

SODC ward councillor's report

– Shiplake – 13th July 2020

Covid-19 - Shielding guidance relaxed

As you may be aware, the government is relaxing the guidance for residents who are currently shielding from 6th July and aims to “pause” or cease shielding from 1st August for the foreseeable future.

It is important that all of our shielding residents are aware that even after the guidance has been relaxed, SODC will still be available to provide support and advice; they can continue to call 01235 422600 or email communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk. Lines are open 9am to 6pm Monday to Saturday. Changes that come into place on 6 July state that people who are shielding:

- can meet in a group of up to 6 people outdoors, including people from different households, while maintaining strict social distancing
- no longer need to observe social distancing with other members of their household
- can form a ‘support bubble’ with one other household – all those in a support bubble will be able to spend time together inside each other’s homes, including overnight, without needing to socially distance. You can find the full details about how shielding arrangements are changing on the government’s website <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>.

Hostile takeover bid – O.C.C.

Oxfordshire County Council are to consider a motion towards launching a hostile takeover bid of the county’s District and City councils. This initiative seeks to use the challenges of the Covid-19 lockdown to effect a long held ambition. Local councils across the UK have suffered losses of income and increased costs during the Covid lockdown. Some of the Oxfordshire council’s – such as Cherwell face major risks to their viability, subject to the arrangements for compensation by central government. OCC councillors intend to appeal to the Secretary of State to help them progress their ambition for greater power. Such a move would be expected to:-

- Defer elections from May 2021 (for West Oxon. DC and OCC; WODC already has had to defer by one year due to Covid.)
- Centralise power to Oxford – with risks of entrenching an Oxford-centric view
- Enable massive planning decisions to be taken far above affected local residents
- Pursue a spreadsheet model of “cost-savings” that may minimise services and pass decisions to officers lacking local knowledge
- Increase council tax in the districts to equalise across the County (City C.T. levels are 2.5 times those of SODC).
- Seize and spend the financial reserves of districts – thus further requiring higher council taxes

The Oxford Mail reviewed this story under the disdainful headline “Never Mind the Ballots”! Discussions concerning financial compensation to local councils from central government continue. Whilst full compensation for loss of income will not happen undertakings for some compensation have been made – with details to be finalised. Income losses have been from less new and large planning applications, building control requests, car park charges, leisure centre and arts centre incomes etc.

Playgrounds and outdoor gyms advice

The government has just published guidance and practical advice on how outdoor gym and playgrounds can be reopened and managed effectively to enable their use while minimising risk of transmitting COVID-19.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-managing-playgrounds-and-outdoor-gyms/covid-19-guidance-for-managing-playgrounds-and-outdoor-gyms>

Before opening play areas, new signage may be needed. Users should be encouraged to wash their hands before and after they visit, maintain social distancing, and to come back at a quieter time if the area looks busy.

Leisure centres update

Currently, indoor gyms and swimming pools must remain closed. The government have indicated that guidance will change to all some opening from 25th July. Full details awaited. SODC is continuing to work on preparation for reopening with our contractor.

New signage

Over the coming days we will be placing new signs around our public toilets to remind people to maintain social distancing and to wash their hands. Our 'Stay Safe, Give Space' message will also be stencilled at key locations in our car parks, parks and mobile home parks.

Consultation on South Oxfordshire Corporate Plan, 2020-2024

Every four years the Council develops a new strategic plan that provides the framework for all of its programmes and operations. As a new administration, this gives us the opportunity to convert our aims into programmes of action, as well as to recognise the many partnerships and collaborations which are necessary to deliver services (current and future) to our residents. For example, we cannot deliver sustainable transport infrastructure on our own, nor can we help our local high streets and businesses to recover from the shock of COVID-19 without working collaboratively with agencies like OxLEP (Oxfordshire's Local Economic Partnership).

The new draft Corporate Plan will be going out for public consultation in mid-July. Feedback will be sought on the six Themes which we have identified as our priorities for the next 4 years, including addressing the climate emergency and improving the targeting of planning and income generation. Further details on the consultation process will be published after the Full Council meeting on 16th July, so please do encourage everyone to participate!

Virtual meetings update

Arrangements to enable parish councils and the general public to take part directly in our online committee meetings are underway. The new system will be trialled for the meeting of the Joint Audit and Governance Committee on 13 July and then hopefully rolled out for all meetings (including the Planning Committee)

Cabinet took place online last Thursday (9th July) and will be followed by full council on 16th July. All meetings can be streamed via meeting links on the SODC website.

Local Plan

The Examination process is set to proceed via video-conferencing.

Many of us have worked very hard to make written submissions to seek improvements in the Local Plan.

The Examination in Public of the Local Plan is also due to be streamed live, starting on 14th July. As you know, back in March the Secretary of State, Rt Hon Robert Jenrick, instructed the Council to take the plan through examination and to adopt it by the end of December. We therefore have a rather bizarre situation where the Council's Planning team is following those instructions and will be defending the eLP2034 that was submitted in March 2019 by the previous administration, while those who opposed the plan in the run up to the local elections in May 2019 - and who registered to speak at the Inspection during the Reg. 19 consultation - are preparing statements in an attempt to make significant improvements to the plan. These representations are being made by Councillors in their individual capacity – reflecting the mandate won in May 2019.

Virtual Planning committees – latest news

As a reminder, the temporary process to handle the backlog of applications and to compensate for the lack of live participation by members of the public at planning committee meetings is as follows:

- If the Parish council objects to a Minor application, a planning officer will contact them to explain the likely recommendation and seek to resolve their planning concerns, but can determine the application, unless one of the ward members calls it in, in which case it will go before Head of Planning + Planning Committee Chair+ Vice Chair+ Ward member to resolve, and they will decide if it should go to planning committee or not for a decision.
- If the Parish council objects to a Major application it will go to planning committee for a decision if the planning officer's recommendation is for approval.
- 'Other' applications (householder) e.g. extensions - unchanged - do not go to planning committee if the parish/town council objects, unless the ward member calls it in, or the planning officers decide it should go to committee.

The statutory time limits remain unchanged as 13 weeks for major development and 8 weeks for all other types of development (unless the application is subject to an Environmental Impact Assessment, in which case a 16 week limit applies.)

The public consultation period for an Application is 21 days (from the date the letter/notice is posted), and if there is a significant change to the Application following amended plans, a further public consultation period, usually 14 days, is undertaken. The Application can be called in to a Planning Committee by a district councillor with planning reasons up to 28 days from registration.

Further planning training is to be made available soon.

As noted previously the current temporary process was caused by Covid-19 and the refusal of the Secretary of State to make any allowances for that. Therefore officers required the temporary process under their Emergency powers for Covid.

New Thames Champion for South Oxfordshire

Cllr Jo Robb is taking on the newly created role of Thames Champion. 40 miles of the Thames flows through our District. The River Thames is one of our most precious natural assets and Cllr Robb will be networking with river users, councillors and neighbouring councils to improve access to the river, and to protect and enhance its biodiversity and cleanliness.

Leigh Rawlins
District Councillor