

District councillor's annual report to Shilton parish council

May 30th 2024

Because this is an annual meeting, I've decided to give a general overview of what a district councillor gets up to, but there will be updates on a few key issues further on, and I'll be very open to questions at the end.

I'm the DC for Shilton and also for Brize Norton, as well as the parishes of Swinbrook & Asthall, north of the A40.

So, what does a district councillor do all day?

Quite a lot!

There are the official meetings: (and you can watch livestream!)

- Full Council roughly every two months, where we debate policy and budgets and major initiatives. Two of the motions I was involved with last year were around agriculture and food growing. Another was about holding a youth climate assembly, so that young people's ideas are taken into account on how we can reach our targets. The first of these is ongoing – I am writing food policies to be considered for the Local Plan. The second is awaiting a new youth officer. So – they are big issues, but not necessarily the crunchy everyday ones that actually make the Council function well, or badly.
- The other main official committees that have regular meetings are the planning committees and the Scrutiny committee, which meet roughly monthly, sometimes more
- I'm on Uplands, but also sometimes sit on Lowlands as a substitute. Less than 10% of planning applications are heard in committee – usually if the parish council's view is opposed to that of officers, or if there is a matter of interpretation, rather than planning law, or if called in by ward councillor, for a planning reason, within 21 days.
- And the Scrutiny committee, which looks at all of the major policy strands being considered for adoption, as well as looking at financial and performance indicators.

Other groups I'm on: Local Plan working group (more about the Local Plan further down) Constitution working group, and Leaders meeting. As Leader of the Green Group of 4, I meet with the leaders of the other political parties once a month. This is a useful way to get early notification of planned changes or events, and also a good place for influencing the conversation.

Less formal activities:

- Actually, the part of the work I most love is some of the volunteering I've taken on, which I could easily be doing without being a councillor: KLCP - hedge-laying and other conservation work, removing tree guards, cutting back on paths. Litter-picking.
- Bringing nature and sustainability into the conversation at the council as often as possible. There are some very good policies at WODC, and many of them are being implemented, but it is sometimes the little things – leaving the grass long in front of the council offices, not buying tropical flowers wrapped in plastic for someone's retirement.

- Making sure that residents feel enabled, that they know where to report a planning breach, or a flood or sewage backup, or a flytip, or an unemptied bin, or an irresponsible landlord, and following these up if satisfactory answers and actions do not follow.
- Also, more positively, making sure that residents, either through parish councils or as individuals, are aware of any grants they may be entitled to – eg small business grants or help for charities through the Westhive platform. And I also flag up any surveys or consultations that might help their voice to be heard. And that brings me to.....

Local Plan 2021-2041

The current Local Plan takes us up to 2031; that's what we are guided by. But there were very high numbers in the later years of the plan, and we have managed to revert to the standard method – 570 homes per year – which gives us some breathing space.

New Local Plan to 2041:

Some of you will have taken part in the 2 stages of consultation last year. Your parish council engaged robustly on your behalf.

It's well worth having a look at the consultation summary report:

<https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/media/cufdp555/consultation-summary-report-february-2024.pdf>

(Or Google WODC Local Plan 2041)

At the end, sites & opportunities. These are proposals that have been put forward; they are not planning applications, nor do they have the backing of WODC. Only a small number of them will go forward.

A next stage of consultation, this summer, will firm up the draft vision, establish the structure and content, and set out a spatial strategy – so, how development will be apportioned across the district. There is a strong sense that WODC should try to take the lead, and not get told what we are doing by developers. The possibility of a railway is gaining traction but will not lead the Plan. But public transport will. Please engage if you can.

Carterton and the surrounding parishes have had a lot of proposals made and it looks as though Carterton will be the focus of quite a lot of development – a strategic plan for Carterton is in draft. Some ideas being suggested are very good, town centre improvements, slightly more dense housing in the centre, better transport links. As ward member for Brize Norton & Shilton, I am, while no nimby, trying to make sure that the characters of these villages are preserved. I'm also always pressing for space for nature, and for Carterton's horticultural history to be recognized, and for "employment sites" to include food-related sites, as well as technology.

Also, with planning – it is not about blocking development, but about balancing benefits and harms. A good development in the right place can add value: better transport links, new schools, more green spaces. There is a lot of lip service paid to making sure the infrastructure gets built/upgraded: transport links, sewage, primary school, surgeries – we need to make sure this happens. I'd like to see more positive policies for what we actually want in place before the sites are chosen.

Five Year land supply

We always have to be able to demonstrate whether we have enough land available in the district to provide 5 years worth of housing. This is fairly constantly being recalculated. In October 23, we were able to show that we had a 5.4 year supply of land. In a recent appeal against a planning refusal in Minster Lovell, the inspector looked at the delivery of housing, and took this figure down to 4.38 years. For this reason, and others, the appeal was allowed. (Grampian clauses have been built into the permission, to try to make sure that the houses will not be built until sewage systems are upgraded.) WODC will publish a new position statement before the end of the month, and there is confidence we will demonstrate 5 year land supply.

Without a five year land supply, we are vulnerable to speculative development that is not in the Local Plan, and that might not be consistent with our policies.

Waste

Waste & litter – there has been a waste review, but no change to bin collections for the time being.

Decarbonisation – waste collection accounts for a huge proportion of the Council's own emissions. One EV waste lorry is on trial, for urban areas.

We have a dedicated fly-tipping officer – there wasn't one before – and fines for fly-tipping and littering have doubled.

Thanks to funding from the Rural Crime partnership, we are in the process of deploying cameras in several known fly-tipping spots.

6 or 7 fixed penalties in the last month – this is expected to increase with new cameras.

Sewage

My election literature: “No new houses until sewage sorted.” I believed that was possible; unfortunately, owing to national pressure and the 5-year land supply (of which more below) it isn't. Instead, we have “Grampian clauses” which say that houses cannot be occupied until infrastructure is upgraded. I am watching carefully to see how these are enforced. We all believe TW will have to go into administration soon, and possibly it will be broken up. There has to be some kind of government funding so that essential repairs and improvements can be carried out.

2 issues on which county council is the lead, but we do a lot of promotion and enabling the process:

Flooding (not going to detail here)

Retrofit

This is help for householders to lower their bills by improving the energy efficiency of their homes. Led by the county council, not going fast enough.

But worth looking: <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/residents/environment-and-planning/energy-and-climate-change/retrofitting-your-home/retrofit-help-you>

More generally on decarbonization, leisure centres are the focus. Funding has been received for solar panels and heat pumps at Witney & Chipping Norton. Carterton was to have led the way, with the most ambitious scheme, but owing to some complex financial issues, the funding has to be reapplied for.

Please get in touch! I'm on all the obvious places on social media, and you can find my email address on the WODC website. I will be having regular monthly café slots in Humble Bumble café in Brize Norton.

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