

District Council Report to Henley Town Annual Meeting

WILLIAM HALL

The council continues to work in challenging times but has been able to cope without any cuts to services.

The efficiency savings made over the last five years by joint working with the Vale of White Horse District Council and shared contracts have meant that the council can once again reduce council tax by 2.5%. This being the third consecutive year means a total reduction of 7.5% which is very positive.

New Homes Bonus money is received from the government for new homes that are built in the district. We received one million pounds this year and expect to receive nearly two million pounds next year. This money will be spent on projects where houses are being built to improve infrastructure.

Grants

The Council continues its million pounds a year investment in community groups through the Communities Capital Grants scheme. This investment in our communities gives local groups the helping hand they need to continue expand their work. I'm delighted now to be entering my third year chairing this committee.

The council has given a £15 million loan to SOHA to enable them to accelerate their housing programme.

Planning

The council is pleased to have an approved local plan which means that large developers cannot gain planning permission on any site they feel is desirable as is happening in districts that do not have such a plan. During the last few months we have been working with other Oxfordshire districts as instructed by the government to review social housing numbers. This means that we will shortly start a process similar to the local plan to accommodate more houses and the plan will be extended from 2027 to 2031. This is not a happy position but is one where we have no choice. There are more houses actually being built than in previous years.

Neighbourhood Plans

Thame now has an agreed neighbourhood plan following their referendum and Woodcote will shortly be holding their own referendum. We have lots of similar plans in the pipeline such as Henley. Smaller parishes tend prefer community led plans.

Planning Enforcement

We have put additional resources into this area as it is important to explain to parishes what we can and cannot do. Where there is a breach of planning there is frustration at the limit of what the council can do and the speed at which it can be done. We are required to give those in breach of planning time to make amendments where possible. However, some issues raised as enforcement are actually minor developments and are now permitted under permitted development rights. Government reforms have now made it easier for people to erect extensions.

Housing

The council continually works in partnership to keep the number of homeless people needing temporary accommodation low. We have seen a rise in this number in the past year but it remains fewer than 20 households.

Waste

We continue to be one of the highest recycling councils in the country. The joint contract with the Vale of White Horse District Council works very well. The floods caused some areas to have collection days changed. However, everyone did their best in exceptional circumstances.

The Big Clean Up continues to be a huge success so once again we have increased the budget by £90K with even more money for the market towns over the next two years.

Market Towns

The market towns are very important to the district and we work in partnership with town councils, business partnerships and share costs of town centre coordinators for instance in Henley. Our economic development team work hard across the whole district involving many small businesses. Car park charges have not increased and free parking on Saturday afternoons in some of our car parks has proved popular. Any surplus car park income is spent on upgrading toilets and car parks and not on any other services as in Henley.

Leisure Centres

Leisure centres are well used by all ages. We work with the contractor to ensure that the facilities are of a standard acceptable to the user. The present provider's contract comes to an end next year so we have been going through a procurement exercise for the letting of the new contract which will be shared with the Vale of White Horse District Council giving more scope for better value.

Didcot

Didcot is the largest growth area in the district with Great Western Park building 3,000 houses, one of the largest sites in the South East. We are working with Hammersons to achieve phase two of the Orchard Centre development which is still proving difficult to secure an anchor store in the current economic climate. Didcot will benefit from Science Vale Oxford as the government has agreed millions of pounds to encourage new business growth to the science parks. There will also be government monies for infrastructure. This is a very exciting part of the district which should create spin off businesses for the whole of the area.

Cornerstone Arts Centre is well worth a visit for the wide variety of shows, exhibitions and children's sessions plus the café.

Boundary Review

The boundary review is now complete and the commission agreed the reduction in the number of councillors from 48 to 36 which will happen following the May election in 2015. Henley South and Henley North will change from 4 councillors to 3 in one ward.

Community Governance Reviews

Community Governance Reviews have not taken place for many years and started at the end of last year. The process is looking at parish boundaries so we are suggesting some changes and where it would affect residents they are being consulted. Parish councils have already been involved and no changes will be made until we hear the views of the parish councils and residents. The review must be complete by August so will be decided at the council meeting in July.

Office Accommodation

If you have had reason to visit the council office at Crowmarsh you will have seen a lot of activity. Vale staff are moving into our accommodation giving us an annual rent of £175,000. Their Abingdon office is being rented to an Oxfordshire County Council service. This is good partnership working of local authorities.

We will continue to work hard to provide good services and value for money in partnership with others.

The council website (www.southoxon.gov.uk) can give you details of all our services, councillors' allowances, contractors and meetings that you can watch at home as they are webcast.

William Hall