

# Annual Report 2022



## CLLR EDNA MURPHY

Lib Dem County councillor for Bar Hill division including Girton, Dry Drayton, Bar Hill and Lolworth

## Introduction

It was a privilege to have been elected in the County Council elections in May 2021 to represent our local communities.

The elections saw the Conservative Group lose its majority on Cambridgeshire County Council. The number of councillors elected for each political group was as follows:

Conservatives	28
Liberal Democrats	20
Labour	9
Independents	4

### 1 The Council

- 1.1 A new Joint Administration of Liberal Democrat, Labour and Independent councillors is now running the Council, and the three groups have signed an Agreement including a policy framework, protocols for working arrangements, and a new committee structure.
- 1.2 I am the Chair of my political group. This means I am responsible for organizing group meetings and ensuring we manage ourselves according to our standing orders.
- 1.3 I have been appointed to the Fire Authority, and was elected its Chair last summer. I am both the first woman and first non conservative to have held this position since its inception. I am proud that also elected Vice Chair was a Labour Councillor from Peterborough, who became the first member of an ethnic minority to be in a leadership position in the Fire Authority. As Chair of the Fire Authority I am a member of the Combined Authority Board, the decision making body chaired by the Mayor, along with leaders of local councils and the Police and Crime Commissioner.
- 1.4 On the County Council I am a member of the Strategy & Resources Committee, Adults & Health committee (including health scrutiny), the Pension Fund Committee and I chair the Staffing Committee which deals with senior appointments and policy.
- 1.5 The County Council's move from Shire Hall in Cambridge to Alconbury finally took place in the autumn - but not for Full Council meetings, for which the 'Multi Function Room' at Alconbury is certainly too small for meetings with COVID social distancing, and probably even when social distancing is not required. The Annual Meeting of the Council in May 2021 was held amid the war planes of the Imperial War Museum at Duxford.
- 1.6 The new Joint Administration has been taking stock of the Council it has inherited. We invited in a 'peer challenge' panel of expert councillors and council officers from the Local Government Association to look at the operation of the Council and advise on priorities. They did so, and came back in spring this year to update on how we were

doing. We also convened an Independent Remuneration Panel, as we are required to do, to review councillor allowances. Unlike the previous administration we agreed their recommendations unaltered.

- 1.7 The Council's Chief Executive retired during the year, and we appointed a new Chief Executive Stephen Moir who started in post in February 2022. Unlike his predecessor, Stephen will serve Cambridgeshire County Council only, not Peterborough too. This is part of a process of disentangling many of the joint staffing structures set up by the previous administration, so that we and they can focus on Cambridgeshire priorities.

## 2 Strategy & Resources

- 2.1 The new Council inherited a budget gap of £22.2M for this year. We managed to balance the budget this time, but very significant financial challenges lie ahead. The budget gap we inherited was set to rise to £86M by 2027, and our 'peer challenge' team identified this as an issue 'of significant magnitude'.
- 2.2 The Council increased its portion of Council Tax in February, by 1.99% for general services, and 3% for adult social care. This was a difficult decision to take during the current cost of living crisis, but many people struggling most with increased bills and prices are those who are most likely to need council services, and likely to pay a lower council tax increase. The Conservative opposition proposed an increase of 3% instead, with no increase for general services.
- 2.3 The Council's budget for this year included a £14M 'Just Transition Fund' to tackle inequality, improve lives, and care for the environment.
- 2.4 The new Joint Administration commissioned an independent review of the Council's development company This Land. This found 'unusual' accounting practices and 'shortcomings [which] require immediate attention'. It said, 'Overall we do not consider that there is a full understanding within This Land of the level of risk exposure the business is under.' The review made a number of recommendations, most to be carried out within 3 months. The new Administration also reviewed the financial model for the lease of the old Shire Hall building.
- 2.5 The County Council's Farms estate extends to 33,000 acres - the biggest public sector rural estate in England and Wales. The new Joint Administration is keen to reposition this asset not just as a source of rental income (although that is important) but also as a major part of our environmental and climate ambitions.

