staff as one of their contractual T&Cs. However, we will also be able to provide parking for local events (e.g. park & ride into Wallingford). We will be putting in place incentives for staff to cycle, walk and use public transport (also in collaboration with other local employers) but we have to accept the need for a certain level of car parking for now. The main car park is already there, and we will use materials for the additional spaces that could be repurposed later if no longer needed.
4. Community – what is the benefit to local community (what was the input from Crowmarsh parish?)  
The onsite café will be open to the public and the Council Chamber and catering areas will be available for hire. First and foremost we are building office accommodation, not an entertainment venue, but if we can generate some income from rental opportunities, we will do so. Crowmarsh Parish Council is very keen on having a larger hall in the community and the parking spaces.

At present Milton Park costs the council almost £1million a year in rent, services and maintenance.

### **Waste Enforcement Efforts**

The waste enforcement team has been out and about highlighting our campaign against littering and fly-tipping. While in Wallingford market place they even issued two on-the-spot fines to people dropping cigarette butts right next to the display!

### **Anti-Idling**

The anti-idling campaign is continuing throughout the next few months, with posters distributed widely, adverts placed on petrol pumps and flyers included with Council Tax bills. This is a major initiative to address the problems we have with Air Quality in many of our towns, including Henley, Watlington and Wallingford.

### **Water consultation**

The Environment Agency has launched a consultation on the challenges we face to protect and improve our waters and find a better balance in meeting the needs of people and nature.

Responses to the [Challenges and Choices consultation](#) will help shape the future approach to managing the water environment and will be used to update river basin management plans in 2021. This consultation runs until 24<sup>th</sup> April.

The consultation seeks views on: the challenges that threaten the water environment; how we can work together to manage our waters; and who should pay.

SODC's Insight and Policy team are collating a response on behalf of the two councils – but other authorities and members of the public are also encouraged to respond.

## **Changes to how SODC will support Neighbourhood Development Plans**

At its meeting on 30<sup>th</sup> January, the Cabinet considered and approved a proposal to change the way the Council supports Neighbourhood Development Plan teams, following changes in the way that central government grants operate. From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020, the Council will continue to be responsible for any Referendums or Inspections that are required by law, and will provide a wide range of advice at all stages of the process (including reviews), but will no longer provide grant support.

The background to this decision is that the funding provided by central Government to the district council has changed in the following ways:

- It has reduced by £10,000 per plan.
- In most cases the council only becomes eligible to receive grant funding if a plan successfully reaches the referendum stage rather than at different stages throughout the process.
- Revised arrangements limit the number of claims that can be made in a neighbourhood area when progressing a neighbourhood plan review. Only one claim may be submitted per neighbourhood area in a five-year period.

Historically, we have been one of a very limited number of councils that have passed on part of the grant funding we receive from central Government to cover our costs in supporting neighbourhood planning directly to neighbourhood planning groups.

At the same time, the grant support from the government directly to neighbourhood planning groups has increased over the years - it includes up to £17,000 financial support, additional financial support up to £10,000 on a pilot scheme for those seeking to promote affordable housing, and technical support.

Officers will continue to help Neighbourhood Planning groups to identify and apply for alternative grant funding, and will offer expert advice and technical support.

## **Motions passed at Council Meeting on 20th February**

Four motions were passed at the most recent Council meeting, covering the rules on 5-yr housing land supply, safety for people hiring taxis, the rules on permitted development (i.e. conversion of office buildings into residential accommodation) and a motion to condemn all racially or religiously motivated hate crimes and to adopt accepted definitions of anti-semitism and islamophobia. For further details see

<http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/news/2020/2020-02/motions-agreed-south-oxfordshire-district-council>