

SODC Newsletter – May 2021 - May 2022

The beginning of the Council's year continued to be difficult with officers being reallocated for work with our partners in respect of CoVID19, and whilst in many ways the crisis is over for the time being, there is still a lot of work going on in the background, mainly in respect of support grants. We have found that the way in which these things work is arcane to say the least, with an announcement being made by the Government about a grant being made available, and then nothing until a few days before the 'go-live' date. Then we receive the details of the scheme which has to be understood and have the appropriate processes put in place. We get to see the workings of this system as we scrutinise the approach we must take, and yes, it is complex, but it is difficult to see how the system can be simplified.

Lynn in particular has helped a number of local businesses get the grants that they needed when they had fallen foul of the convoluted and sometimes changing and challenging regulations.

Just as the CoVID19 work was diminishing and our officers started to return to their normal roles, the crisis in Ukraine arose and officers have again found themselves working with our partners to ensure that our guests from Ukraine are treated as sympathetically as possible. It is essential that where people have volunteered to take families in, the right accommodation is provided and that the right sort of support is available for both the hosts and guests. This is again a long complex process involving multiple agencies working together, but one that, by its very nature, needs to be handled in a sensitive manner.

Planning

We continue to work with residents who have concerns regarding Planning Applications, and we are working on responses to appeals. We have also attended a number of Planning Committees to support requests for refusal of permission.

It is disappointing that, although Chinnor has up-dated its Neighbourhood Plan in line with Government Guidance, we find ourselves having to fight an Appeal in respect of the land to the North of Crowell Road. Yes, the site that was refused at Appeal in 2018. We have worked with officers on the response to the Appeal for Non-determination and at the end of April, Lynn joined members of Chinnor Parish Council to present our arguments for again refusing this proposal. We must bear in mind that the original refusal was made whilst the Administration was undecided as to whether it should support the Local Plan 2034/5 and before Chinnor's NDP had been formally updated, both now in place, but we must also bear in mind that Planning Law is fluid and circumstances can and do change.

Enforcement

This is always a difficult topic, given the very limited powers of enforcement that the Government allows Councils, the last twelve months has seen a significant rise in the number of cases that the Team has opened. These range from minor breaches by individuals who often fall foul of the regulations due to unfamiliarity, to major breaches by developers who know the system and have the legal advisors to help them 'play the system.'

To try and get on top of the building mountain of cases, the Enforcement Team introduced a new protocol for categorising and prioritising cases, which was originally intended to run for twelve months

with a review at the end of that period. During review at Scrutiny, it became clear that this was considered by most councillors to be too long and so the review was agreed to be carried out after 6 months to determine whether this protocol was proving effective. This review is scheduled to be carried out in the very near future.

5 Year Land Supply

As previously advised, as Chair of Scrutiny, Ian has requested a full and thorough review into the Council's preparation for Appeals and the approach taken to review the 5 Year Land Supply. This work remains on plan and the report should come to Scrutiny in July. The findings of the report will help bolster the Council's case at Appeal. Whilst the Council is confident that our figures are correct, there can be no doubt that CoVID19 delayed progress for many developers and this can, and in some areas has, impacted some authorities' land supply. We have written to the Secretary of State pointing out that this situation can result in an unfair, and 'manufactured' bias in favour of developers, but the responses have not been promising.

Community Hub supports residents with calls and supermarket vouchers

Over the year, we've seen an increase in requests for support from our Community Hub team. Our officers have handled a significant number of enquires resulting in food parcels being provided and onward referrals for further support.

Social Housing

We have had a number of requests for help from residents in social housing provided by Housing Associations. Whilst the Housing Associations are legally effectively outside of our remit, in most instances Lynn, supported by our Housing Team, has been able to help bring issues to proper focus and help bring about resolution.

Passed with flying colours

Our colleagues in the councils' Legal team have once again achieved an excellent outcome in their assessment against the Lexcel standard - the Law Society's quality accreditation for legal practices. To quote their Head of Service, Patrick Arran, the team has "passed with flying colours".

The assessment involved a two-day grilling of senior management and team members, and considered factors like client care, financial management, information management, people management and file and case management. The next full assessment is due 2025, although the service still has an annual inspection each year.

Well done everyone.

Office accommodation update

You may already be aware that we've taken advantage of an opportunity to vacate our offices at Milton Park a little earlier than we had once planned. We've enacted a break clause in our lease, which will save the council significant sums in rent and running costs.

The lease will end this autumn and a project is already underway to identify suitable, cost-effective interim accommodation that will meet our current needs now we've adapted to flexible and remote working and will bridge the gap between leaving Milton Park and moving into permanent offices.

High level plans have been drawn up for a new Headquarters building on the 'Didcot Gateway Site' which should provide sufficient work-space for the Council's officers given that hybride working is

now fully established, and the Administration wants to include quality flexible office space to rent out to help towards the Council's operating costs. Concern has been raised about the lack of parking for the offices and the loss of the existing public carpark space; we are not convinced that the expected migration to green travel will happen as quickly as is being supposed!

Waste Collection

This is a service that just had to continue during the period in which CoVID19 had closed down most operational functions, and in spite of the challenges presented, Biffa was, for the most part able to continue with collections, even with reduced crews. Things did reach a head early last summer and it was decided that, in the interests of the safety of the crews, the Garden Waste Service should be suspended. This was a matter that was examined at both Scrutiny and Full Council and fortunately it was possible to reinstate the full service towards the start of Autumn.

Parking Enforcement

As Councillors will be aware, the County Council has now taken over enforcement from the Police, effective from the 1st November 2021. We understand that this is now active, although for the first few months, people parking were given reminders that in future they would receive fines, but we believe that fines are now being issued where breaches are identified.

Grants

It has been a busy year for us with our Councillor Grant Scheme being enhanced by our being allocated funds to help mitigate the impact on voluntary organisation of CoVID19. Under this latter scheme we pooled our funding of £2500 each in much the same way as we do for the Community Grant Scheme.

From our CoVID19 Grant funding we able to provide help to the Sharing Life Trust who run our local food bank, and the Oxford Association for the Blind amongst others.

From our Community Grants Scheme, we have been able to help the Community Church refurbish their Garden of Contemplation, the Village Centre to refurbish the conservatory, provision of outdoor Gym equipment at the Old Kiln Lakes Play area, a Jubilee Seat on the corner by St Andrew's Church and funding towards the electric Car recharging point at the Village Community Pavilion.

As ever, there is much more that we could cover, but we will close here.

Lynn Lloyd and Ian White – South Oxfordshire District Council