

SODC ward councillor's report

Shiplake – 16th May 2022

I will cover April and May separately below :-

April 2022

Covid-19

Following the national pattern, Covid cases fell back then surged strongly again and appear now to have plateaued and to be falling back a bit.

At 03/04/2022, Oxford City was at a weekly rate of 704 per 100k population (it peaked at 1,504 on 6th Jan and then troughed at 437 on 28th February.). By comparison, Cherwell DC was 857 (peak was 18,826 on 3rd Jan.), West Oxon DC at 795 (peak was 1,565 on 3rd Jan.), **SODC at 910** (peak was 1,522 on 3rd Jan. and it then troughed at 430 on 27th February) and Vale of WH DC at 844 (peak was 1,565 on 3rd Jan.). Reading BC (to 3rd April 2022) was at 763 (having peaked at 1,780 on 4th Jan).

These levels were still higher than they were in November and December; by way of comparison at 4th November SODC was at 363 and by the 3rd December was at 764 – whereas at 3rd April the figure was at **910** weekly per 100k of population! The incidences are mostly mild for those with boosted vaccinations and those with antibodies. However local hospitals have reported being under increased pressure.

Since the end of free testing the data feeds into the dashboards are much less reliable and Berkshire has therefore removed their one from their site. The Oxfordshire one continues and at **17th April** showed a much reduced rate of **368** as a weekly rate per 100k of population for **SODC**. There is some reason to believe that incidences have indeed been falling back, however there is also some doubt as to how fully this reporting reflects the whole truth.

There are suggestions from WHO that the BA.2 variant of Omicron is some 30% more contagious than the main Omicron variant and is becoming dominant. More recently there have been suggestions of a “Deltacron” variant comprising elements of Delta and Omicron in France and the USA; however little is yet known about it. However we are seeing a firm climb in cases after the ending of restrictions – probably driven by the BA.2 Omicron variant.

Boosters and vaccinations continue.

The advice must still be to proceed with caution and to protect the more vulnerable.

Ukraine

The local councils of Oxfordshire have organised an emergency structure for dealing with all the aspects of Ukrainian refugees at both county and district level. It is anticipated that staff will be diverted from roles to support this – echoing what was done for Covid. (Unfortunately, as noted above Covid has not gone away!) So overall staffing will be under considerable pressure. Government is providing local councils with funding to help with their role in supporting refugees; this will be routed through county and shares provided to districts.

SODC will register host who can receive refugees and also vet the properties to ensure that they meet reasonable standards. There will also be a need to do DBS (enhanced level) safeguarding checks on hosts and those living there. SODC are already scheduled to receive 200 refugees and more will follow.

If residents would like to contribute to relief it is recommended that donations are made to the Disasters Emergency Committee online. The link is:-

https://www.dec.org.uk/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwz7uRBhDRARIsAFqjulkn5K11ryFs9xQQoLwwss231BEfXsmrv2t32MdCrEB83ZpefccWiYMaAJQAEALw_wcB

The Government (DLUHC) has suggested a scheme to contribute £350 per month to those who can accommodate refugees. Also where a householder is in receipt of a single-occupier discount this will not be lost if they become a host for Ukrainian refugees. Anyone who wishes to make a housing offer can contact the councils' (joint) housing team using the email: housing@southandvale.gov.uk.

SODC have set up the following link:- [Support for Ukraine webpage](#) that provides all the information on how you can support the various organisations that are helping those still in Ukraine with food, water, medicines and shelter during the conflict.

Communications and Engagement

SODC is reviewing its approach to communications and engagement to provide a more consistent approach and to plan sustainable uses of new media.

CIL Rates

New CIL rates are being proposed by SODC for examination by an inspector in the autumn. All being well we would hope to see a significant uplift in rates.

May 2022

Covid-19

The reliability of data on Covid cases is now much reduced following the end of test and trace. However national figures suggest sharp falls in cases and this appears to be supported by hospital data and makes sense for this time of year.

At 8th May cases in SODC were reported as being down to a weekly rate per 100k of population of 115 (it peaked at 1,504 on 6th Jan) although it may be that reporting is incomplete. Indeed Reading BC have ceased reporting their figures because of fears about accuracy.

It seems reasonable to assume that levels will remain low as we go into summer.

Elections in Oxfordshire 5th May

There were no elections in South Oxfordshire. In Vale of White Horse DC there was a by-election for Matt Barber's old seat (He was the former leader of VoWH until 2019). (He stood down on becoming Police & Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley Police). His seat was won by the LibDems by a very clear margin (878 to 519) by Sally Povolotsky, who is also a county councillor. Vale of White Horse is dominated by the LibDems.

