

## District Councillors Annual Report 2015/16

As ever the municipal year gets underway with the Annual Meeting of Council, which is where the appointments are made to the various committees. I'm pleased that your District Councillors have all retained positions of some authority within the council, with Lynda continuing to steer the Planning Committee as the Chairman, Tim as cabinet member looking after Northstowe, Strategic Planning and Transport, and I continued as cabinet member for Finance & Staffing and Deputy Leader of the Council.

### **Northstowe**

Continuing to make the headlines, Northstowe has been keeping us all busy over the last 12 months. Not so long after planning consent was granted to Gallagher Estates for Phase 1 of the development, we received the planning application from the Homes and Communities Agency for Phase 2, along with the Southern Access Road. This second application was for a total of 3,500 homes (on top of the 1,500 already granted under Phase 1), located largely on the former barracks area in Longstanton. You'll recall Phase 1 was located on the old Longstanton Golf Course.

On 24<sup>th</sup> June Northstowe Phase 2 was granted outline consent subject to agreeing of the section 106 agreement, and the necessary conditions to make the application acceptable in planning terms. Alongside this, approval was also granted for the Southern Access Road, linking Northstowe to the B1050, between Longstanton and Bar Hill.

A month later the section 106 and conditions were agreed, and provided for a total of £73 million of funding for community facilities, and a level of 20% affordable housing. It remains to be seen if this level of affordable housing can be delivered, given the governments emerging policy on 'Starter Homes' and we are working very hard to look at innovative ways we might be able to deliver this. Although 20% affordable housing is much less than we would have liked, there are review mechanisms built in to the agreements which allow us to review this figure as the development progresses.

One really positive outcome of the section 106 negotiations was that the lobbying that has taken place from a number of parties to ensure flood mitigation for Oakington is provided as part of this phase has paid off, and

included in the agreements is the provision of a new balancing pond. This will be located somewhere along Dry Drayton Road and will be designed to intercept water coming down from Dry Drayton and Bar Hill.

It is widely accepted that the flooding Oakington experienced in the summer of 2014 was exacerbated by the large volume of water coming from this direction, and so a balancing pond located here would be extremely welcome.

Another key achievement was the inclusion of £450K of capital funding for upgrades to the cycle routes from Northstowe to Girton, which I know will be a welcome pot of money for this really important facility.

Property room sizes were contested by Gallaghers for phase 1, and as a result the council's condition requiring a minimum room size was quashed by an inspector. However, we included the same condition for the Phase 2 application, and the HCA (the applicants) were content to allow this to stand.

Building on Phase 1 is progressing, and the school is beginning to take shape. Bloor Homes have also been appointed to be the first housebuilder on the site, and we could even see the first occupations sometime next year.

Finally, the Northstowe burial ground, which we were keen to see being delivered early on, is to be provided at the completion of the 1500<sup>th</sup> dwelling.

## **Local plan**

South Cambs Local Development Framework was originally adopted in 2007 and was intended to cover the period up to 2016. So, we are now working hard to produce a new Local Plan (the new name for the document setting out all our planning policies) to take over from the previous LDF.

Part of this process involves the new plan undergoing an Examination In Public, which is carried out by a Planning Inspector. This examination was progressing well until March 2015, when the Inspector conducting our examination called for additional work to be done to ensure we have taken into account house prices and affordability when assessing the number of new homes needed. (This was as a result of new planning guidance issued in the intervening period).

The inspector wasn't suggesting our plan was unsound (the measure of success or failure of a plan), but was asking for clearer evidence to enable them to make an independent judgement on the soundness of the plan.

An extraordinary council meeting was called on 4<sup>th</sup> June where the inspector's letter to the council, outlining the work we needed to do, was debated, and the council resolved to note the letter, and asked our officers to do the work required by inspector.

This work has now been completed, and a further extraordinary meeting in March was called, where the council approved the modifications to the plan, and authorised a further period of consultation on the changes.

