

Annual Report – South Oxfordshire District Council

2022-2023

Corporate Plan Delivery

The Council adopted its current Corporate Plan towards the end of 2020, so 2022-23 was the second full year of its implementation. We have continued to publish quarterly performance reports, which contain a vast amount of information, facts and figures about the activities and priorities of the Council. They also highlight where progress has not been as good as hoped. The reports are remarkably readable and provide much more in-depth information than can be provided in this annual report, so again we encourage everyone to take a look at <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/corporateplan>.

The Climate Action Plan quarterly reports are also available on the Council's website, as are a whole host of other qualitative and quantitative reports. A new Data Hub holds all of this information and can be access at any time at <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/datahub>.

The Community Hub – now a permanent fixture

The Community Hub was set up in the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic to provide support across the District, most particularly for vulnerable residents. Much of this work was funded by Government grants, while Council officers were redeployed to work in the Hub while their normal work was suspended (e.g. planning site visits). The Hub proved to be so valuable and appreciated by our communities that it was agreed to integrate it into the “business as usual” structure of the Council once the central funding ceased and it now has a strong focus on community resilience and well-being, post-Covid recovery and helping with the cost-of-living crisis.

Housing Delivery Strategy

In November 2022 the Council adopted a new Housing Delivery Strategy, which will enable SODC to deliver a range of genuinely affordable housing either directly or in partnership with 3rd parties such as Community Land Trusts or Registered Providers like SOHA. The first Council-owned homes will be built in Didcot – the first SODC-owned housing built for 25 years – while others have been delivered or approved in Henley and Thame. Alongside the new strategy there is a budget of several million pounds available by releasing CIL funds paid by developers over the years.

This strategy does not include the affordable homes provided by large-scale developers, which now account for 40% of all new sites.

Climate Action and Nature Restoration

Residents across the district agree that taking action to protect and restore nature is the number one priority, with reducing our carbon emissions and mitigating the impact of climate change ranking almost as highly. Over the past year the Council has strengthened its core Climate Action team and is now working with colleagues across the county and beyond to deliver a wide range of important projects. These include tree and hedgerow planting, decarbonising the Council's leisure centres, managing SODC-owned land in a more nature-friendly way and rolling out the EV charging infrastructure that will be so necessary to achieve our net zero targets. It has been very pleasing to see how many of the applications for SODC grants have focused on improving energy-efficiency and restoring nature to local communities.

The Council is part of a county-wide programme called PaZCO – Pathways to a Zero Carbon Oxfordshire – for which a route map and action plan was developed during this past year. This sets out ambitious targets for reaching our net zero ambitions and identifies how partnership working can help the Council to implement its own Climate Action Plan.

A new Local Nature Partnership (LNP) for Oxfordshire has also been established, involving both private and public sector bodies; the Leader of SODC holds a seat on this group. Access to green spaces has been proven to benefit health and well-being as well as nature itself, so this is a priority focus for the LNP.

Improving our Finances and Investing to Save

The past year has seen an ongoing focus on reducing the annual deficit in the Council's operating position. As with any organisation, this can be done by increasing revenue, reducing costs, or both. Action has been taken at all levels to deliver a budget for 2022-23 that meets the legal requirements for medium-term sustainability. Residents will see an increase of 3.6% in the SODC-portion of their Council Tax, well below the current rate of inflation.

In this past year, Council staff moved out of the Milton Park offices and into temporary shared accommodation at Abbey House in Abingdon. This building can accommodate approximately 40 SODC officers but its facilities are very limited (there is no space large enough for a Council meeting, for example) and is not easy to reach by public transport. While this move is saving the two Councils almost £1m per year in rent, it is not a long-term option as the building is owned by Vale of White Horse Council, which is currently assessing its own options. Our plans to build new, sustainable and modern offices at the SODC-owned Didcot Gateway site are progressing steadily as part of a wider regeneration project for this location. Didcot will be taking approximately 16,500 new houses over the next ten years and the regeneration of a very run-down site opposite the mainline train station is a key priority for the town and for our council. The new offices, should they receive planning permission, will include public space, sensitive landscaping and spare office capacity to generate rental income, which will help to balance the books. Financially it makes sense to invest in a capital revenue-generating asset rather than continuing to spend money from our current account on rent.

Last year the Council appointed a specialist officer to identify and secure external sources of funding for special projects. This post has already paid for itself many times over by bringing in additional money to support climate action, housing schemes and the local economy.

A new CIL strategy, adopted in late 2022, ensures that where viability allows, developers are now required to pay more to the council to support infrastructure projects in local communities. Loopholes have also been closed: importantly, luxury aged care accommodation is now CIL liable. This will generate significantly more income for infrastructure investment to support a growing population.

Planning and Enforcement

This has been another busy year for the Planning team, both in its day-to-day business of assessing and monitoring applications and in the work of the Planning Policy team to develop the new Joint Local Plan with Vale of White Horse Council. The results of the "issues consultation" have previously been shared with the Parish Council; to repeat, the new plan will focus more strongly on environmental factors, sustainability and green infrastructure than on further housing growth. The current Local Plan (LP2035) remains in place and the Council was able to publish a robust and well-

evidenced 5-year Housing Land Supply statement in July 2022. At the time of writing we await further news from Government about proposed planning reforms.

The new system to assess and take action on reported breaches of planning rules has been assessed by the cross-party Scrutiny Committee as being effective and proportionate; there will never be enough resource to take action on every planning breach, but the new system ensures that the most serious cases are acted upon promptly.