

**Report to 2024 Annual Parish Council
From District Councillors
Cllrs Carla Hofman and John Williams**

About Us

We are members of the ruling Liberal Democrat Group. The Liberal Democrats have controlled South Cambridgeshire District Council since May 2018. Carla has been a District Councillor since 2022, John a District Councillor since 2010. John has been a Cabinet member running the council since 2018. He is responsible for Finance and Staffing, which includes grants. He is also a Joint Development Control Committee member which considers major planning applications fringing the boundary of South Cambs and the City. He also deputises for the Leader of the Council on the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority Board.

About South Cambridgeshire Council

The council was formed in 1974 and has just celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. Currently the council has 45 councillors led by a Cabinet of eight councillors, representing over 157,000 people and a workforce of over 660. This includes all those employed in the planning and waste services which are shared with Cambridge City council. Its council offices are at Cambourne and it has a waste depot at Waterbeach.

The council's five-year Business Plan has four themes: growing local businesses and economies, delivering housing that is truly affordable to live in, being green to the core and being a modern and caring council. The council has won national awards for its building control, planning services and for its 4-day week trial.

For 2024/25 the council will spend nearly £81.5m, of which £37m will be met from local taxpayers (including business rates) and Government grants. The council will also receive £7.5m from investments (rents and interests on loans) and nearly £40m from fees and charges. The council has total reserves of about £130m and of this, £100m is invested in Ermine Street the council's housing company. The council has its own social housing stock consisting in total of some 5,600 properties.

The areas covered by council services include building control, business support, environmental health, housing, planning, waste collection and community well-being (including supporting refugees). Building control, planning and waste are operated in partnership with other local authorities. The council provides grants principally for health and well-being, environmental and ecological projects and for business support.

2024/25 Budget

In February, we passed our budget for the 2024/25 financial year. The council is in a strong financial position – something increasingly rare amongst local authorities, even though at £170 per annum for a Band D property we charge one of the lowest council tax

rates in the country. The 3% council tax rise was below inflation. However, looking to the future we have had to build up reserves to meet the possibility of a substantial proportion of Business Rates being redirected to deal with adult social care. The poorest in our communities get up to 100% relief on their council tax bills.

Growing Local Businesses and Economies

We help businesses (specifically Small and Medium Enterprises) to grow. This helps bring jobs and opportunities into our villages. Our work to support local high streets and markets directly benefit communities and helps residents shop locally and help them support local businesses. Also, helping local businesses transition to net-zero means they will be more resilient to the impact of climate change and help the district at large in its efforts to be more sustainable.

Truly Affordable Housing

Everyone deserves a high-quality, safe, and affordable place to live. Our plans are ambitious and ensures South Cambridgeshire continues to be a leader in delivering affordable homes. There have been over 1,000 housing completions every year in South Cambs since 2018, up to 1,500 completions in 2022/23 (the most recent year we have data for). Except for a slight dip in 2020, each year affordable homes being built in the district has rose and has been higher than in the city. In 2017/18 the council oversaw 736 house completions (only 180 of those affordable). In contrast, in 2022/23 we oversaw 1,500 completions (472 of those affordable).

Green to Our Core

Our water scarcity crisis, air quality problems, extreme weather, flooding, and heat waves are all direct consequences of the climate crisis. Being green to our core is a lynchpin of all the work we do as a council and demonstrates how serious we are about tackling climate change.

Our work on 20% biodiversity net gain pre-empted and went further than Government goals and our contributions to the upcoming Local Area Energy Plan will help Cambridgeshire set forth how it will reach net zero. Further, we are actively engaging with Government, the water industry, Cambridge City and other partners to find solutions the water scarcity crisis we are facing.

Our Waterbeach Renewable Energy Network Project will help reduce the council's waste collection carbon emissions, including electric bin lorries. Also, we are, with the Zero Carbon Communities Scheme, EV Charging Point Scheme and other community engagement programmes, helping local communities take steps on the path to reducing emissions. Over the past 4 years we have given out £500,000; this year £125,000 will be available through ZCC grants. Through recipients such as repair cafés, food waste redistribution and sustainable cooking courses, we are helping reduce household waste and encourage recycling and the development of a circular economy.

