

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

July 2020.

Planning

New 'temporary' process removing Parish Council Planning Referrals and limiting District Councillor Planning Call-In to Planning Committee

Some of you will be aware that the Administration has used the emergency powers granted to the council Chief Executive Officers to make amendments to the Council's Constitution without the agreement of Full Council. The intentions of these powers were to enable flexibility to deal with the unexpected, urgent needs that arose and continue to arise due to the CoVID_19 crisis.

It comes as a surprise that these powers have been used to remove a number of important democratic principles from the constitution in respect of planning.

Specifically, the Parish Council's referral to Planning Committee if its recommendations are in conflict with the Case Officer's has been removed. In a similar move, the Right of a District Councillor to Call In an application to Planning Committee, so long as the Councillor has a Material Reason has been removed and instead the agreement of both the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Planning Committee are required to agree the Councillor's request. In effect, either of the two can veto the Councillor's Call-In and there is no route for appeal.

The reason being given is the need to clear a back-log of cases, although no evidence has been provided to support this statement, and whilst video options for committee meetings have been available for some time, there has been little effort put into using this to resolve any issues.

Having taken considerable issue with the Secretary of State's decision to use his statutory powers to direct the Council to progress Local Plan 2034, calling this undemocratic, even though the Administration has no alternative, viable proposal, this seems to us to be a strange way of championing the democratic process. They do say that they intend to review this after 6 AND 12 months, but given that it is modeled on an approach that was introduced in the Vale Of White Horse several years ago to reduce a back-log and which remains in place to this day, we are concerned that it will become a permanent fixture.

We have confirmed with the Secretary of State that it was not his intention that the emergency powers should be used in this way.

With this in mind, Cllr Jane Murphy, seconded by Cllr Ian White, will be putting forward the following Motion at the next Full Council Meeting.

'I move that the recent changes to the Council's Constitution under Section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 made by the Chief Executive Officer and documented in the CEO's Decision Notice of the 18th May 2020 in respect of the passage of Planning Applications through

the approvals procedure should be rescinded with immediate effect and the business as usual procedure previously in force be reinstated.

The removal of the automatic referral of applications to the Planning Committee where the Parish or Town Council recommendations are material and at odds with the officer's recommendations is an unnecessary removal of transparency, an affront to the natural democratic process, disproportionate and inappropriate.

Similarly, the requirement that a Councillor's Right of referral of an application to Planning Committee should be subject to the agreement of two other Councillors, being the Chair and Vice Chair of the Planning Committee, effectively creates the 'right of Veto' over a fellow councillor. This establishes an arbitrary two tier system of Councillors with one councillor effectively holding greater power over another, and with no mechanism for appeal, removing the Planning Committee's power of arbitration and decision, which is again undemocratic and inappropriate.'

For these reasons, the 'temporary changes' are inappropriate and should be rescinded immediately, restoring democratic controls.'

We know that some of our Parish Councils have already written to the Leader of the Council, Sue Cooper, Cabinet Member Anne-Marie Simpson and Chief Executive Officer, Mark Stone, expressing their concern and that others intend to do so, and we thank you for your support.

Harringtons

Information about this project is still very sketchy, although there seems little doubt that there is some activity going on in the background. Your Conservative councillors continue to be vigilant to the threat posed by this proposal to build a new town. Local SODC councillors have been leading resistance to the scheme. Together with John Howell MP and OCC councillors, we have written to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, underlining our opposition to the scheme.

Other Proposals

We are aware of other proposals in the District and we continue to press for more clarity about these so we can decide what our position should be and what actions we should take. These include a warehousing Distribution Centre at Waterstock near Wheatley, suggestions that Homes England will bring their plans forward for development at Chalgrove and Reading's plans for a third Thames Bridge and a Relief Road north of the Thames.

We will keep you posted.

Planning enforcement update

Our Planning Enforcement colleagues continue to adapt the way they work remotely to provide their service. Given social distancing regulations and other pressures on staff during COVID-19 this has been quite challenging. However, since Easter the team has been carrying out limited social distancing site visits,

while recognising local situations where occupiers may be self-isolating or shielding.

New case requests for investigations, and expectations of the Planning Enforcement service, have now returned to pre-Covid19 levels. However, as a result of the ongoing challenges, the team cannot currently provide our 'normal' level of service but are working hard to balance outstanding and new casework.

