

## **Report to Willingham Annual Parish Meeting 14<sup>th</sup> May 2025 by South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) Councillor Bill Handley**

My apologies for not being able to join you this evening. This is my report for the last 12 months of SCDC activity.

### Local Government Review

South Cambridgeshire District Council was formed in 1974 following a review of local government and, in 2024, the council celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year. The government is now conducting another local government review, and it looks virtually certain that, in a couple of years, our familiar local authorities, including SCDC, will cease to exist with their activities subsumed into a larger, unitary authority. We don't yet know what the new unitary authority will look like since plans are still being worked through by the minister of state but during the coming year, I will keep you updated as we learn more.

### Recruitment and the four-day week

The four-day week trial was an attempt by SCDC to see how services might be improved for council-tax payers by improving staff recruitment and retention in the Greater Cambridge area (South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City). Planning officers and HGV driver posts (to drive our waste-collection vehicles) have been particularly difficult to recruit because the council cannot pay the kind of rates that commercial housing developers and lorry firms can pay. Faced with a high risk of disruption to services and a large bill for agency staff the administration felt it had to act.

The plan is that staff will work smarter, using technology and working efficiency to deliver 100% of their work in 80% of the time. Four-day weeks are becoming increasingly popular in the private sector because of the benefits to staff health and wellbeing. Unfortunately, the Conservative government was against the plan and threw a number of obstacles in the council's way, including a 'best value notice' and the threat of 'financial levers'. These demands meant that the council had to spend a great deal of time and money providing the government with detailed data (that they subsequently didn't use) and meant that the final report on the trial could not be completed until the council knew what the financial penalties might be. The administration considered it has a democratic mandate to manage the council's affairs in the best way it thought fit and that the Conservative government was meddling in a local matter for ideological reasons. In the end, the council stood firm and completed the trial, which showed a positive effect on recruitment and a significant saving in agency fees. The incoming Labour government took a completely different view on the trial to the Conservatives; they did not renew the best value notice, and they lifted the financial threats, meaning the trial report could be completed. We are now moving to a conclusion of this long-running saga; in recent weeks, a consultation was conducted, now concluded, and the data has been sent to an independent assessor. Once the conclusions have been

received, a final report will go to full Council for them to make a long-awaited decision as to whether the four-day week should become permanent.

#### Local Government (LGA) Peer Challenge

The LGA's peer challenge programme offers every local authority the opportunity to have its performance monitored by elected members and officers of other councils. It is intended to be a 'critical friend' to support continuous improvement. SCDC invited a peer review team during 2024, and their report praised the council for 'strong ambition', 'good leadership' and 'innovative approaches'. They congratulated SCDC on being one of the few councils in the country to have a very strong financial position with an impressive return on investments. One criticism was that (in common with many other councils) there were a small number of unaudited yearly accounts; these accounts have now all been submitted for scrutiny by the government's auditors and are as up to date as they can be.

#### Mobile Wardens scheme

SCDC continues to support the Mobile Wardens Scheme, which offers support and assistance for older people to allow them to continue to live independently at home by providing daily contact (Monday to Friday) either by a personal visit or by a telephone call, to ensure a sense of security and wellbeing. SCDC is dedicated to supporting this scheme and pledged funding of £345,000 in 2024. Willingham Parish Council also provides financial support for this vital service.

#### Net Zero Villages Grant Scheme

£360,000 was recently awarded to nine local organisations from the Net Zero Villages Grant Scheme. The funding for this scheme comes mainly from the Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority with supplementary funds contributed by SCDC. The scheme empowers voluntary groups, parish councils and community-minded businesses to tackle climate change by reducing carbon emissions from community assets. On this occasion, an application from Willingham was unsuccessful but community groups in Oakington, Over and Cottenham all received substantial funding.

#### Cost of living crisis mitigation

In 2025, SCDC supported 1,785 people with cost-of-living assistance and has invested in specialist Low-Income Family Tracker (LIFT) software, which allows the council to give targeted cost-of-living support to the most vulnerable people in the district.

#### Business support

The council has supported and encouraged numerous retail markets around the district and there are now 14 of them running regularly throughout the year. SCDC's own Christmas Market has been very successful and has hosted 240 traders since 2021, attracting up to 1,500 visitors annually.

SCDC was given the responsibility for allocating Government grants to support local businesses, communities and the local economy. This included £876,000 from the Rural England Prosperity Fund and £200,000 to help rejuvenate some of the district's high streets.

#### Green to our core

SCDC remains committed to 'green' initiatives. It has reduced the emissions from its operations and estate by 22% from 2018/19 levels. It has provided funding to help communities respond to the climate and ecological emergencies, including the distribution of £625,000 of funding through Zero Carbon Communities grants.

#### Improvements to customer service

In late 2024 the council launched 'SAM', an artificial intelligence (AI) website assistant. In its first 25 days it received 1,152 requests for help - of which 87% were successfully responded to by SAM without needing human intervention. A new-look website has just been launched which offers easy access to information that is relevant to a resident's area such as bin collection schedules and planning applications.

#### Northstowe

The Cabin (Temporary Community Centre) is now functioning very successfully, as is the Western Park Sports Pavilion. The Northstowe community continues to grow, helped by SCDC's Communities Team, some of whom are based in The Cabin and speak to residents on a daily basis. Building work has started on a permanent community building which is to be called 'The Unity Building' – a name chosen by Northstowe residents. The Unity should be open in spring 2026.

#### Homes for Ukraine scheme

Sadly, the need for the Homes for Ukraine scheme remains. SCDC has supported 937 guests since the start of the conflict one of the highest in the country for a District Council.

Bill Handley

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