

2017 Annual Report to Parish Councils about South Cambridgeshire District Council

The District Council continues to regard parish councils as very important to the success of the area, and holds regular update meetings with parish councils throughout the year. Last year extra seminars were arranged to explain and discuss devolution proposals, as well as sessions covering planning, housing, refuse collection and the City Deal.

1. All change

New Leader Peter Topping took over from Ray Manning, who called time at the beginning of May 2016 after ten years.

Jean Hunter, our Chief Executive for the past six years, left us on 23 October. She had inspired a “one council” mindset which focused all our staff in a united sense of purpose. Alex Colyer, among other things our Finance Director, acted as interim chief executive as we arranged for her succession. Among other options was sharing a chief executive with one or more other local authorities. In the end we recruited our own new chief executive, Beverly Agass from South Kesteven District Council, who brings significant customer service experience from the public and private sector.

Jo Mills left us after six years as Planning and New Communities Director, and we welcomed Stephen Kelly as Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development for Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire.

The City Deal has recruited an interim chief executive and its own transport director, which ought to take some of the strain off county council officers.

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England completed its review of South Cambridgeshire’s electoral arrangements. Currently there are 57 district councillors. Their number will reduce to 45 and elections will take place for the new wards in May 2018 and every four years after. Locally Oakington will join with Longstanton to form a new ward represented by two councillors. Cottenham and Rampton will revert to being represented by two councillors, as they were before 2004.

2. Peer Review

The District Council asked for a “peer review” to assess its performance. This was carried out in November 2016 by an independent team from other district councils. They gave a very positive assessment, concluding: “SCDC has been on a strong journey of improvement since 2007 and has established itself as a well-respected and strong performing organisation, with good ties to its communities, partners and government. It has clear strategic direction set out in its corporate plan, has identified its future needs and is seen as a great place to work. Relations with officers and members are strong and effective.”

3. Devolution

All district councils in Cambridgeshire, as well as the county council and Peterborough City Council, have signed up for the most generous devolution deal in the country. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough will set up a combined authority, enabling the councils to work together ever more efficiently. The Leader of South Cambridgeshire District Council has been given the Housing

Portfolio in the shadow combined authority that has been rehearsing for the past few months. The leaders of the councils and the Local Enterprise Partnership are meeting regularly so that they will be ready to work with their new chairman, the mayor, who will be elected on the same day as the county council elections this May. The role has already attracted a lot of interest!

A new £20m annual fund over the next 30 years (£600m in total) will support economic growth, infrastructure and jobs. Road improvements will include things like dualling the A10. Rail investment will unblock Ely North Junction, provide new rolling stock, and strengthen the case for a new station at Addenbrooke's.

Cambridge City Council will get a specific £70m housing grant. Another £100m for "affordable housing", homes for rent and part-ownership provided by the council and housing associations, will be targeted in South Cambridgeshire. We think we can make close to 2,000 of these houses available over the coming five years. These are not extra houses to those in the Local Plan, but we will be bringing them forward earlier than otherwise and within reach of more people.

Local control of the skills and apprenticeship budget will offer opportunities for our young people. The next stages in the handover of powers from Whitehall to town hall will extend to community safety (including police and fire services) and integrating local health and social care.

4. Planning, infrastructure and new developments

2016 saw several milestones passed at Northstowe: widening the B1050, excavating balancing ponds to reduce flood risk to Longstanton, constructing pumps at Webb's Hole to reduce flood risk to Mare Fen, opening the first primary school, constructing the first houses, and ending with completion of the legal agreement for phase 2. Over 2,000 houses will be offered at prices and/or rents below market rates.

The application for development of up to 1300 houses at "Wing" got resolution to grant from the Cambridge Fringes Joint Development Control Committee towards the end of April 2016, and permission was issued November 2016.

Cambourne West (which lies mostly in Caxton parish) received resolution to grant for 2,350 houses from our Planning Committee in January.

The A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon Improvement Scheme started – expected to finish 2020.

Major progress was made over Christmas at the site of the new Cambridge North station, which was 80% complete by the turn of the year, to get it ready for its opening in May. Work took place over the festive period to build platforms, install tracks for a new bay platform and to fit overhead wires. The footbridge, lift shafts, stairwells and main station building were all built over the course of last year. The new station, which is expected to handle 3,000 passenger journeys a day, will alleviate the pressure on the existing Cambridge station, where people currently leave the train in order to travel by other means to the science and business parks. The timetable is published and services are scheduled to be inaugurated on Sunday 21 May 2017. An interchange between the northern leg of the Busway and the King's Cross to King's Lynn railway line has enormous potential, which is just as well because there is huge pressure growing on the A10 North corridor.

Urban&Civic plc is the development manager appointed by the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (the government agency charged with disposal of surplus MoD land) for Waterbeach Barracks and Airfield. South Cambs supports the principle of development of this large area of publicly-owned

previously-developed land. A new town north of Waterbeach village is included in the Local Plan still going through examination. Opportunities for broadening the range of new housing are welcomed, as well as innovative approaches to construction. The outline planning application for 6,500 houses, however, raises many questions relating to comprehensive delivery of a whole new settlement, in particular integration with the land held by the other promoters (RLW Estates). It is on their land that a new railway station could be built. We also need to be clear how transport improvements, especially the A10, will go hand-in-hand with occupation of more houses. These issues are fundamental to understand fully before any decision is made.

