

District Councillors' Annual Review 2016 / 2017

Dealing with Issues

We have continued to actively supported our Parish Councils and residents with questions and issues concerning development ranging from questions about fences and hedges up to issues around new major developments. We encouraged the District Council to fight two Planning Appeal rulings with Judicial Reviews in the High Court at the start of this Council year, but unfortunately the Court found in favour of the developers, ending our Five Year Land Supply.

We have worked with our MP John Howell in trying to get back control of development. John has been the driving force behind the Neighbourhood Planning Bill and White Paper proposals that were before Parliament before the General Election was called, and if the present administration is returned to government, these should become part of Planning Law. As it stands, John worked hard to get Planning Minister Gavin Barwell MP support for Neighbourhood Planning, resulting in his Written Ministerial Statement before Christmas, which has helped the Planning Committee refuse unwanted applications, most notably at Sonning Common.

Didcot Garden Town is a major part of our plan for development in the District, offering a significant number of jobs and homes. Following the consultation, all comments from the website, events and conversations with community groups are being used to help prepare a draft masterplan for the Garden Town. This masterplan will be published soon.

Our plans to 'refresh' Berinsfield are progressing at a good pace and will bring significant benefits to this community and the wider district.

SODC Successes

Community Safety

Even with the major cuts of the austerity years, our Police & Crime Commissioner has introduced initiatives seeing Thames Valley Police Force's performance maintain its position as one of the effective forces, right at the top of the League. Our Community Safety Team work closely with the CS Partnership strengthening the County's contributions.

Waste and Recycling

For the third year SODC has been awarded top place in the Recycling League Table in the country. We are asked if waste really is recycled, and we can confirm that that is the case. We have worked with the council's Waste Team and BIFFA, who are up-grading their fleet of lorries and trialling new collection methods to further improve the service.

Finances

South Oxfordshire remains a financially sound council. Despite increasing financial restrictions, we have been able to freeze for the second year running, our part of the council tax. Our sound and prudent approach to money has still allowed us to maintain our Capital & Revenue Grants scheme. This scheme has provided;

Revenue Grants - £391,037 to 15 organisations towards their 2016-17 running costs. We also awarded £1.7 million to a further 17 organisations for the four years 2017-21.

Capital Grants - £998,817 to 25 projects including play area improvements, window replacements and defibrillators, we will be maintaining this in the coming year.

Unitary Authority Bids

Our proposals for a Unity Authority were stopped by the changes within the Government following the Brexit decision last year. Following the County Council's publication of its revised proposals earlier this year, we and the Vale council decided to join them in preparing a combined bid which would deliver based on the strengths of all three councils, which is now with the Department for Communities and Local Government.

Other Matters

In June 2016 the councils pledged to resettle eight Syrian refugee families under a Home Office funded scheme. The scheme is making good progress - Two families have been resettled here in South Oxfordshire,

We have published the Encouraging volunteering in the districts report, a summary of consultation and research undertaken to develop an understanding of how volunteering could be supported and encouraged by the councils. The survey shows that about 25 per cent of residents from all age groups across South and Vale undertake voluntary work. The types of volunteering are varied with community and environmental activities the most popular.

We have helped secure grants for our Parish Councils, supported the various initiatives being taken with neighbourhood planning and provided help and advice in any areas where we can.

Our housing needs team has picked up a Bronze Award from the National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS) as part of their ongoing work in preventing homelessness. This demonstrates again the commitment of both councils and its staff to work together to help prevent people in the most vulnerable households from becoming homeless. The standard for these awards is very high so this is great news and highlights the improvements the team have made to their service. They will deservedly pick up their Bronze Award at the NPSS conference in July.

South and Vale urban design officers together with collaboration from other specialist officers have had the South Oxfordshire Design Guide shortlisted for the Public Sector entry in the Francis Tibbalds Urban Design Awards 2017. Being shortlisted for the award is a good step towards raising the profile of the Council and the need to secure high quality design in South Oxfordshire. Awarded by the Urban Design Group, the awards give more recognition to urban design work, particularly at project stage.

We helped drive the festivities for the Queen's Ninetieth Birthday Celebrations in June last year and helped with provision of funding. 72 parishes were awarded £50,626 to help pay for community events including street fairs, barn dances and firework displays.

That's our summary of 2016/2017. Fuller details are in our Monthly Reports which are provided to the Parish Councils.

Richard Pullen
District Councillor
Benson & Crowmarsh