

Annual Report 2024



Cllr Edna Murphy with other members of the Lib Dem county council group pictured at Alconbury Weald

**Cllr Edna Murphy - County councillor for the Bar Hill division
(including Bar Hill, Dry Drayton, Girton and Lolworth)**

Introduction

The composition of the County Council has changed significantly since my last report. Three councillors have left the Conservative Group and now sit as ‘unaligned’ members. Another has left and joined the Independent group that is part of the Joint Administration running the Council. And a recent County Council by- election in Yaxley saw the seat change from Conservative to Liberal Democrat.

The table below shows the current composition of the Council compared to the latest election results in May 2021. The Conservatives are not the largest group on the Council—for the first time ever.

	2021	2024
Conservatives	28	22
Liberal Democrats	20	23
Labour	9	9
Independents	4	4
Unaligned independents	0	3

The Council

The Joint Administration of Liberal Democrat, Labour and Independent councillors continues to run the Council. I am on the following committees: Adults & Health, Strategy Resources & Performance, Staffing & Appeals (Chair). I am also the Chair of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Fire Authority, which is run by councillors from Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. I attend the Combined Authority, as Chair of the Fire Authority.

Strategy Resources & Performance

The Council set a balanced budget in February 2024, for 2024-25, although this is becoming increasingly difficult for councils of all political affiliations across the country. An increasing number of local authorities are issuing ‘Section 114’ notices—the nearest council equivalent to bankruptcy. There have been a number of polls of county councils and they show a very serious situation. The next 18-24 months in local government could see many authorities, particularly county councils or unitaries, issuing Section 114 notices.

The Council increased its portion of council tax by 4.99 % in total—2.99 % for general services, and 2% for adult social care. The increase in need for social care, and children’s social care in particular. The costs to county councils for these services is the driver for widespread concern about council budgets.

Following a request from three of its committees, Full Council agreed an increase in funding for Emergency Planning, in view of the frequency and severity of extreme weather leading to flooding. The budget also includes record levels of highways funding to strengthen and improve the standard of roads and pavements, including tackling potholes, weeds and gullies, in response to residents’ concerns.

However, without the long-promised, but not delivered, multi year fair funding settlement from Government, future budgets will continue to be a struggle.

Adults & Health

In recent years the availability of NHS dental care has shriveled to almost zero. Dentists say that under the current contract, it is no longer financially viable to offer NHS procedures because of a lack of Government investment. One in five people have resorted to ‘DIY dentistry’ and 4.4 million children in England have not seen an NHS dentist in at least a year, leading to a 17% increase in tooth decay-

related extractions in children.

Cambridgeshire NHS has put in place a local Dental Improvement Plan, and identified the areas of the county most in need as being Fenland, Littleport, Ely, and Peterborough. Following problems with primary care in relation to Sutton's GP service, the county's Committee discussed the issues arising in June. NHS Cambridgeshire also carried out a post-action review.

The vulnerability of the entire NHS system was very evident, mostly due to workforce constraints including shortages and emigration. The *Washington Post* had recently led with the headline *How the UK became a terrible place to be a doctor*. Of the 88 GP practices in Cambridgeshire, thirteen were rated red in terms of vulnerability, and only fifteen or sixteen rated green. It was observed that this left a large number of practices in the amber category.

Assets & Procurement

Shire Hall in Cambridge is to be re-marketed after original preferred bidder Brookgate pulled out. The committee has approved a new Land & Property Strategy to guide the management of its diverse portfolio.

Children & Young People

A new initiative aimed at nurturing and developing social care skills in Cambridgeshire has been launched by the County Council.

Cambridgeshire Academy for Reaching Excellence (CARE) is a new Social Care Academy which aims to improve outcomes for children and young people through support and training being offered for social work students and apprentices, international practitioners, experienced social workers and those in leadership positions. It comes at a time when across the country local authorities are facing a shortage of social workers. More information at www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/care

The Holiday Activities & Food programme has continued over each of the school holidays, ensuring children have access to food over the holidays. This has been and remains a priority for the Joint Administration on the council. More information from: www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/council/communities/support-with-the-cost-of-living/holiday-activities-and-food-programme

COSMIC

COSMIC (Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion Committee) has continued to oversee the Household Support Fund, which supports people experiencing immediate financial hardship to pay for essential items. An increasing number of families are struggling financially at the moment. The Government announced after councils had set their budgets that it would continue to fund the Household Support Fund for six more months, so the council will continue to issue supermarket vouchers to eligible families at the current rate for the next six months.

