

District Councillor Report

March 2023

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Community well-being and climate action in South Oxfordshire's 2023/24 budget

We approved a budget for 2023/4 that shows a financial position in a **much healthier state** than previously forecast thanks to our careful budgeting work in recent years. It also means the council needs to draw over a million pounds **less** from its reserves to balance the budget than it had prepared for a year ago.

£1 million will be invested over the next two years to invest in the council's corporate plan priorities, including 'Everyone Active', an active communities grant scheme, and continuation of the Community Hub to support the district's most vulnerable residents.

The Community Hub plays an important role providing wide-ranging support and advice for residents the Community Hub delivers cost-of-living help for those in most financial need, such as the Household Support Fund. It also supports the council's ongoing work for refugees and asylum seekers and the work with partners to lead and deliver programmes to address inequalities.

The budget also allocates £4.6 million linked to the government's Local Authority Housing Fund, responding to the UK's humanitarian duties to assist those fleeing war. The £4.6 million represents the council's share of the cost towards providing a supply of 'move-on' and settled accommodation, initially for refugees and asylum seekers. This is in addition to the £2 million of funding to secure homes for people in need that was formally agreed in December, allocated in last year's budget.

Other capital expenditure planned will be to improve South Oxfordshire's infrastructure, including flood prevention, leisure centre improvements and resurfacing and lighting replacement at the council's car parks. Decarbonisation funding, including some Government support, will contribute to retrofitting energy saving measures at Cornerstone Arts Centre.

The budget also includes funds to continue priority projects that have already begun, including tree planting and meadow creation, an extension of last year's No Mow May called 'Let it Bee' and supporting water quality work including an application for Bathing Water Status for a stretch of River Thames.

This year the council will increase its share of the council tax by £5 a year for an average Band D property, so for 2023/24 the Band D rate is £141.24 per household which is a below inflation increase of 3.6 per cent.

Whilst the short-term position is more positive, there is uncertainty around future local government funding, especially from 2025/26 onwards. Financial pressures in the medium-term which will affect all councils are the state of the national economy and the lack of clarity on local authority funding.

Budget papers are available to view on in the Council meeting for 16th February papers: <http://democratic.southoxon.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=122&MId=3057>

Work with developers on the Culham Strategic Housing Site

On 3rd February I attended a presentation and discussion with the landscape architect, developers and planning officers on the masterplan for this large site for new housing. District Cllrs Robin Bennett and Sue Cooper were also there and Cllr Duncan Enright from the County Council as well as parish councillors from Clifton Hampden. The presentation focused on the layout and the design to enable as much green space, walking and cycling provision as possible, and good connections with existing facilities, such as the railway station, Abingdon and the Science centre. I pointed out that there needs to be consideration on whether some land needed to be put aside for a cemetery, that walking and cycling facilities needed to be robust as there will be around 8000 people living there in a decade or so and access to leisure/nature needs to be easily accessible for all the residents. Other questions were about provision of water and sewage, traveller sites and sites for worship/burial of different faiths, and the siting of schools. The architect proposed greater density of housing will be nearer the main road, getting less dense to the north of the site. The area near the river, that floods frequently, would be left as 'green infrastructure'. They also proposed that the smaller pylons across the site would be put underground. The secondary school will be on west of the site, quite near the Europa school. The next step is for a master plan to be agreed and then the start of a planning application. If anyone has any comments or questions, please get in touch with me, details at the bottom of the report.

Electric Charging for Vehicles

SODC's Electric Vehicle chargers at its car parks has seen charging volumes triple in its first full six months of the [Park and Charge scheme](#).

The number of charging sessions has doubled since the chargers were first installed. During the same period the average amount of electricity consumed has tripled, meaning that people are now using them for longer charges.

This represents a saving of 90,397kg of CO₂e if those miles had been driven in a petrol or diesel car.

Judging by the feedback we have received, people who have used the chargers are very pleased with this facility in our car parks.

£1 million boost for community and neighbourhood facilities

South Oxfordshire has been allocated £1 million from the government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund to provide better community and neighbourhood facilities and improve public open spaces to help increase the health and wellbeing of residents.

With the new funds, the council is already starting work to support community facilities to reduce their energy bills and lower their carbon emissions. Another study has begun to see where and how the council can provide more arts and culture opportunities and leisure activities in areas that need it most.

Businesses could also benefit from the funding over the next two years with projects to support their sustainability, help deliver enterprise facilities and increase peoples' skills.

Plans include increasing access to green skills courses to help residents gain a new qualification and bespoke decarbonisation advice for businesses to help everyone to move towards a low carbon or net zero economy. A new strategy is also being developed to promote tourism and encourage visitors to stay in the area to enjoy local attractions.

To help businesses further, the council will be offering opportunities for local organisations to tender for contracts to help deliver the projects taking place in both districts.

To find out more, visit southoxon.gov.uk/UKSPF

A new up to date plan for cycle and walking routes in Didcot

A consultation to identify improvements that can be made to cycling and walking as part of the Local Cycling and Walking Infrastructure Plan (LCWIP) in Didcot has been launched.

This is one area of the South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils [Didcot Garden Town Delivery Plan](#), a plan to help improve the lives of residents living in and around Didcot Garden Town.

As well as focusing on the connection of cycling and walking routes in Didcot the LCWIP will look at a wider area including Milton, Steventon, Harwell, Upton, West Hagbourne, East Hagbourne, Blewbury, South Moreton, North Moreton, Little Wittenham, Chilton, Long Wittenham, Appleford, Culham, Clifton Hampden and Sutton Courtenay.

The aim of this consultation is to gather feedback from people living in the area about the cycle and walking routes they know, to provide better links between Didcot, surrounding villages and new developments to improve connectivity for residents and businesses. It is a vital step in the plans to create safer cycle and walking routes for residents across the Didcot Garden Town area.

The deadline for feedback on this consultation is 11.59pm on Sunday 19 March and details can be found on the [Didcot Garden Town latest news page](#) of the South Oxfordshire District Council website.

After this feedback has been gathered there will be another consultation later this year where the public will be given the opportunity to comment on specific designs, locations, and proposed improvements for the LCWIP area.

South Oxfordshire's response to the Government Consultation on Planning and 'levelling up'

SODC's response to the Levelling-Up and Regeneration Bill: reforms to national planning policy consultation can be read on the council website, submitted on 2 March: <https://www.southoxon.gov.uk/south-oxfordshire-district-council/planning-and-development/local-plan-and-planning-policies/external-planning-consultations-our-response/>

That is the 'external planning consultations, our response' page. We have said we think the '5 year housing land supply' test should be abolished, that District/City council's should not be held responsible for developer's failure to build and as long as a District has an up to date plan, the area should not be penalised but supported by legislation.

Thame Green Business Expo!

Please help us promote our upcoming [Thame Green Business Expo!](#)

On Thursday 16 March 2023, 11am – 2pm at Thame Town Hall

It is free to attend. We're inviting local organisations to join us at Thame Town Hall for an exhibition and series of talks showcasing sustainable products, services and resources. People will be able to engage with the Thame Green Living Plan and find out more about how they can engage with the group's upcoming projects. We will have guest business speakers, local resources and eco-friendly stalls to encourage businesses to become more sustainable. There will also be time to network with the local business community and share ideas.

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