

## **SODC A Conservative District Councillor's View** **(Or What The Council Is Doing)**

**September 2020.**

### **Planning**

#### **Local Plan 2034**

The situation on LP2034 is that it continues to progress through the examination stage and the Inspector has concluded taking verbal submissions via Zoom. He has also provided us with his initial findings in record time and having now had a chance to review these and discuss them with planners, we are pleasantly surprised at how little he considers needs to be changed, although it has to be acknowledged that his is not the view of the administration which was more than happy for the District to continue with an old and demonstrably out of date plan.

If you wish to read the report by Mr Bore (the Inspector), you can find it here:

<http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/sites/default/files/IC12%20-%20Inspector's%20Preliminary%20Conclusions%20Letter%20280820.pdf>

For us, given that the Secretary of State has directed that we as a Council must adopt the Plan by the end of this year as the Administration was unable to provide him with any viable alternative, this means that we have as much control of development in the Ward as we might expect at this stage and that our Neighbourhood Plans have as much weight as might be afforded them at their various stages.

#### **Planning White Paper**

The Government's White Paper on planning is proceeding through consultation and if you wish to read it you can find it here:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/907647/MHCLG-Planning-Consultation.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/907647/MHCLG-Planning-Consultation.pdf)

Much to my surprise, given that it is written in Whitehall-Speak, it is quite readable, but, we must remember, the devil will be in the detail that goes into the Bill which is put before Parliament.

As a Conservative Group, we have a number of concerns regarding the proposals and in the circumstances, we have written to the Secretary of State about these. One of our major points is regarding Neighbourhood Plans and I reproduce here our question and the response received:

" . . . it seems a bit light on support for neighbourhood plans, is this intentional as logically it may make sense for wider planning to be done at the Unitary/County

Level and Neighbourhood plans be enhanced to empower communities – with the district level plans in two tier areas being ended?”

The forthcoming Devolution White Paper will strengthen local leadership and institutions, devolving key powers so that they are exercised at the right level to make a difference for local communities. We will ensure that these powers align with the vision articulated in the Planning for the Future White Paper. In relation to neighbourhood plans, the Government is committed to retaining neighbourhood planning as an important part of the planning system. However, we will want to consider whether the content of neighbourhood plans should become more focused to reflect our proposals for Local Plans, as well as the opportunities which digital tools and data offer to support their development and improve accessibility for users.

Well, there you go, but what does it mean? It is only my (Ian's) personal opinion, but cutting away the Whitehall-Speak I interpret it as saying 'Neighbourhood Plans as still going to be a very important part of planning, but we haven't worked out how it is all going to fit together yet! As our MP is John Howell and as he is the NDP Champion, we will be continuing to monitor this through John.

We also know that Enforcement is of interest to you, given the weakness of the enforcement powers that Local Authorities have, and we think that you will find the following of interest:

“Something that we really feel would help our residents would be will this be beefing up the enforcement aspect of planning. Do you intend to move to a 100% enforcement model for all breaches, no matter severity and impact?”

We want to see as part of our planning reforms a greater focus on the enforcement of planning decisions so communities have greater confidence that planning rules will be followed. At present, planning enforcement is a discretionary activity for local planning authorities, and some breaches may not get enforced. But we want local planning authorities over time to be able to strengthen their enforcement teams as decision making become simpler and more rule based, enabling more breaches to be tackled. We will also review and strengthen the existing planning enforcement powers and sanctions available to local planning authorities to ensure they support the new planning system.

Again, remove the jargon, and I interpret this as meaning that they haven't got very far in their detailed thinking about this but will certainly be taking it on board.

## **Devolution**

It is mentioned in the response above on Neighbourhood Planning and it seems that it is very much at the forefront of Government thinking. That said, whilst here is a lot of high level 'chatter', we haven't yet seen much on the detail, although a Green or White Paper s expected in the Autumn. That said, it hasn't stopped us, as a group, from giving the Government the benefit of our thoughts on the nebulous concept. As we understand it, for Oxfordshire, there could be

two options, if a Unity Authority were contained by the County Boundary. The first, and in our view the best, option is a Unitary Authority taking in all of Oxfordshire, similar to the Authority now in place in Buckinghamshire. The other option would be for an authority for a slightly enlarged catchment area around the City of Oxford (perhaps called the Oxford Unitary Authority) and a second 'doughnut authority' around that (perhaps called the Rural Oxfordshire Authority.) This is speculation based on our limited dialogue, but it will become more substantial later this year.