## 3 Adults & Health

- 3.1 One of the major changes the new administration made to the Council's committee system was to combine the former Adults Committee and Health Committee into a single committee, making the most of the close relationship between health provision and adult social care. The Committee has been working hard towards the introduction of the Government's Integrated Care System across health and care providers in Cambridgeshire. We also welcomed a new Director of Public Health, Jyoti Atri.

- 3.2** The COVID pandemic has had a devastating effect in terms of loss of life, long-term health challenges, and the emotional impact on families. We certainly do not yet know the full impact on health long term for those who have had Covid. Workforce challenges in health and care are acute, as people are reassessing their careers and Brexit undermines the ability to employ staff with the right skills. The Council has worked extensively with partner agencies to support the COVID effort, though with all precautions now removed in England case numbers have surged in recent months.
- 3.3** The Joint Administration has adopted a 'health in all policies' approach. We are investing in the development of 'Care Together', with Community Catalysts supporting local social care micro-enterprises as an alternative to large agency staff models, and rolling out the Real Living Wage to social care workers. We have established increased support for unpaid carers and expanded the Direct Payment option to more people. And we have invested further in the Enhanced Response Service as an alternative to continuing reliance on over stretched A&E departments.
- 3.4** The Council has invested in public health programmes, including more NHS health checks, and local grants for community wellbeing activities. It has also started to assess the impact of government reforms on our social care responsibilities, in which it's clear there will be very significant new responsibilities and costs without new funding.
- 3.5** Work is progressing on the opportunity to build 80 flats on land at the Princess of Wales Hospital in Ely. 16 of these will be let out to Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust as a hospital rehabilitation ward enabling health and social care to be further integrated.

#### **4 Children & Young People**

- 4.1** A major focus of this committee during the year was to ensure funding of vouchers over school holidays for families eligible for free school meals. This happened throughout 2021/22 and is guaranteed throughout 2022/23. The Council has also worked with local providers on to establish the Holiday Activity & Food programme for the children of families on benefits-related free school meals. The numbers of children in Cambridgeshire eligible for free school meals has continued to increase significantly across the county.
- 4.2** The Council has carried out a high-profile drive to recruit more local foster carers and ensure more children and young people in care can remain within the county.
- 4.3** The national shortage of HGV drivers means the County Council has faced challenges in both home to school transport and school catering during the year, adding still more pressure for existing staff on top of Covid.
- 4.4** A motion calling for a network of mental health hubs to meet the needs of young people received unanimous support from the Council. Work is beginning on putting this into practice.

**4.5** A full and comprehensive review of admission arrangements for all own admission authority schools has been agreed, to include the published definitions of existing school catchment areas, and admission policies for schools with a sixth form. The Council is also proposing to commission new and additional places to meet rising demand for specialist placements for children with special educational needs.

## **5 COSMIC!**

**5.1** The former Communities & Partnership Committee was renamed Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion Committee – COSMIC for short.

**5.2** The committee has been responsible for supporting communities through COVID, making provision for refugees from Afghanistan and now Ukraine, assisting EU citizens in obtaining settled status and voting rights, as well as a range of public services from libraries to mortuaries. It runs what was the Innovate & Cultivate Fund, now Cultivate Cambs, funding community support activities. It also drew up a Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy.

**5.3** COSMIC makes decisions about the Household Support Fund, which supports people experiencing immediate financial hardship to pay for food, household energy or other essential items. The number of families struggling financially is increasing and tragically this is likely to increase rather than decrease in the next few months.

**5.4** The committee is also responsible for developing one of the Joint Administration's major commitments - decentralisation of Council services and decision making, to bring the Council closer to communities and make it more locally accountable.