The county council, City, South Cambs, East Cambs, and private sector interests north and south of the A14 junction have commissioned a study from transport consultants examining options for a major upgrade of the A10, as well as the contribution that other modes of travel can make to easing congestion.

Cambridge finds itself the centre of attention from all four cardinal points of the compass. From the south we have the London Stansted Cambridge Consortium, which has set itself the goal of joining the ranks of the top five global knowledge-intensive business clusters. From the east, a newly formed Cambridge-Norwich Tech Corridor seems keen to further the agri-tech and clean-tech interests we have in common. To the north, Peterborough is enlisting our support for the establishment of a university there. And the National Infrastructure Commission is very keen to facilitate links with the other place and points in between. East-West Rail is working out how to bring back a rail link between Bedford and Cambridge, and the next stage of the Oxford to Cambridge expressway is the dualling of the A428 from the Black Cat to Caxton Gibbet, scheduled to start in spring 2020.

Planning performance: Over the last nine months, decisions have been issued on 94% of major applications and 87% of non-major applications within 13 and eight weeks respectively – putting South Cambridgeshire District Council among the top performers in the country. This follows determined efforts to improve performance.

The **Local Plan** continues to be examined by the Inspector, a process now in its third year. Although the District Council recognises that the inspector needs to test every element of the plan for its soundness, nevertheless this is a very long time for a local plan to be considered. The council believes that its policy of building large communities such as Waterbeach and Northstowe helps to protect the Green Belt, which otherwise would see Cambridge simply extend and envelop more of South Cambridgeshire's separate and distinct pattern of villages. The Local Plan should be concluded by the end of 2017.

The council has also promoted the development of **Neighbourhood Plans** to enable villages to put forward their own views on where development would be suitable and where it would not, for their own locality. The Planning Portfolio Holder has set up a Neighbourhood Plan Task and Finish Group, of district and parish councillors. They will oversee the development of a number of documents including a revised agreement for use between the council and any parish council preparing a Neighbourhood Plan.

Local development management issues: Smithy Fen has seen a lot of unauthorised activity the past few months, necessitating engagement of a multi-agency task force. Cottenham also faces the prospect of 600 additional houses. The Endurance 50, off Oakington Road, already have planning permission. The Gladman 200 obtained resolution to grant in controversial circumstances at the end of March, and a public inquiry hearing an appeal into what became in effect the same application was adjourned to allow the parish council to be fully represented.

5. Housing

The Council currently owns, manages and maintains a stock of 5,500 homes. This year the Council was shortlisted for the Chartered Institute of Housing “Exceptional Landlord of the Year” Award after industry judges were impressed by the authority’s innovative approach in delivering efficient services and outstanding homes.

Some key initiatives that the Council has led the way on nationally include the setting up of a property company – Ermine Street Housing – that rents homes in the private sector to generate income to support Council services, and setting up the Housing Development Agency with Cambridge City Council to deliver 250 social homes each year. The Council is also one of the top three performing councils in the country for re-letting homes and has exceeded customer satisfaction targets for repairs. A trusted handyperson scheme to help tenants with small jobs around their home has also been set up along with warm homes strategy to tackle fuel poverty and condensation while making people more comfortable in their homes.

This year saw the further introduction of new government policies providing additional challenges for the housing service. The first of the 4 years of mandatory 1% reduction in rents has limited the Council’s ambition to deliver new build housing but it still managed to continue the programme in a more modest way with completion and handover of 39 new homes this year.

Recognising the wide range of aspirations and financial circumstances of its residents the Council is working to identify an appropriate range of solutions. These include affordable rent and shared equity homes as well as Government’s new Starter Homes and Rent to Buy and innovative products like Rentplus. It also maintained its record of managing homelessness with minimal use of bed and breakfast accommodation.

The Council is a vanguard authority and regional lead for the Government’s Self & Custom Build agenda and is starting to apply for planning permission on its first plots. The council is actively promoting self-build, and has held regular seminars to help people who want to construct or commission their own homes, exploring such matters as regulation, finance, and modular construction. There are already 600 names on our register of those interested in contributing their own “sweat equity” towards solving the housing crisis.

Housing White Paper: While there may have been some disappointment with the emphasis in the White Paper on requiring local authorities to get houses built, when landbanking by big housebuilders and controlling the release of houses to keep prices up are seen as contributory factors limiting the supply of new houses, two shifts in government policy were generally well received:

- a set of measures to make it easier for small building firms to get back into the business of building houses, and
- greater willingness to allow local authorities to build houses again. (The public sector used to build half the houses the country needed.)

Councillors and staff have already had meetings with Gavin Barwell, the Housing and Planning Minister, and more are expected as we put together a package of measures best suited to the needs of South Cambridgeshire.

