

Cllr Thomas Bygott

2022-23 Annual Report to Longstanton Parish

31st May 2023

Introduction

Thanks to everyone in the village for your support over the past seven months. It is an honour to be your representative and, as always, I am happy to assist if you have an issue with the District Council or need some advice.

South Cambridgeshire District Council is one of several layers of local government and sits between the Parish and County levels. It covers 105 villages and the two towns of Cambourne and Northstowe. Although SCDC collects Council Tax on behalf of other local authorities, only a portion of this is collected for the district. The breakdown for the average (band D) property in Longstanton, following the budget meeting in February, is:

Authority	2022-23 band D	2023-24 band D	Change
Cambridgeshire County Council	£1,469.61	£1,542.87	+4.98%
South Cambs District Council	£160.31	£165.31	+3.12%
Cambridgeshire Police Commissioner	£257.58	£272.52	+5.80%
Cambridgeshire Fire Authority	£74.97	£79.92	+6.60%
Cambridgeshire + P Combined Authority	£0	£12.00	New
Longstanton Parish Council	£75.71	£79.44	+4.93%
TOTAL	£2,038.18	£2,152.06	+5.59%

My group put forward an alternative proposal that would not have increased the district portion this year. It would also have provided an additional planning enforcement (compliance) officer in order to bolster resources in the planning enforcement team and to provide for the growing demand to investigate breaches of planning conditions and consent. We also proposed to invest £50,000 in fraud prevention work and raising fraud awareness in the community, to tackle the growing level of fraud being attempted against both the council and members of the community, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic and cost of living crisis.

The Government has provided help to all households with a domestic electricity connection over the course of the winter; the Energy Bills Support Scheme (EBSS) consisted of £400 in six automatic monthly instalments up to March. Households with traditional prepayment meters were given vouchers instead, but the last of these must be redeemed by 30 June 2023. For businesses, an Energy Bills Discount Scheme (EBDS) will continue until March 2024. More information can be found at: www.gov.uk/get-help-energy-bills and www.gov.uk/guidance/cost-of-living-payment.

Housing

The District Council owns and maintains around 5,600 council houses and continues to build more every year. Last year (2022), developments were completed in Swavesey, Waterbeach, Melbourn, Meldreth, Toft and Great Abington. There are projects currently underway in Orwell, Gamlingay, Great Abington and Sawston. People wishing to rent council homes can apply through the Home-Link website www.home-link.org.uk, the choice-based lettings scheme for all council and housing association homes in Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk. Other types of properties such as extra care and equity share properties may also be advertised there. Decisions are made impartially by officers using objective criteria, and councillors can provide advice but can't influence a decision in favour of any applicant.

The council has successfully bid for £1.7 million in Government funding, from the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, to continue work to decarbonise council homes. The Fund is designed to upgrade a significant amount of the social housing stock across the country that is currently below Energy Performance Certificate C, up to that standard. Energy saving measures such as exterior wall insulation, cavity wall insulation, loft insulation, new windows and doors, draft proofing measures, as well as heat pumps and solar panel installation can be provided with the funding. These measures could save tenants between £220 and £400 a year on energy bills.

Planning

Work is proceeding on the next Local Plan, in which the District Council and Cambridge City Council are working together on a proposal for a "Greater Cambridge" Local Plan. The two councils have decided to build more than the Government has asked them to. They initially proposed building 48,840 new flats and houses across both council areas between 2020 and 2041, around 12,000 more dwellings than the Government requires. To put the number in context, Cambridge City had 52,000 houses in 2020. The Councils have chosen not to stick to the Government 'standard method' for calculating new housing which shows that around 36,700 new dwellings are needed to 2041.

A consultation was held on the new Local Plan 18 months ago and a report on it released last summer which can be found at: <https://greatercambridgeplanning.org/media/2574/gclp-first-proposals-consultation-report-v2.pdf>. I reviewed an update of the plans at the council's Scrutiny and Overview Committee in January. The total number of houses has been increased to 51,800. A further meeting will be held in the summer of the Joint Local Plan Advisory Group, when further details will be revealed. The new Local Plan is expected to be adopted in either 2024 or 2025, but these projects can sometimes take longer than expected.

More information and updates can be found at: <https://greatercambridgeplanning.org/emerging-plans-and-guidance/greater-cambridge-local-plan>.

The Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities has awarded Greater Cambridge Shared Planning (GCSP) £290K to improve feedback processes for its emerging Local Plan. The funding seeks to build upon the earlier work in producing a "digital" Local Plan by speeding up the processing and the review of the thousands of comments made by communities and developers through the process. This will shorten the time between people making comments and Councillors and communities being able to see who has said what about the emerging plan.