In Oxford City 24 out of 48 seats were up for election and the closing position for the council became :- Labour 32 (-2), LibDem 9 (no change), Green 6 (+3) and Ind 1 (-1) – so despite some losses Labour remain dominant there.

In Cherwell DC 16 out of 48 seats were up for election and the closing position became Con 25 (-5), Lab 10 (+1), LibDem 7 (+4), Green 2 (+1) and Ind 4 (no change) – so the Conservatives, just, retain control.

In West Oxfordshire DC, 16 out of the 49 seats were up for election and the closing position became Con 20 (-7), Lab 9 (+1), LibDem 15 (+5), Green 2 (+1) and Ind 3 (no change). The Conservatives thus lost control and the council is to be led by Andy Graham (LibDem who defeated Ian Hudspeth in the Woodstock & Bladon seat at the County elections last year) in a partnership with the Greens and Labour.

In April 2019 Oxford City was held by Labour in a sea of Conservative blue – including at the County Council. The position is now very different and when it comes to key issues of spatial planning and the level of desirable population and housing growth for our future. Moreover the renewed recognition of the need to rebalance the UK economy and to “level up” at national level starts to create scope for a changed direction of travel.

Ukraine

The local councils of Oxfordshire continue to work together to support Ukrainian refugees. As at 3rd May, 377 visas had been issued to Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion - who had sponsors in the South Oxfordshire area via the Homes for Ukraine scheme. More will no doubt follow.

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AONB extension

On 20th April local parishes from Harpsden along to Kidmore End met to start to prepare a case to Natural England for an extension of the Chilterns AONB. Subject to parish confirmations, work will be prepared to integrate existing landscape studies, address any gaps and to prepare a robust case to Natural England as to why the nominated areas of extension are appropriate and fulfill the relevant criteria. A further meeting is to be held – probably in June – and Mapledurham parish will be invited to join in.

No Mow May

SODC is supporting biodiversity by avoiding mowing in may wherever possible and encouraging others to enable wildflowers etc to bloom and support insects/wildlife.

Joint Local Plan

SODC is underway with consultation and work on a new Joint Local Plan with Vale of White Horse DC. The councils are trialling an innovative new digital approach to this consultation. This enables users to explore more interactive online content and hopefully will find the approach to be quicker and more appropriate. The aim is to gain more responses for ordinary residents – as well as parishes and others. The consultation is open from **Thursday 12 May until 11.59pm on Thursday 23 June 2022**. **This is the link :**

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/planning-and-development/local-plan-and-planning-policies/local-plan-2041/>

Queen's Speech, Levelling Up and Planning Reforms

Changes to planning are expected, but as yet detail is emerging slowly. There is renewed support for a plan-led system and suggestions that the presumption in the NPPF should be amended to lean against sites which are contrary to the Local Plan or Neighbourhood Plan – even where there may not be a 5 year Housing Land Supply; this could potentially restrain speculative developers and rogue inspectors? Contrary to the suggestions made by Robert Jenrick there is clear support for local democracy and the role of councillors and Planning Authorities. It seems that the standard Method will be retained in some form – particularly for plan-making. The Duty-to-cooperate is to be revised and there will be more emphasis on regeneration. There is however a suggestion of requiring an “infrastructure levy” (locally set) to cover almost all infrastructure and affordable housing thus sharply limiting the scope for s106 obligations in future. I have a lot of fears about this suggestion. It could lead to the levy being unviable in some areas but not collecting enough elsewhere. Larger strategic greenfield sites offer a lot of land profit but also require a mass of infrastructure – roads and schools etc from first base; s106 is a much more effective tool in such cases. I also fear social housing being separated from market housing and the past evidence on that is far from encouraging. The devil will always be in the detail.

We are also promised more detail on how regional policy and levelling up is to be made to work in practice.

Energy rebate

The energy rebate of £150 for Bands A-D properties is being actioned. It is much simpler to do so for direct debit payers where the Council Tax account and Bank account have the same name. For residents who pay by other means much more administration is required to enable payment to the correct person.

Crossways

The Crossways site for 11 homes has gone to appeal.

Retirement Village or “Land East of Reading Road”

The Retirement Village site for 65 dwellings is subject to an enforcement as works are proceeding in advance of discharge of and contrary to the understood conditions.

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor