

Title	District Councillors' Report
Authors	Cllr Barker, Bretherton & Gregory
Meeting	Thame Town Council
Date	3 rd March 2020

Local Plan

We always wanted to be able to make significant changes to the Plan during the inspection process, but were advised that this wasn't possible, which is why we were going to recommend its withdrawal. If we are, after all, able to make the kind of changes we have been seeking during the examination in public, then we would certainly consider this to be a pragmatic option.

We believe that elected members have a mandate to shape the implementation and detail of a local plan and as such we are against Oxfordshire County Council taking over the SODC emerging local plan.

There will be a special cabinet and full council meeting on Thursday 5th March to decide whether to change the plan after the Secretary of State agreed to lift the ban on discussing the local plan for 1 day.

Council Budget and Council Tax

Detailed analysis of the council finances has revealed that spending is far ahead of income on such a scale that the council is heading for bankruptcy. For several years now, the council has been taking millions from reserves every year.

Council tax can only be increased by £5 per year, where an increase of over £50 would be required to plug the gap. In fact, every new house built in the district makes the finances worse, because the cost of providing statutory services is less than the council tax received.

Therefore, last October, all department heads were instructed to carry out the deepest spending review ever done, looking at every line item of income and expenditure. Staff were also asked for ideas to increase council income, for example by reviewing fees and charges, many of which have not increased in decades.

As a consequence of these financial problems, it was not possible to create a growth bid (new spending request) for funding of Market Town Co-Ordinators, but in our opinion the communication to the 3 town councils around this funding was inadequate and very late.

As a result of the through review, the new budget does not require any transfers from reserves this year and some breathing space has been achieved to make fundamental changes through new initiatives that will be reported on in coming months (for example new building – see below).

Young care-leavers up to the age of 25 will now receive a 100% discount on Council Tax to help them adjust to independent living.

New Crowmarsh building - exhibition and feedback day

There was a great turnout for the exhibition at Milton Park on 13th February, and lots of useful feedback on the proposed design, features and name for the new building. There is a project website at <https://southoxfordshirehq.wordpress.com/> which will be updated as the project rolls out.

The reason for building a new Council office, is that that SODC currently spend nearly a million pounds per year on the temporary offices, without any insurance income as this expired many years ago.

As SODC own the land at Crowmarsh, the only cost is the building which is quickly offset by annual savings, as well as investing (capital budgets) rather than spending (revenue budgets). To increase the annual savings, council is insisting on high environmental standards to reduce energy consumption.

Waste Enforcement Efforts

The waste enforcement team has been out and about highlighting the campaign against littering and fly-tipping. While in Wallingford market place they even issued two on-the-spot fines to people dropping cigarette butts right next to the display!

Anti-Idling

The anti-idling campaign is continuing throughout the next few months, with posters distributed widely, adverts placed on petrol pumps and flyers included with Council Tax bills. This is a major initiative to address the problems we have with Air Quality in many of our towns, including Henley, Watlington and Wallingford.

Water consultation

The Environment Agency has launched a consultation on the challenges we face to protect and improve our waters and find a better balance in meeting the needs of people and nature.

Responses to the [Challenges and Choices consultation](#) will help shape the future approach to managing the water environment and will be used to update river basin management plans in 2021. This consultation runs until 24th April.

The consultation seeks views on: the challenges that threaten the water environment; how we can work together to manage our waters; and who should pay.

SODC are preparing a response on behalf of the two councils – but other authorities and members of the public are also encouraged to respond.

Changes to Neighbourhood Development Plan funding

Following changes to central government grants, from 1st April 2020, SODC will continue to fund Referendums and Inspections and to provide advice and support at all stages of the process (including reviews), but will no longer provide grant funding.

The Government have reduced funding to district councils and increased grant funding directly to neighbourhood plan groups, the net effect is that more funding is available than before.

Officers will help Neighbourhood Planning groups to identify and apply for Government grant funding.

Motions passed at Council Meeting on 20th February

Four motions were passed at the most recent Council meeting:

- The council has agreed for the leader of the council to write to the Secretary of State for Housing to call for a review on the wide-ranging impact of permitted development rights that allows offices to be converted into residential homes. When an office is converted to residential use office floor space is lost and in Thame alone, we have lost 654 jobs worth of office space since 2013. Permitted Development Rights effectively gives developers a free pass to create new homes of any type, of any quality in any location providing the building began its life as an office. This motion was proposed by Councillor Kate Gregory.
- Rules on calculation of 5-year housing land supply
- Safety for people hiring taxis and private hire
- A motion to condemn all racially or religiously motivated hate crimes and to adopt accepted definitions of anti-semitism and islamophobia.

For further details see <http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/news/2020/2020-02/motions-agreed-south-oxfordshire-district-council>