6. Financial performance

One of the main 'unknowns' in the annual budget cycle had been the level of the annual settlement received from the government. This was not advised until after the Autumn Statement (which was usually delivered around Christmas time). The budget then had to be prepared for approval by the full council in February. This timescale always made planning beyond one year difficult, so this year the government introduced the option of a 4-year settlement which would allow councils to know exactly what level of government funding they could expect for a 4-year period. Any council wishing to take the 4-year option had to publish an efficiency plan by October 2016 showing where it would make savings to meet budget forecasts. We signed up to this, giving us more certainty in forward planning - although there may still be some funding streams (like New Homes Bonus) that are excluded from the detail of the 4-year settlement.

Business rates - Local businesses are now getting more support from the council due to an increase in the level of Non-Domestic Rate Relief for those businesses operating in rural areas. Mandatory relief has been increased from 50% to 100% meaning some small enterprises will now not have to pay any rates at all.

Larger businesses are also being helped by the creation of three Enterprise Zones in our District. These are in Waterbeach, Cambourne and Northstowe. This policy is designed to attract new businesses to the district by offering rate relief for up to five years if they move into one of our new Enterprise Zones.

Businesses who are liable to pay rates are able to appeal the amount they have to pay, by challenging the Valuation Agency's assessment. When appeals are successful any reduction in income is a direct cost to the council, and we have had to make provision

Benefits - Residents who are in receipt of benefits are continuing to receive support from the council in respect of Council Tax payments. The Localised Council Tax Support Scheme continues for another year unchanged, which makes this the fourth year it has been in operation without having to be adjusted. This is a scheme that is fully funded by the council and receives no grant to support it from Central Government.

Community Chest Grants - The hugely successful Community Chest grants programme made a total of 63 awards last year, each providing funding of up to £1,500 for community projects. Another £52,000 (or £1,000 per week) will be given out in the coming year, but as the popularity of the scheme increases, so we've had to reduce the maximum amount that can be granted down from £1,500 per award to £1,000. Hopefully this will help the money last a little longer into the coming year, because at £1,500 a time we usually run out of budget within 6 months.

Performance on collecting rates and council tax - Our collections teams have put in another superb year, making sure that we collect as much Business Rates and Council Tax as possible. [The latest year-to-date figures, as at February 2017, are 98.9% and 98.1% respectively.] We are regularly in the top quartile for collecting Council Tax and this year collection rates are around the same level as last year, which were 99.4% for both Council Tax and Business Rates. This ranked us at 2nd best in the country for Council Tax collections, and 22nd best for Business Rates.

7. Environmental services

Bin collection days changed for over 130,000 households across Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire at the end of February as a result of new rounds aimed at reducing the need to travel for waste collection vehicles by up to 20,000 miles each year, cutting traffic and emissions, and contributing to a £700k efficiency savings target over three years. Households were sent a new collection calendar and leaflet detailing how the changes would affect them. Signs were put up at entrances to villages to further increase awareness: information is also available on www.scambs.gov.uk/bin-changes.

The Council monitors a range of services for which licences are granted. Earlier this year the licensing team spotted a fake drivers' badge after a scanned copy was submitted by its Buckinghamshire-based holder for checking. On further investigation the driver had not obtained the badge from us and it was proved to be counterfeit. As the District Council only ever issues taxi driver licenses to individuals after an interview is carried out in person, the matter was immediately referred to Thames Valley Police for investigation. During the operation, several properties were searched and licensing officers worked alongside police at a registered taxi office to check driver badges and car license plates. A second fake South Cambridgeshire badge was seized as evidence, along with revoked plates from another council outside the area.

8. City Deal

It isn't just about chopping down trees on Milton and Histon Roads, bulldozing a busway across the West Fields, requisitioning road space to extend the cycleway network or imposing a workplace parking levy on Cambridge businesses.

The Smarter Cambridge initiative has built a Cambridge-wide dedicated wi-fi network which will be extended into South Cambridgeshire in due course. Currently, they are collecting data from GPS sensors that are already put on buses (so they know where each and every bus is, real time), air quality monitors, how many cars are going down major roads, congestion, how full each car park is, etc. They could eventually draw on a vast range of sensors, even down to whether an individual on-street car park space is full or empty. Councils could also bolt on to it, and they think it might help elderly social care to put monitors in vulnerable peoples' houses.

In summer 2017 the City Deal will roll out a travel app, to help people know where the buses are (exactly and in real time). It will also have a "predictor" function in due course. So you could be in Northstowe or Cambourne or wherever and tap in "I want to drive to Cambridge at 8.30am: what is my predicted drive time... and how much less would it be if I left 30 mins earlier or later?". This might induce people to spread their journey times, easing peak-time congestion.

9. Thanks

Simon Edwards and Lynda Harford join me in thanking the members and officers of the parish council for what has been an especially interesting year. We have also worked well with the two county councillors, and we particularly wish David Jenkins well as the twelve years that he has been one of the representatives for the division that includes Cottenham come to an end.

We would also like to record our appreciation of Eddie Murphy's tenure as editor of the Cottenham Newsletter. He has often indulged us on matters of word-length and deadline. We wish him well, and have already begun establishing a working relationship with Adrian Lent which we look forward to being equally fruitful.

Tim Wotherspoon.