

SODC Councillor's Monthly Report July 2020 Updated in red (2nd July)

SODC Councillor's emergency £2000 budget for volunteers. I emailed your clerk and chair details of my budget for your comments and thoughts on 30th March 2020. This contained details of eligibility criteria. To date I have now received two requests. These are: (a) A group providing food parcels to the most vulnerable and applied for by Chalgrove Parish Council. I awarded this group £500 and (b) Chalgrove Transport Scheme for medical related transport necessary protection items. I will award this group £400 as soon as they have approval from the medical establishments. I do of course realise that many people are helping each other privately which is great. Please respond to me as appropriate to your communities' needs if you think my fund would be suitable and qualify.

SODC Local Plan. I have already emailed the timetable for the Examination in Public which commences on 14th July. The Chalgrove Airfield item (STRAT7) will be on 28th July. I have registered to speak as has the Chairman of Chalgrove Parish Council and the Chairman of the Chalgrove Action Group-SHIELD. I would be interested to know if any other representatives of Parish Councils and Parish Meetings or others in our Chalgrove Ward have registered or tied to register and have had no response.

SODC 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.

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.

New Thames Champion for South Oxfordshire. 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.

Improvements for cycling across Oxfordshire. Oxfordshire County Council has announced a series of improvements aimed at making cycling safer and more attractive for a range of journeys across Oxfordshire, with funding from a £2.9m two-stage Government grant. The first phase will involve:

Purpose-built cycle parking areas, particularly in market town squares, close to rural bus stops, and at park and rides

Priority given to cycles, from changes to traffic light timings to prioritise people travelling by bike to adapting the road network to allow more space for bikes

An upgraded maintenance scheme for cycle paths and cycle routes, with improved signage and route markings.

As part of the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, along with the other districts, we are working with the county council on a series of Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plans (LCWIPs), with Didcot among the first locations to benefit.

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.

David Turner

SODC Councillor (Chalgrove Ward)

30th June 2020

Support available for those struggling to pay their council tax. People in South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse who have outstanding payments on their council tax bill and are struggling to pay are being urged to contact their district council to find out

what support may be available. An extra £150 of discount is now available to certain residents.

South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils are very aware that many people have new or increased financial worries following the Coronavirus pandemic and there are a number of ways they can help people struggling to pay.

The government hasn't suspended council tax during the pandemic and so it still needs to be paid. The two councils are especially concerned that people could get into further debt if they don't keep up with their payments and so have written to more than 6,000 households, who aren't currently in receipt of council tax support, whose accounts are in arrears, advising them on the options that are available and urging them to get in touch.

The councils can also now confirm that residents receiving a reduction on their council tax via the councils' Council Tax Reduction scheme, will receive up to a further £150 off their 2020/21 council tax bill. The councils are writing to all eligible residents to let them know. The extra discount comes from a government hardship fund announced in April.

Anyone who is worried about being able to afford their council tax should get in touch with the councils to find out about the help that's available to best support them. This can include:

- rescheduling council tax instalments so that they start later or are spread over a longer time;
- applying for council tax support - the councils' council tax reduction scheme can help reduce the amount of council tax people have to pay – visit www.southoxon.gov.uk/ctrs or whitehorsedc.gov.uk/ctrs for details;
- making payment, setting up a Direct Debit, or changing payment arrangements online via southoxon.gov.uk/counciltax or whitehorsedc.gov.uk/counciltax.

To support those who are self-isolating, and to help avoid unnecessary travel and contact, residents are encouraged to pay online. People can make single payments by credit or debit card when it best suits them.

Alternatively, you can pay by calling the 24/7 automated payment service on 0345 302 2313 (south) or 0345 302 2315 (Vale) - please choose option 1 and option 1 again. When you call you will need to quote the council tax reference at the top of this letter or as displayed at the top of your council tax bill, so please make sure you have either of these with you.

More information on the support available to help people pay their council tax can be found on our South and Vale websites.

Cllr Leigh Rawlins, Cabinet Member for Finance at South Oxfordshire District Council, said: “We are obviously concerned that if people are struggling to pay bills at the moment, they could experience much more challenging financial debt problems in a few months’ time. We are therefore writing to people who have missed all, or part of, a recent payment to let them know about the support that’s available. Above all, our message is – if you are struggling to pay, please contact us.”

Cllr Andy Crawford, Cabinet Member for Finance at Vale of White Horse District Council, said: “These are very uncertain times and we know that there will be many people who are now struggling to pay their bills. We want to do what we can to help make sure that your council tax doesn’t add to those worries, so please get in touch with us if you are having trouble paying. Given the potential impact of the current situation on those already on low income I’m pleased that we have been able to provide up to £150 additional discount to those on the Council Tax Reduction scheme.”

David Turner

2nd July 2020