

South Cambridgeshire District Council – Caxton and Papworth Ward

District Councillor's Monthly Report – December 2023

Christmas Market

The Cambourne Christmas Market will be held at Cambourne Village College on Sunday 10th December, between 11.00am and 3.00pm. This event is supported by South Cambs District Council. Over 70 vendors have signed up for stalls, including gift and food vendors. All welcome.

Bus Services

The Combined Authority (the Mayor's Office) has reviewed passenger numbers on the subsidised bus routes that serve the Caxton and Papworth ward villages – specifically the X2, X3, 8 and 18. They are happy these services have sufficient riders to continue for at least next year. Separately, the CA has talked to Whippet about the large number of late and missing buses, particularly on the 18 route. Whippet cite a shortage of drivers and breakdowns, but have promised to improve.

National Highways legacy funding for communities – A428

National Highways has launched a £2 million legacy fund to support not-for-profit groups in Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire as part of the A428 Black Cat to Caxton Gibbet improvement scheme. National Highways is now calling on all local not-for-profit groups to apply for the grants, including local schools, charities, community groups, and environment and heritage groups. Two funds available for applicants are:

- A £1.7 million Social Value Fund to maximise the wider benefits of the scheme available for all not-for-profit organisations – grants between £15,000 and £200,000
- A £250,000 Community Fund to support the local community and provide social value available for non-for-profit groups or small voluntary and community organisations – grants of up to £15,000

This is the first of five funding windows and is open to applications until 1 February 2024. To find out more about the application process and submit an application, applicants should visit:

www.nationalhighways.co.uk/our-roads/a428-black-cat-to-caxton-gibbet/leaving-a-positive-legacy/

Road Closures in the New Year

Cambridgeshire County Highways has advised of two applications for road closures:

- National Highways has requested multiple partial and complete closures as they begin construction of the A421 extension between Black Cat Roundabout and Caxton Gibbet. The application covers the period between 2nd January 2024 and 31st December 2027 (yes, 2027!). Roads affected include Toseland Road, B1040 St. Ives Road, A1198 Ermine Street South (North of Caxton Gibbet), A1198 (South of Caxton Gibbet), B1046, Potton Road, and Cambridge Road Eltisley. Not all roads will be closed at the same time and diversions will be sign-posted where there are complete closures. National Highways have promised to provide advance warning before closures are put in place but it will be prudent to look out for yellow signs with more information.
- The County will implement daytime only “as needed” closures for repairs to the Elsworth to Conington road between 8th January and 31st March 2024, also on New Barns Lane Conington. There will be a fairly lengthy diversion via Boxworth and the A1307 (the “old” A14) when needed.

Changes to absentee vote applications

From 31 October, new postal and proxy vote regulations come into effect. An online service for applying for an absentee vote has been launched. Electors wishing to vote by post will now be required to reapply for their postal vote every three years. Also, the number of voters a person can act as proxy for will be limited to four, of which no more than two can be 'domestic' electors (electors who are not overseas or service electors). A check of an applicant's National Insurance Number or other relevant data will now also be made for all absentee vote applications. A transitional period allows electors with an existing postal or proxy arrangement time to make the adjustment and reapply under the new rules. A new digital service was launched to allow electors to apply online via GOV.UK for a postal or proxy vote. Go to <https://www.gov.uk/apply-postal-vote> or <https://www.gov.uk/apply-proxy-vote> respectively.

External Scrutiny of SCDC

There have been multiple external organisations scrutinising the work of the council in the last few weeks:

Corporate Peer Review

As I mentioned last month, South Cambs has been the subject of an LGA (Local Government Authority) Corporate Peer Challenge, which has been described as an Ofsted inspection for councils, if less confrontational. The lead peer was Cllr Joe Harris, leader of Cotswolds District Council and the Lib Dem lead at the LGA. He was assisted by Cllr Sam Chapman-Allen, Leader of Breckland Council and leader of the District Councils Network, together with several officers from other authorities.

