

Annual Report 2023



CLLR Edna Murphy

County Councillor for Bar Hill division

(including Bar Hill, Dry Drayton, Girton, Lolworth)

Introduction

2022 will be notable as the year of the death of HM Queen Elizabeth II on Thursday 8 September. The accession of HM King Charles III was proclaimed in Cambridge and Ely, and elsewhere in the county.

The composition of the County Council has changed since last year following the death of Independent Chair of the Council Derek Giles who had retired from that role as a result of his ill health, and another councillor switching parties (Cllr Doug Dew, representing Hemingfords & Fenstanton, left the Conservative Group in January 2023 and joined the Liberal Democrat Group). Cllr Geoff Seeff (Lib Dem) won the St Neots seat The Eatons in the by-election in February following Cllr Giles's death. The composition now is:

Conservatives	27
Liberal Democrats	22
Labour	9
Independents	3

A County Council by-election will be held on Thursday 4 May, the same day as the District Council elections, following the resignation of Cllr Dan Schumann (Soham South & Haddenham).

1 The Council

- 1.1** The three-group Joint Administration of Liberal Democrat, Labour and Independent councillors continues to run the Council. The Agreement signed by the three groups in May 2021 is scheduled for a two-year review, which will take place after this May's elections.
- 1.2** I have worked on various committees within the Council: Adults & Health, Strategy & Resources, Pensions, and chaired the Staffing and Appeals Committee which oversees the recruitment of senior officers. I have also participated in Planning, Environment & Green Investment and of course Full Council.
- 1.3** I have also continued to Chair of the Fire Authority, and represent the Authority at the Mayoral Combined Authority's Board. I am the lead member for Governance and significant work has taken place during the latter half of the year. I report regularly to the County Council on the issues facing the Fire Service and have spent some time this year lobbying for additional funding for the Service.
- 1.4** The County Council's Chief Executive Stephen Moir carried out a reorganisation of the senior staffing structure, and the Council has been making senior appointments. The process of disentangling joint staffing structures with Peterborough Council set up by the previous administration has been very positive. The Combined Authority has also appointed a new Chief Executive and embarked on a new structure, having had interim management and governance reviews for most of the year.
- 1.5** The County Council's new HQ at Alconbury Weald was formally opened on Friday 8 July 2022. Whatever its merits as office facilities, it is a poor choice of location for a democratic body given the non-existent public transport links available and its inaccessibility for both councillors and most importantly the public.

2 Strategy & Resources

- 2.1** The high rates of inflation over the last year, and the turmoil of the Liz Truss / Kwasi Kwarteng mini budget in the autumn, significantly increased the costs of providing council services and widened the already challenging budget gap for the coming year.
- 2.2** The Council increased its portion of Council Tax in February, by 4.99% in total, ie 2.99% for general services, and 2% for adult social care.

- 2.3** The Conservative opposition unsuccessfully proposed an alternative way forward in which the increase was only 4%, but plugged the large funding gap this created with one-off funding intended for environmental projects, care, and strengthening council services.
- 2.4** The committee has considered a number of significant procurement exercises and strategic initiatives, many of which are necessarily considered commercially confidential. It also scrutinizes the performance of the Council's property subsidiary, This Land, which is has a new senior team, and a revised strategy, and seems to be much improved.

