

SODC A Conservative District Councillor's View **(Or What The Council Is Doing)**

May2020.

This is our first report for some time, and it seems strange to be starting up again.

Planning

Neighbourhood Plan updates

This is of importance in our Ward following on from the result of the Wheatley Brooks University Appeal result, but I will go into that in more detail later.

At present we have one Neighbourhood Plan adopted and in the process of up-date (Chinnor) and three in the course of preparation. Of those three, Sydenham is ready for the referendum as is the Chinnor up-date. Due to the CoVID-19 crisis, the referenda have been suspended, and the Government has indicated that all elections and referenda will now be postponed until May 2021.

To mitigate this delay, we have been assured that, provided the Plan or up-date are ready to go to referendum, and the confirmatory letter issued, then the new Plan or Amendments will have full weight. This is particularly important in view of the Wheatley Brooks University Appeal decision.

Wheatley Brooks University Appeal

This was in effect the test by which the LibDem/Green Administration's planning policies would be measured. The key plank to their desire to abandon the Local Plan 203 (LP2034) was that then Cabinet Member for Planning, Leigh Rawlings, and the Council for the Preservation of Rural England (CPRE) had assured the Administration that the old Core Strategy 2012 would remain valid until 2024 and for some policies, until 2027. This contrary to all advice from the Council's own officers and legal advisors and advice for the Secretary of State (SoS) and his people.

The Inspector's Report has been delayed as it was 'called in' for review by the SoS and it was finally published on the 23rd of April, although it took four working days to appear on the SODC web site and to date the Administration have not commented. It is some 117 pages long and so far, Ian has so far only completed a high level scan. However, why reinvent the wheel when an excellent summary of the situation has been produced by one of the District' ex-councillors who has great experience in planning.

Oxford Brookes University, Wheatley Campus Planning Appeal Decision.

On the 23rd April the Oxford Brookes University planning application for 500 homes in the Green Belt was granted by appeal to the Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick. Residents of Wheatley and Holton are deeply disappointed by this decision as it goes against the views and recommendation of the emerging Neighbourhood Plan for no more than 300 homes. This was to allow for much needed affordable homes but also to protect the infrastructure and communities of Wheatley and Holton. We also sought to protect the landscape of the former Deer Park to the western side of the campus but to no avail. This comes just a couple of months after the Liberal Democrat and Green Party

councillors allowed planning permission for a gas fired power station, again in the Green Belt at Wheatley, against the wishes of Wheatley Parish Council.

The wider implications of this decision are immense. The Secretary of State agreed with the independent planning Inspector that the majority of the most important policies in South Oxfordshire District Council's current development plan, used for determining this appeal are out of date.

This could have a devastating effect on all villages and towns in the entire district. The leader of SODC insists that the current plan, adopted in 2012, could last until 2027 but the current development plan consists of saved policies in the "Local Plan 2011" and the "Core Strategy 2012" and is a collection of old policies some from 2006, some 13 years ago.

Failure to have an up-to-date plan and indeed one that the Planning Inspectorate and Secretary of State determine are out of date will mean a loss of planning control for the wider district as it opens the floodgates for speculative planning applications.

Having an up-to-date plan in place means that you retain control over where development should be located, rather than it being delivered in an ad hoc way as a result of speculative development. Indeed, scoping requests are already being made to SODC regarding a new town, known as Harrington, just outside Wheatley.

The appeal report by Oxford Brookes are clear, when stating 'I'm afraid the idea of relying on the current plan is hopeless. Any claim that the existing plan is not out of date is completely lacking in any credibility, as evidenced by the new one, which graphically reveals everything that is out of date about the old one. "

This was the outcome experienced councillors and officers warned the new admin about when they were elected on a promise of scrapping the emerging plan. It isn't just about the 5 years of land supply. The 12-month delay in proceeding with the new local plan will cost the district dearly and a lack of clear understanding and direction in the ruling group is telling.

Toby Newman

Former SODC Councillor and Planning Chairman

Wheatley Parish Council

The Administration has yet to comment.

It is for this reason that we have emphasized the importance of the Neighbourhood Plans and their progress.

Harringtons

In his commentary above Toby mentions Harringtons, or as longer standing resident will know, what had previously been mooted as Stony Bassett. There can be little doubt that this proposal has resurfaced as a result of the

Administration's obfuscation and delays in respect of LP2034. Again, why reinvent the wheel We reproduce a read-out of the situation.

Harrington: what's happening?

