

Title	District Councillors' Report
Authors	Cllr Kate Gregory, Cllr Pieter-Paul Barker and Cllr David Bretherton
Meeting	Thame Town Council
Date	28 th April 2020

Coronavirus Updates from SODC

Updates are being sent to Town and Parish Councils from the Community Support team at SODC every Wednesday.

The most recent update included:

- Grants funding available** – grants of up to £3000 are currently available for town and parish councils to apply for from Scottish and Southern Electricity towards projects that will specifically support residents in vulnerable situations. They're encouraging applications for projects that will provide extra help to those who are self isolating or social shielding, such as the elderly or anybody with underlying health conditions. The deadline for the first round of applications is 30 April. For more details visit <https://www.ssen.co.uk/RCF/ENGLAND/>
- Community support update** - We've had encouraging reports from the voluntary and community groups we're working with that they are feeling confident and able to provide support to the people that need it on an ongoing basis. SODC have now referred over 452 residents to our network of volunteers across South Oxfordshire and the Vale since the Community Support service began less than a month ago. We've also called over 537 residents on the shielded list in the last week to check if they needed additional or ongoing support. Food remains the main area people require support. Last week we provided 37 food parcels to residents of both districts that had nobody else to turn to and where we weren't able to immediately refer them to a volunteer group. This takes the total number of food parcels to 67 food parcels since launching the service, which has helped to feed 74 Adults and 22 children. Contact details of the Community Support service are 01235 422600 communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk
- Letters to government** The Leader of South Oxfordshire, Cllr Sue Cooper, and Cllr Robin Bennett, Cabinet Member for Development and Regeneration, have written to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the plight of 15,000 businesses in South and Vale that are not eligible for business grants. You can read the letter in full on the SODC [website](#).
- Business grants update** - In the past week we've made significant headway in paying out the government funding to support small businesses affected by COVID-19. As of yesterday, we'd paid out £17 million across both districts, and we're well on track to pay all the requests we've had by 30 April. We are currently phoning all of the eligible businesses in the district that haven't yet taken up the offer of support.
- Bulky waste services return** - To help residents deal with some of the waste they may have built up during this pandemic we've reopened our bulky waste collection service for large household items, such as sofas and washing machines. We had initially suspended the service to focus on collecting kerbside household waste while some of the waste crews were off sick or self-isolating. We will keep the situation under constant review and if necessary,

suspend it again if staffing levels become an issue. Whilst recycling centres and charity shops stay closed, we're urging residents to store any waste that we cannot collect through our regular kerbside service.

Council Finances

The hard work by Councils has been recognised by the Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick, in a letter he sent to all Council leaders on 18th April, in which he thanked all local government staff for the "heroic" efforts being made. He also stated, "I said that I would ensure you had the resources you needed to do the job, and I meant it. I promised that I would champion your cause and fight your corner as we work together, and I meant it." This follows the allocation of a further £1.6bn to help local authorities deal with providing support to local communities while at the same time losing significant amounts of revenue from services such as parking, planning and leisure.

Very little of the £1.6bn is for District Councils, so far SODC has spent £1 million and received only £45,000

All Oxfordshire leaders have now sent a letter to our local MPs asking them to fight our cause in the battle to cover this revenue gap (calculated to be about £79m across the county if the emergency goes on for about 3 months). In it, they say, "Without this support, authorities across Oxfordshire will become financially unsustainable with depleted or no reserves, and for some, the ability to set a legal budget for 2021/22 being unlikely."

Planning

Town and Parish Councils play a vital role in the planning process, and we are determined to ensure that the current emergency does not undermine the democratic process. Although many of SODC's planning staff have been redeployed to support the coronavirus support efforts, they are still continuing to process and determine applications. Unsurprisingly, the number of applications has dropped in recent weeks, but there is still a steady trickle coming in. Parish Councils have been asked to provide feedback to the SODC Planning Team on whether applications should continue to be considered, and the feedback has been mixed. Uncontentious applications are being handled as normal through delegated powers, but any applications which would normally go to the Planning Committee for determination have been put on hold until the Committee can meet again. We still need valuable input from parish councils please.

A further letter has been sent by the Leaders of both South Oxfordshire and Vale Councils to ask the Secretary of State to consider suspending the targets for the length of time to determine applications and also to readjust the 5-year Housing Land Supply calculation, given that a) major applications cannot be considered fairly and b) many local construction sites have effectively closed down during the emergency. We await a response, but we know that other planning authorities across the country are also lobbying on these issues.

You can read the letter [here](#).

Other Council Operations

We are pleased to report that many normal council-run operations are continuing to operate, including waste collections, taxi licensing (renewals only), payment of benefits and housing services. All known homeless people in the district have been housed safely. We also anticipate that the bulk waste collections (a paid-for doorstep collection service) will soon resume, which should help anyone who has taken advantage of lockdown to have a bit of a clear-out!