

As Councillors it's been our pleasure to work with the Parish Council and residents over this last year. This report gives us the opportunity to present the work of the South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC).

### 2024/25 Budget

In February, SCDC approved the budget for the 2024/25 financial year which included a whole range of ways we're investing in improving the lives of residents. SCDC is in a strong financial position – something increasingly rare amongst local authorities, many of whom have faced stinging budget cuts or bankruptcy this year (and many more who will face bankruptcy over the next twelve months). Rather than making short-term, politically easy choices like freezing Council Tax, we gave thought to the long-term wellbeing of South Cambridgeshire's residents, making sure we are in a position to continue to fund services in the long term. Because of recent and high inflation, real-terms Council funds are shrinking faster and traditional funding methods for council funding simply aren't keeping up.

SCDC has made sensible financial investments over the past six years and consequently brings in £7 million in investment income. Without these investments, SCDC wouldn't be in a position to maintain the historic levels of service we do and wouldn't be in a robust financial position.

### Council Tax and Council Tax Support

SCDC's increase in Council Tax represents an extra 42p per month for a band D household. This increase is below inflation which has been at record levels and is currently 4.1%. For SCDC this is a real terms budget cut.

We are increasing the thresholds for support offered under the Council Tax Support Scheme in line with inflation, making sure people currently able to claim don't lose out.

This scheme means that the poorest in our communities get up to 100% relief on their council tax bills. Across Cambridgeshire, SCDC, Huntingdonshire and Cambridge City offer up to 100% relief whereas East Cambs offers only up to 91.5%, Fenland 80% and Peterborough 70%.

### 2024/25 Business Plan

In February, SCDC also agreed the 2024/25 Business Plan. Our work for the next financial year will continue to be focussed on SCDC's four priority areas: (1) Growing Local Businesses and Economies, (2) Delivering Truly Affordable Housing, (3) Being Green to Our Core, and (4) Being a Modern and Caring Council. We'll take a quick look at these priority areas in turn.

### Growing Local Businesses and Economies

Our work helping businesses (specifically SMEs = Small and Medium Sized Enterprises) grow will help local communities thrive, bringing jobs and opportunities into our villages. Access to high quality jobs is essential to make sure everyone can live their life how they want to. 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. Our work to support local high streets and markets will directly benefit communities and will help residents shop locally and help them support local businesses. We remain interested to provide this same level of support for small businesses that conduct their work substantially on-line and possibly from the proprietor's home.

### Truly Affordable Housing

Our work as a council is to ensure that housing is accessible for all whether for employment, business or family connections or simply the wish to live in the district. We recognise that everyone deserves a high-quality, safe, and affordable place to live and therefore our plans are ambitious. We will make sure that SCDC continues to be a leader in the delivery of good quality homes in communities that exemplify good-quality living.

SCDC has a proven track record of delivery - providing more and more affordable housing since 2018 and on a par with the housing advances being made in the City.

There have been over 1,000 housing completions every year in South Cambs since 2018, rising to 1,500 completions in 2022/23. Each year (except for a slight dip in 2020 - due to COVID) we have increased the number of affordable homes being built in the District. Since 2018, the amount of market-rate housing built has consistently been double that of the City for the entire duration we've been in power in South Cambridgeshire. In 2022/23 we oversaw 1500 completions (472 of those affordable).

SCDC recognises that giving people access to affordable homes is one of the best ways to tackle the structural inequalities we face and to give people the agency to make decisions in their lives.

We are working to ensure housing across the district is built to the highest possible standards of energy efficiency and are working to raise the standards of existing housing up to scratch. This will help our residents who are facing rising energy costs and the increasing uncertainties in our climate.

### Green to Our Core

Climate change is the single biggest issue facing all communities. This is not some far away problem we can ignore and bury our head in the sand, it is affecting the District. Our water scarcity crisis, air quality problems, extreme weather, flooding, and heat waves are all direct consequences of the climate crisis. That being green to our core is a lynchpin of all the work we do as a Council demonstrates how serious, we are about tackling climate change and mitigating its effects.

Our work on 20% biodiversity net gain has pre-empted and gone further than Government goals and our contributions to the upcoming Local Area Energy Plan will help Cambridgeshire set out how we will reach “net zero” in regard to energy usage.

We are continuing to actively engage with Government, the water industry, Cambridge City and other partners to find solutions to the water scarcity crisis we are facing.

SCDC's Waterbeach Renewable Energy Network (WREN) Project will help reduce the Council's carbon emissions and is a landmark project being watched by other authorities up and down the country.

Over the coming year we will continue to improve the energy performance of our commercial buildings and other assets owned by the council, following on from the Greening of South Cambs Hall. Alongside this we are, through 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, ensuring they can be resilient to the effects of climate change and that all residents are able to benefit from the transition to net zero.

We are giving more staff support for the Zero Carbon Communities Fund. Over the past 4 years we have awarded £500k in support of projects to help local communities. This year £125,000 will be available through the scheme.

Through schemes such as repair cafés, food waste redistribution schemes and cooperation with other authorities across the county, we are helping reduce household waste and encouraging recycling and taking steps towards the circular economy.

