

Cllr Caroline Newton - Haseley Brook SODC Annual Report 2022/23

This is my final report Annual Report: having been SODC Councillor for Haseley Brook for almost 6 years I stood down at the most recent election. It has been a privilege to have represented the communities in this ward. I have tried to do so to the best of my ability, and hope you feel I have done so well and fairly.

Planning

Apart from individual casework issues, the strategic matters with which I have most been involved have related to planning.

Harrington

In the last year the most consequential one has been the proposed new town of Harrington, at J7 of the M40 near Great Haseley. I have been (and remain) completely opposed to the concept of a town of 6,500 houses being built in that location - beautiful, open countryside far from jobs and sustainable transport hubs.

Solar Farms

Another issue that has been particularly pertinent in this ward (especially along the M40 corridor from Milton Common to Lewknor) has been the proliferation of proposals for solar farms. Two (Harlesford and Cornwell) have been approved and are going through the more detailed planning process before construction starts. These, together with proposals for solar farms at Milton Common and Lewknor represent over 330 hectares of open agricultural land.

I have worked with local communities to try to prevent such a massing of solar farms in a small area of valued landscape and productive farm land. I think most of us accept the need for solar power to contribute to our energy mix, and wouldn't argue against the installation of some dispersed solar farms on agricultural land across South Oxfordshire. But like many residents, I would much rather see solar on roofs, and am concerned about the impact of the scale of this industrial development. I successfully made the case at SODC Full Council this spring for policies to address this - but I am worried that the new council will ignore the resolution: none of the Lib Dem candidates supported the motion, arguing, in fact, that it is unnecessary to have any limit.

Residents in affected parishes will need to continue to make the case for the protection of their countryside.

Chalgrove

In March, Homes England (HE) confirmed that they are still determined to push ahead with the development of Chalgrove Airfield (which was allocated as a strategic development site in the current Local Plan). In light of opposition from the Civil Aviation Authority (and unflagging resistance from the residents of Chalgrove village), HE seem to have gone back to the drawing board and were able to give very little indication of their strategy, mitigation etc etc. HE said they would be bringing forward new plans in due course - though gave no indication of timescale.

Local Plan

Work continues on the Joint Local Plan 2041 - the strategic spatial development plan that will determine how South Oxfordshire and the Vale of the White Horse grow over the next 18 years (including where - and how much - land should be allocated to new housing and businesses etc). It is due to be adopted by the end of 2025. The scale of the aspiration for new housebuilding will be announced later this summer. I am hopeful that it will not be so large that Harrington becomes a possibility, but will be following with close interest.

Planning Enforcement

SODC's failure to strongly enforce planning rules has remained a real frustration for many residents. SODC announced a new triage system for enforcement in 2020 which was explicit that the council would ignore relatively minor breaches. Opposition councillors argued this would be a green light to people tempted to break the rules, and so it has seemed to prove. Without a properly resourced Enforcement Team this will continue to be a problem for residents who want to see planning applications and condition fairly enforced.

Infrastructure levies

I know many of us are concerned that public services (GPs etc) are not keeping pace with population growth. It is SODC's job to ensure that developers meet planning conditions imposed during the planning process, and - with OCC - that the money levied from development is spent on the right infrastructure in the right places at the right time to the benefit of existing and new residents.

Housing

SODC has described the pressure on our housing services as a 'perfect storm' - with cost of living combining with a contraction in the private rental market, and the arrival of refugees from the Ukraine war to increase the competition for homes.

We are all aware of the large number of new homes being built in this area. But the most recent figures suggested there are currently 1283 households on our register, far outstripping the homes available.

The most recent survey indicated there were 3 rough sleepers in South Oxfordshire, with 17 households in emergency accommodation at the end of March. Of those 4 were Ukrainian households who could no longer be accommodated by their local hosts. To date, the SODC housing team have supported 139 Ukrainian families at risk of homelessness.

In the meantime, discussions have begun with Oxford City Council about how residents on their housing register can apply for homes here in SODC, adding greater strain to our housing stock.

Waste

Recent Government figures indicate that South Oxfordshire had - again - one of the highest recycling rates in the country. Our recycling system, devised a decade ago, which allows us to put all our recycling waste in one green bin continues to be very successful. But the main reason we do so well in the league tables is because of the amount of garden waste we put in our brown bins. The ratings are calculated on weight of refuse, and we are big gardeners here in South Oxfordshire!

The Environment Act 2021 which seeks to protect and enhance our environment, includes policies around waste and recycling. It may well have implications for how our rubbish services work. SODC will be letting residents know what these might be in due course.

Climate Change

SODC declared a climate emergency in 2019 and an ecological emergency 2021. The council has set targets to be carbon neutral within its own operations by 2025; and for us to be a carbon neutral district by 2030. I was keen to support SODC's own net-zero aspirations, but remain sceptical about the council's capacity to set - and more importantly deliver - a target for the whole district.

With funding from central government, SODC has worked with other Oxfordshire councils on a strategy for creating a network of charging points for electric vehicles. This has included charging points in council car parks. I have been concerned that the focus of these strategies is the city of Oxford and the large towns in the county. It is essential that villages also receive EV charging capacity: they are often vibrant spots in our tourist economy and, just as in towns, many village-dwellers do not have access to their own charging points.