

SODC Monthly Report - March 2020 - Cllr Caroline Newton

Local Plan

On 5 March, the SODC Cabinet agreed that SODC should take back control of the Local Plan 2034 (the development strategy for the district) and to see it through its independent inspection. Cabinet's recommendation was taken to and Emergency Full Council that evening, and councillors agreed it by a large majority. All Liberal Democrat, Green, Labour and Conservative councillors at the meeting voted for it.

Since they took control of SODC last May, the Lib Dem/Green alliance had tried to withdraw the Plan and start a new one. But Robert Jenrick, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, concerned that this would leave the district vulnerable to unplanned, speculative development as well as undermining the Local Plans of neighbouring councils, effectively instructed SODC to push ahead. This is the first time the Secretary of State has used his powers in this way.

The Conservatives continue to believe that the submitted Local Plan offers a good, sound, deliverable spatial strategy for South Oxfordshire as it seeks to address the unaffordability of housing in the district and to provide homes for key workers in Oxford City - whilst locating as many of the sites as possible close to the areas of current and future employment (Oxford City, Culham) thus reducing the need for car use.

The following figures help illustrate the acuteness of the need for more housing in this area:

- First-time-buyer age is now over 41 years
- House prices are 63% above national average
- A National Housing Federation report indicates the average house-price to income ratio in South Oxfordshire stands at 14 times. In 2000, it was 6 times
- That's 14 times average annual salary
- When the current South Oxfordshire strategic plan was drafted it would take 3 years to save for a deposit. Now, it will take a quarter of a century
- The Valuation Office date shows that in the past 6 years, lower quartile private rents in South Oxfordshire have increased by 20% compared to the national average over the same period.
- Average monthly rent represents 44% of income.

SODC's draft Local Plan will not solve these problems overnight, but I do believe the provision of new homes is an unavoidable moral imperative for the planning authority. Key will now be working with developers to make this new housing as environmentally sustainable as possible.

Harrington

SODC's decision to move the Local Plan on to independent inspection means that Harrington (the proposed 6000-plus town near J8 of the M40) has been taken off the table for the time being. Regrettably, the new development at Chalgrove remains in the draft LP, and I will be working with colleagues to ensure that we can mitigate the impact it will have on neighbouring villages.

Oxford-Cambridge Arc

I went to a briefing in London last week on progress on the Oxford -Cambridge Arc - the area between the two university cities (including Milton Keynes) which Government sees as representing one of the greatest opportunities for economic growth in the UK. At the moment, the area contributes £111 billion GVA, and productivity is good, but there are some signs that growth is falling below the national average - constrained by infrastructure, the fact we have almost full employment in this area, lack of housing etc for new workers.

There was a tacit determination not to discuss the Expressway, which leads me to conclude the issue may have moved off the agenda (though we are await confirmation of that) - but plenty of discussion about East-West Rail for which plans seem increasingly well-advanced. Rob Brighthouse, the Chairman of EWR (and former CEO of Chiltern Railways) gave the budget of EWR as £4-5 billion - and the potential boost to GVA of £75 billion.

Budget

SODC has agreed it's budget for 2020-21. The revenue budget has increased from Council Tax will be increased by £5 - that's a total of £126.24 for an average Band D property. It includes a £106,000 for a work programme aimed at tackling the climate emergency; and £500,000 over two years for a Transformation budget.

Councillor Community Grants

This year a number of schemes in Haseley Brook Ward applied for funding from our £5,000 Councillor Grant fund. A number, sadly, did not qualify, but I was pleased to recommend grants to Great Haseley towards an adult outdoor gym, the cricket club for new equipment, and to the PC for dog bins. I also gave a grant to Oxfordshire Lowland Search and Rescue which helps vulnerable missing people across the county.

The grant scheme will be running for the FY 2020/21, so please to get in touch with me if you want to discuss a possible application. A wide variety of schemes can qualify for grants, and I'd be delighted dln previous years I have given money to playgrounds in the ward, to Little Milton community shop, and to the Human Story Theatre group which was staging a play in Great Milton. You can find more information on the SODC website.

Oxfordshire Electrical Vehicle Infrastructure Steering Group

OCC is developing a group to establish the principles and action plan to deliver a charging infrastructure for EVs, and I've been appointed as the council's representative on it.