

ANNUAL REPORT – SODC | CLLR ANNA BADCOCK MAY 2022

The past 12 months have been eventful as always, but the hard work of the officers have helped get money to where it needed to be and services delivered.

As always, it's the officers who keep services operating and I was particularly grateful for help from the finance and grants team in getting loans, grants and funds to businesses during and post Covid. Plenty of people did call me for help and I was delighted I could assist in difficult times.

As always, the Waste Team, led by Ian Matten have been exemplary in swiftly and efficiently answering any email I sent through by following up with on site visits. I would continue to urge all Parish Councils to ask residents to report missed collections straight to Biffa so that an evidenced map of problems can be referred back to if needs be when reviewing services, and that if problems persist to contact me. I often pick up reports of missed collections via the Watlington Town Facebook Page, and I know that the admin for the page allows the outlying villages access too. Please do post in that page or email me directly to report persistent problems.

Planning

As always, Planning is and always will be a contentious issue, and all applications and discussions have people on both sides, even if one voice is louder than the other, the quieter ones often contacting me directly. The edge road around Watlington is one such.

Comparatively to our neighbours, the Watlington ward has – by the very nature of consisting of many conservation areas and AONB which limits development – has had less development than our near neighbours in Chinnor and Benson. However, I am always aware and mindful of the impact of all building and get involved with applications where I am asked or which need a wider viewpoint. If anyone has questions they are always welcome to contact me.

Officers at SODC have always been responsive and helpful, but pressure over the last few months have meant that this has reduced – I would urge that if help is needed to call an application in to committee that parish clerks call me directly (all have my number) to ensure I can act responsively and speedily.

Some areas of the ward have long term planning and sustained development, other areas suffer from repeated applications in unspoilt countryside, so to try and sum up the issues here would be futile. However, I am in regular contact with the excellent officer for the Watlington, Pyrton and edge road developments who has been fantastic at listening to concerns and fighting to get the best outcomes for all parishes. I'm also astutely aware of the applications in the AONB villages and am grateful to residents and Parish Clerks who keep me abreast of all aspects to these applications.

Enforcement

This is always a difficult topic, given the very limited powers of enforcement that the Government allows Councils, the last twelve months has seen a significant rise in the number of cases that the Team has opened. These range from minor breaches by individuals who often fall foul of the regulations due to unfamiliarity, to major breaches by developers who know the system and have the legal advisors to help them 'play they system.'

To try and get on top of the building mountain of cases, the Enforcement Team introduced a new protocol for categorising and prioritising cases, which was originally intended to run for twelve months with a review at the end of that period. During review at Scrutiny, it became clear that this was considered by most councillors to be too long and so the review was agreed to be carried out after 6 months to determine whether this protocol was proving effective. This review is scheduled to be carried out in the very near future. I am on Scrutiny and would encourage all residents interested in enforcement to watch the live feed.

5 Year Land Supply

Always a concern, the Chair of Scrutiny, has requested a full and thorough review into the Council's preparation for Appeals and the approach taken to review the 5 Year Land Supply. This work remains on plan and the report should come to Scrutiny in July. The findings of the report will help bolster the Council's case at Appeal. Whilst the Council is confident that our figures are correct, there can be no doubt that CoVID19 delayed progress for many developers and this can, and in some areas has, impacted some authorities' land supply. We have written to the Secretary of State pointing out that this situation can result in an unfair, and 'manufactured' bias in favour of developers, but the responses have not been promising. Again, any questions on this, please let me know and I shall bring them up at scrutiny, and please do watch the live feed if you are interested.

Community Hub supports residents with calls and supermarket vouchers

Over the year, we've seen an increase in requests for support from our Community Hub team. Our officers have handled a significant number of enquires resulting in food parcels being provided and onward referrals for further support.

Housing

Due to the financial pressures of Covid, I was contacted by a few people about Housing and Council Tax issues, and was delighted to be able to bring about the help and support they needed, resulting in positive outcomes.

Office accommodation update

You may already be aware that SODC has taken advantage of an opportunity to vacate the offices at Milton Park a little earlier than we had once planned.

The lease will end this autumn and a project is already underway to identify suitable, cost-effective interim accommodation that will meet our current needs now we've adapted to flexible and remote working and will bridge the gap between leaving Milton Park and moving into permanent offices.

High level plans have been drawn up for a new Headquarters building on the 'Didcot Gateway Site' which should provide sufficient work-space for the Council's officers given that hybrid working is now fully established, and the Administration wants to include quality flexible office space to rent out to help towards the Council's operating costs. Concern has been raised about the lack of parking for the offices and the loss of the existing public carpark space.

Waste Collection

This is a service that continued during the period in which CoVID19 had closed down most operational functions, and in spite of the challenges presented, Biffa was, for the most part able to continue with collections, even with reduced crews. Things did reach a head early last summer and it was decided that, in the interests of the safety of the crews, the Garden Waste Service should be

suspended. This was a matter that was examined at both Scrutiny and Full Council and fortunately it was possible to reinstate the full service towards the start of Autumn.

Parking Enforcement

As Councillors will be aware, the County Council has now taken over traffic enforcement from the Police, effective from the 1st November 2021. We understand that this is now active, although for the first few months, people parking were given reminders that in future they would receive fines, but we believe that fines are now being issued where breaches are identified.

This will affect Watlington and it will remain to be seen how active wardens are.

Grants

It has been a busy year for the Councillor Grant Scheme now more people are aware of its existence, although I do also consistently flag this via Facebook. I remain grateful to the Parish Clerks who ably assist many applicants.

This year I was able to support The Watlington Allotment Society with a community shed; Wild Oxfordshire for their various Hedgerow schemes in the ward; Footsteps Family Hub (previously the Children's Centre) for equipment; Rainbow Nursery for outdoor play equipment.