

Annual Report 2020/21

South Northants Council

The past twelve months has been dominated by Covid and Local Government Reform. A year ago we went into lock down, the councils were asked to invoke their emergency procedures to help the vulnerable.

The Local Resilience Forum led the response at a county level. SNC were part of that structure. We worked to ensure that food parcels and medicines were distributed, homeless people were taken off the streets and our staff could operate from home. Our staff were heavily involved with the distribution of emergency grants that the government made available.

As we began to have the limited unlock in the summer SNC staff were involved with the return to business. Environmental Health staff inspected premises and gave advice on a safe reopening and Economic Development staff worked to ensure shops had signage and advice on how to socially distance and trade safely.

The routine continued through the second and third lock downs. Throughout members had regular briefings as to the strain on the local hospitals, bed occupancy rates, infection rates and sadly the death rates in the district and county.

Since the beginning of 2021 we have had the vaccination rates which has seen Northants make great progress in vaccinating all of our most vulnerable cohorts and we are now moving to second injection for the older population while moving down the age groups.

Throughout this the process of Local Government Reform has been ongoing. In April 2020 the government issued a revised Structural Changes Order to cancel the elections for May and create a Shadow Council made up of all the existing Councillors. Ian McCord, the Leader of SNC was appointed as the Leader of the Shadow Council and Jonathan Nunn, the leader of Northampton Borough was appointed Deputy Leader.

The Shadow Authority has in place a budget, constitution and other policies and procedures that are needed to establish the new council.

From 1 April to 10th May this is called the Interim Period when the old councils are abolished but the new councillors to be elected on May 6th have not taken over.

Looking forward, once the election is out of the way a new set of 93 councillors will set the policies and direction of West Northamptonshire Council.

Local Plan Pt 2

This plan has been many years in compiling and sets out the future of our district for the next 5 years. It was consulted on many times by our parishioners both locally with exhibitions, on the internet and in our own publication SNC Review. It was adopted at full Council in July 2020 and form the backbone of current and future planning applications in our district. It has been used on many occasions since adoption to prevent speculative developers trying to build in the open countryside outside village boundaries. It also importantly identified areas within the district suitable for industrial development and it is encouraging that applications have already come forward for two of these sites which vindicates our choices.

Major Projects

Current development at Radstone in Brackley is drawing to a close in the current phase with in excess of 1500 properties being built. The new medical centre and Sainsbury's supermarket were completed and are in operation in the town as well.

Towcester Relief Road

This long-awaited road construction looks likely to be completed by 2023 well ahead of schedule mainly due to advance funding from the Government and will divert traffic away from Towcester Town Centre.

Brackley Leisure Centre opened in 2018 with a new 25m swimming pool and learner pool and Towcester Leisure centre has been now been fully refurbished and both will reopen when lockdown rules allow.

Watermeadows Towcester

23 hectares of land in Towcester was part of a 19th century landscaped park. It was acquired by SNC and is being made accessible as a natural asset for the town. Funding was gained from Heritage lottery, water environment grant and Rural Development for England to create a play and picnic area, a bound gravel pathway to allow access for wheelchairs and pushchairs and improvements to the River Tove to improve natural habitats.

Car Parking

The old Co-op site in Towcester has been purchased with extra Developer monies to increase free car parking for the town and enhance and improve a rather run down area.

Toilets in Brackley and Towcester have been upgraded and handed to the respective Town councils to manage and operate.

Towcester Town Hall has been sold to the Town Council to manage and improve.

Farthinghoe Bypass is progressing and should be finished by 2026.

SNC Financial Highlights

2020/21 has not been a normal year! What should have been a “calm sea and a prosperous voyage” turned into the perfect storm.

On top of the expected work of preparing the budget for the new authority, the billing of Council Tax and business rates across West Northamptonshire and arranging the transfer of assets, they have had to cope with a significant increase in the number of benefit claimants, last minute changes to business rates and enabling the payment of millions of pounds in grants supporting jobs and businesses across the District.

Council Tax

With the creation of the unitary authority the structure of the bills will change and the District and County amounts will be combined. Comparing the WNC bill with the previous County/District and Adult social care elements the bill rises by 5% for a Band D property. The Fire Service bill rises by 2% and the PCC element tops the list with a 5.1% rise. Overall, the tax increase is 4.9%.

As we need to harmonise Council Tax across the West over the next 3 years the rises in South Northants will be slightly larger. Rises in Daventry District will be higher still and slightly smaller in Northampton Borough.

To help offset the increase for those most financially vulnerable the Council Tax Reduction Scheme has been set at 20%, a decrease from the 26.5% originally consulted on. A hardship fund will also be established to help those who face the largest increases and additionally additional support is being provided for those leaving care.

Government Grants

As a result of the pandemic businesses have been hit hard and the Council has fully played its part in providing financial support

Grant funds are in addition to business rate support for business. Retail, hospitality and leisure businesses have benefit from not only zero business rates for 202/21 but lump sum grants of up to £25k. There are business rate reductions and further grant funding available for 2021/22.

To date some £4m has already been distributed to businesses in the area and this continues to grow week on week.

SNC Grants

SNC, for many years, has been able to use 50% of its new homes bonus to support local organisation across the District. In 2020/21 we have distributed nearly £700k to a variety of communities. In total, over the course of the New Homes Bonus scheme SNC has been able to provide well over £5m in funding through our grants scheme.

