

SODC ward councillor's report

Shiplake – 10th October 2022

Death of the Queen

Sadly on Thursday 8th September Queen Elizabeth II died - after reigning for over 70 years. This is the longest reign in our own history and second only to Louis XIV of France globally. She earned great respect for a lifetime of service and the manner in which she fulfilled her role. She was succeeded by Charles III.

A period of mourning was respected causing numerous public council meetings to be deferred – hence the change in the date of this council meeting. Council work (as opposed to public and formal decision-making meetings) continued except for the Bank Holiday declared for the state funeral on the 19th September. District council facilities with the exception of car parks, toilets and emergency response remained closed on that day.

Proposals to recognise and memorialise the Queen will be considered – including planting towards the “Green Canopy” campaign of her Platinum Jubilee.

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 1st October, **reported** cases in SODC were at to a weekly rate per 100k of population of 101 (it peaked at 1,504 on 6th Jan) – a low level – but now rising – albeit that reporting may be 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.

In Australia and New Zealand winter flu was more impactful and more virulent than normal and this may well transmit into the UK's winter season. Booster jabs for both Flu and Covid for over 50s and the vulnerable are being rolled out through autumn, before any winter peak.

Hackney Carriage tariffs

SODC are implementing set hackney carriage tariffs for the first time. The vast majority of other councils do set tariffs. The rates in South Oxfordshire are being set at the 16th highest at a level compatible with Oxford, Wokingham and Reading. These tariffs offer cabbies a fair reward and give passengers a reliable and consistent approach to charging.

Henley Conservation Area

A new conservation area for Henley is being progressed through due process and will in due course influence planning decisions within the designated area.

SODC IT and processes “transformation”

One of the baleful fruits of past decision to outsource SODC services in an ineffectual way has been a lack of IT development and progression to more up-to-date and efficient systems. A major programme of analysis and migration is now being planned. Analysis has taken place of all activities and processes in the council with a view to providing a better and more efficient service. This analysis has identified many opportunities for improvements and scope to migrate to better software and hardware-provision solutions that will be better and also offer flexibility and resilience.

Performance reporting – Corporate Plan and Climate action Plan

Quarter One reports are being published against the criteria for SODC's action plans. Generally progress is good.

Investment Zones

Hoping to achieve a dash for economic growth, the Government are considering designating some investment zones wherein there would be deregulation and low/no tax incentives. Within these planning controls would be minimised and planning designations such as Green Belt, AONB, SSSIs and habitats etc protections dispensed with. The suggestion is that these might incentivise companies to invest and grow – without Government investment – although there is past evidence that in significant measure they simply cause hopping from outside the zone to within it without great growth in new jobs. To the extent that planning is abandoned in these zones there would be little local control nor application of commonly expected standards. Personally I would see risks that rather echo the slackening of building control before Grenfell.

Crossways appeal

Annoyingly the appeal Inspector for the Crossways site refused to apply the widely understood logic of settlement limits and also refused to accept SODC's annual statement of Housing Land Supply – simply because, requiring responses from sites developers across the district, it had not been available at the hearing – even though it was provided in good time for his determination of the case. Instead he asked the applicants if they would be content for him to accept this evidence. For their part they argued to exclude such evidence. SODC applied a detailed methodology to the HLS statement – following “best practice” as counselled by the LGAs Planning Advisory Service that works closely with central government to help councils comply. Under the government's HLS rules Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) have to prove their supply – by reference to support evidence from.... Developers. Yet here, when that process is followed as swiftly as responses could be obtained from developers, the appeal inspector decides ad hoc to ignore it. The current set of ministers are said to be considering the future of the HLS rules and targets. Moreover the new PM denounced the Planning inspectorate for too frequently not upholding the decisions of LPAs! It is certainly evident that the current system is chaotic and not fit for purpose.

Baskerville Arms

I am very concerned by the closure of the Baskerville Arms and would be interested to understand the latest update and consideration of making an ACV application to SODC.

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor