

South Cambridgeshire District Councillors' Annual Report to Parish Councils April 2014

Before starting to write this report I looked back at the one I wrote in April 2013. I reflected at that time that the previous 12 months had not been easy either for residents or for the council and many similar challenges have continued during this past year. It would seem, however, that both residents and the council have resolved to address these with energy and a willingness to do things differently.

Many of us have become canner about managing the rising cost of such things as fuel. Judging from the number of cyclists I see along the route of the guided busway, this mode of transport continues to increase in popularity thus saving money on car fuel, promoting health and fitness and saving carbon emissions. Some of us have learned to 'switch' suppliers for gas and electricity whilst villages such as Rampton, dependent as they are on oil to heat their homes, have a group purchasing arrangement which provides members with discounts for bulk deliveries. This was set up through Rampton Energy Group [REG] a member of South Cambridgeshire District Council's [SCDC] Sustainable Parish Energy Partnership. This year has seen the formation of a new member group in Oakington and both are now collaborating with Sustainable Cottenham [SusCott] to identify energy/money saving initiatives that will benefit all 3 villages in the future. SCDC continues to support member groups through the appointment of a preferred Green Deal supplier, Climate Energy and successful bids for government grants that will fund these initiatives.

The council, too, has been investigating and, indeed, embarking upon joint working initiatives. By summer 2013 it had set up a shared internal audit function with Cambridge City [CCc] and Peterborough City councils; autumn saw the start of a shared payroll service with CCc. Recent discussions with Huntingdonshire District Council have led to an agreement to form a strategic partnership that will also share services with SCDC. The first of these will be building control. The biggest project in establishing shared services is currently underway between SCDC and CCc. Earlier this month Cabinet agreed the 'in principle' creation of a single shared waste service subject to preparation of a detailed business case and its formal consultation. The proposed joint service will have a single management structure and workforce located at SCDC's Waterbeach depot and will use a single pool of vehicles. The announcement that green bin waste collections would be cut during winter months provoked some concern. This was allayed by clarification that the change to monthly rather than fortnightly collections will be for 3 months only when garden waste is very low starting after the trees have finished shedding their leaves.

This year saw completion of the work on SCDC's Local Plan Submission Document and at a special meeting of Council on 13 March members voted to approve its submission for examination. No development has been included for any of our 3 villages. Villagers at Waterbeach and around Bourn airfield have though expressed concerns about the major developments that are planned in their areas.

This was also the year when planning permission for the first phase of Northstowe was finally given. This phase will include 1,500 homes, a local centre, a primary school, a sports hub and secondary school provision. Although it is the Northstowe Joint Development Control Committee [NJDCC] that makes the decisions a great deal of influence is exerted by the Northstowe Parish Forum [NPF] and acknowledgement must be made of the contributions to the work of the NPF by representatives of our villages. These contributions have been extremely valuable. News that the A14 upgrade is due to start in 2016 means work is now underway on the HCA's plans for phase 2.

Northstowe and the other developments proposed in the local plan will provide the homes that are needed not just to sustain the future economic growth of the area but also to allow the grown up children of local families to access decent local housing.

Following government changes to benefits and against the national trend towards the increasing use of temporary accommodation, its use in South Cambs has substantially decreased over the past year. The council's purchase of empty homes for use as temporary accommodation has been a contributor to this success. Planning permission was also given this year for superior replacement units to be built at Robson Court, the hostel at Waterbeach used by the council for emergency accommodation.

With a housing waiting list of around 1,700 SCDC started this year to build council houses again. The first 4 were recently completed in Linton following the demolition of a block of council garages for which there was no longer need. Two further schemes are currently underway. The council's successful delivery of affordable housing through exception sites continues locally with work just starting on 5 new homes on Histon Road, Cottenham.

SCDC's most ambitious project though must be the setting up of a housing company, South Cambs Limited. This will have the potential to meet a wide range of housing needs in the district and generate a significant revenue stream in future years. In November Council approved a pilot proposal and action plan together with the advance of £7m to the company on a secured basis funded from prudential borrowing. A cross party group has been set up to work with officers on development of appropriate business case[s]. I am pleased to be a member of this group and look forward to bringing you further news of its plans.

This exciting project is evidence of the council's efforts to mitigate against further cuts in the future to government grant funding. On 18 December the settlement announcement included the news that there would be a 24% reduction in direct grant funding for 2014/15 [about £870,000] with a suggestion that a similar cut will be applied in 2015/16. Against these cuts the council had already identified more than £900,000 of savings/additional revenue but in anticipation of cuts in future years the move towards a more commercially based approach is seen as prudent preparation for maintaining high quality services for residents.

SCDC continues to support parish councils and local groups who strive to provide additional facilities and services for residents through the Community Chest grant scheme. All 3 of our parish councils have successfully applied during the year as have other local groups such as Cottenham Community Centre, Cottenham Day Centre and Cottenham Bowls Club. The maximum grant is now £1,500 and I believe there is still money in the pot.

Thank you to both our parish and county council colleagues for the last year. I am confident that, whatever the challenges, all will successfully rise to them. Your district councillors welcome hearing from you about the items in this report or anything else of a local or strategic nature.

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