SCDC has this year 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. Also included in the budget is more support for the cleaning team, so that incidents of fly tipping can be addressed more quickly. The capital budget also includes funding for a new vehicle for these officers, an essential part of the resources they need to do their jobs effectively. Fly tipping is a blight on the countryside and as a rural area, SCDC is particularly vulnerable. This proposal amounts to a significant investment into our ability to combat fly tipping and to make sure offenders are brought to justice.

We are creating two new posts, bringing in-house our litter picking along highways rather than contracting it out. This will save the Council approx. £25k a year - giving us a more reliable and cost-efficient service.

### **Modern and Caring Council**

The council is undergoing significant transformation work. Our transformation work, unlike in other councils, is not just about saving money but is about finding ways of improving our services for residents and using the resources we have efficiently and effectively. We are making more and more of our services available online and are updating our website to make them more easily accessible to

residents. Our commercial investments are successfully bringing increasing income to the Council and we're working to tackle income tax and business rates fraud.

We are making sure we provide tenants with safe and secure homes – undertaking all landlord safety checks and provided targeted health and wellbeing support for vulnerable residents. Part of this is making sure our staff have the training to respond appropriately to safeguarding issues. Further we are working to do all we can to support asylum seekers and refugees, including those from Ukraine, who are settled across the district.

The council is going to spend £897,000 on support for Ukrainian guests, funded by central government. How this money gets spent and what exact support we provide is up to SCDC. We have broad discretion to allocate funds.

SCDC supports one of the largest populations of Ukrainian guests of any district council and is looking at other councils' work to see where things have been successful or less so, and making sure the support we provide is as effective as possible. The Landlord Incentive Scheme is modelled on the one from Bristol City Council for example.

There are various support schemes available such as funding for host families, employment support, and small grants fundings for activities to help integrate guests– some examples from 2023 include:

- £300 to fund sports activities for guests in Sawston,
- £300 for art therapy sessions,
- £300 to Cottenham to fund Christmas events for Ukrainian families.

We also provide support for guests moving on from hosts into independent accommodation via our landlord incentive scheme which aims to help make renting more affordable for Ukrainian guests.

SCDC is working to develop new neighbourhood plans so that local communities can take a leading role in determining their future development. We're working to support "Cambourne 25" so that stakeholders across Cambourne can work together to resolve legacy issues across the town. In Northstowe, this next year we will break ground building the permanent Community Centre and we are advancing our plans for a Civic Hub and the Phase 2 Sports Pavilion.

On a cross-party basis, we passed a motion meaning the Council will treat care experience as though it is a protected characteristic. SCDC has also agreed on a cross-party basis to work towards White Ribbon accreditation, a charity that seeks to tackle domestic abuse and gender-based violence.

### [Cambridge 2050](#)

Michael Gove announced 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. We had hoped that as the local planning authority we would have a seat on the board of this to try and direct the new development. Unfortunately, local authorities will only sit on an advisory council

alongside businesses and industry partners, meaning we won't have a vote or decision-making powers. There is a lot we still don't know about Cambridge 2050, and we (as your District Councillors) will keep Parish Councils informed as we learn more. As an administration 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.

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 help us unlock developments such as at Bourn Airfield, Waterbeach and the Cancer Research Hospital. This has been a good first few steps but significantly more work on water scarcity will be needed to realise the scale of growth within our own local plan let alone those coming from central government.

#### Four-Day Week Trial

SCDC has been trialling a four-day week for "desk-based" staff since January 2023. This included an initial three-month trial and in May 2023, following independent assessment of performance data, Cabinet extended the trial by 12 months, meaning the trial period ended March 2024. Separately, a three-month trial for waste crews was approved in May 2023. This followed the initial desk-based trial due to the complexities of reorganising bin collection rounds for around 128,000 households across Greater Cambridge.

Under a four-day week, officers are expected to carry out 100% of their work, in 80% of the time, for 100% of the pay. The Council undertook the trials because of the acute recruitment and retention issues it was facing, which is amplified in Greater Cambridge due to the high cost of housing and living. Similar trials are taking place across the UK, Ireland, and US, as outlined by the 4 Day Week Global Campaign, notably both the Scottish and Welsh Governments are considering such trials.

During the trials, the Council has spent £434,000 less on agency staff covering roles that were previously identified as hard to fill. 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 issued a 'best value notice' (BVN) to the council, stating its opposition to the four-day week. This notice asked the council to submit significant amounts of data to the government.

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. The Government reiterated that they do not support a four-day week for local authorities and asked for views about the use of financial levers in future settlements to disincentivise the practice. The results of this consultation were overwhelmingly against the imposition of financial levers although the government appear to be ignoring this result.

The Council had expected, subject to data showing performance had been maintained or improved and a member decision, to consult on a four-day week shortly after the end of the formal trial. We cannot do that until the government tells us what financial levers it would use, as we would 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 or not to keep the four-day week permanently. This decision will be based on evidence and has not already been made.

### [A Concluding Comment](#)

A report of this nature can only be a brief summary of the extensive business of SCDC. If you'd like more detail on any of the topics we've presented, please let one of us know and we'll be happy to do some investigations. In the recent Peer Review conducted at SCDC, there was discussion around the quality of relationships between SCDC and Parish Councils. The Parish Forum, and regular updates from SCDC for Parish Councils Clerks, we believe are helping, but we would like to hear from you about any other form of assistance you would value to support your work, as Councillors and as residents in the Parish.

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