This has all been very frustrating, because it has delayed the process by at least a year, and in the meantime, as some of our existing policies are now considered out of date, it has resulted in a number of large, unplanned, applications for housing being made, with some having to be approved. (There are three such applications waiting to be determined for Cottenham, while one has already been approved on Beach Road).

The Inspector has issued a revised timetable for the examination process and we hope to be able to resume the examination on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2016.

## **Finance**

As ever, the council's finances are very tight, with further reductions in government grant to deal with this year. When I became a councillor, we were in receipt of around £7.8 million of government grant per annum, but each year it has been cut and cut to the point where by 2018 it will have reduced to zero.

The chancellor's Summer Budget, delivered in July 2015, set out a number of additional challenges for us as a council, and gave us particular headaches in how we balance the books in our Housing Revenue Account. This is because the government, alongside the reduction of the benefits cap, and changes to the welfare state system, announced that we will be required to reduce council house rents by 1% per annum each year for the next 4 years. Clearly this is going to impact our Housing finances to the extent that we are now having to review our new council house build program. Of course it is really good news for our tenants, some of whom will be seeing significant reductions in their

benefits, and so an equal reduction in the rent that they have to pay will be welcomed.

Following on from the Summer Budget, the government announced our settlement in December 2015. This is where we know how much funding we will have for our General Fund activities (i.e. everything other than housing). As expected our grant from government is due to be cut, but at an ever increasing rate, until revenue support grant is entirely phased out, and further cuts will be levied on the amount of business rates we are able to retain.

Fortunately the council has been predicting this for a number of years now, and has put measures in place to try to save money as well as increase it's income. Around £5.5 million has been saved over the last 5 years, and the budget for 2015/16 shows there is a further £930,000 yet to go. Some of this will come from further efficiencies in the Environmental Health section (mainly a re-organisation of senior management posts), and some will come from increased income from our commercial activities like the business hub, and our in house bailiff service. It won't all be delivered in one year either, so we will be on the hunt for savings for another 2-3 years.

One major contributor to our income is now Ermine Street Housing, which is a housing company we set up to provide market rented housing in the area. The organisation isn't just limiting it's focus in South Cambridgeshire either, and you may have seen in the press recently that we have taken on the management of some MOD properties in Brampton.

By 2017 we expect Ermine street Housing to be bringing in around £600,000 per annum to the council which will be a welcome boost to our finances.

Overall our reduction in funding equated to around £15 per band D Home. To meet this reduction in funding the council agreed to increase council tax by £5 per band D home, with the remaining £10 shortfall being made up of a combination of increasing our income, and making further efficiency savings.

### **Shared Services**

One of our efficiency drives is to enter into a number of 'shared service' arrangements. A good example is our Waste and Recycling service, which is now being shared with Cambridge City Council. This has resulted in £600,000

of savings so far, and we are aiming to make a further £150,000 of savings over the next 2 or 3 years.

Other services already being shared are the Home Improvement Agency, Payroll, Building Control, Legal Services, and shortly ICT. These are being shared with a combination of Cambridge City Council and Hunts District Council.

Finance and Planning are 2 further areas we are hoping to share, and we have appointed a new shared Head of Finance, as well as a new shared Planning Director in anticipation of this.

## **Housing**

One of the council's main success stories this year has been the continued growth of our housing company Ermine Street Housing. This is an organisation we set up to provide market housing to the rental sector alongside our affordable properties which are managed by the council. Ermine Street Housing has been targeted to bring in around £600,000 per annum to the council through its commercial activities, and it has recently been shortlisted for a national innovation award. It has been shortlisted for the 'Reinventing Public Services' award, and will be up against other councils and organisations from across the country.

## **Planning**

The council's planning service has undergone a number of changes this year, with the most recent being changes to the criteria for deciding which planning applications are determined under delegated powers. Under the old scheme of delegation, applications where a Parish Council recommends refusal and the planning officer recommends approval would automatically be determined by the Planning Committee.

