

South Oxfordshire District Council Report

Governance

At the elections last May, South Oxfordshire Conservatives captured 33 of the 36 seats.

The one-party dominance of the council has changed the nature of governance: group meetings are now almost the Full Council meetings. It also brings heavier responsibility to get things right and I hope some of the changes I've made to the way we do things is helping with that. Underlying those changes is the intent to a full *member*-led authority.

Finance

SODC has frozen its council tax this year, following a reduction of 3% last year. Of the 300+ district councils in England, only six now have a lower tax than South Oxfordshire. There have been no service cuts to achieve this, just plain old good financial management with a strong control of costs.

Within three years, we are expecting our grant from government (once more than 50% of our income and worth millions of pounds) to be gone. In its place will be a series of "incentivising" income sources such as New Homes Bonus (for each new house built in the district) and retention of business rates. South Oxfordshire is placed as well as any council to cope with that change.

Corporate Services Outsourcing Project

Driving down costs has been key to our financial success and the Corporate Services Project is a perfect example of that. SODC is already at the top of any list of innovation in local government; our plan to unite multiple authorities in different parts of the country to align and jointly commission services breaks the mold once again. Working with councils in Somerset, Hampshire and our neighbours at Vale of the White Horse, the project is set to save the five authorities over £50m, including more than a million pounds each year for the next 9 years for South. Areas covered include HR, IT, licensing, car parks and property management.

Best of all, the Government liked the idea so much, they paid nearly all the costs of the tender and procurement!

Devolution

Alongside other authorities in Oxfordshire, since last summer, the council has been seeking devolution of powers from central government. It became clear that the initial bid was not sufficiently strong and so – together with six other district councils – I have proposed to government that we look at a series of unitary councils in the county. That initial proposal has been well received and so we are now working on the detail of how that will work. A key element to the new proposal is the complete integration of health and social care. If that goes ahead as planned, Oxfordshire will be leading a generational change in local government.

Local Plan

Our current Local Plan identifies the need for nearly 11,000 by 2027. More recent work – looking ahead a little further to 2031 - suggest that figure needs to be closer to 15,000. On top of that, Oxford City Council claims it has insufficient space to build the home it believes it needs and wants us to build more to back-fill. The 2011 Localism Act 2011 requires that authorities co-operate on how to deal with this situation. Whilst the Act does not insist on agreement, inspectors at Local Plan inquiries have tended to come down hard on those councils that don't take sufficient extra numbers.

As such, it is possible that we will need to build nearly 20,000 new homes by 2031.

We have been working very hard on ideas how to achieve that number without spoiling the beautiful (and – in a recent national survey - the happiest in the country!) place we live in. Expect to see significant public consultation on those ideas in the Summer.

Berinsfield

Last month, the district council committed £1.5m to consultation, research and master-plan development to help tackle some of the challenges faced in Berinsfield. Over the next 18 months, a plan will be developed for significant investment in social and community infrastructure in the village. The cost of that could be around £50m in total. The idea is to use the up-lift in land value if housing permission is given to pay for this investment.

Didcot Garden Town

Didcot is the district's largest town and a significant amount of the council's energy goes into improving it. Our latest project is Garden Town status. We have already received £0.5m from Government and will be using this to make long-term plans for an upgrading of the infrastructure and urban realm in the town.

Location

Didcot is also likely to become our long-term home. It sits handily between ourselves and Vale and has good access.

Since the Crowmarsh offices were destroyed in the fire last January, we have made base in temporary quarters. We have just over 3 years left on the lease we've taken in Milton Park. Long-term, we think owning our own building – particularly given the slightly unusual needs of a local authority – is likely to achieve best value for the taxpayer. Changes like the Corporate Services Project and devolution deal could mean significant swings in the number of staff we need to accommodate, so we are treading cautiously at this time, but expect to firm things up towards the end of the year.

Chief Executive

After more than 12 years, David Buckle, the council's chief executive, has announced his retirement. The search for a successor is underway and an announcement is expected in the middle of May.

John Cotton

District Councillor for Berinsfield Ward, Conservative Group Leader and Leader of the Council
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