Transport

There are several major transport projects currently being designed through the district. Firstly, East West Rail (EWR): a new railway line connecting Oxford and Cambridge. The Government has given its support for the next section of the route between Bedford and Cambridge. An announcement on the final route selection is currently expected this month, May 2023.

The main preferred route from last year's consultation has generated significant opposition in a string of villages between Caldecote and Harston, passing very close on a raised embankment. There has been some talk of reducing the impact by lowering the embankment. Two pressure groups - the Cam Bed Rail Road (CBRR) and Cambridge Approaches (CA) - have been campaigning for a "northern route" that would pass between Girton and Oakington with a station called "Northstowe" on the outskirts of Oakington (but a long way from Northstowe) before entering Cambridge from the north. I have spoken on several occasions to the technical team at East West Rail to remind them of the major technical reasons why a northern route is unsuitable. I have also suggested an alternative southern route alongside the M11 that would be far less damaging to nearby villages.

The two guided busways being proposed by the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP), the Cambourne to Cambridge (C2C) and the Cambridge South East Transport (CSET) projects have both been an ongoing source of argument for several years. My involvement with C2C has been to ask to save 3,000 trees along a strip of land nearly 3km long past Hardwick that were to have been cut down for a dedicated route between St Neots Rd and the A428. It has been decided that this section of the route will use St Neots Rd itself and that most of these trees will not need to be cut down.

I am opposed to the CSET project because its guided busway would use part of the route of the old railway line between Cambridge and Haverhill that was closed in 1967. I am instead supporting a plan put forward by RailFuture to rebuild the railway to Haverhill. If CSET goes ahead, rebuilding the railway will not be possible. It seems that the foolish short-term thinking that led Dr Beeching to destroy much of our railway network continues today through undemocratic quangos like the GCP.

Another of the GCP's poorly conceived projects is the Cambridge Congestion Charge. I have been campaigning consistently against this for more than 14 years, having first proposed a motion at the District Council against it in February 2009. That motion was successful, but the policy was reversed in July 2018 after the Liberal Democrat group took control of the Council in May of that year, and supporting a Congestion Charge has been District Council policy since then. My group put another motion forward at March's council meeting calling for a referendum to be held before implementing the charge, but this was defeated along party lines.

The £5 daily charge would cover the whole city, including Addenbrooke's and Royal Papworth hospitals. Hospitals are usually sited at the edges of cities so that city residents can easily access them via the convenient public transport that operates within cities, but where residents of outlying villages can also access them. In most villages, development is too sparse to support viable public transport, and most long-distance travel is done using the car. We need to make sure that our hospitals are easily accessible from both the city and the countryside.

Cities like Singapore, London and Stockholm already had the best metro systems in the world before they imposed congestion charging. Cambridge does not have public transport to this level and a congestion charge would not raise anything like the level of funding that this would require. When the Cambridgeshire Autonomous Metro was being proposed, its main funding source was to be a levy on property developers building new towns and other major projects.

Environment

This is one area where my group has been working co-operatively with the current administration. I don't believe that because we're in opposition we should automatically do the opposite of what the administration does. In recent years we have supported council motions for the district to become zero carbon by 2050, to declare a Climate Emergency and to request that the pension fund divest from investment in fossil fuels. The Council has policies of being 'Green to the Core' and 'Doubling Nature' that I am also very happy to support.

Far from coming at an economic cost, I believe that zero carbon initiatives will encourage new technologies, boosting efficiency, innovation and entrepreneurship. It will also make us healthier, as diesel fumes are a major cause of cancer, heart disease and dementia. In the case of investing in oil companies it is also because of the long term financial risks that these investments pose for the council's staff and retirees.

The blue bin system that I helped to introduce in 2007 is also going strong and has been extended into Cambridge City. The Shared Waste Service took delivery of its second fully electric bin lorry last summer. At the start of the project, the Shared Waste Service had around 55 diesel collection vehicles, using around 50,000 litres of diesel a month. The huge spike in the cost of natural gas and oil following Russia's invasion of the Ukraine highlighted the need for us to reduce our dependence on imported fuels from hostile and unstable countries. Electric vehicles are not only more environmentally friendly but are easier to maintain as they have fewer moving parts. Battery technology has advanced to the point where, despite the distances between our villages, electric vehicles are now suitable for this role. I hope that the Council will eventually replace all its diesel-powered vehicles. Having an electric vehicle fleet will mean that the Council's rubbish collections can proceed smoothly despite supply disruptions and price spikes.

Groundwater

Following the drying up of the ponds in Longstanton and Northstowe over the past few years and concerns that this may lead to further cracking of buildings in the local area, I have been attending regular monthly meetings with the Longstanton Environmental and Groundwater Group (LEGG) and the management of the District Council. We have been making progress towards commissioning a further investigation that will help understand what damage has been done to the underground aquifer what remedial action might be possible. I will report more on this when further results are received.

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