The breakdown of the awards can be seen below;

Applicant	Project Outline
Adstone Old School Village Hall	Energy reduction project
Deanshanger Parish Council	Community volunteers / Good neighbours
Eydon Community Sports Field	Lawn mower
Roade Village Hall & Playing Field Charity	Buggy access to playground
Towcester Area Door to Door	Community transport
Towcester Evening WI	Planting bluebells
Towcester Football Club	Junior Football Tournament 2021
Wappenham Parish Council	Millennium oak tree protection
Brackley Brownies	5th Brackley Brownies continuation of services
Stoke Bruerne Canal Partnership	Waymarking project
Boddington Good Neighbours	Good neighbours' setup
Yardley Youth Football Club	Youth football U9 & U11 winter training
Nether Heyford Playing Fields Association	Portable floodlights for Heyford Playing Fields
Greatworth Community Transport Association	Community minibus service
Ability CIC	Community transport
Boddington Parish Council	Recreational cycling in Boddington
Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)	South Northamptonshire Advice Service
Daventry Contact	Provision to SNC
Maidford Parish Council	Renovation and repairs of Maidford Village Hall
Renew 169 Wellbeing Café	Mental health project (2 years)
South Northamptonshire Volunteer Bureau (SNVB)	Brackley area volunteer car service (BAVCS)
South Northamptonshire Youth Engagement (SNYE)	Youth provision and support (2 years)
Towcester Studio Band	Development plan 20/21
Harpole Youth Club	Toilet refurbishment
Cogenhoe & Whiston Parish Council	Village hopper community bus service
Northampton Mens Own Rugby Football Club	Dressing room refurbishment
Racing Minds CIC	Men's mental health support group
Re-Solv	Boosting wellbeing and community resilience - today and tomorrow
Wootton Grange Bowls Club	New equipment
South Northamptonshire Volunteer Bureau (SNVB)	Minibus
South Northamptonshire Volunteer Bureau (SNVB)	Rural Information Centre
Daventry Volunteer Centre	Happy at Home Project

Leisure and communities Section 106 developer contributions

Work has progressed to support our local sports clubs and Town and Parish Councils to access SNCs allocation of S106 funding for leisure and communities. The following projects have had funds agreed and our Leisure Facilities and Contracts Officer continues to build a future pipeline of projects. Roade Football Club - £6,000, Middleton Cheney Academy, £11,000, Brackley Cricket Club - £67,000, Brackley Bowls Club £36,000, Mens Own Rugby Club - £19,000, Brackley Squash Club - £17,000 and Roade Library - £89,758.

Computer support for school children. The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the divide that exists between those young people who have their own computer and those who do not have access to one at home. Our IT team have risen to the challenge of covid and already offered up 20 redundant laptops for use by local families in desperate need of IT equipment while they home schooled their children during lockdown.

SNVB

The SNVB (South Northants Volunteer Bureau) have had to adapt their service offer since March 2020 as many of their regular programmes have been restricted by Covid-19. The volunteer bureau has supported a new influx of volunteers who have offered their time during the pandemic. The mini bus service is one example of how SNVB has adapted, using their mini bus to provide a vital service in collecting and distributing food parcels to vulnerable residents in our district. South Northants Council has committed to continue financial support to SNVB for the first 12 months of the new West Northants Authority.

Parish and Town Council Clerks/Chairmen's Forum

The Healthy Communities Team have continued to communicate with Parish and Town Councils throughout the pandemic. Three virtual forums have been delivered as a way of keeping Clerks and Chairmen updated. Local Government Reform has been a constant agenda item. Other updates have included The Building Stronger Communities Strategy, Planning, 2021 Census, Housing Services, SNC Community Resilience Hub and emergency Covid support to residents. The Healthy Communities Team will continue to organise the virtual forum until face to face meetings are allowed.

Free school meals. Our Housing Options & Strategy Team are working with partners in the West Northants locality to support the roll out of Free school meal vouchers for eligible pupils across Northamptonshire through the school holidays. Assistance has been provided in the form of supermarket vouchers distributed by schools.

Waste and recycling

Waste collection has continued throughout the pandemic providing an excellent service despite the fact the tonnage has significantly increased with people staying home.

Job Club

Due to the economic competitiveness of South Northamptonshire, this area has been able to tackle the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and still embrace opportunities for growth. The Job Club went virtual and is helping many residents change career, look for job opportunities or start a new business.

HS2

I have continued to attend HS2 liaison groups and petition for greater involvement, fairness and collaboration when dealing with affected communities. It is important to maintain this momentum in the new council. There is evidence that cost cutting is causing some commitments made to the Select Committee to be overlooked going forward. It is vital in this construction phase that HS2 is held to account at a most senior level in the new council. Meanwhile HS2 have opened up an office in Brackley which has brought 120 jobs in design, finance and general support staff.

This is just a quick snap shot of what has been happening in SNC this last year. There are great plans for the new West Northamptonshire Council going forward and we hope to instil in the new council the standards and cultures we have come to expect from SNC together with sound financial control. Many of our senior staff have been successful in applying for new roles in the West and I am hopeful that with hard work and commitment from our new councillors that we can be even more successful in the future. It is most important that we get representation from our area so that we are not subsumed into the inevitable difficulties posed by Northampton Borough. If we can get planning and highways to work more closely together, have housing and adult social care aligned and environmental health and trading standards all operating as one team our residents will be better served by better quality decision making. That is the new goal. A fresh start and bright future for all.

It has been a joy to get to know you and represent you as your councillor.

With all best wishes

Rosie Herring