We have employed two new Environmental Enforcement Officers. These roles are in place specifically to address the issue of fly tipping – so that the council can more effectively prosecute fly-tippers.

Modern and Caring Council

The council is undertaking a transformation project. This is not just about saving money (about £2 million in total) but is also finding ways of improving our services for residents and using the resources we have efficiently and effectively. We are making more of our services available online and are updating our website to make them more easily accessible to residents. We have a fraud squad to tackle housing benefit, council tax and business rates fraud and misuse of our grants.

We have a Cost-of-Living programme to support those struggling in these challenging financial times. This includes supporting food banks, community hubs, community wardens and the distribution of electric blankets etc. We are working to do all we can to support asylum seekers and refugees, including a large number of guests from Ukraine, who are settled across the district. Some £600,000 has been spent under the Cost-of-Living programme.

We are working with parish councils to develop more Neighbourhood Plans so that local communities can take a leading role in determining their future development.

Cambridge 2050

Michael Gove announced his plans for 'Cambridge 2040' in July 2023. Since then, we have had little clarity from the government. The figure of 250,000 homes has been revised down to 150,000 homes and 2040 has been pushed back to 2050.

In March 2024 a 'growth corporation' was announced, which will direct a lot of the initial work, as a precursor to a Development Corporation. Unfortunately, local authorities will only sit on an advisory council alongside business and industry partners, meaning we won't have a vote or decision-making powers. We have been clear about the importance of having local voices involved in local planning decisions, as well as the need for new transport, new schools and new health services. The boundary of the DC has not been made known to the council.

We've also been firm on the issue of the environment and water scarcity. This is why we have seen movement from the government to increase water supply to help us unlock existing developments planned for Bourn Airfield, Waterbeach and the Cancer Research Hospital on the BioMed Campus. This has been a good first few steps but significantly more work on water scarcity will be needed, to realise the growth within our own current Local Plan let alone the Government 2050 plan.

Four-Day Week Trial

The Council has been trialling a four-day week for desk-based staff since January 2023. This trial period ended March 2024. Separately, a trial for waste crews started in September 2023 which as you know stopped Monday collections and the disruption of Bank Holiday Mondays. Waste followed the desk-based trial due to the complexities of reorganising bin collection rounds for around 128,000 households across Greater Cambridge. Under our four-day week, officers are expected to carry out 100% of their 5-day work, in 80% of the time, for 100% of the pay.

The council undertook the trials to attract and keep talented colleagues, improve its services by filling vacant posts permanently, rather than relying on more expensive agency staff, and to reduce costs. This followed successful 4-day weeks in the private sector both in the UK and abroad.

During the trials, as advertised posts were filled with permanent staff, the council spent £434,000 less on agency staff covering 10 roles that were previously identified as hard to fill - equalling a full year gross saving of £480,000 (of which £320,000 is saved by South Cambs). Initial results suggest there has been no statistically significant negative impact on services but rather in some areas the Council's services have improved. Further, health and wellbeing surveys of council staff show there has been a significant positive impact on both mental and physical health.

In November 2023, the Government being politically opposed to a 4-day week issued a 'Best Value Notice' to the council. This notice requested the council to submit significant amounts of data to the Government in the hope that the council would cease. In December 2023, the Government published a four-week consultation on the Local Government Finance Settlement, setting expectations around local authority funding in future years. It asked for views about the use of financial levers in future settlements to disincentivise the practice. The result was overwhelmingly against the imposition of financial penalties, but the Government has so far not commented on this.

The Council had planned to consult on a 4-day week before this summer, shortly after the end of the formal trials. We cannot do that now until the Government tells us what financial levers it would use, as we are not be able to explain the full financial impact on the council. Whilst we wait for the Government to tell us what they will do so we can consult, staff are continuing to use a four-day working pattern.

Once a consultation has been carried out, and once all the evidence has been independently analysed, councillors will at full council meeting decide whether to keep the 4-day week permanently. This decision will be based on the evidence put before all councillors and has not already been made.

Carla and John