3 Adults & Health

- 3.1** National changes in health and care decision-making took place during the year, with the creation of local Integrated Care Systems spanning health and social care. Cambridgeshire & Peterborough created a joint Health & Wellbeing Board to replace the previous separate Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Boards.
- 3.2** This year has exposed the vulnerability of NHS services nationally and also locally. A BBC investigation last summer of dental provision in the UK revealed that no dental practice in Cambridgeshire was accepting new adult patients. Large numbers of patients are having to travel far afield, pay money they cannot afford for private treatment, or resort to DIY dentistry—and a resident of Ely was recently reported as having had to travel to war-torn Ukraine for dental treatment which was quicker and cheaper than that available in the UK.
- 3.3** Meanwhile the residents in Bar Hill's Maple Surgery heard the consortium of which they were members was ceasing to operate and were taken on by a Cambridge group in record time. Normally the transition to a new practice takes 3 months but the team had the surgery up and running with new management over a weekend. They will be spending more time in the next months completing the transition, as well as taking on additional resource to support the asylum seekers who have arrived recently in Bar Hill's hotel. This is not the only GP practice in the County that has had abrupt changes to its services, but the changes in Bar Hill seem to have resulted in an improvement which is welcome.
- 3.4** In addition to Covid, avian flu precautions were implemented across the UK during the year, including a protection zone in the County after a confirmed case.

4 Children & Young People

- 4.1** Funding of vouchers over the school holidays for families eligible for free school meals has continued, as has the Holiday Activity & Food programme for the children of eligible families. The cost of living crisis has seen many Cambridgeshire families reliant on such schemes.
- 4.2** The Council was praised by Ofsted for the work of senior leaders in Children's Services in responding to the challenge of Covid, and for maintaining continuity during structural change. Most children in need and those with a child protection plan were supported well.
- 4.3** The Council is still seeking residents who would like to make a difference to the life of a child or young person by becoming a foster carer. Cambridgeshire is not unusual in having an ongoing demand for foster carers but it is important to keep raising the issue to encourage people to come forward if they are interested in this vital role.
- 4.4** In a piece of good news for Cambridgeshire, the Council and the Government reached agreement on the 'safety valve' process to resolve the escalating deficit in the cost of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities education.
- 4.5** The deficit for this funding stream was expected to grow to over £90M by 2025/26 if left unchecked, and the Council was not permitted to divert funding from other sources to fill the gap. Cambridgeshire has now been awarded £49M which will be used to create 463 new special school

places, with a further £11.3M in capital funding to support new SEND provision on mainstream school sites. Cambridgeshire has historically received less funding per child for education than other areas.

5 COSMIC

- 5.1 COSMIC (Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion Committee) has continued to oversee the Household Support Fund, which supports people experiencing immediate financial hardship to pay for food, household energy or other essential items. An increasing number of families are struggling financially at the moment. COSMIC agreed to use some of the money from the fund to give a 'payment holiday' to pensioners in arrears with their water bills.
- 5.2 A Warm Hubs programme over the winter was funded by the NHS and administered by Cambridgeshire ACRE with fantastic support from local parishes.
- 5.3 A review of the mobile library service resulted in a number of improvements, including more stops, more fuel-efficient routes, and local storage of vehicles. Cambridgeshire's Library@home volunteers were one of three voluntary organisations in the county to be given the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service—the highest award a local voluntary group can receive in the UK.
- 5.4 **The Government is introducing a requirement for photographic ID for voters at elections.** This starts with the elections in May 2023 (ie not in South Cambs), and will cost up to £180M over ten years, despite cases of voter identity fraud at polling stations being almost non-existent. Around 2 million voters in the UK do not have the right form of ID to enable them to vote—they can apply for free Voter Authority Certificates, but applications for these are extremely slow and many people are likely to find themselves deprived of their right to vote on 4 May. Young people are likely to be particularly disadvantaged, as most of the forms of ID related to older groups. County officers have been working on ways in which the Council can support the effort to ensure the many people without the required photo ID apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate so that they are not denied their right to vote. There was a Lib Dem motion on this topic which was fully supported by the Council as a whole.