The Council ran a quality of life survey in August 2023, with a sample of 5,500 people asked about their views on a range of issues. While most Cambridgeshire residents felt happy and safe, over half of 18-24s felt lonely with 61 % of them struggling with their mental health. A significant proportion have been affected by the cost of living crisis and financial pressures are widely felt.

The committee has been overseeing a Cambridgeshire Priorities Capital Fund. This consists of £1M left over from the previous administration's £5M Communities Capital Fund. The fund was opened to a single round of one-off applications, and was heavily over-subscribed.

Environment

An exceptionally wet winter left the ground saturated from mid- December onwards. Storms Babet through Henk compounded the problem, leaving many areas with flooding issues and further road degradation.

The Council continues to decarbonise its own buildings, winning grant funding for installation at a

further nine council premises. Cambridgeshire was ranked fifth out of all county councils by Climate Action UK for our climate change work, including a gold star for decarbonising buildings and heating.

The council is in the process of installing solar car ports at Babraham and St Ives Park & Rides. Energy from these will power EV chargers, including some specially designed for people with disabilities, as well as providing energy to commercial customers by private wire.

The application for an incinerator at Wisbech was granted by the Government minister, despite local opposition, but is now held up by another minister's review of licensing of incinerators nationally. Fenland District Council is seeking a judicial review of the decision.

The council's planning committee refused an application by Envar at Woodhurst for new incineration facilities. Envar have appealed, and an inquiry has concluded with a decision expected before summer.

Local Nature Recovery Strategies are now being prepared across the country. The Combined Authority is responsible for the one for Cambridgeshire, and has contracted this to the County Council together with Natural Cambridgeshire. Parishes are engaged in this activity too, with many leading ambitious local activities.

Cambridgeshire will join most other councils in introducing weekly food waste collections by 2026.

Swaffham Prior community heat project won the prestigious national Edie Net Zero Award for Renewable Energy Project of the Year and is currently in the running for an international award. By November, 65 homes in Swaffham Prior, including 23 Sanctuary properties, were fully connected to the new energy centre.

The Government's decision on the application by Sunnica for a large solar farm between Burwell and Red Lodge has been delayed several times—most recently until early April. The Chair of the County Council's Environment & Green Investment Committee wrote to Michael Gove to draw to his attention the poor level engagement by the applicant with local communities.

The Council once again hosted a Solar Together programme in Cambridgeshire. Organised and run by independent company iChoosr, this has previously worked well. However, in this round there were problems with one of the suppliers operating in Huntingdonshire. Cambridgeshire and other councils have been working with iChoosr to seek to address the causes of this before deciding whether to run further rounds of the programme.

Cambridgeshire has been awarded £11.5M over two years to improve energy in homes which are not on mains gas, including offers being made to some residents in Little Downham. More information at actiononenergycams.org/funding

The annual carbon footprint report showed the County Council's own carbon emissions at 46 % lower in 2022/23 compared to four years earlier. 60 % of these emissions is from waste. Total greenhouse gas emissions for Cambridgeshire as a whole in 2021 were 6.8 million tonnes CO₂e, with transport being the highest emitting sector. There has been a 25 % reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in Cambridgeshire between 2005 and 2021. East Cambridgeshire produced the highest volume of greenhouse gas emissions per person in the county, mostly from land use and agriculture, unsurprising in an important food-growing area.

