

SODC District Councillor Report  
Cllr Georgina Heritage  
Haseley Brook ward



## **Annual Report**

### **May 2024**

#### **First year of a Second Term for the Liberal Democrat/Green Administration**

In May 2023 the ruling administration at SODC was re-elected with an increased number of councillors; the partnership is now made up of 21 LibDems and 8 Greens. The majority party, the Liberal Democrats, made the decision to continue the administration partnership with the Green party. There was one change to the membership of the Cabinet, with Cllr Freddie van Mierlo joining following his election in Watlington. Cllr David Rouane (LD) continues as the Leader of the Council, with Deputy Leaders Cllr Maggie Filipova-Rivers (LD) and Cllr Robin Bennett (G).

This resounding result vindicated the focus that had been placed on nature, climate change, affordable housing and community well-being over the previous four years and gives us the confidence to develop a new 4-year strategic plan through to 2028 which builds on the progress made during our First Term. This annual report highlights some of those achievements and explains how our strategic priorities are being translated into delivery by Council officers.

#### **Affordable Housing Delivery**

The SODC Local Plan 2035 includes a policy which ensures that 40% of new housing developments of 10 or more units are affordable, with a variety of tenures included. In 2023/24 156 affordable home completions have been registered so far (with another quarter to go), and a new **Housing Delivery Strategy** adopted in November 2023 will enable SODC to build up its own stock of houses for social rent or to provide funding for 3<sup>rd</sup> parties such as Community Land Trusts or Housing Associations to deliver more homes.

A small development on the Broadway in Didcot will be the first homes built by the Council in over 25 years, and we have also been able to purchase over 20 houses with the help of a 40% grant from the Government as part of the Local Authority Housing Fund programme.

A new **Empty Homes Policy** has been adopted in March 2024 to enable the council's Housing Team to more actively engage with private owners to return properties to the rental market as our housing list grows.

During the past year, SODC has allocated over £7m of CIL funding for infrastructure projects across the district.

## **Joint Local Plan 2041**

Over the past year the Planning Policy team has been working hard on the development of the new Joint Local Plan (covering both South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse districts), which will guide the kinds of new housing and jobs needed and where they should go, informing planning decisions for the districts. A key milestone for the JLP was the “Preferred Options” consultation held between 10 January and 26 February 2024, which was carried out both online and with in-person events and which attracted a very high number of submissions. Feedback from this consultation is now being processed and analysed, and the next stage will be a consultation on the draft Plan in the autumn of 2024.

Having an up-to-date Local Plan is essential to avoid speculative planning applications and unwelcome proposals which do not align with our strategic vision, our housing need or our environmental aspirations for our district. Just as important as the housing site allocations in the Local Plan, are the policies to protect and restore our natural environment – such as reducing light pollution, delivering biodiversity net gain, and securing open green spaces for our communities.

## **Community Hub becomes permanent**

The Community Hub was first set up during Lockdown to provide support for residents during the pandemic. Government funding ceased in 2023 but SODC committed to on-going funding for this important service, particularly as so many residents have been affected by the cost-of-living crisis. The Hub has now been made a permanent part of the Council’s structure and will continue to offer advice and support on a wide range of issues including financial help, housing and homelessness concerns, Council Tax payments and Health and Wellbeing. The Active Communities team runs a variety of activities and programmes to help people recover from Covid-19 or to help families access free or low cost activities that provide physical and mental wellbeing opportunities.

## **SODC Grant Schemes including new CIL Grant Fund**

Each year SODC provides capital and revenue grants to a wide range of voluntary and community organisations to support their on-going operations or to fund a one-off project or event. Many local groups and projects have benefitted from this scheme.

The newly launched CIL Grant Fund is designed to provide much-needed infrastructure to support the growth of the district as a result of recent housing developments. It is the first time local organisations are able to bid for grant funding from SODC’s share of the CIL receipts collected from house builders. At the time of writing, many Expressions of Interest have been registered and funds will be allocated later in 2024.

## **Reducing our Carbon Emissions**

As a Council we have a very ambitious target to achieve Net Zero in our own operations by 2025. Over the past year we have continued to decarbonise our leisure and arts centres by switching to non-fossil fuel heating systems, reducing the temperature of water in swimming pools, circulating warm air more efficiently and generally upgrading the fabric of the buildings. This has helped to reduce emissions considerably, but the largest source of emissions for us is our waste management service, which accounts for over 57% of SODC's total emissions. Decarbonising the entire waste fleet at a time when technology is still evolving and while we were waiting for clarity from the Government on future recycling requirements would have been expensive and impractical, so we haven't been able to make the progress we would have liked. However, we have now agreed a 2-year extension with Biffa and are in the process of acquiring a new fleet of more efficient vehicles and a waste management strategy that will take us further forward towards reaching our goals.

We also continue to collaborate with other authorities across Oxfordshire on the delivery of the "Pathways to a Zero Carbon Oxfordshire" action plan, which includes installing EV charging stations, retrofitting homes to make them more energy efficient, exploring Biodiversity Net Gain projects and renewable energy infrastructure.

## **Recycling Champions!**

We were very excited to be announced as the country's top recycling district in DEFRA's latest tables! Initiatives such as our "Check it before you chuck it" promotional campaign in autumn 2023 demonstrate our commitment to maintaining this position.

## **Financial Stability**

When the council were first elected in 2019, one of the first priorities was to stabilise the finances of South Oxfordshire District Council. They were in a very poor state and the Council were having to draw on around £3m of reserves each year to plug the funding gap in its operating activities.

Over the past few years the Council has restored financial stability and for 2023/24 approved a balanced budget with only a small (sustainable) draw on our reserves. The Council was fortunate to benefit from higher interest rates but we also employed a specialist officer to seek external grant funding to supplement our own resources. This officer has paid for himself several times over by securing government funding for projects such as the decarbonisation of our leisure centres and covering the increased costs of our swimming pools.

The Council Tax charged by SODC remains one of the lowest in the country and it still costs us more to deliver services to new households than we earn in Council Tax receipts, so we have to generate income from other services and grants to cover all our costs. The Council have worked hard to balance increases to fees and charges with the pressures of the cost-of-living crisis and providing value for money remains a priority.

## **Openness and Accountability**

We are committed to transparency in the way we make decisions (almost all our public meetings are live-streamed and all papers are in the public domain at least a week in advance) and to reporting on our performance with honesty and accountability. Our quarterly performance reports are online at [www.southoxon.gov.uk/corporateplan](http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/corporateplan) and our quarterly Climate Action Plan reports are also online at [www.southoxon.gov.uk/climateaction](http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/climateaction).