## **6 Environment**

**5.1** The new Environment & Green Investment Committee, chaired by Cllr Dupre, has been exceptionally busy this year, with a large number of practical projects as well as new strategies. The committee is responsible for climate change and renewable energy, strategic planning, flood and water, biodiversity, waste, antiquities, and surprisingly digital infrastructure and broadband.

**6.2** Waste has been contentious, with unpopular commercial applications for incinerators at Wisbech and Woodhurst, very expensive odour control measures required to the Amey facility at Waterbeach, and uncertainty about the Government's intentions following several consultations on extended producer responsibility, deposit return schemes, and recycling. The Council's recycling centres at Milton and March are also in the early stages of plans for upgrades.

**6.3** The Council's high-profile scheme to get the community of Swaffham Prior off oil and onto a new renewable energy community heating system continues to progress well, with a £3.2M Government grant awarded. Other energy schemes include the installation of solar panels on Park & Ride sites, small-scale solar farms with private wire connections to commercial customers, and replacement of gas and oil boilers in schools and in the Council's own premises around the county. We have also run another round of Solar Together, the group buying scheme for homeowners wanting to

invest in solar panels and battery storage.

- 6.4** Meanwhile commercial operation Sunnica has submitted a planning application to the Secretary of State for what is believed to be the largest solar farm in the country, stretching from Red Lodge in West Suffolk to Burwell in East Cambridgeshire. The County Council is a consultee in this process.
- 6.5** The committee developed two important strategies this year - a revised Local Flood Risk Management Strategy, and an updated Climate Change & Environment Strategy. The Flood Risk strategy was accompanied by local initiatives to promote and fund community flood groups, visits by the Floodmobile to demonstrate options for fitting flood prevention measures in domestic properties, and clarification of the responsibilities of riparian owners for maintaining their watercourses. The year saw local flood and water matters require attention in all parts of Bar Hill division.
- 6.6** The Climate Change & Environment Strategy sets a new and more ambitious target for a net-zero carbon Cambridgeshire by 2045, aiming to work with businesses and communities to bring this about. We are also working on a Cambridgeshire Decarbonisation Fund and Local Area Energy Planning. Lib Dem Council Leader Lucy Nethsingha is leading plans for a 'Cambridgeshire COP' following the high-profile international COP26 climate negotiations in Glasgow.
- 6.7** As every year, the Council publish edits carbon footprint report. COVID meant 2020/21 was an unusual year, with not only less travel but also less construction, two of the biggest greenhouse gas contributors. The shrinkage in our carbon footprint is likely not to be sustained next year.
- 6.8** We invested an additional £109K over last winter to undertake urgent repairs to various biodiversity sites, as well as to begin a biodiversity audit of the Council's land to set a baseline for our commitment to increase biodiversity in Cambridgeshire. We have also promoted, and taken part in, the Queen's Green Canopy initiative to mark the Platinum Jubilee.
- 6.9** The County Council has responded to various strategic planning consultations including for North East Cambridge, the move of the Cambridge Waste Water Treatment Plant, and various phases of the development of Northstowe. It also adopted the revised Minerals & Waste Local Plan.
- 6.10** A new heritage website for Cambridgeshire is currently under construction. Meanwhile, a recent discovery in Fenstanton has turned out to be of international significance—a human skeleton with a nail through the foot, which experts believe to be the remains of a Roman crucifixion, probably of a slave.
- 6.11** Connecting Cambridgeshire has produced a new digital connectivity strategy for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough. We were concerned that the implications of the 2025 copper switch-off for many systems were not fully taken on board.



## **7 Constitution & Ethics**

**7.1** An issue dominating Cambridgeshire politics since the whistle was blown in 2018 is 'Farmgate' – in which the County Council's deputy leader Cllr Roger Hickford was awarded the tenancy of a County Council-owned farm in Girton. The new Joint Administration took office committed to publishing the facts, and this has now happened. Mr Hickford was found by independent investigators to have broken the councillors' Code of Conduct in seven different ways, including bullying and improper use of position for personal advantage. Mr Hickford resigned from the Council before the election.

