

MINUTES OF THE ANNUAL PARISH MEETING
HELD IN THE JUBILEE HALL ON 13th MAY 2024

The meeting was attended by:

The Lewknor Parish Councillors:

- Mrs Caroline Hjorth
- Mr Duncan Boulton
- Mr Les Gordon
- Mrs Margaret Poole
- Mr John Poole

Ms Barbara Drysdale (LPC Clerk)

Also present were:

- Clr Georgina Heritage (SODC)
- Angus Richards (Savills)
- Debbie Jones (JPPC Planners)
- Kevin Brady (Woodfield Brady Architects)
- Eight residents

Apologies were received from:

- Clr Ray Hudson (LPC)
- Mr Peter Gardner (NP committee chair)
- Clr Freddie van Mierlo (OCC)

Item 1: INTRODUCTION AND WELCOME

Mrs Hjorth opened the meeting. She thanked all those present for attending.

Item 2: ANNUAL REPORT ON PARISH ACTIVITIES 2023/24

Looking through my report from last year, I can see that my opening paragraph may be very similar this year: I just want to say a huge thank you to those residents who help our parish with local issues including overgrown vegetation and litter. Our March Litter Pick yielded 56 bags between Postcombe and Lewknor! Well done to everyone who gave their time. Whilst talking about rubbish, another well done goes to our District Council and Biffa who can proudly say that they are joint first in England for re-cycling due to the diligence of all residents.

I believe the biggest accomplishment in the parish this past year was to get our Neighbourhood Plan approved firstly by a referendum of parish resident and then approval by District Council Cabinet. I'll leave Peter Gardner to tell you more in his annual report but the parish council would like to extend a massive thank you again to Peter and all the team.

Another exciting development was the long-awaited resumption of a bus service linking the parish to Thame, albeit only on two days a week: Tuesdays for Market Day and Thursdays. Please do try to use the service if you can as tickets are still only £2 following the County Council's help, timetables are on our noticeboards and in the Notices section of parish council website www.lewknorparishcouncil.gov.uk.

This was followed by the implementation of 20mph in certain parts of the parish, although controversial in some parts of the UK, it seems that on the whole it has been welcomed here. The vehicle activated signs should follow soon.

A big Thank You to both Georgina Heritage, who has been in her role as District Councillor

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for a year now, and Freddie van Mierlo, our County Councillor, for their help with grants this year enabling the parish council to help Jubilee Hall to get full CCTV installed.

The parish council has also arranged the installation of a new salt bin on Beacon View, cleared paths up by the bus stops on the B4009, got the trees cut back on the steps from the B4009 down into the village - and hopefully, a handrail will be installed here soon. The parish council has also asked for improvements to be made to the steps adjacent to the M40 on Salt Lane in Postcombe. And thanks to Councillor Ray Hudson for re-roofing our bus shelter on the A40.

Big strides have been made to try to reduce speeding through Postcombe: new signage and road markings have been installed and a Community Speedwatch Team was established in January, lead by our Postcombe councillors; a huge thank you to all the volunteers who have signed up to help. The village gates north of Postcombe have been moved to where 30mph comes into force and hundreds of bulbs have been planted at either end of the village, giving a cheery welcome throughout Spring.

We have frequently been asked about the shop in Lewknor after Fabric Fields vacated last year. Although not a Parish Council responsibility, we have been in close contact with SOHA (the Housing Association who own it) to ensure a local business takes over the premises. We are assured that this will be completed very soon.

Finally, I want to thank all the Parish Councillors for their hard work throughout the year; and a special mention to John Poole for the several training sessions and meetings he's attended on Planning - and Championing the Countryside about new building in Green Belt, a subject we all need to be aware of.

Items 3: DISTRICT COUNCIL REPORT

By Councill Georgina Heritage

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 3rd 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

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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

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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 and our quarterly Climate Action Plan reports are also online at www.southoxon.gov.uk/climateaction

Item 4: COUNTY COUNCIL REPORT

By Cllr Freddie van Mierlo, Chalgrove and Watlington Division

2023 saw both significant changes to the administration running Oxfordshire County Council and progress against county-wide and local objectives.

In October, the Liberal Democrat-Green group set up a minority administration following the departure of the Labour group from the Oxfordshire Fair Deal Alliance. The Labour group walked away after parents and Lib Dems/Greens called for the resignation of the Labour cabinet member for Childrens Services following a poor Ofsted report into Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The new administration created a dedicated cabinet portfolio for SEND improvement, now headed by Cllr Kate Gregory (Thame and Chinnor), with significant progress already made against the SEND improvement plan. Cooperation still exists between the Labour group and Lib Dem/Green administration who voted together to pass a budget in early 2024.

