

SODC Councillors Annual Report for Parish and Town Councils

Councillor Robin Bennett, Berinsfield Ward

First year of a Second Term for the Liberal Democrat/Green Administration

In May 2023 the ruling administration at SODC was re-elected with an increased number of councillors; the partnership is now made up of 21 LibDems and 8 Greens. Cllr David Rouane continued as the Leader of the Council with Cllr Maggie Filipova-Rivers (LD) and Cllr Robin Bennett (G) sharing the role of Deputy Leader. This resounding result vindicated the focus that had been placed on nature, climate change, affordable housing and community well-being over the previous four years and gives us the confidence to develop a new 4-year council plan to 2028 which builds on the progress made during our first term. This annual report highlights some of those achievements and explains how our strategic priorities are being translated into delivery by Council officers.

Affordable Housing and Infrastructure Delivery

The Local Development Plan has a policy which ensures that 40% of new housing developments of 10 or more units are affordable, with a variety of tenures. In first 9 months of 2023/24, 156 affordable home completions have been registered.

A new **Housing Delivery Strategy** adopted in November 2022 will enable the council to build up its own stock of houses for social rent or to provide funding for 3rd parties such as Community Land Trusts or Housing Associations to do so. A small development on the Broadway in Didcot will be the first homes built by the Council in over 25 years. We have also been able to purchase over 20 houses with the help of a 40% grant from the Government as part of the Local Authority Housing Fund programme and a further 5 properties using 'Section 106' affordable housing contributions.

A new **Empty Homes Policy** has been adopted this March which will enable the council's Housing Team to actively engage with private owners of longer term empty homes to rent them out, as our housing waiting list grows. The Council is now a Registered Provider of affordable housing itself too, and this requires new policies and resources to ensure that properties are well maintained and responsibly managed.

During the past year we have allocated over £7m of CIL funding for infrastructure projects across the district, helping ensure the impact of new housing developments is managed. SODC CIL funding has enabled the replacement of the Abby Sports Centre astroturf pitch and the swim changing rooms, for example.

Berinsfield Garden Village

I have chaired regular meetings of the Garden Village steering group, usually held every few months at the Berinsfield Community Association, which includes representation from the Parish Council, Soha, the County Council, local charities and Ptarmigan/JTP, who are preparing a masterplan for the Mount Farm site. Having this group has helped us win extra funding for the village, such as money from the Shared Prosperity Fund towards improved community facilities. More information can be found at www.southoxon.gov.uk/berinsfield, where you can also sign up to the mailing list for the latest updates.

New draft Joint Local Plan 2041

Over the past year we have been working on the development of the new Joint Local Plan (JLP) covering both South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse districts. This will guide the kinds of new housing and jobs planned and where they should go. A key milestone for this

was the “Preferred Options” consultation held in January and February 2024. This was carried out both online and with in-person events and it attracted a very high number of submissions, approximately 1300. Feedback from this consultation is now being analysed and will inform the next version of the Plan, due to have another (Reg 19) consultation in the autumn of 2024.

Just as important as the housing and employment development site allocations in the Local Plan are the policies to protect and restore our natural environment, such as reducing light pollution, delivering biodiversity net gain and securing open green spaces for our communities, and a host of policies on better quality, more energy efficient homes.

Community Hub becomes permanent

The virtual Community Hub was first set up during the pandemic to provide support for residents. Government funding for this ceased in 2023 but we committed to on-going funding for this important service, particularly as so many residents have been affected by the huge cost-of-living crisis. The Hub has now been made a permanent part of the Council’s structure and will continue to offer advice and support on a wide range of issues including financial help, housing and homelessness concerns, Council Tax payments and Health and Wellbeing.

We have maintained funding of the Active Communities team which runs a variety of activities and programmes to help people recover from Covid-19 or to help families access free or low- cost activities that support physical and mental wellbeing.

South Oxfordshire Grant Schemes including new CIL Grant Fund

Each year SODC provides capital and revenue grants to a wide range of voluntary and community organisations to support their on-going operations or to fund a one-off project or event. In the past year, I have provided Councillor Grant funding in this ward for new games and more inclusive facilities at the BCA, The Berin Centre maternity library, and hedge management by Green Dots, amongst others.

The newly launched Community Infrastructure Levy Fund is designed to provide vital infrastructure to support the growth of the district as a result of recent housing developments. The new fund will for the first time allow local organisations to bid for grant funding from the District Council’s share of the CIL receipts collected from house builders. At the time of writing, many Expressions of Interest have been registered and funds will be allocated later in 2024.

Reducing our Carbon Emissions

As a Council we have a very ambitious target to achieve net zero carbon emissions in our own operations by 2025. Over the past year we have continued to decarbonise our leisure and arts centres by switching to non-fossil fuel heating systems, reducing the temperature of water in swimming pools, circulating warm air more efficiently and generally upgrading the fabric of the buildings. This has helped to reduce emissions considerably. the largest source of emissions for us is our waste management service, which accounts for over 57% of SODC’s total emissions.

There are big challenges for the council in decarbonising the entire waste collection fleet - at a time when technology is still evolving and while we are waiting for clarity from the Government on future recycling requirements. We have agreed a 2-year extension with current Biffa contract and are in the process of acquiring a new fleet of more efficient

vehicles and a waste management strategy that will take us further towards reducing carbon emissions in this big area of council work.

We also continue to collaborate with other authorities across Oxfordshire on the delivery of the “Pathways to a Zero Carbon Oxfordshire” action plan, which includes installing EV charging stations, retrofitting homes to make them more energy efficient, exploring Biodiversity Net Gain projects and renewable energy infrastructure. In the past year we also published a new Air Quality Action Plan to ensure that we continue to monitor air pollution in our towns.

Recycling Champions!

We are very pleased to be announced as the country’s top recycling district in DEFRA’s latest tables. Initiatives such as our “Check it before you chuck it” promotional campaign in autumn 2023 are part of our commitment to maintaining this position. In exploring new waste strategies and ideas, we are committed to increasing the proportion of kerb side and business waste that is collected for recycling while also working on ideas on how to reduce overall waste produced.

Openness and Accountability

We continue to broadcast nearly all our public meetings – where technology is available in the buildings the meetings take place. We report on our performance with honesty and accountability. Our quarterly performance reports are online on our website: www.southoxon.gov.uk/corporateplan and our quarterly Climate Action Plan reports are also online at www.southoxon.gov.uk/climateaction.

Financial Stability

Over the past five years we have restored financial stability and for 2023/24 we approved a balanced budget with only a small (and sustainable) draw on our reserves. We did benefit from higher interest rates, but also by employing a specialist officer to seek external grant funding to supplement our own resources. This officer has paid for himself several times over by securing government funding for projects such as the decarbonisation of our leisure centres and to cover the increased running costs of our swimming pools. The Council Tax charged by SODC remains one of the lowest in the country and it still costs us more to deliver services to new households than we earn in Council Tax receipts, so we know we need to generate income from other services and grants to cover all our costs. We have worked carefully to balance increases to fees and charges with the pressures of the cost-of-living crisis and providing fair value for money remains a priority.