|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Title** | District Councillor’s Report |
| **Author** | Cllr Robin Bennett  [Robin.bennett@southoxon.gov.uk](mailto:Robin.bennett@southoxon.gov.uk) |
| **Parish** | Dorchester on Thames Parish Council |
| **Date** | 8th March 2021 |

**Our services at the district councils**

Officers are currently working on what the roadmap out of lockdown means for district council services. We’ll have some more news on how it will all affect the councils in the coming weeks, but for all of our services – including publicly accessible buildings like our leisure, arts and community centres – there will be a variety of things to consider before they can begin to reopen, not just the government’s easing of restrictions.

 The earliest our offices could reopen according to the road map would be from 21 June, but this is unlikely to mean an immediate return to office working for council staff who continue to work from home at this time. Any reopening of the building is likely to be gradually phased.

Garden waste collections resumed last week.

**‘Ecological Emergency’ declared by South Oxfordshire District Council**

An Ecological Emergency has been declared by South Oxfordshire District Council.

The declaration reflects the council’s commitment to protect and restore the natural world – a key priority set out in the South Oxfordshire Corporate Plan. This builds on the council’s pledge to become a carbon neutral council by 2025 and a carbon neutral district by 2030. It also calls for the council to incorporate the climate and ecological emergencies and nature recovery as strategic priorities in planning policies. The council will now also look into establishing a Biodiversity Steering Group and to embed climate action and ecological initiatives within all council work areas, including COVID-19 recovery projects and programmes.

**Tree Champions**

The Council has appointed two Tree Champions, Cllrs Ian Snowdon and Peter Dragonetti. Their work will form part of a wider drive to protect and restore nature across South Oxfordshire.  The district boasts 14 per cent tree cover, the highest in the county, but is still a long way behind the average of 36 per cent in Europe as a whole. The area, therefore, needs more trees and woodlands to help enhance nature and wildlife to mitigate global warming.  The Tree Champions’ role will include encouraging people to reconnect with nature and promote woodland protection/conservation and tree-growing initiatives. They will liaise with council officers and members to develop a new Tree Policy and Strategy. They will be involved in promoting the value of trees and woodlands in tackling the climate and ecological emergencies. Raising awareness of the statutory protections for trees and woodlands within local communities and parish and town councils will also be part of their remit.

**Conservation funding for Newts**

The great crested newt is a protected species. We’ve raised £240,000 for the conservation of these internationally important amphibians through an ongoing, innovative developer-funded conservation scheme.

**Community space and affordable homes in Didcot**

We are looking to create new community spaces and high quality, sustainable affordable homes on three empty properties that we own on Broadway in Didcot.  
One at 120 Broadway could be in line for a full refurbishment to make a space for community activity on the ground floor with affordable homes on the first floor.  
The other two buildings at 116-118 Broadway are no longer safe to use in their current condition, as many of you know and so we plan to demolish them this year to make way for a new community space along with one and two-bedroom affordable homes on the floors above.   
We’re working on a sustainable design for the whole development. For those of you up to speed with the different sustainability standards, the aim is to build the affordable homes to [PassivHaus](https://www.passivhaustrust.org.uk/" \t "_blank) standards at units 116 and 118 and refurbish 120 to equivalent [EnerPHit](https://passipedia.org/certification/enerphit" \t "_blank) standard.

**Community hub support**

 In the coming days, the hub will be contacting those who have recently been added to the shielding list to let them know about the support available to them. A total of 2,688 new shielded residents have been added to our lists in the past week in South Oxfordshire. Naturally, contacting these residents is likely to mean an increase in the number of requests for help we receive. Queries are mostly from residents self-isolating due to Tack and Trace or a positive Covid diagnosis as well as further finance related enquiries.

The government is adding more people to the shielding list as a result of new risk models showing that a combination of health and personal factors, including age, ethnicity and BMI could mean someone is at a higher risk from Covid-19.

**Financial assistance for residents in the South**

 There are still funds available to support residents who are struggling to afford food and basic essentials as a result of Covid, although the funds are becoming limited. If residents need assistance with food, they should contact Citizens Advice in the first instance, or if needed they can call our Community Hub.

**Business grants update**

The government has confirmed details of the next payment period for the *Local restrictions support grant (closed) addendum,*which provides ongoing funding for rate-paying businesses that have been forced to close due to the national lockdown. The second payment cycle covers 16 February to 31 March 2021.

So far, we have paid out more than £2.6million from the first payment cycle of this grant, covering 5 January to 15 February, supporting more than 1,000 businesses across South and Vale.  All eligible businesses should have received an email confirming their payment arrangements for this period.

We will now begin the process of preparing the new grants in advance of payment, subject to us receiving final clarification, including grant funding, from the government. We expect to be able to email eligible businesses confirming the payment process and their grant allocation week commencing 8 March if not before. Businesses in receipt of this grant do not need to take any action, they will continue to receive the money automatically without having to apply again.

For more details about the grants available to businesses visit [svbs.co.uk](http://www.svbs.co.uk/).

**The Oxford-Cambridge Arc strategic framework**

The government recently announced a new plan designed to transform the Oxford-Cambridge Arc region. In response,Cllr Sue Cooper, Leader of South Oxfordshire District Council, said:

“Finally there is some recognition of the pressures on local infrastructure and community wellbeing from the Government.  South Oxfordshire is only a small part of this large Arc stretching across to Cambridge, but we can play an important role in setting the right direction for this new body and ensuring it is accountable to elected councillors and local residents, not just the Government.

The knowledge economy, including local successes such as the Covid vaccine development, can be a strong part of the rebuilding the UK economy, but this should be by working with other areas of the UK, not by building excessive numbers houses around and between Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge.

We must also do what we can to ensure that Arc projects protect and enhance our natural environment and so we welcome the continued opportunity to work with the government and our partners to explore how we can best achieve this. I also intend to use our collective local influence to push for stronger environmental planning policies and investment in green technology.

South Oxfordshire District Council policy remains against the building of an Expressway from Oxford to Cambridge and we will continue to watch the Arc very closely to ensure it does not act as a means of un-pausing this road building project.”

**Pushing for data on sewage releases in our rivers**

Our “Thames Champion,” Cllr Jo Robb, has renewed calls for Thames Water to tell the public when it releases raw or partially treated sewage spills into the Thames and its tributaries and ditches. Thames Water has data monitors on almost all, if not all, of its outfalls in South Oxfordshire. It is providing public data on sewage discharge in six key sites in and around Oxfordshire, but we want to see this scheme rolled out along South Oxfordshire’s stretch of the Thames. If you see (or smell) evidence of sewage in the river (brown appearance, smell, sewage foam or “rag” which is sanitary products and solids) please report to the Environment Agency on 0800 807 060.