You may have noticed that the developers behind the proposed development of Harrington have submitted a formal request for an environmental scoping opinion from SODC as part of the renewed planning application process. They are effectively seeking to update the Environmental Impact Assessment from their initial (2017) application. SODC is being asked to state which issues the EIA will need to include - hydrology, ecology, infrastructure etc as well as the cumulative impact of and on other developments.

SODC has 5 weeks to respond, and has started work to do so.

On the basis of SODC's scoping opinion, the applicants will submit an Environmental Statement. In the opinion of the SODC planning officer, as this application is largely similar to the 2017 application, it is likely this will already have been well-prepared and will be submitted quite quickly. The next step would be a formal planning application. Assuming the application is ready for submission (which seems likely), it could be submitted in the early summer.

In terms of scale, the primary difference in this application from the previous proposal seems to be a reduction in land identified for employment and schools. The number of houses - 6,500 - remains the same.

Might Harrington be included in the SODC Local Plan 2034?

The developers are continuing to promote the Harrington site as an alternative to one (or a number of) sites in SODC's emerging Local Plan. If the LP were already adopted, SODC would most likely reject the application as being in conflict with the LP. But as the LP process isn't yet concluded, this is an attempt to persuade the Inspector to swap out other sites in favour of Harrington.

During the preparation of the LP, officers assessed Harrington as one of the least sustainable of all the sites under consideration - and that contributed to it being excluded from the final draft. In the new application and EIA the applicants will presumably attempt to demonstrate that this assessment was flawed or that they have dealt with the problems officers highlighted. In particular, the applicants seem to be stressing the environmental sustainability of the scheme - eg they claim it will be powered by solar energy rather than gas (presumably a reference to the separate proposals for two solar farms nearby), and that the vast proportion of residents will work in the new community and will therefore not contribute further congestion to local roads.

There are signs that the Inspector of the LP, who has already started his preparatory work for the Examination in Public (and who was responsible for the successful inspection of Oxford City' LP last year) is largely content with the numbers and site allocations of SODC's draft LP. The emerging LP has allocated more houses than we are deemed to need partly so that it would remain sound even if the Inspector were to ask us to take out some houses (or, indeed, one or more entire sites) - ie the LP could still be sound even if some of the smaller sites were taken out entirely. But in the event of one of the larger sites - Chalgrove, for example - being removed it is not impossible that the Inspector would consider Harrington an appropriate alternative.

SODC believes the emerging LP to be sound and deliverable, and will be defending it robustly at Inspection in its current form. But the fact remains that the Inspector may take a different view.

What happens if the Inspector does not decide to include Harrington in the Local Plan?

Normally, an application of this scale would have to be determined within 16 weeks, but this is often extended with agreement of the applicants. As this application seems to have been timed to coincide with the Inspection of the emerging LP, it must be likely that the applicants in this case would agree for a determination of the planning application to be delayed till the end of the Inspection. So we can expect the Inspection to run its course (with representation from many parties including SODC and the Harrington promoters) before the planning application is determined.

In the event that the Inspector signs off the emerging LP as it is currently drafted (ie without Harrington) and it becomes our adopted LP, SODC would then have to consider the Harrington planning application on its merits. Harrington conflicts with the emerging LP, and would be in conflict with the adopted LP, so it is unlikely that SODC would seek to approve it.

This has been prepared by the SODC Ward Member for Haseley Brook, Caroline Newton, with the support of some of her residents and gives a good view of the situation as it stands at present.

Local Plan 2034

As you will be aware, this has been seriously delayed by the Administration's inability to accept the advice of the professionals, instead choosing to rely on the view of then Cabinet Member for Planning Leigh Rawlings and the CPRE. From taking power in May until late September, the Administration had been unable to define a clear policy for moving forward, and had not been able to convince the Scrutiny Committee (Chaired by Ian) that it had a way forward even though it holds the majority of the seats. This policy vacuum was of great concern to us and also to the other District, City and County Councils and it put their plans at risk as well. This issue is of such significant that the SoS took the reluctant decision to initially suspend all progress on LP2034 or any other activity at that level, until the Administration could show that it had a clear grasp of the planning requirements and law and a clear policy. After over 6 months of 'negotiations' with the SoS, the Administration could only suggest abandoning LP2034 and starting afresh, relying on LP2011 and Core Strategy 2012. This was unacceptable to the SoS, who reluctantly decided to direct that LP2034 should proceed under report to him.