This is no longer the case as parish councils will now be able to request applications should go to committee, and these requests will be considered by the Chair of Planning (currently Lynda) and the Head of Development Management. These applications will go to planning committee if the Parish Council has given material planning reasons that cannot be addressed by condition. This means Parish councils will no longer be solely reliant on the

local District Councillor requesting that the application is determined by the planning committee, and they now have the option of putting forward their own case.

The Planning Committee itself will also have an increased workload now, as the Northstowe Joint Development Control Committee (NJDCC) has now been stood down. This committee was ideally placed to determine the major outline planning applications for the New Town, together with the section 106 agreements, as these applications had key strategic considerations which affected both the District and the County Councils, and so it made sense for members of those authorities to sit on the committee. Now these applications have been dealt with, the remaining 'reserved matters' applications are much more suited to being determined by the normal Planning Committee, which is how we will proceed for the foreseeable future.

I imagine if and when a Phase 3 application is submitted, the NJDCC will rise again, like a phoenix from the ashes!

## **Boundary Review**

The Local Government Boundary Commission is responsible for ensuring appropriate local government representation at both Parish, District and County levels. They have a set of quite complex rules which they apply to local authorities, such as how many electors per councillor there are, how big each ward is, where the boundaries are, and how many councillors there are in a council.

Due to the growth of some of our wards (particularly Histon and Impington), we have broken one of the rules relating to the number of electors per councillor, and this has prompted the boundary Commission to undertake a full review of all the wards in our district.

At the same time, we were required to look at the number of councillors we had, which at 57 is rather on the high side. As a result, the council has agreed to reduce the number of councillors down to 45, which of course means many of the wards will change by having fewer councillors looking after them. In addition to this the ward boundaries will also have to change to ensure the council remains within the Boundary Commissions rules on numbers of electors per councillor.

The council has produced a scheme of changes which minimises the amount of change but ensures we remain within the criteria set out by the Boundary Commission. The result locally (if the Boundary Commission accept our scheme) will be the Cottenham ward will change from being a 3 member ward, covering Cottenham, Rampton, Oakington & Westwick, to a 2 member ward covering just Cottenham and Rampton.

Oakington will become part of a new 2 member ward which will comprise Oakington & Westwick, Longstanton, and Northstowe. Of course as soon as Northstowe begins to grow, it will undoubtedly trigger another boundary review (as the ratio of electors to members will be no longer meet the criteria) and things will all change again. This is one of the prices we have to pay for living in a growth area.

In tandem with these changes the council have also resolved to change the election arrangements. Up to now we have always elected our council in thirds. That is, each year, for 3 years, a third of our councillors are up for election, with no district elections in the fourth year. From 2018, when the changes will come into effect, the council will have all out elections, every 4 years.

### **Community chest**

The hugely successful Community chest scheme has now been replenished with over £50,000 of funding, for 2016/17 and is open for applications again. We've done really well from this scheme locally since its inception, with 15 schemes having gained a total of around £15,000 funding. No doubt, word is out about how quick and simple it is to win a grant, and so I would encourage any community groups or Parish councils to make their applications quickly in case the pot runs dry again.

Awards are given on a first come first served basis, and when the budget is spent, then that's it until next year.

### **The Greater Cambridge City Deal**

The Greater Cambridge City Deal was originally signed in 2014 and was designed to create an infrastructure investment fund of up to £500m of public

funding and £500m private investment which is to be used to accelerate delivery of 33,480 planned homes, enable delivery of 1,000 extra new homes on rural exception sites, deliver around 400 new Apprenticeships for young people, create 45,000 new jobs, and create a governance arrangement for joint decision making between South Cambs District Council, the County Council, and Cambridge City Council.

On 28 January 2015, the City Deal Executive Board agreed the prioritised City Deal Programme for 2015-2020. The decision of the Executive Board is based upon the deliverability of the schemes within the 5 year timeframe and the economic growth benefits they bring to the area.

