

# Stroud District Councillor Report

September 2nd 2020

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## SDC business

- **Business support discretionary grants.**

As mentioned last month, eligible businesses have been able to apply to the new discretionary business support grant scheme, which offers priority to businesses who were not eligible for support in the previous schemes. 133 businesses have been granted £1.325m, out of the fund 'pot' of £1.417m.

- **Business support based on 'business rates'**

The earlier scheme which offered either £10k or £20k to zero or low rated businesses has been concluded with over 2260 grants being made available. The total government funding for this scheme was £25.210m.

- **Tackling racism**

As mentioned in last month's report, there had been complaints against a case of a SDC Councillor's activities on Twitter. The Monitoring Officer and subsequently our 'Independent Person' has determined that the postings of Cllr Young had not significantly breached the Council's Code of Conduct. However, as a result of complaints from the public, SDC has sought to update members understanding of diversity, equality, anti-racism, discrimination etc. The current SDC Code of Conduct is also being reviewed by a cross-party member's group, who will review the existing Code and report back to Council with suggestions. Members have recently undertaken further training to update and to hopefully address any shortcomings of member's understanding of these issues.

## SDC Full Council

This meeting discussed and agreed to support further budget for the Council's Council Tax Support Scheme, which is likely to increase due to COVID-19.

The budgets for the two Water Source Heat Pump schemes, as reported below, were finally approved.

Jon Beckett, a senior officer, was delegated to attend the Gloucestershire Engagement Board, who will now administer future COVID-19 related activities, rather than other bodies and authorities as has happened over the last 5 months.

<https://www.stroud.gov.uk/council-and-democracy/meetings/council/council-16-july-2020>

## SDC Strategy & Resources Committee - 9<sup>th</sup> July 2020.

This meeting was held mainly to discuss the business case for installing water source heat pumps at both SDC's premises at Brimscombe Port and at Ebley Mill. The heating system at Brimscombe needs to be moved due to the redevelopment there. The costs for doing this is about the same as installing heat pumps, which take heat from the adjacent River Frome. Questions were raised as to whether they

could be installed at Ebley Mill, as the boilers there only have a few years life in them. Members were told that they would need to be supplemented with other forms of heating and as the Council has declared a 'Climate Emergency' and has an aim for the district to be 'Carbon Neutral' by 2030, it was agreed that the new installations should go ahead and funding was consequently approved. There are significant government grants available at the moment to cover the installations, which last 30 years and the running and maintenance costs relatively low.

Each year SDC produce a rolling 4-year Corporate Delivery Plan. A revision to that agreed earlier in the year was necessary due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and was presented by senior officers and agreed by members.

### **SDC Strategy & Resources Committee - 30<sup>th</sup> July 2020.**

An Extraordinary Meeting was held to discuss the financial position of our sport centre operators, Sports Leisure Management (SLM). During COVID-19, leisure centres have suffered badly, and income is extremely low, too low to support such facilities. To help with the necessary maintenance of Stratford Park, SDC have paid SLM their management fee for 2020-2021 upfront, rather than monthly. Also, a previously agreed budget to pay Leisure Centre employees the 'Living Wage' (as for SDC employees), rather than the 'Minimum Wage', was also paid in advance. After much discussion and deliberation of the various options for further funding, members agreed to offer SLM a loan of up to £170k. This loan is subject to a number of 'terms and conditions' and has yet to be accepted or rejected by SLM. The consequences of SLM non-acceptance, options and the future running of the Centre were also disclosed in a 'closed session'.

### **Audit and standards committee – 29<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

The committee had a full agenda which allowed it to test that arrangements for audit had remained robust during lockdown. Over this period, some auditors had been re-deployed into operational work to offer a 'sense check' to new business processes and grant giving activity that had needed to be set up quickly to respond to Covid-19 arrangements. Reports were received from:

1. Counter fraud unit - much of their work has been related to the Council Tax Support Scheme and 'Right to buy' applications. This service has been successful in obtaining one successful prosecution, 5 civil penalties and 2 criminal penalties. Other matters are investigated and dealt with before formal proceedings. It is anticipated that the amount of fraud work will increase in the future particularly around claims for business support grants.
2. The Internal Audit team received an excellent outcome from an independent review of their work. This gives confidence to members that internal audit reporting systems give an accurate picture of the performance of the Stroud District Council
3. Corporate governance statement was approved. This shows how elected members and officers are held to account for the work of the council
4. Papers on investments and treasury management were presented. The on-going impact of Covid-19 is monitored effectively and, after a dip at the end of March 2020, investments have begun to improve. One long term fund is currently closed for access but this was within the council's 'long term' portfolio so will not impact on the council's short and medium term financial needs.

Jim Dewey

Green Party

Cllr Coaley Uley and Nympsfield Ward