Questions have been raised about the democratic rights and whether this was the right thing to do. In our view, yes, for two reasons. Firstly the Wheatley Appeal result demonstrates that a delay of another five years until a new plan replacing LP2034 would have been disastrous for our communities. Secondly, the Administration had not developed a real high-level view of what it's policy

should be which would result in further delay. It was an extremely difficult decision and one we would not like to have to make.

The situation on LP2034 is that it is now progressing through the examination stage and the Inspectors (yes, we have two working on it!) first set of questions have been answered.

SODC Finances

You may have seen comment by the present Administration that we left the Council's finances in a mess, heading for a situation in which the Council would be unable to balance the books and would eat into reserves.

Our position is simple. Yes, we minimized increases in our part of the Council Tax during the years of Austerity relying on income from investments (Reserves) and during our final year in charge implemented a series of changes to mitigate this and correct the trend. The current Administration's budget is effectively the same budget that we had prepared prior to last year's election. Our view is that reserves are there to help when things are tight. What is the point in having them if that is not one of the reasons?

Advice to help food banks and markets stay open

After learning some food banks and food markets had closed over concerns about maintaining social distancing, staff from Oxfordshire County Council and Cherwell District Council have devised practical infection control guidance for people and organisations supporting more vulnerable groups. A shared resource is now in place which helps communities, third-sector organisations and small businesses understand how to keep themselves and others safe. The guidance, which has received positive feedback, has helped several food banks and food markets to remain open, providing essential items to less privileged individuals and families.

South and Vale's community support service

South and Vale's community support service has connected over 500 residents with local community groups since the service was established less than a month ago. Consisting of more than 65 FTE staff volunteers and 200 community groups, the service is aimed at residents who need help because of their health or financial circumstances and who have nowhere else to turn. To date the councils have delivered more than 119 food parcels, feeding 238 residents including 55 children

Grants

Before the CoVID-19 crisis started, Council agreed to maintain the Councillor's Grant at £5,000 following recommendation of the Scrutiny Committee that the Administration should not reduce this to £2,500.

At the beginning of the crisis, a decision was made to change to rules of the scheme to make available £2000 of the Grant Pot to each councillor to enable us to help in emergencies where a small amount of money was needed. So we have combined our funding and have £4,000. So far, and we don't find this surprising the way that our Parishes immediately organized themselves through good planning and having vibrant, caring communities, we haven't needed to dip into this. We are aware that a significant number of our residents have had to make use of the Food Bank in Thame and we are exploring ways in which we can help support that endeavour.

Waste and Recycling - Reminder

At the start of the CoVID-19 crisis we had very real concerns about the collection of waste and due to the virus' potential impact on the Biffa crews, to what extent collections would continue. We had a very real expectation that Brown Bin Garden waste collections would be suspended in line with the bulky waste and kerb-side electrical and cloth items.

There has been some disruption with the crews on the main collection vehicles being reduced from three to two due to the need for some isolation but they have done splendidly and giving them a wave, a thumbs-up or a smile tells them that they are appreciated; you can tell from the smiles on their faces!

It looks as if the Brown bin collections will continue and bulky item collections have been resumed. All other aspects are under review.

Update on fly-tips

There has been a lot of coverage in the local and national media about fly-tipping in the lockdown, particularly while household recycling centres are closed. Locally it's had a lot of focus since a press release earlier this week by Oxford City Council on the subject.

Here are our figures for February to April this year, and the same period last year for comparison. While the provisional figures for April are quite high, they were just as high in March, before the recycling centres were closed.

	2018/19	2019/20
February	59	68
March	82	92
April	74	90*

*The figures for April this year are provisional, any may change following validation checks.

Business grants

Hot off the press – the Secretary of State has today given the councils a heads up that it will be extending its grants scheme to small businesses that don't currently pay business rates – for example, businesses operating from serviced offices. We're expecting the guidance to follow soon, and we'll share the full details with councillors in a future update.

A quick update on the current scheme:

- We've paid all of the straightforward requests we've received
- We're processing all straightforward grant requests on the day we receive them (it takes a couple of days for payments to reach bank accounts)
- We're putting all available resources into working through the remaining requests that require additional checks as a matter of urgency – this is to ensure we're not giving money out to ineligible businesses. We're hoping to have all these queries resolved by 20 May.

There is much more we could write but seven pages is already too much!

Lynn Lloyd and Ian White

South Oxfordshire District Councillors for the Chinnor Ward..