

Cottenham Ward District Councillors' Report for Annual Parish Meetings 2015

Finance

The district council's principal services are planning, housing, licensing, refuse collection and recycling. It also administers elections and collects business rates and the precepts levied by county and parish councils, police and fire services. We also offer grants up to £1,500 for small capital projects for community groups, and awards to fund further training for promising athletes. Our general fund annual budget is £16m. Council housing turnover (a separate account) is £29m. The county council is responsible for adult social services, highways, education, minerals and waste.

Ermine Street Housing, a company we set up, makes much-needed housing available on all types of tenure whilst offsetting diminishing government grant and making your council tax go further. This year we will make additional savings of £670,000 but, to protect services, have reluctantly raised our portion of council tax by £2.45 a year (making £125.31 on a Band D property). In answer to recent criticism that councils are sitting on reserves and failing to collect taxes, South Cambridgeshire can show a steady running down of reserves from £6.7m (2014/15) to £2.5m (2019/20) which we consider a prudent level given uncertainty in future local government finance. Our collection rates are consistently among the highest in the country, the figures for 2014/15 being Council Tax 99.2% (£91.78m out of available £92.52m) and Business Rates 99.3% (£69.9m out of available £70.4m).

Demographics

The Office for National Statistics' mid-year estimates for 2013 show the district's population increasing and getting older. Compared to the previous year (151,068) total population rose 0.2% to 151,400, with 0.9% more women (from 76,000 to 76,700) and 0.5% fewer men (from 75,054 to 74,700). There has also been a decrease in the economically active population, from 94,900 to 94,100: those aged 16-64 make up 62.2% of the total population, compared to 63.8% nationally. Whilst the proportion of 25-44 year olds has fallen from 26.5% to 26%, for 45+ it has risen by 1.9% (from 67,204 to 68,500), forming 45.2% of total population (42.7% nationally).

Planning

The Local Plans for Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire are being tested simultaneously by a government-appointed inspector. 14,000 new homes are proposed in Cambridge and 19,000 in South Cambridgeshire for the period 2011-2031. Hearings started in November and resumed in February. We need to adopt a new Local Plan to demonstrate a five-year land supply for the construction industry. Without this the default provisions of the National Planning Policy Framework are the basis on which planning applications are decided.

Broadly speaking, houses cost about ten times annual salaries, prompting economists to warn of dire consequences, never mind putting home ownership out of reach of most young people. The government has responded by imposing ever stronger incentives and sanctions to encourage local planning authorities to get more houses built. Among other initiatives, our council has agreed to become a "Right to Build vanguard", matching those wanting to build their own houses, commission designers and contractors to do that for them, or fit out a shell to their own specifications, with landowners and agents. One recent year saw more houses provided through self- and custom-build than by any single volume housebuilder. The construction industry must be picking up, however: for me one of the most significant steps of the year was the re-firing of the red-brick kilns at Accrington.

We believe that our residents have come to expect strong economic growth (and thus just about accept the accompanying housing and transport pressures). We are mindful, however, that the unique selling point of the Cambridge area is the high quality of life enjoyed especially in the countryside surrounding the city. We are determined to preserve and enhance the character and appearance of our historic and natural environment. This underpins the choices we have made about the location of new housing and employment and our will to improve transport and other forms of connectivity (such as ultra-fast broadband: Connecting Cambridgeshire reached Oakington & Westwick July/August and Cottenham in November).

In tandem with the Local Plans we held our draft Community Infrastructure Levy charging schedule consultation between 28 April and 7 July. The intention is to collect contributions towards facilities and services from small developments which are not covered by large-scale Section 106 planning obligation agreements.

There is no development for Cottenham in the Local Plan but is this the best way forward? In the current circumstances it leaves Cottenham to some extent vulnerable to speculative applications. Wouldn't it be better for the village to work out what's best rather than leaving the field wide open to developers? One way of doing this would be through a neighbourhood plan. Let the parish council know if you think this might be a good way to proceed.

Maintaining the strong sense of community in our villages leads the council to look for small sites on which we can provide affordable housing for local people so that families can stay together. The sustainability of our villages underlies our protection of valuable local services – particularly shops and pubs. This principle was upheld recently when an appeal for change of use of the former Mace shop to another take-away was dismissed. We are now getting a Costcutter instead.

Transport

Improving transport is one of the most urgent concerns for those anxious to avoid a brake on the Cambridge Phenomenon. The Highways Agency finally submitted the Development Consent Order application for the A14 Cambridge to Huntingdon Improvement scheme at the end of 2014. As a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project it will be determined by the Planning Inspectorate.

Our council joined the A428/421 alliance, which persuaded the government to commit to extending the dual carriageway from Caxton Gibbet to the Black Cat. We have entered into a strategic partnership with Huntingdonshire District Council to save money by sharing services (as well as having similar arrangements with Cambridge City Council).

The partnership that received the most attention during the past year was the City Deal, which was signed in June. This is an agreement between the government, Cambridgeshire County Council, South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City councils, the University of Cambridge and the Greater Cambridge Greater Peterborough Enterprise Partnership (the LEP), to facilitate economic growth in the Greater Cambridge area. Initial focus has been on how to spend £20m a year for the coming five years on transport improvements. However, the City Deal also covers housing, particularly "Affordable Housing", and skills, with emphasis on increasing the number of apprenticeships. The City Deal is run by an Executive Board of five people including the leaders of the three councils, advised by an Assembly of fifteen people, three members of each council and three members each appointed by the University and the LEP.