6 Environment

- 6.1 The Council awarded the first spending from its Just Transition fund, including £2.175M for a business case for the first phase of the Council's plan for Cambridgeshire to reach Net Zero carbon by 2045. £1.75M was also awarded for flood work and nature restoration.
- 6.2 On the hottest day on record in the UK, Joint Administration members of the County Council voted to sign Zero Hour's Nature & Climate Declaration, while the tarmac melted in the Council's car park outside the building.
- 6.3 The County Council is working with district councils on energy retrofits in homes with poor energy efficiency. A number of Cambridgeshire residents including in Little Downham received individual invitations to apply for this.
- 6.4 The public inquiry into the proposals for an incinerator at Wisbech took place in February. The waste disposal contract with Thalia (formerly Amey) at Waterbeach has taken considerable amounts of council time. In addition to the odour emission works required by the Environment Agency, the new year saw new enforcement by the Environment Agency of rules on 'persistent organic pollutants in waste upholstered domestic seating'. This led to a week of the Council being unable to accept unwanted sofas, futons, gaming chairs, upholstered dining seats, and other similar items. These must now be incinerated not landfilled. In addition to this, discussions are also ongoing with Defra regarding proposals to introduce weekly food waste collections.

- 6.5** The first households in Swaffham Prior are now receiving renewable energy from the new energy centre. Interest in this project has been considerable. Other energy projects (solar panels on Park & Ride sites, North Angle solar farm, and replacement of gas and oil boilers in schools and in the Council's own premises around the county) are continuing to progress. In conjunction with iChoosr the Council ran another round of Solar Together, the group buying scheme for homeowners wanting to invest in solar panels and battery storage.
- 6.6** The Examination into the planning application by Sunnica for the large solar farm between Burwell and Red Lodge began in autumn 2022.
- 6.7** Anglian Water and Cambridge Water announced in the autumn their preferred location for a new reservoir in the Fens, north of Chatteris, to come onstream in the late 2030s. A planning application will come in due course and progress through a number of stages. It will be a decision for the Secretary of State through the Planning Inspectorate, as with other major infrastructure schemes.
- 6.8** The council has published an interim Tree Strategy, which it will revise once it has baseline information about what trees the Council has, where they are, and how the Council can expand and improve the trees for which it is responsible.
- 6.9** We received details of the County Council's carbon emissions for the year. There was a significant reduction in the early stages of the pandemic, due to construction work ceasing, but this is likely to increase again in future years.
- 6.10** We agreed a motion to the Full Council calling for managed divestment by the council's Pension Fund from fossil fuels.
- 6.11** The council ran a #LetsGetOutdoors campaign over the summer to encourage residents to make use of Cambridgeshire's fantastic parks.

7 Highways & Transport

- 7.1** The condition of Cambridgeshire's roads and pavements remains a serious challenge and concern. In fact this situation has been building for many years, with the Council's approach being one of 'managed decline'. However, recent extreme weather has speeded up that decline very significantly. The peaty soil under the road surface has shrunk in hot dry weather, and expanded in wet weather, causing the surface to crater and split. Adding more tarmac to level the surface simply increases the weight and makes matters worse. The severity and extent of the problem is far beyond the maintenance budget of the Council, so simply 'freeing up some money' is not an option. The Council has been actively engaging with the Department for Transport to seek their support and funding. Clearly this is a significant problem that staff are working on intensely and looking at different options, while repairing as many potholes as they can physically get round (and commissioning Milestone to deliver as rapidly as possible).
- 7.2** The Council used a data interpretation and modelling tool to identify a 'Safe and Dry' programme of 115 locations where work was needed to improve flood resilience. The Council is also undertaking a two-year programme to clean and plot all gullies and surface drainage features to improve highways drainage management into the future. Plans for strengthening the Oakington Road Bridge are in place and the budget is committed.
- 7.3** The freezing spell over winter caused many road and pavement surface defects, and failure of pothole repairs. We encourage residents to report faults online as that is the only way they are logged and become translated into works commissioned from Milestone. Although it is difficult to keep reporting these problems, it is necessary.

