

SODC ward councillor's report

Shiplake – 5th September 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 26th August, **reported** cases in SODC were at to a weekly rate per 100k of population of 33 (it peaked at 1,504 on 6th Jan) – a VERY low level – as we would hope to see in summer - although it may be that reporting is incomplete. Indeed Reading BC have ceased reporting their figures because of fears about accuracy.

Oddly, excess deaths nationally through the summer have been higher than would be expected without any simple cause being identified. It would appear that the aftermath of Covid on our NHS health system and individuals is taking a toll.

Booster jabs for both Flu and Covid for over 50s and the vulnerable are being rolled out through autumn, before any winter peak.

Ukraine

Refugee arrivals continue to arrive as the war in Ukraine goes on

Planning – Housing Land Supply

SODC has published its Housing Land Supply statement for this year – declaring a **supply of 5.58 years :-**

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/planning-and-development/local-plan-and-planning-policies/our-development-plan/five-year-land-supply/>

SODC's statement process has been updated to adopt a “best practice” methodology which is not rather more detailed than before – following expert advice.

Councils Withdraw from Ox-Cam Arc Project

SODC and Vale of White Horse leaders have agreed that they do not support proposals for a pan-regional development and growth partnership across the Oxford-Cambridge Arc – with its associated costs.

Cllr David Rouane, leader of SODC, wrote to Cllr Barry Wood confirming that South Oxfordshire will not be involved in the continuation of the Arc, a scheme that at one stage mooted a million new houses and an Expressway between the two cities. Indeed one could argue that the high-growth plans previously mooted for the Arc were starkly contrary to the Government's plans for regional “Levelling Up”.

Cllr Rouane suggests focusing scarce funds on supporting residents through the cost of living crisis. You can read Cllr Rouane's letter here: [Address \(southoxon.gov.uk\)](https://www.southoxon.gov.uk)

Oxfordshire 2050

The Oxfordshire Plan 2050, a County-wide plan for growth and development, has collapsed after the Districts and City failed to reach agreement on housing numbers. Three “growth” scenarios were proposed by independent consultants: the Standard Method, “business as usual” which reflected current high rates of housing growth and a “transformational” scenario. The

“transformation scenario would have represented an extra 51,000 new dwellings across Oxfordshire by comparison with the Standard Method approach - with perhaps 25% of that falling on South Oxfordshire.

Oxford City (Labour) was seeking housing numbers in excess of those projected under the “transformational” scenario and was supported as regards higher local growth aims by the only remaining Conservative district – being Cherwell DC. In contrast SODC and Vale of White Horse DC wanted to see growth in line with the Standard Method for calculating housing need – with a focus on absorbing and providing for the very high levels of housing growth that have already been committed in existing local plans.

Some £2.5m of government money was spent on the 2050 Plan but these funds were earmarked specifically for Oxfordshire 2050 - so could not have been spent elsewhere. However the funds spent were in large part spent on research that was in any event necessary for all Local Plans and thus continues to have value. Much of the work previously done under Oxfordshire 2050 will now simply be absorbed by local authorities in the drafting of their own Local Plans (including South & Vale’s Joint Local Plan).

The key County-wide groups including: the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Climate Group, the Affordable Housing Group, the Infrastructure Group and the Local Nature Partnership will continue to operate.

Cost of Living Crisis - Clinic

SODC and BBC Radio Oxford co-hosted a Cost of Living Clinic in Didcot over the August Bank Holiday weekend. Oxfordshire Mind, Citizens Advice, Didcot Food Bank, officers and councillors from South Oxfordshire District Council and other organisations were on hand to provide residents with advice and support.

A clinic in Abingdon will follow later this month (19 September) and it’s hoped that clinics will be rolled out elsewhere in the District later this year.

The clinic follows the Council’s recognition a Cost of Living Emergency at Full Council in July. The new Prime Minister’s plans to deal with what is likely to be a terrible winter for many of our residents and local businesses are awaited.

The Council is calling for urgent action from government including: a review of the energy cap regime to ensure that it provides much greater protection to consumers; an immediate reduction to VAT; an increase in benefits in line with inflation; reinstating the Universal Credit Uplift, providing immediate support for public transport; and increase funding to local authorities which are facing inflationary pressures. **I attach a help leaflet.**

As ever, please direct residents to our Community Hub where officers can guide residents to the support that’s available: 01235 422 600, email communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk or go to <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/cost-of-living-crisis-advice-and-support/> communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk

Cost of Living Crisis - Household Support Fund

Regrettably, our portion of the Household Support Fund has been spent and is now open only to pensioners. Government guidance requires us to put aside a third of the funds for pensioners so with the main tranche now all accounted for, only pensioners are eligible for the remainder. Any pensioners struggling to pay their household bills are encouraged to get in touch with the Community Support team who can guide them through the application process.

