

SODC ward councillor's report

Shiplake – 13th September 2021

Covid-19

Covid cases are much higher than at the equivalent time last year, as the Delta (Indian - B.1.617.2) variant continues to make its mark. We will need to see how things develop now that schools are back and tertiary education is due to return.

At 7/9, Oxford City was at a weekly rate of 304 per 100k population. By comparison, Cherwell DC was 449, West Oxon DC at 407, SODC at 312 and Vale of WH DC at 302. Reading BC (to 7th September) was at 412. On the plus side these rates are mostly a bit lower than when I reported to you in July.

The vaccine programme continues – with particular focus on the younger groups down to age 16 and completing 2nd doses.

A booster programme is expected to support those over 70 or who are vulnerable. There will also be a broad-based flu inoculation programme to try to protect the NHS during the winter.

Government are hopeful that we may have seen the worst from known Covid variants. However in Israel there has been a marked 4th wave – despite having very high levels of vaccination that were achieved early; this therefore raises some questions about the durability of antibody levels.

New NPPF

A new version of the NPPF (National Planning Policy Framework) has been published by MHCLG. I attach a note of some of the key changes.

AONB extension

An extension to the Chilterns AONB is to be considered as advised separately. This begins to reflect the findings of the Glover report and also public concerns.

It is understood that this review process will be done by Natural England.

Plan Consultations – Arc and OP2050

The Government have commenced a consultation on how they aim to dictate the future of the Ox-Cam Arc. In February there was a statement on setting a spatial framework for the Arc in which Government would seek to dominate the overall aims and ambitions for the economic scale of desirable development in the Arc. To underline that it was stated that their dominance of the Arc would be written into national NPPF policy. Although reference was made to consulting with local “partners” and residents the thrust of the document was of central dictat. It can be found ;-

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/planning-for-sustainable-growth-in-the-oxford-cambridge-arc-spatial-framework/planning-for-sustainable-growth-in-the-oxford-cambridge-arc-an-introduction-to-the-spatial-framework>

It is a matter of law and established practice that there must be consultation. Arguably, following the Chesham and Amersham by-election ministers are rather less confident of large-scale development and encouraged population growth in the South East. Moreover there are a lot of policy questions around the future of regional “levelling up”.

The current consultation can be found here and closes on 12th October:-

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/creating-a-vision-for-the-oxford-cambridge-arc>

I would urge the view that the new investment in the UK economy should be focussed outside the over-heated South East – in the regions where the greatest growth potential and quality under-utilised resources exist. Ideas of growing the arc population by 50% or more will have seriously adverse Environmental, Social and economic impacts – in my view!

Milton Keynes appears to be content to double its population from 250k to 500k by 2050. It would appear that public sentiment in Oxfordshire would not support excessive growth?

In the Government's view the Ox-Cam Arc will dominate the sub-region with an overall view to 2050 and then each of the Counties will set out a Joint Spatial Strategy Plan for their Local Planning Authorities. For Oxfordshire it is the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 and progress to date can be found here:-

<https://oxfordshireplan.org/>

The present stage is the "Regulation 18, part two public consultation. The responses to part one were fiercely negative, contrary to large-scale growth with associated concreting development and strongly in favour of more environmental and climate considerations. Since then progress have been made and the current consultation – which ends on 8th October can be found here :-

<https://oxfordshireplan.org/have-your-say/>

It is important to respond – to indicate views on policy, scale of desirable growth/development and the spatial shape of allocations for growth.

Formerly the body for organising planning co-operation in Oxfordshire was called the "Oxfordshire Growth Board". However its members have agreed to change its name to the "Future Oxfordshire – Partnership". This is to re-establish a more balanced approach for the future.

Thames Farm

A submission by Taylor Wimpey for groundworks and the void-filling (with coverage of the inter-relationship with drainage) is expected soon. Having taken advice the position of SODC's professional planning function is that the void-filling of the sinkholes on site will represent major engineering works that go beyond the scope of the original application and will thus need to be the subject of a separate application; the applicant disputes this finding. As yet the necessary detail on the void-filling proposals has not been submitted to SODC.

It will be necessary to take an holistic view of whatever is put forward – with input from key stakeholders and expert consultees.

Refuse collection

The national shortage of HGV drivers continues. The Road Haulage Association (RHA) suggests that there is a current lack of 100k drivers. Moreover of the 380k licence holders it is estimated that one third of them are expected to retire within the next 5 years; this is because the age profile of HGV drivers is weighted to older drivers.

Government have sought to simplify testing arrangements and to create more capacity by ceasing to require special testing for some other non-HGV categories. They have also temporarily relaxing safety rules limiting drivers' hours to 9 hours per day; 11 hours per day will be accepted for the present time. However government have not been prepared to issue temporary visa for foreign/EU drivers nor to list HGV skills as relevant to "skilled" foreign applicants for UK residency. Industry experts point out that in addition to a licence a driver requires a CPC and that new licence-holding drivers must complete some 8-9 weeks of having to have an experienced driver to mentor them before they can drive on their own; limits for this include employers' insurance arrangements.

Currently BIFFA (SODC's refuse collection contractor) is facing challenges in having enough HGV drivers. There are a number of reasons for this :-

- Brexit/Covid – many HGV-qualified drivers from the EU etc have left the UK
- Re-start of the economy – there is now much more demand for drivers as activity starts to return post Covid – so widespread new recruiting. Many employers offering bonuses.
- Covid – staff off sick or isolating
- Covid – there has been much less training and test availability for HGV qualifications

Managers at BIFFA are doing their best to recruit more. In the meantime the brown bin garden waste collections have been on temporary stop. (The subscription arrangements provide for 20 collections per annum – something that dates back to 2014.)

Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE)

CPE will proceed in November and be organised through OCC. Details have been circulated to Clerks separately

New offices for SODC

Progress is being made on new offices for SODC following the fire that destroyed the Crowmarsh offices in January 2015. The previous administration did all too little to progress matters causing all the insurance money and millions more to be eaten up by the expensive temporary costs of Milton Park. Decisions to move forward will be considered soon.

Grants

Councillor grants are again open with round 1 of 2 closing on 1st October.

The capital grants scheme is anticipated to re-open soon.

Keep safe!

Leigh Rawlins

District Councillor