The aim is to establish a “combined authority”, bringing together the planning and transport functions of the three constituent councils. The task is to compose a single integrated strategic planning and transport plan after 2019.

South Cambs is also part of the London Stansted Cambridge Consortium, reflecting very close economic integration along the two railway lines. Cambridge Science Park station was granted permission but transfer to Network Rail means a new approval is required. Much interest has been expressed in completing the east-west rail link from Oxford. We received a visit from the Oxon Innovation Engine Group to learn how local councillors of all political colours seem quite comfortable working together round here, prompting an article in “The Economist” and follow-up letters comparing governance in and around the two cities.

Cyclists had a field day when the Tour de France, which set off from Yorkshire, had a stage starting from Cambridge and heading south through our district.

Northstowe

At Northstowe, the outline permission for phase 1 of 1500 houses was issued on 22 April 2014. Archaeological excavations began in June, with an open day on 20 September. Throughout the year the committee has been dealing with detailed matters relating to pre-commencement conditions, such as design of the B1050 between the Longstanton western bypass and the Busway crossing, and the main roadworks on the development site. Gallagher has appointed Jacksons to carry out these engineering operations, which are expected to take forty weeks. In October, the primary school became the first building to be granted full planning permission, with design input on the colour scheme from pupils in Oakington.

The outline application for phase 2 of 3500 houses (and the town centre) was submitted at the end of August, and a public consultation ran during the autumn. Towards the end of the year Northstowe attracted government interest at the highest level, especially from the Treasury, leading to a request for us to bring forward determination of “resolution to grant”. The committee responded by doubling the frequency of its meetings! In the event the meeting on 25 March ended after six hours without reaching a decision. The application will return to the committee on 29 July.

Two balancing ponds are being excavated off Hattons Road, intercepting flow on Longstanton Brook, and intended to reduce flood risk to Longstanton. There are similar intentions for attenuation lakes on Oakington Brook off Dry Drayton Road, to alleviate flood risk to Oakington too. Without wishing to raise expectations unduly, your district councillors have been exploring ways of bringing these forward earlier than currently planned in the Northstowe development, in light of the 8 August rainfall event that brought the most recent high water. (With regard to climate change, 2014 is universally recognised as the hottest year on record.) These facilities make excellent sanctuaries for wildlife too.

Housing

The council is landlord of 5,500 council houses which we strive to maintain to a very high standard. We have installed solar panels to provide free daytime electricity to over 2,500 of them. We are responsible for tackling homelessness, helping an average of 40 struggling households per quarter remain in their own property or find an alternative home. Unlike many councils, we have kept bed and breakfast accommodations at very low levels. This reflects the work done through Ermine Street Housing and projects like the re-building of Robson Court, Waterbeach.

Environmental Services

We have been making some small-scale improvements to the landscape – such as planting wildflower meadows at Coolidge Gardens and doubling the Oakington community orchard. We have also brought a string of successful prosecutions for fly-tipping (and fraud).

We are responsible for collecting rubbish from your house, taking it to the recycling and refuse disposal site run by AmeyCespa under contract to the county council. We have 5 ‘bin lorries’ for emptying green bins, 6 ‘residual waste vehicles’ for black bins and 7 ‘recycling trucks’ for blue bins. Each black and green freighter collects 13-15 tonnes of waste per day and each blue truck collects around 8 tonnes per day. (Most recyclable materials weigh less.) Each vehicle has a driver and two loaders. They start work as early as possible, leaving the depot about 6am to beat the traffic and finishing about 2pm to avoid adding to afternoon congestion. During the seven-hour shift each truck has to return to the depot once or twice to offload.

The last decade has seen huge advances in computer programming for route planning. Companies like Amazon and supermarkets organise their internet-shopping deliveries as efficiently as possible. Redesigning our bin collection routes last year enabled us to reduce our fleet by three vehicles and their crews (without compulsory redundancies). However, we are now aware of one or two snarl-ups when traffic encounters bin lorries at times they weren’t expecting. These problems are being ironed out.

Once the leaves have fallen, green waste falls overall by 50% in winter. To save money, the green bin crews have moved to annualised hours contracts, working the same number of hours as before (and the same as the black and blue bin crews), but skewed more to summer than winter. This is how your green bin came to be emptied just once a month in December, January and February. This move was popular with the crews but more importantly the new schedules have saved around £400,000 a year, which is equivalent to avoiding an additional £6 a year in council tax for a Band D property.

Many thanks to those of you who have already given us your views on these changes. This feedback is being carefully assessed. We also carry out a survey each year about bin collections, street cleaning and graffiti removal. If you would like to take part, go to www.scambs.gov.uk/EnvServSurvey or call 01954 713258 to request a paper survey form.

Conclusion

Simon Edwards is Deputy Leader and portfolio holder for Finance and Staffing. Lynda Harford is chairman of the Planning Committee, and also a county councillor for the Bar Hill division. I am portfolio holder for Strategic Planning and Transport, and chairman of the Northstowe Joint Development Control Committee. We feel that we bring to these positions an awareness that it’s what affects our own residents that matters. We hope our sense of teamwork comes across in everything we do.

Lynda and Simon would like to join me in thanking Jo Brook and the parish council for our good working relationship throughout the year.

Tim Wotherspoon