### **Latest update on Civil Parking Enforcement and Car Park Fees**

As reported last month, there have been ongoing discussions regarding Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) in Oxfordshire – this is where local authorities would take over control of enforcing on-street parking rules, a responsibility that currently lies with Thames Valley Police in our area.

Assuming the proposal is approved by all authorities, CPE could be brought into effect in our area by November 2021.

In the meantime, the Cabinet has been looking at carpark fees for the SODC owned carparks, as these have not been reviewed for some years. As Chinnor is the only community in our Ward that has an SODC Carpark, which is presently free to use, Lynn has already given Chinnor PC a briefing.

Full details of the Cabinet discussion can be found at:

<http://democratic.southoxon.gov.uk/mgAi.aspx?ID=10361>

One of the provisions is for the introduction of charges for the carpark in Chinnor High Street, although quite how these will be implemented and enforced remains to be seen. As Chair of Scrutiny, Ian has asked for a report to be brought forward to the Scrutiny Committee for review at its meeting on October.

### **Activity during Lockdown**

Did Lockdown make you slow down or were you inspired to take up running or join in with classes online? SODC wanted to hear from residents about how lockdown affected their ability to keep fit and we are sure that you will have been aware of the survey that is now concluding.

Lockdown for some residents was a chance to explore different ways to keep fit and the choice of apps and online classes meant that it was easier to exercise without leaving home than ever before. However, using exercise apps and online classes isn't for everyone and for many the pressures of shielding, being isolated from friends and family and the impact of lockdown on mental health meant that finding the ability or motivation to exercise was hard.

Before Covid-19 people living in South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse were slightly above the national average when it came to being physically

active. Lockdown has had a big impact on that. According to a national report by Sport England in April, 33% of adults were doing less exercise than before the outbreak and worse still 40% of children were doing less than 30 minutes a day or nothing at all.

The district council wanted to hear about the lockdown leisure experiences of residents as part of the Lockdown Lifestyle survey. Questions include:

- What type of activity did you do before lockdown?
- What stopped you from being physically active during lockdown?
- What have you missed most about your usual physical activities since lockdown?
- Have you tried a new activity that you are likely to continue?
- Do you feel confident about returning to physical activities?

The results from this survey will help the council to focus on activities that residents want to see in the districts, to help support those who have struggled over the last few months and to assist families and those who are vulnerable to take those first steps back into the community and keeping healthy.

### **Virtual meetings**

We now have a system that will allow the general public, town and parish councils and other external organisations to contribute directly to our virtual committee meetings, and this has worked well albeit with occasional technical hitches. The most notable of these was a Planning Committee which was held whilst thunderstorms covered the District, and this made the audio difficult for some of us at times! We are pleased to report that we were able to complete the meeting successfully, but we ask people to bear with us if glitches do arise.

### **New Emergency Assistance Grant funding**

We have £45,373 to distribute to voluntary and community groups to help people who are struggling to afford food and other essential provisions as a result of Covid-19.

From today, groups can apply for grants of up to £5,000 to go to:

- projects directly helping vulnerable people affected by the effects of COVID-19, such as providing access to food and other essentials e.g. toiletries;
- existing schemes supporting people struggling to afford food and other essentials, and where the need is greatest;
- projects advising and providing information to people to help them access longer term support they might need, such as benefits;
- projects that provide targeted support in areas of greatest need and deprivation, including rural areas.

We will be assessing applications on a rolling fortnightly basis. The first deadline for applications is therefore midnight on Tuesday 15 September.

There's more information on our website at:

<http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/services-and-advice/community-advice-and-support/grants-and-community-loans>

The cash comes from £63 million of emergency assistance funding from the government for local authorities to support people who are affected by Covid-19.

