

Dear Editor,

A couple of weeks ago, The Sunday Times mentioned people referring to South Oxfordshire as 'the dustbin' for property developers. Being surrounded by AONBs, some inside the district itself, means the land available for the 'Growth Deal' policy should be limited in this district to the narrow strip between the Chilterns AONB and Oxford's greenbelt. But supreme efforts have been made to circumvent this – apparently leading to this 'dustbin' rumour- a further insult to the district after the 'dump it on Didcot' housing-without-infrastructure policy of previous years.

In other news, Oxford University makes a lifesaving, not for profit, vaccine with Astra-Zeneca. Some of the best news we have had this year and for which we are all extremely grateful and proud.

There's not much consistency in these two pieces of news. Oxford's greenbelt has been accepted for the last 50 or so years as a successful tool in preventing urban creep and acknowledged as protecting the setting of this historic and successful city. The two universities and their science and technology spin offs, research at Harwell, Culham and Rutherford-Appleton, the John Radcliffe and other Oxford hospitals, plus the Cowley car works (now converting their production to electric cars) are what this area is rightly known for and of which we are proud to be part.

So why is South Oxfordshire now a 'dustbin'? What has led us to this point? It's a long and winding road, but it starts with a poor economic policy, failing government funding formulas for universities, and, quite likely, housing policy written by Conservative party funders. Colleges that own land in Oxford's greenbelt are now very keen to develop this land, their fiduciary duty to their college pushing them in this direction while the commodification of education means tuition fee limits leave colleges in deficit (though it remains true that many colleges are still very wealthy). And then there are the government agencies involved here: Homes England and UK Atomic Energy Authority – both behaving like they are private property developers.

But just building more houses will not provide the affordable housing we know is needed here (and there are limits to the success story of Oxfordshire: housing unaffordability and areas of continual deprivation being two of them). They'll be executive homes and 'investment properties', a clear lesson from the last 10 years of ever-rising house prices and ever more unaffordable houses built.

I am a Councillor in South Oxfordshire, having been elected in the swing away from the Conservatives in May 2019, a swing in large part created by the ditching of protections for that greenbelt and the constraints of South Oxfordshire's land in the Conservative's draft Local Plan. The Secretary of State Rt Hon Robert Jenrick's legal direction on us (firstly to stop us doing anything at all with the Plan for a full 5 months, wasting time while he worked on his General Election campaign, then, secondly, to force the Plan through examination and to consider adoption by this December) has now come to a head.

In December, South Oxfordshire Councillors must consider the final report (not yet published at time of writing) from the Inspector on this draft Local Plan and consider adopting it in full. If we do not vote to adopt it, there are a whole raft of other things

the SoS is legally able to do: accept the Plan himself for South Oxfordshire; bring commissioners in to run the Council under 'value for money' rules (while many other councils face bankruptcy), give all Planning powers to the County Council who have agreed to accept them if offered; take Planning powers into the Ministry and charge the District Council for this, and probably other powers of which I am not even aware. As there is another election coming this May for the County Council, we're not expecting Rt Hon Robert Jenrick to do us any favours

The Green/Libdem-led Council has achieved a lot in the last 18 months. We suggested improvements to this draft Plan where possible, and hope these will be accepted by the Inspector (increasing the carbon-efficiency of the homes built in the Plan as far as legally possible being one) and we have developed a council Corporate Plan for the district which will be in place until 2024. A vision that puts climate change, nature restoration, well-being and prosperity at the heart of what the Council does. We have started the process for building properly affordable, zero carbon affordable-to-run homes, we have brought both nature restoration and a questioning of growth for its own sake into the conversation across Oxfordshire, we have pushed through Civil Parking Enforcement working with other councils, and acted decisively on building a new, properly sustainable Council headquarters in Didcot after so much dither in the previous administration. He can't take that way from the people of South Oxfordshire, even if we are now considered a dustbin.

Yours faithfully,

Sam Casey-Rerhaye (Councillor for Sandford & the Wittenhams)