Our Planning Enforcement team would like to thank you for your continued support and understanding while they work hard to deliver this service.

Local Plan 2034

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

Virtual Hearing Sessions will commence at 10.00am on Tuesday 14th July and will be conducted via Microsoft Teams.

Version 2 of the [Programme \(82.8 KB\)](#)  is now available which includes a list of invited participants for each session. Matter 5 (Spatial Strategy) and Matter 6 (Green Belt) have also been amalgamated into a single session due to interrelated issues.

A [Guidance Note for Participants \(84.3 KB\)](#)  has been produced by the Inspector and covers arrangements for the Hearings.

The Planning Inspectorate has produced a [Technical Note for Digital Events](#)

More information about the local plan can be found on our web site at

<http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/services-and-advice/planning-and-building/planning-policy/local-plan-2034>

Lewknor Neighbourhood Plan

The Lewknor Neighbourhood Plan is currently out for pre-submission consultation, which closes on 31 July. The documents are available to view on the website [here](#).

<http://www.lewknorparishnp.org/>

If you'd like to make any comments on the plan, please do visit the web site and make your views known.

Oxfordshire Plan 2050

Along with other district councils, we're helping to prepare the Oxfordshire Plan 2050, which will set out the long-term plan for the whole county.

Our joint team has commissioned an Oxfordshire Growth Needs Assessment (OGNA), which will set out how many new homes will be needed in the county from now until 2050.

A formal consultation on the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 Regulation 18 Stage 2 plan will take place in early 2021. Residents will be able to comment on the number of new homes needed and the broad locations for development up to 2050.

Postal Deliveries

Postal deliveries in the Ward have been poor for a long time and even worse since the start of the CoVID-19 crisis. We are fully aware that the short comings are not the fault of the post men and women responsible for making the deliveries, who do an excellent job and often work ridiculous hours; letters and parcels have been received late afternoon on a disturbingly regular basis and we thank them for their contributions, particularly during the CoVID-19 crisis.

Whilst the postal service is a long way outside our remit as councillors, Lynn has taken the matter up with a senior Director within Royal Mail who has looked into the issue and has promised that remedial action will be taken, both short term and long term, to improve the situation. So, watch this space, or more appropriately, your letter box.

Recognition for our volunteers

Last month we were celebrating all the amazing work by volunteers in our districts and there's now an opportunity to get them formal recognition. The government is looking for nominations for honours or awards.

If you would like to nominate someone you think has made an exceptional contribution to the response to the Covid-19 crisis in the UK please do visit: <https://www.gov.uk/honours/nominate-someone-for-coronavirus-work>

South and Vale's community support service

Contact visits by the Community Support Hub

In the past couple of weeks, visits have been made to check on the welfare of the 269 vulnerable residents across both districts that officers have been unable to reach by phone or email. They were able to speak to 161 on the doorstep and left letters where possible for the rest. Of these visits, 5 were in the Chinnor Ward.

The visits proved to be worthwhile; most people they spoke to were absolutely fine and needed no additional help at this time, six individuals needed immediate support and another eight wanted to talk to somebody about what additional help they could get, but not urgently.

Some kind offers from councillors to help with these visits have been made but after seeking further advice on this matter, for GDPR reasons this is sadly not possible.

Council tax support available for residents

There are approximately 6,000 residents in both South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse who have missed the latest payment on their 2020/21 council tax bill, which excludes those who currently receive council tax support.

We're sending a letter to these residents to make them aware of the outstanding payment and to encourage them to get in touch with us if they're experiencing financial difficulties. There's a number of options available to residents that may be struggling to pay their bill such as changes to payment arrangements, by direct debit instalments, or applying for council tax support.

Above all, our message to anyone who is struggling to pay remains that they should contact our council tax team as soon as possible on to discuss the support available:

The number that they should call is - 0345 302 2313

Discretionary Business Grants

By the deadline on Wednesday we had received 137 applications for the discretionary business grants scheme, which we're now evaluating against the eligibility criteria. We're also following up with some of the applicants seeking further information and clarification.

If all these eligible applications are successful we will still have some limited funding left for a second round of applications, which we're planning for 29 June to 6 July.

Other local authorities have reported being in the same position as us – largely down to the very tight eligibility criteria the government applied to the funds.

For this second round, we'll have wider eligibility criteria and will be contacting the 300 or so businesses that began an application for the last round but abandoned it when it became clear they weren't eligible.