The reviewers failed to find what they referred to as 'red lights' instead providing with a lot of minor recommendations. They also found evidence of good working practices and positive relationships with stakeholders. The Homes for Ukraine scheme, the Cost of Living programme and the CEO's work with the Integrated Care System were especially praised. The Executive team will now convert the recommendations into an action plan.

I am aware that several parish councillors from our ward met with the reviewers, and I would like to thank them for taking time to do that. Better communication with the parishes was identified as needed and I look forward to seeing the proposed improvements.

DLUHC and the Best Value Notice

As I also mentioned last month, a Best Value Notice has been issued, which requests the Council provides the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) with extensive data on a weekly basis for the next six months. This data covers staffing, costs, service delivery, performance, and resident feedback. South Cambs Cabinet has agreed the Council will every week answer up to 80 questions totalling 186 individual data points, as the four-day week trial continues.

Notices of this type have been issued to three other local government bodies this year - but for concerns such as an unrealistic budget, significant governance weaknesses and major cultural problems. None of these apply to South Cambs which is in a strong financial position, and is acknowledged by external parties to be well run and high performing.

The three-month trial of a four-day week for desk-based staff began in January this year as the Council tried to address critical recruitment and retention issues facing local government. These issues are particularly acute in South Cambridgeshire due to the strength of the local economy and high cost of living. Following independent analysis which showed performance was generally maintained, with nine areas showing substantial improvement on the previous year, that trial was extended until the end of March 2024 to assess recruitment and retention benefits over a longer term.

The Council has maintained its full opening hours, so they are at least the same as before the trial, and now stays open to the public later on Wednesdays.

At an Extraordinary Council meeting last month, councillors heard that staff turnover and staff sickness was down. Recruitment had seen clear benefits with almost 100 new staff joining the Council this year. The performance of services across the board during the trial was encouraging – including in the waste service, which has recently joined the trial and is seeing more than 99% of bins collected on-time every week. Thanks to the improvement in recruitment, the amount expected to be spent on agency staff cover this year is hundreds of thousands of pounds lower than it would otherwise have been.

The council is now finalising details of the public consultation that it will have to undertake in order to take a final decision on whether to make the 4 day working week permanent next summer. Expect extensive communications from the council as the consultation opens up.

External Auditors

Every council is required to have its accounts audited by an external auditor. South Cambs' accounts have been audited by Ernst and Young (EY) for the last 5 years, but responsibility will rotate to KPMG for the next 5 years. EY has just presented the final accounts for 2021-2022. They show the council is in a strong financial position with healthy reserves and limited exposure to investment risk. Looking forward, they identified no “best value” impact from the 4 day week trial.

The latest audit is being signed off at a time when the vast majority of councils are behind on their audits due to problems with the capacity of the auditors we are required to use. Much of these delays are the result of the covid lock-downs. Only six out of over four hundred councils across the country are fully up to date with their accounts.

The joint planning service (covering Cambridge City and South Cambs) is reporting that its spending is close to budget, whereas this time last year it was £250,000 overspent. We are assured that this improvement was due largely to the benefits of the 4 Day Week trial. The planning service has recruited into a significant number of planning roles which had been previously difficult to fill and required expensive agency staff.

Parking Enforcement in South Cambs

New Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) powers in South Cambridgeshire have now been given to Cambridgeshire County Council following Parliamentary approval.

Earlier this year an application was submitted to the Department for Transport (DfT) to enable Council Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) to issue Penalty Charge Notices for the majority of on-street offences such as parking on double or single yellow lines. Previously only the Police could do this.

Benefits are expected to include increased compliance with parking restrictions which in turn would improve traffic flow, road safety and lead to a reduction in obstructive and dangerous parking. It will also support economic growth in the district.

Following the decision by Government, the CPE scheme in South Cambridgeshire will officially come into effect on 19 December. To give people notice and a chance to find a more suitable parking place, information has now begun to be placed on vehicles that are parked in some areas where parking is in the greatest demand, such as commuting and shopping areas.