**7.2** In less contentious news, the committee proposed a new Parental Leave Policy for councillors which was adopted by the Council.

**7.3** The committee proposed, and the Council agreed, changes to the Council's standing orders which mean that councillors will no longer be able to propose to Full Council motions that relate to current planning applications that are before the Council or that it is likely to be consulted on. This does not prevent councillors speaking out, campaigning and supporting their residents in all sorts of ways on contentious local planning applications. But the purpose was to stop councillors misusing Full Council meetings to set Council policy on applications which must be decided impartially by the Council's Planning Committee.

## **8 Highways & Transport**

**8.1** The new Council is facing up to the many challenges left by its outgoing administration. Not least of these was the atrocious state of the county's 100k gullies, whose lack of maintenance contributed to the flooding of winter 2020/21. These are now being mapped and cleared, including one which was in such a bad state a metal detector was required to actually find it.

**8.2** We have established a new funding pot for local communities to bid into for 20MPH zones, to make these more widespread and easier to obtain. Also a working group will publish a proposed new policy on heavy goods vehicles in villages, which will align with the Combined Authority's forthcoming Local Transport & Connectivity Plan.

**8.3** The Council has been focusing on Active Travel, with the aim of improving infrastructure for pedestrians, cyclists, and equestrians. A new Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan is in progress. The Council has expressed interest in taking up the prospect of being able to enforce moving traffic offences such as breaching weight limits.

**8.4** Local Highways Improvement bids last summer were successful for Dry Drayton, but not for Girton or Bar Hill. A new policy on LHI bids and a less burdensome process is being developed for the next round, and more funding is being set aside for LHI bids. It is a priority to improve safety and support local priorities.

**8.5** The budget for work on the Oakington Bridge remains in the highways maintenance

budget, and preparatory work assessing the requirements for flood control measures is underway. Resurfacing and gulley cleansing has taken place in a number of places throughout Bar Hill division, including Girton, Dry Drayton and Bar Hill. The recent development of ramps on the Bar Hill roundabout has been investigated and the fault appears to be only with the fill material that is now settling rather than anything structural with the bridge. Milestone will do borehole investigations to assess the make up and type of material used, after which it may be possible to resin inject the area or dig and replace the backfill material.

- 8.6** Traffic in Cambridge is set to grow by 30% in the next ten years, and there is a serious lack of funding for public transport. Without this, many people who cannot drive, or cannot afford to buy, insure or fill up a car, are left with limited or no options for travel. The Greater Cambridge Partnership has been consulting for some time on ways to relieve traffic congestion in Cambridge and improve public transport into the city. These consultations are still ongoing. One of the options on the table is some form of congestion charging to pay for better public transport. Motions proposed to the County and District Councils have sought to permanently rule this out. The motion to the County Council was defeated, but these attempts to rule out any option are premature, as the consultation is still ongoing.
- 8.7** I have been challenging National Highways this year in two key areas. First to try to get them to engage with the local community in working out the future for the derelict building site in Bar Hill, and second to hold them to account for the dying trees associated with the A14 works – this is 40k saplings they planted 94% of which, in 2020, were found to have died. The Council has renewed its efforts to hold them to account, and publicity on the matter has produced promises from National Highways that they will replant fully following a survey in April 2022.

## **9 Combined Authority**

- 9.1** A new Mayor was elected in May 2021. This resulted in the scrapping of the CAM Metro and the '£100K homes' project. A new Chief Executive was appointed, and the Combined Authority has decided to be established in offices in Huntingdon.
- 9.2** During the year, the Combined Authority's Climate Commission published its ambitious report; the Government announced there would be no more money for affordable housing, and snubbed the Combined Authority's bus improvement plan.

### **And finally**

Please continue to get in touch if you have queries.

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