As before, we will be offering grants of around £5,000 to a maximum of £10,000 depending on the size of the business.

All the eligibility details for this second round will be on our business support website next week at www.svbs.co.uk, ready for its launch on 29 June.

New High Street Funding

Like all local authorities, we have been allocated some funding to help the high streets move into the next phase of the lockdown and we've received £125,160 at South Oxfordshire.

There are some strict guidelines on what we can use the money. We're currently asking teams to consider how best to use the funding given the guidance that it should be used for marketing or education campaigns rather than on physical changes.

We are also having initial discussion with town and parish councils about the funding. When we have some firmer proposals for how we can make the best use of the funding we'll share the details in a future update.

Virtual meetings

We are currently working on providing a system that will allow the general public, town and parish councils and other external organisations to contribute directly to our virtual committee meetings, which we will be testing shortly – should the tests be successful, we are hoping to implement the new system as soon as possible.

On 18 May the Chief Executive took a decision, under emergency powers, for the councils to hold virtual meetings including the adoption of virtual meeting procedure rules. The priority, at that time, was to ensure the councils used a safe platform for the transmission of live meetings which would be accessible for members of the public. The software we use for our virtual meetings meant we couldn't initially include invitations to external parties like towns and parishes, although we made it clear that they would, along with any other interested parties, be able to provide written statements, which many have done. To date these meetings have been successful and allowed the councils to maintain a transparent democratic decision making process.

We agreed to review this arrangement after six months but made it clear that the operation would be kept under review with the ambition to return to public speaking as soon as possible. Officers have been actively investigating and working on options to allow external parties like towns and parishes and members of the public to address council committee meetings using the current meetings platform. We believe we have found a solution, which we will be testing over the coming weeks with the intention of introducing it for the meeting of the Joint Audit and Governance Committee on 13 July and then hopefully rolling it out for all meetings (including the Planning Committee) after that. All of our meetings need to continue in the meantime, particularly the planning committee, following the government's guidance that we should do all we can to continue the planning process.

New Thames Champion for South Oxfordshire

It seems such a long time ago now, but at the Full Council Meeting of 11th October 2018, Cllr Lynn Lloyd put forward a motion in respect of the River Thames and its importance to our District as she had felt for some time that it

was a resource that was often overlooked. This is the text of that motion which was passed by Full Council.

Motion to be proposed by Councillor Lynn Lloyd, seconded by Councillor Felix Bloomfield:

That Council asks officers to investigate opportunities to better promote the River Thames for tourism and leisure activities for all residents especially young people in the district.

Things often seem to move slowly in local government but this month the administration announced that Cllr Jo Robb is taking on the newly created role of Thames Champion. The River Thames is one of our most precious natural assets and Cllr Robb will be networking with river users, councillors and neighbouring councils to improve access to the river, and to protect and enhance its biodiversity and cleanliness. You can find out more about Cllr Robb's new role on [our press release](#).

<http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/news/2020/2020-06/councillor-set-champion-river-thames-south-oxfordshire>

Waste and Recycling - Reminder

Collections for our Ward have been maintained at a near normal level of service during the CoVID_19 crisis and now this is easing we do not expect to see any significant disruption. The variable heat-waives we are experiencing at the moment do mean that crews are setting out earlier from time to time and we advise that waste bins are put out for 6:00AM on the day of collection when this happens. Details are posted on the SODC web site and twitter, but the safest thing we find is to put them out the night before where possible.

It is disappointing that the crews are finding that there is an increasing trend in recycling bins being contaminated with non-recyclable items such as food waste and nappies. Where this happens, the bin will not be emptied and an explanatory note left.

Hopefully you saw our press release on Last month about contamination and our online recycling quiz - as a gentle reminder to residents to recycle responsibly.

It seems everyone loves a quiz - we have been delighted with the public response – in less than two days since it was launched it has been shared across social media and **more than 1,200 people** have taken part. We will be analysing the responses to see which items people are confident about and which they are unsure of and target later comms to help people put the right thing in the right bin.

If you haven't yet tested your recycling knowledge then [click here to take the Green Recycling Bin Quiz](#)

<https://survey.southandvale.gov.uk/s/TheGreenRecyclingBinQuiz/>

There is much more we could write but seven (and a bit!) pages is already too much!

Lynn Lloyd and Ian White

South Oxfordshire District Councillors for the Chinnor Ward..