

District Councillor Update:
Cllr Jo Robb, South Oxfordshire District Council
February 2022

Voter ID

Despite scant evidence of electoral fraud, for the first time, voters will be required to show photo identification to be able to vote at polling stations on May 4. The new requirements, introduced by the UK government last year, mean that you must show ID to be able to cast your vote at polling stations in local elections as well as Police and Crime Commissioner polls and general elections. Many people are unaware of this change so please make sure you have acceptable photo ID – passport or drivers' licence - with you when you come to the ballot box. A full list of other acceptable forms of ID is available on the SODC website (see below) and on the Electoral Commission website. If you don't have an approved form of ID, you can register for a postal vote or if you'd like to vote in person, you can apply for a Voter Authority Certificate – for this you only need a passport sized photo and your National Insurance Number. Applications close on April 25. Please don't lose your democratic right to vote! More information can be found here:

<https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/local-democracy-and-elections/elections-and-voting/new-for-2023-you-will-need-to-show-photo-id-when-voting-at-a-polling-station/>

Money, Money, Money

One of the key priorities of our administration at SODC has been to steer the council to financial stability. During budget setting season especially, financial stability and ensuring value for money are utmost in member's minds.

This has meant reducing costs through ending expensive outsourcing arrangements and bringing services back in house where possible; as well as making difficult choices to increase revenues through raising council tax and fees and charges such as parking charges in council-owned carparks and fees for planning applications. It has also meant ensuring that those who should be paying tax are doing so. When, last year, one of my administration councillor colleagues discovered that a number of larger businesses were not paying business rates, the council employed external consultants to audit the business rates register. The result was a net of £2.6m of back tax of which £500,000 has been retained by SODC. It will see an extra £200,000 a year coming into the District going forward. Shows the benefit of having diligent local representatives!

A newly updated Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) Charging Schedule has also been adopted, requiring developers to pay more towards new local infrastructure. The new schedule closes some major loopholes and CIL, for the first time, will now be levied on student housing, build-to-rent housing and, importantly, on older people's accommodation including the luxury type approved by the planning inspector at Little Sparrows on Blounts Court Road in Sonning Common. All these were previously exempt from CIL.

The Budget, which passed through Scrutiny in late February, and will be coming to Full Council on 16 February, was balanced with £500,000 of reserves being used to fund ongoing

priority projects. Based on ongoing need, the Community Hub will continue while funds are also being made available for the continuation of the council's climate team which is leading the council's retrofit, nature recovery and clean rivers work.

£4.6m is also being allocated for the purchase of 21 properties to be used to provide permanent accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers about to go onto the housing register. This is part of the government's £500m Local Authority Housing Fund. The properties will form part of the council's own social housing stock. SODC is investing some £10m in acquiring and building social housing as part of the Housing Strategy agreed by Council last December.

<https://democratic.southoxon.gov.uk/documents/b9990/Budget%20papers%20supplement%20Thursday%2026-Jan-2023%2018.00%20Scrutiny%20Committee.pdf?T=9>

Cost of Living

The Cost of Living crisis is continuing to impact local residents and for this reason, the District Council is keeping its Community Hub open. We have also opened a third round of the Household Support Fund to those who are struggling to make ends meet. Anyone experiencing hardship should contact the Hub where officers can guide residents to the support that's available and provide confidential advice: 01235 422 600 or communitysupport@southandvale.gov.uk.

Sewage (Again)

It was pleasing to have played a part in making water companies more transparent about sewage discharges. After months of work by their technical team, Thames Water has released its online sewage discharge map. I don't recommend anyone check the map before eating - it makes particularly grim viewing during times of heavy rainfall. The map will be especially useful during the summer should you or your family fancy a dip in the river. Of course, transparency is all well and good, but we must continue to push for an end to sewage dumping. <https://www.thameswater.co.uk/edm-map>

Great British Spring Clean

This year we'll again be supporting the Keep Britain Tidy Great British Spring Clean by loaning litter pickers, high-viz jackets and bags to community litter picking groups and individuals. The event runs from Monday 17 March to Sunday 2 April. Equipment can be booked by completing and returning the booking form and declaration document to waste.team@southandvale.gov.uk. The forms are available on our South litter picking pages.

Homes for Refugees

SODC's Housing Team has one of the best track records in the country for reducing homelessness (as reported in our Quarterly Performance Management Reports) and is putting its expertise to good use in finding accommodation for refugees as well. Now that many Ukrainian visitors are reaching the end of their initial six-month stays with local families, some are having to find new homes and the Housing Team is working hard on this challenge. We will also further funding from central government's Local Authority Housing

Fund (see above) shortly to purchase accommodation on the open market for this purpose, to reduce the cost of temporary hotel accommodation. There are several benefits to this approach (which we had started to deploy in any case with our own limited funds) because we are able to ensure these homes are energy-efficient and of an appropriate quality as well as benefiting from rental payments and adding to our own eventual housing stock.

In the meantime, monthly payments to hosts of Ukrainian guests have increased to £550 over the winter and we are still keen to hear from anyone willing to provide accommodation to families in need; any enquiries can be directed to the SODC Community Hub – www.southoxon.gov.uk/ukraine

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) Consultation

The Government is asking people for their views on their proposed approach to updating the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The NPPF sets out the government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied. The policies set out in the NPPF apply to the preparation of Local Plans and Neighbourhood Plans and to decisions on planning applications. The NPPF covers a wide range of topics including: housing, business, economic development, transport and the natural environment. To find out more, visit the Government's consultation webpage. The consultation closes on 2 March 2023

Leisure needs survey

We have appointed Stuart Todd Associates to undertake two studies to support the work on our Joint Local Plan, the Playing Pitch Strategy (PPS) and the Leisure Facilities Assessment and Strategy (LFAS). The two studies will help provide updated guidance and evidence of leisure needs in both South and Vale. As part of the work Stuart Todd Associates and the National Governing Bodies are writing to sports clubs, parish councils and local organisations to find out more about the leisure provision in the districts. Please can I encourage anyone who is contacted to respond to the survey.