Fens 2100+ is a new programme launched in 2023 to enable the Fens to adapt to the challenges of climate change now and into the future. It is a partnership project between the Environment Agency, Association of Drainage Authorities, Internal Drainage Boards, National Farmers Union, and Anglian Northern and Great Ouse Regional Flood & Coastal Committees. Its aim is to develop a Fens-wide flood resilience investment strategy, and develop a strategic case for continued investment in flood risk management across the Fens. The project will set out the investment choices needed so that Flood Risk Management Authorities can plan for the next 25 years and the Fens can flourish and adapt to climate change. Over the next 100 years, an additional £4.5 billion will be needed to manage flood risk in the

Fens— based on today's costs and not accounting for climate change. Under current flood risk management funding rules half of that investment would be funded, the rest is not. The Fens 2100+ programme has been developed to address that gap. The Council has also updated its policy and protocol for enforcement under the Land Drainage Act 1991.

An estimated 10,000 public EV charge points will be needed across Cambridgeshire by 2030. With fewer than 500 currently installed, this is a huge challenge. A small-scale pilot project to trial on-street connections is due to begin shortly.

Gigabit-capable broadband coverage in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough has hit 85 % a year early, meaning we are above the national average and ahead of Government targets, although there is still work to do to improve.

Highways & Transport

The condition of our roads and pavements is still a huge challenge, in Cambridgeshire as it is nationwide—a mixture of inadequate Government funding, decades of neglect, extreme weather, and in some cases poor standards of repair. The Council has received some additional funding for pothole repairs which it has been using on new technology, and more crews on the ground, but it is far from adequate to do more than fix the worst aspects.

156 roads in Cambridgeshire have been identified as failing because of their soil base, and the effects of more and heavier vehicles, historic neglect, and extreme weather. Many of these are in East Cambridge, and Little Downham and Pymoor in particular. A plan for short and medium term actions has been agreed, but longer term the focus needs to be on securing funding.

The Committee reviewed its policy on weed removal, following residents' and councillors' concerns, and will resume cyclical spraying except where residents agree to manage weeds manually.

The replanting of trees along the A14, using award-winning fully biodegradable tree guards, has continued over the winter. National Highways is reported to have committed £2.9m to the first 160,000 trees which represents a more thoughtful and less 'scattergun' approach. It is hoped that this new approach to planting will work and that we will have the contribution to biodiversity that was so critical in the initial planning of the A14.

The Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) proposals for a 'Sustainable Travel Zone' with a congestion charge were abandoned as they clearly had insufficient public or political support.

Meanwhile however the Government is progressing its plans for what it is calling Cambridge 2040, a huge intensification of development in and around Cambridge run by yet another layer of local government—an unelected organisation called the Cambridge Delivery Group. There are existing challenges to the carefully-thought out development proposals already put in place by the local councils in 'greater Cambridge'. The Environment Agency is objecting to some key developments on grounds of lack of water. The Government is proposing to get around this by introducing a system of 'water credits' and water offsetting. These seem to be a distraction, avoiding solving the actual problem.

The Government's proposals for 150,000+ more houses in and around Cambridge will certainly need sustainable transport solutions if the city is not to become congested beyond capacity. Whether we will see the funding needed for all the transport options - rail, trams, light rail, bus and better cycling provision - remains to be seen.

Parish meetings with highways officers: these meetings are happening fairly regularly now. Local Highways Officer and other members of the County's Highways team attend a session with Clerks of the four parishes in Bar Hill Division (Lolworth, Girton, Bar Hill and Dry Drayton) as well as other parish councillors who wish to attend. There the issues and concerns of residents are raised and the county's team provide feedback, explanation, or other updates on progress. There are starting to be results from these sessions, in parallel with a significant reorganization of the county's highways functions which is

underway now.

Combined Authority

The Combined Authority has been implementing an improvement programme following the issuing of a Best Value Notice in January 2023. The Notice has been revised and recognises the significant progress made since then, but also that some elements need further work.

The Mayor increased his precept on the Council Tax, from £1 a month at Band D to £3 a month, specifically for new or improved bus services. However, no sooner had these proposals been agreed than Stagecoach announced huge cuts which the Combined Authority has been working through.

There has been interest locally in setting up groups focused on local bus services. Currently bus companies (mostly Stagecoach) can effectively pit one area against another or exploit fragmentation as routes pass through different areas. If the community response is also joined up we can advocate more strongly for better bus services – albeit Stagecoach is fundamentally driven by profit not to provide an inclusive and comprehensive service.

Please contact me with queries or concerns: Edna.Murphy@cambridgeshire.gov.uk