



South Cambs District Councillor (SCDC) Bill Handley's Report to Willingham Annual Parish Meeting

A summary of activity over the 12-month period to May 2024

Apart from being one of your district councillors, Bill is also the Lead Cabinet Member for Communities (a portfolio which includes health and wellbeing, arts and culture and new towns (notably Northstowe).

Here is my report to Over's Annual Parish Meeting. It's quite long because there has been a lot going on in the last twelve months, dealing with a wide range of issues. There has been a great deal of progress in which I am proud to have played a small part.

SCDC Services

I thought it would be useful to remind everyone of the main (statutory) services that SCDC provides. They are:

Benefits, business support and development, council tax collection and support, environmental health, housing, licensing (pubs, taxis). Two large services, planning and waste collection and recycling are shared services in partnership with Cambridge City Council. You can find more details here: [Home - South Cambs District Council \(scambs.gov.uk\)](https://www.scambs.gov.uk)

SCDC's financial position

SCDC's accounts have been published as required by government and are up to date. In common with all other local authorities, SCDC has seen its government funding cut significantly in recent years. Unlike many other councils, SCDC is on a very sound financial footing. Commercial investments have been used to make up the shortfall of withdrawn government funding and, in this, SCDC has been very successful, bringing in around £7M per year. If it were not for the threat of the Government's Fair Funding Review, which threatens to strip district councils of business tax revenue and give it to bigger, unitary councils, SCDC would have a projected surplus all the way to 2029. Very few councils can say that.

When it comes to Council Tax, SCDC remains one of the lowest taxing authorities in the country, with a £5 per year increase – 42p a month - for the average band D home, equivalent to a below inflation rise of around 3%. It is remarkable that three parish councils in South Cambs have a bigger council tax precept than SCDC. The Council Tax relief threshold has been increased in line with inflation so that people on the lowest incomes can continue

to claim. SCDC is one of a diminishing number of councils still offering up to 100% relief for those residents in most need.

Councillors' allowances have been raised in line with the increase for officers. The basic allowance is now £5,800 out of which councillors are expected to cover certain costs such as telephone calls and internet charges.

Non-statutory services

SCDC provides a number of services that are not statutory – ones that the administration provides because it thinks they are important to its residents rather than because they are obliged to provide them by law and they include the provision of certain grant-funding and community initiatives. SCDC's healthy financial position has meant it has been able to continue to underpin these services, where many other councils have had to scale them back or discontinue them. Here is a brief commentary on some of them:

Cost of living support

The council's ongoing support for the cost-of-living crisis was extended into a second year. The initiatives included supporting mobile food and Community Hubs (offering advice on the support available) and delivering 500 electric blankets to residents struggling with the high cost of energy.

Mobile/Community Wardens

One of the first things I did after I became a councillor was to press for the Mobile/Community Wardens scheme to be extended to Over and Willingham. Unfortunately, the Age UK scheme (in particular) is under financial pressure. SCDC has injected an extra £100,000 of funding to keep the schemes going for another year, whilst work that we have commissioned continues to quantify the benefits of the scheme to the wider care system. It is hoped that with this data, extra funding will might come from organisations such as the County Council and the NHS to help underpin the schemes.

Homes for Ukraine scheme

Continuing Russian aggression in Ukraine means that this scheme is still very active. South Cambs supports one of the largest numbers of Ukrainian guests of any district and the council provides support such as funding for hosts, employment support for guests, and small grants for activities to help guests to integrate. The latest initiative is to provide support for guests moving on from hosts into independent accommodation via our landlord incentive scheme which encourages private landlords to accept Ukrainian guests as tenants. The council determines the priorities for the scheme but continues to receive financial support from the government to provide them.

SCDC Allotments toolkit

We appreciate the health and wellbeing benefits of garden allotments and is trying to promote them by offering grant funding and signposting to advice. <https://www.scambs.gov.uk/community-safety-and-health/community-action/allotment-toolkit/> There are also small grants in the pipeline to encourage new community growing clubs – look out for further details soon.

Grants

Here are examples of grants that have been made available through the year:

- Community chest (small community projects) - £80K (in 2023/24)
- Service support grants (for the voluntary and community sector) £174K
- Long-term health - £13K
- Leisure Centre support (post-Covid) - £5K
- Council tenant community grants - £6K
- 6 Free Trees Scheme - £5K
- EV charge-points for local charities - £15K
- Zero carbon (larger grants to encourage carbon reduction) - £126K see below.

Zero Carbon Communities grant scheme 2024

SCDC's popular Zero Carbon Communities grant scheme has now been running for six years and the latest scheme is now open for applications. Since its inception, more than half a million pounds has been given to schemes across the district under two main themes: to lock-up carbon or reduce emissions and to increase community engagement on any matters related to climate change. Grants of between £2,000 and £15,000 are available to parish councils and community groups in the district and a total pot of £125,000 is available. Further information, help and advice is available by emailing zcc@scambbs.gov.uk

Growth in Greater Cambridge

Michael Gove announced his plans for 'Cambridge 2040' in July 2023 but, since then, details have been slow to emerge. Gove's original figure of 250,000 new homes has since been revised down to 150,000 and the 2040 target has been pushed back to 2050. Last month, the government announced that it intends to set up a 'growth corporation'. The administration had hoped and assumed that, as the local planning authority, it would have a seat on the board of this organisation and bring to it significant local knowledge and experience but it seems that local authorities will only sit on an advisory council alongside businesses and industry partners and without a vote or decision-making powers.

There is still a great deal that is unknown about the government's Cambridge 2050 plans. Even if there is a Labour government after the upcoming general election, we do not think that government policy will change much because large and powerful international high-tech businesses want to move here, especially those engaged in medical research and the biosciences and the pressure for growth will be intense. It is therefore vital that the local authorities use any power that the government allows to make sure that the infrastructure needed for such growth is in place, such as plans for a sustainable transport system, which is badly needed to prevent our roads from grinding to a halt due to congestion and to reduce the decline in air quality levels. New schools and health facilities are going to be needed, water scarcity issues are critical and environmental protections must be put in place. Affordable housing is going to be vital.

What about the Local Plan?

As a partner (with Cambridge City Council) in the Local Planning Authority (LPA), SCDC has already put in a huge amount of work into shaping the new Greater Cambridge Local Plan. This is a key planning document which ensures that growth is delivered in a sustainable way both for people and the environment. The Cambridge 2050 proposals means that much more work will now have to be done and the existing timetable is no longer realistic. I will keep you up to date with developments as the emerging Local Plan develops.

Four-Day Week Trial

Ironically, just as the government's Cambridge 2050 vision looks like placing huge extra demands on the LPA's planning resources, they are trying very hard to hinder SCDC's attempts to recruit more planners! 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 using modern working practices and getting the best from technology. Since January 2023 the council has been running a trial to see if this employment model would help to mitigate acute staff recruitment and retention problems. This is particularly acute for certain types of qualified people, such as planners (of which there is a national shortage) and HGV drivers for our waste collection vehicles. The problem is amplified in Greater Cambridge due to the high cost of housing but similar trials are taking place across the UK, Ireland, and USA and both the Scottish and Welsh Governments are giving consideration for such schemes. Four-day week working is becoming increasingly common in the private sector.

Initial data from the trial are encouraging. The Council has spent £434,000 less on expensive agency staff, who were needed to cover roles that are identified as hard to fill. There has been no statistically significant negative impact on services and in many areas, the Council's services have improved. Health and wellbeing surveys of staff show a significant positive impact on both their mental and physical health.

The government has been vigorous in its opposition to the trial and it issued a 'best value notice' demanding that the council regularly submits large amounts of data to its civil servants. They have issued a threat to use "financial levers" to penalise the council which has had ramifications for the conclusion of the trial – because a consultation cannot be undertaken or a conclusive report on the trial produced until the government states what those financial penalties will be. Whilst this information is awaited from the government, the council's staff continue to operate a four-day working pattern.

Once we have clarity from the government, a consultation will be conducted and the trial data will be independently analysed. The council's elected members will then, at full council, decide whether or not to make the four-day week permanent.

More (and better) council homes

One of our business plan priorities, most 'affordable' housing is delivered by housing associations, often via S106 schemes. However, SCDC is a significant builder of social affordable housing. It has a very able New-build Team which finds suitable locations for new council houses and gets them built. Since 2018 we have more than doubled the council's housing stock and there are currently over 400 new council homes planned for the next few years, all of them built to high standard of energy efficiency. We are also well into a programme of upgrading the thermal efficiency of our existing council housing stock which will result in a significant reduction in energy running costs for tenants.

Bill Handley May 2024. Contact 01954 200287 (please leave a message) or email cllr.handley@scamb.gov.uk