

SODC ANNUAL REPORT - 2021/2022

Cllr Caroline Newton - April/May 2022

COVID - COVID continued to affect work at SODC over this last year. Officers worked hard to deliver high quality services despite the various restrictions imposed throughout the year.

SODC has been responsible for distributing Government-funded grants including over £1.5 million of Additional Restrictions Grants to businesses before the scheme closed at the end of March, and £360,000 in Test and Trace isolation grants. Checks continue to be carried out on people who may have fraudulently applied for the £500 isolation grants during lockdown in accordance with Government instructions.

UKRAINIAN REFUGEES - South Oxfordshire has seen some of the highest number of host applications for the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme in the country, a testament to the spirit of generosity and compassion of people here. Amongst non-metropolitan areas in the UK, South Oxfordshire is second only to South Cambridgeshire, with over 230 hosts approved. SODC has worked with other Oxfordshire local authorities to check the suitability of accommodation and help Ukrainian families settle here. Of course the arrival of so many people, many having experienced trauma on their journey, will put pressure on schools, and health & social services etc. I'd like to pass my appreciation to everyone in this ward who - whether in the course of their jobs, by opening their homes, or in untold other ways - are helping so many find sanctuary here.

PLANNING -

Local Plan 2035: The administration at SODC has continued working towards the implementation of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2035 (LP2035), the strategic development plan which determines where housing, employment and infrastructure will be focused up to 2035.

The site in LP2035 that most affects the Haseley Brook ward is Chalgrove Airfield. Like most local residents I have been most concerned about the impact this would have on surrounding villages. Apart from the sheer scale of the development, I have been worried that the local road network does not have capacity for the additional traffic it will bring (during construction and afterwards); and I was also very unhappy about the height of the buildings in the first outline planning application, which rose to 6 storeys in the centre of the new town. Following the Civil Aviation Authority's objection to the outline planning application for the site, Homes England (the agency responsible for bringing forward the development) has been working on developing a new application that will allow Martin Baker to continue to operate safely. If - and when - that comes forward residents will be able to respond to the consultation, and I would strongly encourage you to do that.

Local Plan 2041: Work has been underway throughout the year on the next development plan - Local Plan 2041 - which is due to be adopted in 2024 which SODC is creating with the neighbouring Vale of the White Horse District Council. The scale of LP2041 will be driven by the longer-term 'Oxfordshire 2050' strategy being determined by the Oxfordshire Growth Board (a high level body which brings together businesses, local authorities and civic bodies from across the county).

I will be working hard to ensure that any developments proposed in, or near, this ward are small scale and will be well-supported by infrastructure. I will strongly resist any attempt to include a new town at so-called Harrington near Great Haseley.

Biodiversity: The Environment Act 2021 (one of the Government's flagship pieces of legislation last year) includes provisions to make the achievement of '10% biodiversity net gain' mandatory for all permitted building projects from the end of next year. This means that any development needs to ensure that habitats are protected, and that any that are lost or degraded must be compensated by enhancing or creating habitats that are of greater value to wildlife and people.

Enforcement: An integral element of a strong Planning function is effective Enforcement of breaches of planning rules - with homeowners confident that SODC will take action if they - or their neighbours - break rules. That is why I was so concerned last year when SODC announced a new Enforcement policy which would lead the council to enforce only the most grievous breaches. The new policy was introduced to help the council deal with an exceptionally heavy case-load, and whilst it may be helping with that, I fear it is at the cost of a real deterrent to abuses of the planning system. I will continue to monitor the situation. Please let me know if you think planning abuses are not be adequately enforced.

SOLAR FARMS - We are currently seeing a concentration of large solar farms in this ward. The first two - Cornwell and Harlesford, covering over 130 hectares of open countryside between Tetsworth, Great Haseley, Wheatfield and Adwell - received planning permission in the last year. There is a further application

for a 112 hectare solar farm at Dodswell (Milton Common); and plans are being drawn up or under consideration around Lewknor and Postcombe which together could cover as much as 100 hectares.

Whilst I recognise the importance of generating green energy close to the point of use, I feel it's really important that we balance that with the value of our beautiful local landscape and our production of food. These solar farms seek 'temporary' planning permission - but 'temporary' in this case means 40 years. They will outlive many of us.

I will continue to make the case to SODC that it's vital we focus on installing solar panels on new residential and commercial buildings to prevent even more of our countryside being lost.

SODC HQ - Work continues to make a permanent home for SODC. The Council has been based at Milton Park (near Didcot) since our old home was destroyed by arson in 2015, and the council has now decided to develop land in central Didcot as a new HQ. However it is now looking for interim accommodation until that site can be developed.

ELECTRIC VEHICLE CHARGING - Residents in Oxfordshire have been amongst the most enthusiastic buyers of electric vehicles, but till now, there have been very few open-source EV charging points in South Oxfordshire. SODC has now installed EV charging points in all the SODC-run car parks across the district. As a representative of this rural ward, I am keen to ensure that EV points are available in villages as well as our market towns: I will continue raising my concerns on behalf of residents who don't have driveways in which they can charge EVs.

ENERGY SUPPORT PAYMENT - Many people in this ward will be anxious about the huge rise in their heating bills. The new £150 grant from central government (sometimes referred to as a Council Tax rebate) will be administered by SODC. Where possible, it will be paid to all qualifying properties (Bands A-D) using bank account details already held within the council tax data base. A separate discretionary fund will be made available for households in need who would otherwise not be eligible (Bands E-H) for the rebate. This is a major piece of work for the Council Tax team, and its administration will continue for many months.

LOCAL GRANTS - I was delighted, this year to be able to support wide range of local activities and communities through the award of my Councillor Community Grant, which gave me £5000 to distribute to schemes designed to benefit residents in the Haseley Brook ward.

I allocated money to refurbish the skate ramp at Tetsworth, to install new bins in Postcombe and Little Milton and some new picnic benches at the playground in Lewknor. Seeing the war horrors in Ukraine, it was particularly poignant to have been able to contribute to restoring the War Memorial in Great Haseley and to buying trees for Little Milton recreation ground to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I. I was also pleased to fund a First Aid course for residents in the Haseleys - and, across the ward, an awareness campaign about urology cancers, activities for elderly people delivered by Age UK, and support from Wild Oxfordshire for communities seeking to regenerate nature.

Finally, it has been an honour to serve for another year as the representative for the beautiful ward of Haseley Brook in South Oxfordshire District Council. I work with your parish council and other organisations - but am always happy to hear directly from residents or businesses that need my support. Please do get in touch.

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