### **Business Grants**

Across our district we've given out well over £1million in Discretionary Business Grants.

Friday 28<sup>th</sup> August was the deadline for applications to the fund and we're pleased to say we've now paid out to all of the successful applicants.

The fund was provided to us by the government to help support small and micro-businesses affected by Covid-19, particularly those not eligible for other business grants and over the last four months colleagues in Economic Development and a number of other departments have worked incredibly hard to process the applications and make the final payments quickly.

In South Oxfordshire 107 micro and small businesses each received a £10,000 grant, making it a total of £1,070,000 that we were able to give out.

We're now looking into what options there are to distribute the remaining funds.

### **Waste and Recycling - Reminder**

Collections for our Ward continue to be maintained at a near normal level of service during the CoVID\_19 crisis and now this is easing we do not expect to see any significant disruption. The variable heat-waives we are experiencing at the moment do mean that crews are setting out earlier from time to time and we advise that waste bins are put out for 6:00AM on the day of collection when this happens. Details are posted on the SODC web site and twitter, but the safest thing we find is to put them out the night before where possible.

We have had a number of questions about the disposal of PPE equipment and masks now that it is a mandatory requirement that they be worn in some places. These should be put in your grey bins and we suggest that you put them in plastic bags beforehand. The waste in the Grey Bins is taken to the Energy Reclamation Centre, (a fancy name for an incinerator that captures the heat and uses it to generate electricity,) so these items and any contamination is properly destroyed.

### **Every household must check their details - Reminder**

From 3 August we began sending yellow letters to every home in our district. The 'Canvass Communication Form' requires residents to check and confirm the details of everyone over the age of 16 that lives in their property.

This is something we need to do each year by law in order to ensure the electoral register is up to date.

In previous years everyone received the same letter and had to respond accordingly, however this year the process has changed slightly as there are different letters depending on individual circumstances.

In some cases – following a data-matching exercise with DWP – we're aware that there has been a change to the registered electors living in a property. These properties will receive a different letter from the one we will send to the majority of properties whose occupants have remained the same since the last election.

The letters explain exactly what the resident needs to do - it is very important that people read it carefully. Please encourage your ward residents to do so. For the vast majority of residents, if the details on the letter are correct, then they won't be required to do anything.

The general message to all local residents is: When you receive your letter, if you need to make a change to your registration information, please respond as soon as possible by visiting [householdresponse.com/southandvale](https://householdresponse.com/southandvale) – you will need the two-part code on the yellow letter to do this. Doing this will make sure the process runs smoothly and there will be no need for additional contact, which is particularly important at the moment.

### **Oxfordshire Investment Plan**

OxLEP has finalised its Oxfordshire Investment Plan, which – among other things – promises to deliver 24,500 new jobs to the county.

The Investment Plan (attached) takes forward some of the ideas set out in the Local Industrial Strategy and turns them into a programme of actions until the year 2030.

The portfolio promises to deliver at least:

- 24,500 new jobs (gross fulltime equivalents);
- 344,400m<sup>2</sup> of new commercial and innovation floorspace;
- 29,400 new homes (based on existing local plans and the Oxfordshire Housing & Growth Deal);
- 2,700 qualifications (NVQ4+ and Apprenticeships); and
- support for over 41,000 adult and young learners.

OxLEP will now engage with Ministers and officials as part of Government's preparations for the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review and development activity in support of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc programme.

### **Our New Website is live**

At the end of last week, we published our new council websites to gather public feedback.

When anyone visits our normal website homepages they will be given the option to try out the new sites and let us know what they think, or they can simply carry on with the old sites.

As time goes by, we'll make the prompt to try out the new sites more prominent. We will continue to update and improve the new sites while they're live so please do send through your feedback – the best way to do so is using the feedback form, which you can access, along with a link to the new sites via the link below:

<http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/news/2020/2020-08/try-out-our-new-website-and-let-us-know-what-you-think>

**There is much more we could write but seven pages is already too much!**

**Lynn Lloyd and Ian White**

**South Oxfordshire District Councillors for the Chinnor Ward.**