District Councillor Update – Woodcote & Rotherfield Ward

4 March 2024

Cllr James Norman, Cllr Jo Robb

Budget

Amid the waves of bad news about local authorities on the brink of bankruptcy, SODC voted to approve its 2024-2025 budget with no cuts to services and the council's finances stable.

The budget priorities quality, cost-effective local services, significant support for community projects and investment in local facilities. £500,000 will be made available to support community projects, such as to help improve people's quality of life, improve local facilities and deliver action on climate change. £60,000 will be made available to support the arts across South Oxfordshire and £405,000 to improve the facilities at Cornerstone Arts Centre following a review of the facility and a new strategy approved last month.

When the Green/Liberal Democrat administration took over the council in 2019, it was running with an annual deficit of £3m. Fiscal discipline, increasing fees and charges where appropriate, and ending expensive outsourcing contracts has helped turn the finances around.

Unlike many councils across the country, there was no consideration of reducing services. The Community Hub will continue to provide vital support to residents, and in light of the increasing challenges of homelessness, there is also increased funding for homelessness prevention and an expansion of the housing team.

The council's capital budget includes significant planned investment in social housing and decarbonisation of leisure centres to reduce energy usage and ongoing costs.

The council tax for 2024/25 has been set at £146.24 for the year for a Band D property, making South Oxfordshire the seventh lowest taxing district council in the country.

SODC's element of the council tax paid by householders funds services such as: household waste and recycling collections, community support, leisure services, parks and public toilets, housing services, planning services, environmental health and licensing.

You can find out more about the budget on the SODC website: Community grants and secure finances in South Oxfordshire's draft 2024-25 budget - South Oxfordshire District Council (southoxon.gov.uk)

Joint Local Plan - Consultation

The consultation period for the Regulation 18 Consultation on the Joint Local Plan has ended. While the formal consultation is closed, the Council still wants to engage with young people and to this end, the planning policy team has created an interactive online survey aimed at young residents.

Please could you send this to your local residents and encourage young people to respond:

https://www.menti.com/altipyz4mup8

The planning policy team has also conducted in-person youth engagement workshops and are keen to facilitate more. Please could you let your local school, college or youth group know and anyone interested should contact communications@southandvale.gov.uk

The Green Group at SODC provided a response to the consultation, expressing concern at the scale of new development, welcoming the removal of strategic sites including at Chalgrove and Nettlebed and suggesting some new policies, including a requirement for a Community Benefit Fund for all new large-scale renewable energy projects.

Wallingford & Henley Bathing Water Status Applications

The application for bathing water status at Wallingford has progressed to the national consultation stage of the process! This is great news following last year's bitter disappointment.

Please complete the consultation, which closes on 10 March and show your support to Wallingford. The beach, which has been enjoyed for swimming by generations of residents and visitors, has the benefit of nearby parking, shower and change facilities and shops, restaurants and transport connections a short walk away in the town.

https://consult.defra.gov.uk/water/consultation-on-designation-of-27-sites-as-bathing/

Bathing Water Status places an obligation on the Environment Agency to conduct regular water quality testing during the bathing season and to make the results of this testing public. This means that people can make an educated choice about whether or not to swim. It also gives communities greater powers to push the sewerage undertaker (Thames Water) to upgrade treatment works in the plume of influence of the bathing area. If successful, Wallingford will join only three other river sites with Bathing Water Status across the country.

This has been the culmination of many hours of hard work by local volunteers. It is hugely gratifying personally to see Wallingford progress to the next stage. As a river swimmer and having worked on this since 2019 in my role as River Thames Champion, I know how much effort has gone into this process over many years. It is great to see that this year, Thames21 will start the process to make Pangbourne a Bathing Water area.

Unfortunately, Henley did not make it to national consultation as DEFRA announced mid-way through the process that formal swim events would not count towards the user numbers required. Given there is nowhere in the town of Henley where people regularly swim, the application was sadly unlikely to succeed once the many events put on by Henley Swim were discounted. We are now working with Henley Town Council to provide better facilities in the town for people wanting to swim – not easy in a town with lots of mooring

and boat activity – but the Town Council is working hard to find a solution. Readers might recall a time when the Thames had many bathing areas including at Henley, outside the Henley Rowing Club.

New Community CIL Fund

Town and parish councils and not for profit community groups in South Oxfordshire are now able to bid for their share in £750,000 of new funding to improve or deliver new community amenities.

The Community Infrastructure Levy Pilot Grant Fund (whoever comes up with these names?) will give organisations a financial boost of between £75,000 and £250,000 per project for new or expanded facilities including community centres, sports and cultural facilities, open spaces, play areas and more, which are needed as a direct result of new development.

The grant is funded by contributions from developers for building new homes in the district.

The grant scheme compliments the council's existing community grants and uses CIL funding collected from developers.

Projects will need to deliver new or expanded physical infrastructure to cater to more residents and weight will be given to projects that have elements of sustainability, inclusivity and consideration of environmental impacts.

Expressions of interest are open to organisations for SIX WEEKS with submissions closing at 5pm on 5 April 2024. Following the EOI process, projects that meet the funding requirements will be invited to submit a full application.

Changes to the Garden Waste Service

The District Council has set out plans to change the way its garden waste service is paid for in 2025.

The council has agreed the introduction of a permit scheme from April 2025 which will include subscribers receiving a sticker for their bins to identify them as fully paid-up garden waste customers. This kind of scheme is offered successfully by many other local authorities, including in neighbouring West Oxfordshire.

The permits will act in a similar way to a parking permit as a proof of subscription payment. All subscribers will receive a new sticker annually each time they renew.

This will help to ensure that only households that have paid for the service have their brown garden waste bins emptied.

The garden waste subscriptions currently run via annual direct debit payments from the date people signed up for the scheme. Next year, the councils will stop taking direct debit payments for the service. Customers will instead make a single annual payment by debit or credit card – so that everyone's payment year will run from 1 April to 31 March each year.

Benefits to customers include an all-new online system so they can manage their account and change their details much more easily. This will also mean the councils can contact people quickly if there are any disruptions to the service, such as during adverse weather.

Current subscribers will receive notification of the changes with this year's invoices. This will provide more information on the new system in 2025 as well as details of changes to their direct debit payment this year and the annual fee increase to cover the cost of running the service.

Council reaffirms its commitment to supporting people seeking sanctuary

In its first full meeting of 2024, council debated significant points of interest to the district, with a motion centred around support for Ukrainian refugees and the council's commitment to supporting people of any background displaced by war and persecution.

The Council passed the motion and resolved to continue to collaborate with Oxfordshire councils, statutory and voluntary sector partners in the development of a strategic approach for supporting people seeking sanctuary from any background which is coherent, effective, and compassionate.

The motion came ahead of 24 February marking two years since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.