A Warning Notice will be issued to people who continue to park where there are restrictions throughout January – this looks like a parking ticket but there is no fine attached. Penalty Charge Notices will be issued from 1 February which will mean a fine of between £50 and £70, depending on the severity of the offence.

Shared Prosperity Fund

South Cambs will receive over £1m from this government scheme to allocate as grants to business and community schemes. The council is currently discussing how big these grants could be (probably up to £100k) and what sort of schemes should be targeted.

Community Chest Grant funding

Funding is still available for community projects through the Community Chest Grant. Up to £2000 may be available for approved projects from not-for-profit organisations and smaller parishes. For detailed information, go online to <https://www.scambs.gov.uk/community-safety-and-health/grants/community-chest-grants>

As we approach winter, I would like to specifically highlight the available funding for cost-of-living related projects, of which over £17,000 remains. This fund can be used for start-up and capital costs. If any community group would like assistance in completing an application, they can email community.chest@scambs.gov.uk

Safe and Legal Routes

The government is consulting on “Safe and Legal Routes” where each council in the country is being asked how many more refugees it can accommodate. South Cambs said between 25 and 50 as long as it receives additional funding. Many councils say zero. some with justification such as Kent.

County Council budget gap

Cambridgeshire County Council’s estimated budget gap for 2024/25 has increased from a predicted £16M to more than £23M—largely due to increases in demand for services and inflationary pressure. Without action being taken this gap will grow, and is predicted to be more than £20M in the following year, and a further £19M and more the year after that.

Cambridgeshire is not alone. The Local Government Association currently reports that councils across the country face an ‘inflationary storm’ with a predicted £4Bn funding gap over the next two years. A report from the Council’s Chief Executive says: “In 2023-24, pressures on our budget have arisen principally due to several very high-cost children’s social care placements and a delay in receiving income from a newly constructed solar farm (which requires connection to the electricity grid). In addition, we are seeing that demand for bed-based care for older people is also rising, following a period of reduction in demand and then stability stretching back for some time, to the beginning of the pandemic.”

The report also points to wider national and international issues which have an impact on the council’s pressures—such as interest rates which the Bank of England has said are likely to remain above five per cent until 2026. This will affect all goods and services the council buys, the cost of borrowing, and pay award costs for council workers as well as for a large externally commissioned workforce which includes staff working in residential care for vulnerable adults and children.

The report highlights how all services in the council have been the subject of a comprehensive exercise to find efficiencies, alongside a number of specific reviews into particularly high cost areas such as home to school transport, children's social care placements, and high levels of historic adult social care debt. Proposals to set the Council's 2024/5 budget will be discussed by county councillors in December before a period of scrutiny during January, including an opportunity for residents to comment on the plans.

Cambridge 2040

Cambridge 2040 is Michael Gove's vision for significant employment and housing growth in Greater Cambridge. There was not much in the Autumn statement about it other than fairly modest sums of money for retrofitting water efficiency into existing houses and some money for enhanced planning services. Local leaders who met with Mr Gove think there is £3m to set up a Cambridge office to work up the scheme. There was mention of a possible Development Corporation but there is no reason to believe that this is definitely the route they are taking. It is one of a number of delivery models but there are many reasons why it is not the best. There is a small amount of money over 2 years which will go to the joint planning service.

Oxford Cambridge Pan Regional Partnership Conference

The annual conference took place in Milton Keynes last month with over 250 delegates. The focus is on economic development and environmental enhancement across the region. Bridget Smith leads on the environment and is determined that there will be a focus on large scale environmental schemes in the short rather than long term. These will include building on the Forest of Marston Vale scheme with the concept of a large scale community forest for the region.

South Cambs Hall

Like most local authorities South Cambs now allows hybrid/home working which means that large offices are no longer needed in the way they once were. It has therefore moved all of its staff onto the first floor of the Cambourne offices and are converting the ground floor to space for businesses and community groups to work and hold events. It is hoped that this will encourage new start-up businesses, as well as helping existing businesses through a programme of support events and networking. The new space will be open on 24th April 2024.

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