Applications close on 30 September.

Cost of Living Crisis - Rough Sleeping and Housing Support

There is evidence of growing numbers of people rough sleeping in the District and these numbers are likely to increase further. SODC's Housing Team are expert at supporting people who are homeless or are at risk of homelessness and SODC follows the Housing First approach: whereby people in need are first provided with a roof over their heads and then additional support follows:

Link: [About Housing First | Housing First England \(homeless.org.uk\)](https://homeless.org.uk)

Please contact: housing@southandvale.gov.uk or call 01235 422 452 to let us know if you would like to discuss a housing issue or have concerns about a resident who is homeless - or about to be.

Everyone Active Grant

Applications are still open for the new Everyone Active Grant. Individuals and organisations working on projects that help residents get active or maintain activity could get up to £1000 in funding. Eligible organisations are not limited to traditional sports clubs: gardening clubs, green gyms, walking groups etc could all be eligible. Do spread the word and if you are unsure whether your group is eligible, just ask! The Grants team has created a promotional poster you can download: [Everyone Active Grant Scheme \(Poster\) \(southandvale.gov.uk\)](https://southandvale.gov.uk)

The maximum claim is £1,000 (from a district fund of £50k).

The deadline for applications is 30 September. More information available at: [Grants - South Oxfordshire District Council \(southoxon.gov.uk\)](https://southoxon.gov.uk)

New offices

From early October the (small temporary) offices of SODC (and VoWH DC) will be at Abbey House in Abingdon.

Protecting our Rivers: Bathing Water for Wallingford

Volunteers have been conducting water quality testing at eight sites along the River Thames from Abingdon Bridge to Nosworthy Way in Wallingford, as part of the partnership project led by Thames21 and funded by South Oxfordshire District Council. The test results will form part of an evidence base to support an application for Bathing Water Status at Wallingford Beach, a well-known swimming area that has been enjoyed by local residents and visitors for generations.

Should the application for Bathing Water Status be successful, the Environment Agency would be required to test the water in and around the bathing area for faecal bacteria and to make the results of these tests public. Bathing Water designation also requires the sewage undertaker (Thames Water) to treat effluent to "human health" standards thus giving greater powers to bring about improvements to treatment works that impact the bathing area. Cllr Jo Robb has been working with Thames 21 to roll out bathing areas in other locations along our stretch of the Thames, including at Pangbourne Meadows.

Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

As part of our efforts to ensure our services and support are accessible to all, SODC are conducting a Diversity and Inclusion Survey.

Residents are asked for their views on how SODC can make it easier for people with different needs to access our services. SODC already do what is required of us legally, but is seeking to go further to help ensure everyone is able to find out information they need in the best possible way.

The survey is open on our website and will run until 11.59pm on 19 September. Posters, Easy Read leaflets, paper copies of the strategy and survey will be available in local libraries from 15 August. (Alternative formats and languages are available by contacting or calling 01235 422 425.)

Broadband Rollout

Residents may have noticed that Gigaclear are rolling out high-speed broadband. Gigaclear have already installed broadband locally in places including Kidmore End, Sonning Common and, in Woodcote.

The County Council maintains close working relationships with commercial operators and is taking a partnership approach to the rollout of commercial broadband.

Some residents have expressed concerns around the erection of unsightly poles for super-fast broadband. In 90% of delivery, existing Openreach ducts are used by all telecoms operators for blowing fibre through. However, there are areas where the legacy Openreach (Post Office) network was built by simply burying telephone lines. This is mostly in rural areas, but also in some suburban locations. The cost difference between arranging road closures, digging in new ducts then blowing fibre through them is in the order of four times the cost of standing poles and “flying fibre”.

Ofcom has granted Code Powers to Operators to stand new poles without planning consent so the default will always be overhead delivery, typically on a highway verge where there is no requirement even for a wayleave. If an Operator wants/needs to use private land, they must request permission from the landowner. However ultimately if that permission is ‘unreasonably withheld’ (i.e. the landowner just doesn’t want the pole), then the Operator can use statutory Code powers to trump the landowner anyway.

Gigaclear can be contacted if you have any queries: **Email:** networkbuildqueries@gigaclear.com **Phone:** 0370 774 0537

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor