

Annual Report 2023

CLLR NEIL GOUGH

County Councillor for the Cottenham and Willingham division (including Rampton)

Introduction

The composition of the County Council has changed since my last annual report following the death of Independent Chair of the Council Derek Giles. Cllr Geoff Seeff (Lib Dem) won the The Eatons seat in the by-election in February and another councillor switched parties. Cllr Doug Dew (Hemingfords & Fenstanton) left the Conservative Group in January 2023 and joined the Liberal Democrat Group. The current make-up 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 sit on the Strategy and Resources Committee, Constitution and Ethics Committee and on the Planning Committee. In addition, I am a Board Director at This Land, the County Council's land development company.

1.3 The 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.

1.4 The council's new HQ at Alconbury Weald was formally opened on Friday 8 July. (Many share the view that the location is entirely wrong given the non-existent public transport links.)

2 Strategy & Resources

2.1 The high rates of inflation in the last year, and the turmoil of the Liz Truss / Kwasi Kwarteng mini budget, increased the costs of providing council services and therefore widened the budget gap.

2.2 The Council increased its portion of Council Tax in February, by 4.99 per cent in total—2.99 per cent for general services, and two per cent for adult social care. The Conservative opposition proposed an increase of four per cent instead, plugging the council tax gap by using up one-off funding meant for environmental projects, care and strengthening council services.

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 These concerns are widespread and access to healthcare services remains a shared concern of residents throughout the division.

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.

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. The deficit 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 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

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.

5.1 A Warm Hubs programme over the winter was funded by the NHS and administered by Cambridgeshire ACRE with fantastic support from local parishes.

5.2 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.

5.3 The Government is introducing a requirement for photographic ID for voters at elections. This starts with the elections in May, and will cost up to £180M over ten years, despite cases of voter identity fraud at polling stations being almost non-existent. Around two 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 (fortunately we have no planned elections in the division for a while).

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 car park outside the building.

6.3 The County Council is working with district councils on energy retrofits in homes with poor energy efficiency.

6.4 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.

6.6 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 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 (in red) ceasing, but this is likely to increase again in future years.

6.9 We agreed a motion to the Full Council calling for managed divestment by the council's Pension Fund from fossil fuels.

7 Highways & Transport

7.1 The condition of Cambridgeshire's roads and pavements remains a serious challenge. My workload in the division is dominated by this issue. This situation has been building for many years in which the council's approach was 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. The B1050 remains a very significant problem. The safety of this road is the primary consideration and I have been promised an updates on the immediate plans to address the deterioration. The longer term scheme is on hold due to the results of the piling study that revealed a need for funding that far exceeded the budget capacity.

7.2 The council used a data interpretation and modelling tool to identify a 'Safe and Dry' programme of 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.

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.

7.4 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

7.5 The working group I was involved in 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.

7.6 The GCP offered South Cambs District Council funding to help with the set-up costs of adopting civil parking enforcement. This was approved by the county council and is now progressing to the central government for final approval (including the necessary Parliamentary instrument).

7.7 A Local Highways Improvement bids in 2022 were successful in Willingham after rejection in the prior year. This scheme has all now been installed but concerns have been raised about the quality of the installation. The Cottenham LHI for the Oakington Road has been delayed but is finally progressing.

7.8 An allocation of s106 funding from Northstowe for traffic calming in surrounding villages has been made to the villages of Cottenham, Rampton and Willingham. Various schemes have been identified with the Parishes and progressed with County Highways.

7.9 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, and the GCP needs to listen to the concerns of residents. The current proposals have raised significant concerns and identified problems of fairness. What is needed is action to address the decades of decline in public transport inflicted by successive Governments and local councils.

9 Combined Authority

9.1 The Combined Authority has had a somewhat turbulent year, including an attempt to depose the elected Mayor of Cambridgeshire & Peterborough (dubbed the Fenpowder Plot) which was unsuccessful. 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. The Combined Authority has agreed an Improvement programme with a package of external support, and an Independent Improvement Board has been established.

9.2 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. 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 around five years to implement. Meanwhile the Combined Authority is finalising a Bus Strategy for submission to Government.

9.3 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.

9.4 The Combined Authority's Local Transport & Connectivity Plan, on which many other local transport plans depend, is being finalised.

9.5 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.