The macro budget environment for councils across England remains extremely challenging, with falling government funding and rising demands for adult social care and children's services. However, recognizing the importance of protecting vulnerable adults and children, the administration passed a budget with above inflation rises for both these services. All

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parties put forward proposals for the maximum allowable tax rise of 4.99%. 2023 also saw new SEND schools in Didcot approved and an unpaid carers strategy approved.

Highways remains the main way in which residents interact with council services on a daily basis – and also the source of much correspondence. 2023/4 saw improvements to how residents can report road defects through Fix My Street and ongoing efforts to improve customer service. While the council receives well below the budget needed to maintain the roads from central government, the administration approved a £7m project for 2024/5 to repair roads with a programme of surface dressing. Locally, with the support of residents and parish councils, wherever potholes and drainage issues occur I have sought to encourage speedy and longlasting repairs for our area. I’m delighted that this year we will see extensive surface-inlay (resurfacing) to the B480 at Cuxham and Brook Street in Watlington, as well as drainage improvements across the network. Progress continues on plans for the Watlington Relief Road, with a public consultation held in 2023/4 on a planning application, which will be determined later this year.

Climate has also been at the heart of the council’s activity, with heavy rain focusing minds on the consequences of a changing climate. Key initiatives, including the Strategic Active Travel Network, Mobility Hubs, Vision Zero, EV charging, electric buses, and active travel funding bids are all contributing towards OCC’s overarching vision of a cleaner and greener transport network. Oxfordshire County Council’s hard work was recognized as it topped the Climate Emergency UK climate action score card league table for upper tier authorities. I am also extremely proud to have welcomed new rural bus routes to Chalgrove and Watlington division, bringing back services for the first time since Conservatives cut them. Watlington is now served by not only the 11 bus to Oxford, but also buses to Reading (Mon, Wed, Fri) and Thame (Tues, Thur). My sincere hope is that this is just a starting point of a revival of buses in our area.

As ever, I continue to advocate for projects and issues important to local communities and individual residents. Issues have ranged from road agreements, trees, road markings, flooding, children’s services, traffic calming and much more! Some issues seem interminable with progress excruciatingly slow – for example the pedestrian link between Red Kite View in Watlington and Cuxham Road, or progress on traffic calming in Cuxham. However, I remain determined to represent residents and parishes to the Council and push for progress – however slow. I have also again been privileged to support community projects through the council’s Priority Fund, including First Steps Family Hub Chalgrove, Watlington Concert Band, Watlington Allotments, Watlington Bowls Club, Nettlebed Sports Association, and various projects with parish councils across the division.

The next County Council elections will be in May 2025. These will be fought on new divisional boundaries, which split the Watlington and Chalgrove division into two separate divisions. Watlington will become part of a ‘Watlington and Rotherfield’ division, while Chalgrove forms its own division with part of Thame. Ewelme moves to become part of a revised Benson division. This means regardless of the outcome of upcoming national and local elections many villages I currently represent will get a new county councillor from 2025. Over the next year I will continue to work with residents and parish councils to move forward projects and resolve issues, leaving them hopefully in a better state than when I started in 2021.

Item 5: NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN REPORT

By Peter Gardner, Chair, Lewknor NP group

The Lewknor Parish Neighbourhood Plan was approved in a referendum of voters held in the parish on 23 November 2023. The outcome was an overwhelming vote in favour, of the 33.5% turnout, 90.7% were in favour. Following the referendum, South Oxfordshire District

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Council (SODC) adopted the Neighbourhood Plan and, as a result, planners now need to take it into account in any planning decisions.

SODC had run a consultation on the draft plan from 19 April to 7 June 2023. Various comments were received which the Steering Group reviewed and made changes to the plan where appropriate.

The revised plan was then submitted to an external examiner appointed by SODC. His assessment was that the plan was fit to move forward once some final amendments and format changes had been made enabling the plan to go to a referendum.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed to this result by responding to our various consultations and voting in the referendum, by offering feedback, by offering your skills and time, or for simply spreading the word. This ensured the plan reflected the views of residents.

I would personally like to thank the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, both the current members: Kayti Foster, Duncan Boulton and Peter Freeman who have worked tirelessly on this for more than six years, and past members of the group for their hard work on the plan.

Item 6: THE PROPOSED KNAPP FARM DEVELOPMENT

Details of the proposed redevelopment of Knapp Farm on Weston Road in Lewknor were presented by Mr Angus Richards (Savills), Ms Debbie Jones (JPPC Planners) and Mr Kevin Brady (Woodfield Brady Architects). The proposal was to convert the old buildings, some listed, into four dwellings: three two-bedroomed houses and one four-bedroomed house; with a central courtyard, private gardens for each house plus an open area to the rear where the emphasis would be on biodiversity. Residents inspected the plans and asked questions.

Item 6: MATTERS RAISED BY THE PUBLIC

A resident questioned who and why cables had been laid across Salt Lane and London Road (A40) in Postcombe. The Clerk reported that OCC had said it was a traffic survey but not by OCC.

The meeting closed at 8pm

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