

Report from South Cambridgeshire District Councillor (SCDC) Bill Handley to Willingham Annual Parish Meeting 2023

This report covers the last 12 months of activity by District Councillor Bill Handley and the Liberal Democrat-led District Council.

May election

One of the first things to happen in the past year, in May 2022, was district council elections. The Liberal Democrats fielded two successful candidates, Dan Lentell and me. A few months later, Cllr Lentell felt he no longer wished to be part of the Lib Dem group and resigned, becoming an independent member.

I accepted the invitation to remain on the Cabinet as Lead Member for Communities (which includes Health and Wellbeing). Also in my portfolio is the delivery of SCDC's obligations in Northstowe and I am immensely proud of the progress that has been made since I became involved 12 months ago. I have also been involved in the delivery of the council's response to the Homes for Ukraine scheme and to the mitigation of the effects of the cost-of-living crisis on the residents of South Cambs - more about these projects below. I have also been engaged in a great deal of casework this year, helping residents in both villages; something that I find, personally, extremely rewarding.

Homes for Ukraine

SCDC has been highly active in the local administration of the government's Home for Ukraine scheme, and I have been the Lead Member for the project throughout. Communication with both hosts and guests has been key and we have issued a weekly community update for hosts and, recently, one for guests. Throughout the scheme, South Cambridgeshire has remained one of the local authorities with the highest number of Ukrainian arrivals which shows how keen South Cambridgeshire residents have been to support and provide homes for Ukrainian refugees. The key statistics for the district at year ending March 2023 were that 408 hosts have welcomed 787 Ukrainian guests into their homes, 914 DBS checks have been completed and 405 welfare visits made. In our villages, Willingham currently has 5 Ukrainian guests and Over has 15.

The council is now heavily engaged in the next phase of the Homes for Ukraine scheme. Whilst many guests will remain with their hosts, some will want, or need, to move on and the council is helping these people to find a new host, apply for social housing, or to rent privately.

The council is still looking for potential hosts, so if you feel you can help, please contact duty.communities@scambs.gov.uk

Cost of living support

The cost-of-living crisis affects everyone and SCDC has been supporting residents throughout, providing a package of support to help South Cambridgeshire residents through the winter. We supplied more than 300 residents who are 'just about managing' with free electric blankets and slow cookers - low-cost methods of staying warm and cooking food. Extra funding was provided to support an extra 100 eligible families with housing costs through Discretionary Housing Payments, Discretionary Council Tax discounts and a Warm Hubs programme. A further £200,000 has recently been allocated for further support. Amongst other initiatives, a series of roadshows are planned, giving cost-of-living talks designed to highlight the support available to the most vulnerable. It is hoped that this will improve the reach and uptake of grants and other support services that many people do not know are available to them. We plan to evolve the successful Warm Hubs into Community Wellbeing Hubs, offering more services.

“Green to our Core”

One of the Council’s ongoing Business Plan objectives is to be “Green to Our Core” and we have delivered a number of initiatives in the last year. Two electric refuse collection vehicles are now operating in the district, a third is on order and a fourth will follow soon. These will replace diesel vehicles³ and plans are being developed for a large solar array at the Waterbeach depot to charge them. Following earlier successful initiatives, our ‘6 Free Trees’ project was introduced to increase tree cover on parish council land, enhancing biodiversity and carbon capture. We have been working with community partners to provide equipment and information kits to encourage greater recycling and minimise waste at community events. More information can be found here:

<https://www.scambs.gov.uk/climate-emergency-and-nature/>

GCP “Making Connections” consultation

One “big-ticket” item that has been much talked about in the past year and which will feature strongly in the coming months is the consultation on the GCP’s “Making Connections” consultation. This is intended to significantly improve public transport services across the area and to promote and facilitate safe and convenient active travel, such as cycling and walking. The introduction of these improvements is to be financially underpinned, initially by the GCP. Only after they are established, a “Sustainable Travel Zone” (widely known as a Cambridge congestions charge) is proposed to provide ongoing revenue.

The GCP’s consultation document was designed to stimulate nuanced feedback, asking a range of open and closed questions to discover whether or not respondents support the scheme, which elements they did or did not support, what they might like to see done differently and what alternatives they would like to see in the proposals. Since the consultation closed, the GCP has been processing around 24,000 responses. The analysis is ongoing, but the majority of concerns seen so far have been related to the how the proposals will affect patients and visitors to the Addenbrookes Hospital Campus, those wishing to visit friends and loved ones and those needing to enter the zone for business reasons. It was always intended that the issues raised by the consultation would be dealt with by positive, practical changes which are likely to include exemptions, dispensations and discounts, underpinned by the latest technology. This is what the GCP is now working on, and they have a clear remit to protect those on the lowest incomes, many of whom do not drive and who would benefit greatly from the planned improvements to public transportation. What is clear is that, going forward, messages about the benefits of the scheme need to be made more clearly and forcefully.

The results of the consultation will be included in a final report on the proposals and next steps, scheduled for the GCP Board in June 2023 after which they will make a recommendation to Cambridgeshire County Council on whether to proceed with a scheme.

Growth in the Greater Cambridge area and the Local Plan

Economic growth in the Greater Cambridge area is one of the main drivers of the GCP’s “Making Connections” proposals. Companies of all kinds want to move to the Cambridge area, creating jobs of all kinds and the prosperity that goes with them. These companies need people, and those people have to have somewhere to live. This is the reason that the government requires local planning authorities (like SCDC and the County Council) to plan for greater numbers of houses and the infrastructure (schools, medical facilities, roads) to go with them. As we all know, one of the consequences of growth is an

exceptionally high cost of living, making home ownership impossible for many people and leading to people choosing to live in areas further away from the city that have lower rents and house prices. Many then commute to their workplaces in Cambridge, leading to greater congestion, poorer air quality and higher energy use. These consequences, which should concern us all, are the main drivers for the GCP's transport plans described above.

You may ask why we need to accept the projected growth, but this is not a decision that local authorities like SCDC can take. The government requires that all planning authorities produce a Local Plan and expects them have a clear understanding of the 'objectively assessed' needs for housing and jobs. A 'carrot and stick' approach is adopted; local authorities that deliver the number of houses that the government agrees are needed continue to have control over development planning whereas, those that do not, can lose the ability to decide what is built and where. This was the case prior to 2018, which resulted in hundreds of houses being approved or built in Over and Willingham outside of the agreed village limits.

SCDC is currently working to the Local Plan that we inherited from the previous (Conservative) administration and discussions are currently being held as to how the government's growth requirements can be delivered (especially given the potentially serious consequences for water supply in the area) without leaving us exposed to the 'stick' that I describe above. Meanwhile, work on the next Local Plan is ongoing and the all-important draft plan consultation is due in autumn 2023.

Business Support

SCDC has a highly effective Business Support Team which provides advice and support, especially for small and medium-sized businesses and start-ups. The street-trading sector has been targeted for support and, locally, new street markets have been set up in Northstowe; the team is hoping to support similar initiatives in Over and Willingham in the coming months.

Bill Handley

District Councillor for the villages of Over and Willingham and Lead Cabinet Member for Communities (including Health and Wellbeing).

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