- 7.4** The development by the council of a South Cambridgeshire Transport Strategy is pencilled in for 2023-2024. It has been a significant length of time since the previous strategy and so an update is long overdue. It will be an opportunity for South Cambridgeshire to embrace proposals which have been developed, for example in Bar Hill Division the agreed approach for NMUs and active travel schemes, so they are explicitly supported by South Cambridgeshire too.
- 7.5** The County Council plans to fit street lighting with energy-efficient LEDs. The council spends £3.3M a year on energy for street lights, and this sum will pay back in under six years.
- 7.6** The working group on Heavy Goods Vehicles produced a new policy and criteria against which to judge applications for weight limits in villages. A number of applications have already come forward. The new funding pot for 20MPH schemes has attracted a large amount of interest.
- 7.7** In autumn the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) consulted on its proposals for improved bus provision and active travel in the Cambridge area, which it proposed to fund through a charge for driving in a 'Sustainable Travel Zone' between 7:00AM and 7:00PM on weekdays. The results of the consultation will be published in the late spring. The GCP needs to listen to the concerns of residents. It does not seem likely that the proposals will go forward in their current form. What is needed is action to address the decades of decline in public transport inflicted by successive Governments and local councils.

8 Combined Authority

- 8.1** The Combined Authority has had a somewhat turbulent year, including an unsuccessful attempt to depose the elected Mayor of Cambridgeshire & Peterborough. Most significantly, the auditors (EY) wrote to the Authority in June expressing concerns about the functioning of the Combined Authority, and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities has become involved, setting some clear requirements for improvement.
- 8.2** The Combined Authority has agreed an Improvement programme with a package of external support, and an Independent Improvement Board has been established. I am the lead member for Governance and have supported the creation of a new constitution and governance structure, which will be much more fit for purpose and with a more thought through structure to support better decision making. There is still some way to go but there has been significant progress.
- 8.3** In September 2022 Stagecoach gave six weeks' notice of its intention to withdraw from a large number of bus routes. The Combined Authority pulled together a tender process at very short notice, and was able to find new providers for most of those routes, though there have been changes in frequency and extent of several of them. Additional funding was diverted to support these routes, and the Mayor has decided to levy a precept which will be added to the council tax to ensure the stability of these services for a further year.
- 8.4** The Combined Authority really needs to move ahead with a system of franchising of local bus services, which would give democratic control of routes, timetables, and fares, but to do this it needs to find sources of large amounts of income, and in any case franchising would take c 5 years to implement. Meanwhile the Combined Authority is finalising a Bus Strategy for submission to Government.
- 8.5** The Combined Authority remains starved of resources by the Government compared to other Combined Authorities. It received no money for its Bus Service Improvement Plan, and very little active travel funding. The Government also decided there would be no more money for affordable housing for any Combined Authorities.
- 8.6** The Combined Authority's Local Transport & Connectivity Plan, on which many other local transport plans depend, is being finalised.

8.7 Now that it has no money for, and therefore no real role in, housing, the Combined Authority has reorganised its committees into new 'thematic committees' including (for the first time) the environment.

9 Campaigns

9.1 I am pleased that campaigning has proved fruitful in some respects. For example 2 years of relentless campaigning has forced a re-think by National Highways in relation to the management of the A14 trees. Originally 860k saplings were planted, at least 70% of which died. Since it was made public, via a motion to Full Council in March 2022, National Highways struggled to justify the approach it had agreed to, as it was obviously not going to achieve positive results. Instead it has undertaken an honest appraisal, and proposed a new, more scientifically based approach. They have also undertaken to take on an additional 5 years of obligation, to ensure trees thrive and become established. This is a really important step. We are watching their progress closely. It is also important that their learning translates to other projects, where planting or biodiversity net gain is a key outcome.

9.2 Another positive initiative has been to persuade the County's Highways team to consider seriously the development of a path around the perimeter road in Bar Hill as part of its active travel plans. This is at an ideas stage only, but with the adoption of the idea there is now a possibility that the Council will be able to put forward well thought through proposals, for residents to consider. Obviously there is a long way to go before this can become a reality, not least the challenge of finding funding, but it is a start and at least gives us the chance to consider a clear proposal.

Cllr Edna Murphy
April 2023