

SODC REPORT - 14 OCTOBER 2019
CLLR CAROLINE NEWTON - caroline.newton@southoxon.gov.uk

PLANNING

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government intervened ahead of SODC Full Council on Thursday 10 October to prevent councillors debating the draft Local Plan - the strategic vision for the district for the next 15 years. He has asked for time to consider whether to instruct that the Plan proceed through to public inspection.

The Lib Dem/Green administration in SODC had indicated that it would withdraw the Plan and start again. This was against the advice of officers at SODC, and despite representations from neighbouring councils (including Vale of the White Horse, Oxford City and Oxfordshire County Council) and from communities across the district, concerned about the damage that withdrawing the Plan would do to the district and its neighbours.

The ruling coalition argued primarily that the Plan allowed too many houses to be built in South Oxfordshire, that too many sites were in the Green Belt, that the Plan did not include adequate environmental standards to address the Climate Emergency.

Whilst sympathising with these views, other parties maintained that:

- + the Plan should continue through to independent assessment during which the Inspector could decide whether the Plan offers the correct number of homes for South Oxfordshire
- + historic under-delivery of houses means that a successful Local Plan has to offer a margin of over-supply in order to hit the Objectively Assessed Need for housing
- + the Plan secured thousands of so-called affordable housing for this district - where there is a great shortage of homes for people on lower incomes
- + hand-in-hand with the Plan came an unprecedented £500 million from central government to pay for infrastructure and affordable homes - and that by withdrawing the Plan the county would lose much of that funding
- + the loss of that funding would have immediate, drastic consequences for neighbouring councils who - like South Oxfordshire - have been relying on the improved infrastructure and connectivity it would provide
- + whilst the Green Belt should only be built on in exceptional circumstances, with house prices in and around Oxford now at 12 times average salary, and - for example - Oxford's hospitals unable to recruit staff because of lack of local accommodation - it's time to consider whether those exceptional circumstances now exist
- + developments should, sensibly, be built near the main employment centres and transport hubs (eg Oxford) to reduce the need for car use
- + the draft Local Plan aimed to support the development of the world-leading technology centre at Culham which aims to provide many hundreds of high-value jobs for residents of the district
- + SODC can create subsidiary building standards and design-guides to require developers to build to high environmental standards. In any case, in the meantime, the Government has issued a consultation on much higher building regulations which would dramatically cut the emissions of new-builds by 2025.
- + withdrawing the Plan would leave the district vulnerable to so-called 'speculative' building - that's development over which SODC and residents have little control, and which would come without the necessary mitigating infrastructure
- + Amongst these speculative developments would, most likely, be some of the schemes identified in the draft Local Plan (though potentially bigger and - given the loss of government infrastructure funding - much less well served with roads, cycleways, rail improvement etc) - and others.
- + Most particular in this ward, I was very concerned that the loss of the draft Local Plan would open the way to Harrington, and a very much expanded town at Chalgrove.

I'm sure councillors from all parties regretted that the Secretary of State felt the need to intervene in this way. Dozens of people came to the Council meeting on 10 October to give their views to councillors - both for and against the Plan - and were understandably frustrated that they were unable to do so. But I believe the Government's intervention last week recognised the real damage a decision to junk the draft Local Plan would cause for the district, and sought time to consider what would be in the best interests of all residents.

OTHER BUSINESS

In the event, the removal of the Local Plan from the agenda at Full Council allowed time for other issues to be discussed at some length, and councillors agreed the following:

CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Having declared a Climate Emergency at Council in April councillors agreed to aim for a carbon-neutral District Council by 2025 (ie in the council's own operations), and a carbon-neutral district by 2030. The district-wide target is a particularly stretching one, not least as very few of the levers - beyond planning and building control - are in the hands of the District Council. But there was unanimity that the District Council should set the ambition, and work with partners, residents and businesses to achieve a zero-carbon district as soon as possible.

The new Climate Emergency Advisory Committee - established by Full Council in July - is working on identifying the process to get there.

EU CITIZENS

There has been great concern amongst EU citizens living locally about their status should the UK leave the EU without a deal. The Council unanimously agreed that SODC should do what it can to help those living in this district to regularise their residency here; and to advise landlords and employers etc (as necessary) of their rights and responsibilities in this regard.

THIRD READING BRIDGE

Councils and MPs representing areas south of the River Thames to the east of Reading (ie Berkshire) are pushing ahead to build a case for a third bridge over the river at Sonning/Playhatch. But whilst claiming the bridge will remove 55,000 cars a day from Reading's roads, their strategic case contains no measures for South Oxfordshire to mitigate the impact of the routing of these 55,000 cars through our villages and towns. SODC Councillors agreed - as OCC councillors did in a similar motion last month - that no planning for a new bridge should take place without also including mitigation measures for South Oxfordshire, and to insist that any new bridge be open only to public transport, bicycles and pedestrians.

SODC OFFICES AT CROWMARSH GIFFORD

Councillors agreed to push ahead with developing plans to build a new council building at our old site in Crowmarsh Gifford.

SEPARATELY

HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING

SODC and Vale of the White Horse are asking people for their views on a new joint strategy to address homelessness and rough sleeping. Local authorities are required by law to publish such a strategy every 5 years and the current one runs out in 2020. SODC has generally been very successful in reducing both homelessness and rough sleeping - but would welcome comments on whether the new draft strategy answers the needs of people most at risk.

The consultation can be accessed at <http://survey.southandvale.gov.uk/s/homelessness2019/> and closes at 5pm on 25 November.

COUNCILLOR COMMUNITY GRANTS

Each councillor has £5000 to award to projects that offer community benefits in their ward area. The minimum grant is £250. Please ask local organisations to check out 'SODC Councillor Community Grants' on their search engine - and contact me if they would like to apply.