The agreed areas for concentration during the first 5 years, taken from the initial indicative list below, are as follows:

- Milton Road bus priority - (This scheme is currently out to consultation).
- Madingley Road bus priority – (The consultation results are now being considered).
- Histon Road bus priority - (This scheme is currently out to consultation).
- A428 to M11 segregated bus route/A428 corridor Park & Ride
- City Centre capacity improvements/cross-city cycle improvements
- A1307 corridor to include bus priority/A1307 additional Park & Ride - (This scheme is currently out to consultation).
- Better Bus Journeys Scheme – Cambourne to Madingly Mulch section (Consultation results being considered).
- Chisholm Trail cycle links/Chisholm Trail bridge - (Funding approved 8.4 mill and a planning application to be submitted).
- Year 1-5 reserve scheme development
- Years 6-10 programme development
- Programme management and early scheme development

Work is progressing slowly, and we hope to see some actual deliverables (The Chisholm Trail for example) during 2016/17.

## **Devolution**

The government have been promoting the idea of devolution for some time now, but it is only just recently that things have been gathering pace, and proposals are starting to see the light of day.



The initial ideas were that a devolution deal might be struck on an enhanced Greater Cambridge City Deal footprint. In other words, a combined authority comprising South Cambs, Cambridge City, Hunts DC, and a subset of the County Council.. This quickly looked unworkable, as the county Council would be required to be a member of this combined authority, which would prevent them joining any other combined authority, which was also being suggested for Peterboro, Fenland and East Cambs.

So initial proposals were worked up for a combined Authority based on the County of Cambridgeshire together with the Unitary authority of Peterboro. However, while negotiations were progressing, albeit very slowly, the government indicated that this would be too small an area, and made it clear that the only deal that would be credible was one comprising Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk. And that the combined authority of these counties, and their respective district council's would be under the umbrella of an elected Mayor. The Mayor would have a number of powers devolved by government to him/her, and the County Councils would hand over a number of powers upward to the Mayor, mainly around transport, skills and health. Districts such as South Cambs would lose no powers at all, so anything coming out of the deal could be seen as a positive, albeit we would have a Mayor to deal with, rather than the various ministers we have been used to.

The initial deal leaves a lot to yet to be negotiated and ironed out, and South Cambs have signed up to commit us to debating the offer at a special Full council meeting scheduled for the end of June, where we will decide if we are going to take this forward or not.

## **Successes**

The council has seen a number of successes over the year, and two that I'm particularly proud of are the achievement of the Gold standard for 'Investors In People' (IIP), and the success of Ermine Street Housing.

We've been assessed three times now for IIP and each time we've improved our score by initially achieving Bronze standard, then Silver, and now Gold. Almost immediately after achieving the Gold standard though, a new standard of Platinum was created! So, as part of our 2016/17 corporate plan, we are now aiming to hit the Platinum standard at our next assessment.

Ermine Street Housing was an initiative that was worked up by members and officers at the council, and had its origins back in 2013. It was clear to us at that time that government funding was due to be reduced to a point where we might not be able to continue as a council, and so we set out to come up with a project which would create an ongoing income stream to the council to make up for lost government grant. The result is Ermine Street Housing, which has successfully completed the 2 year pilot project, and is now set to make around £100m of investment, and in turn bring in around £600,000 a year in profit to the council. And it's doubly pleasing to see Ermine Street being nominated for an award for 'Reinventing Public services'.

Each year the District Council hosts an award ceremony, aimed at recognising and celebrating the achievements of community groups and Parish Councils across the district. Each year our ward manages to scoop one or more awards and this year we congratulate Rampton's 77 Committee for winning the prestigious 'Outstanding Local Service' award. A well deserved, and long overdue award for this superb local organisation.

I hope this report gives you a flavour of the work the District Council has been undertaking over the last 12 months, and I would like to pay particular tribute to the help and support we have received from all 3 Parish Councils over the last 12 months, and the hard work and help given by the respective Parish Clerks.