
County Councillor Report

Cllr Michael Atkins, Hardwick Division

Annual Report May 2022

Summary

- County Council has been run by new administration since May 2021
- Immediate financial deficits have been closed but financial state of Council is difficult
- Feedback from committees: Adults & Health, Children, Communities, Environment, Transport
- District Council Elections 2022
- Highlights from news in April 2022
- Contact details

A new administration

It was a great privilege to be elected to the County Council in May 2021, and I was delighted to form part of the Joint Administration now running Cambridgeshire County Council, alongside the other Liberal Democrats, and with the support of the Labour and Independent Groups.

Much of this year has been spent 'taking stock' of the organisation and challenges that we inherited, with the help of an expert peer panel of experienced councillors from the Local Government Association. Following the retirement of the Chief Executive of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough councils, we appointed Stephen Moir to the post in February 2022 – he will oversee the work of Cambridgeshire only (not Peterborough), as we seek to untangle the joint structures and focus on Cambridgeshire priorities.

I have served on the council's Children and Young People committee; and also as one of two representatives on the Combined Authority Overview and Scrutiny committee, which has given me an insight into the workings of that public body that I hope will be helpful to our villages, particularly given its unconstrained resources and grant-making activities.

Council Finances

At the beginning of the year, the deficit in the proposed budget for 2022/23 was £22.2m. Through various elements of cost savings, vacancies, and one-off support from the UK government we have closed this gap and agreed a balanced budget for 2022/23, though significant deficits remain for future years. The Council is constrained by fulfilling its statutory responsibilities, such as for home-school transport and adult social care, with incoming resources bearing little relation to the increased demand for such services. The increases in council tax, of 2% for general services and 3% for Adult Social Care, are vital to safeguarding these important services over the next few years.

The council has built up a good level of reserves over the last few years, although these cannot be used to sustainably fund critical services. Part of these reserves will therefore be used to enable the household support fund to continue helping those in need; a further £14m has been set aside for a Just Transition Fund to support our communities transition to low-carbon living in a fair and inclusive way.

Adults and Health

The Council investing in the development of 'Care Together', with Community Catalysts supporting local social care micro-enterprises as an alternative to large agency staff models, and rolling out the Real Living Wage to social care workers. We have also established increased support for unpaid carers, and expanded the Direct Payment option to more people. We have invested further in the Enhanced Response Service as an alternative to reliance on an over-stretched A&E. The Council has invested afresh in public health programmes, including more NHS health checks, and local grants for community wellbeing activities. It has also started to assess the impact of government reforms on our social care responsibilities, in which it's clear there will be very significant new responsibilities and costs without new funding.

Work is progressing on the opportunity to build 80 flats on land at the Princess of Wales Hospital in Ely. 16 of these will be let out to Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust as a hospital rehabilitation ward enabling health and social care to be further integrated.

Children and Young People

A major focus of this committee during the year was to ensure funding of vouchers over school holidays for families eligible for free school meals. This happened throughout 2021/22 and is guaranteed throughout 2022/23. The Council has also worked with local providers on to establish the Holiday Activity & Food programme for the children of families on benefits-related free school meals. The numbers of children in Cambridgeshire eligible for free school meals has continued to increase significantly across the county

The Council has carried out a high profile drive to recruit more local foster carers and ensure more children and young people in care can remain within the county. We remain very grateful to all our existing foster carers for their life-changing efforts.

A motion from a Fenland councillor calling for a network of mental health hubs to meet the needs of young people received unanimous support from the Council. Work is beginning on putting this into practice. The Council is also proposing to commission new and additional places to meet rising demand for specialist placements for children with special educational needs

Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion

The former Communities & Partnership Committee was renamed Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion Committee – the acronym CoSMIC appears to have stuck! The committee has been responsible for supporting communities through COVID, making provision for refugees from Afghanistan and now Ukraine, assisting EU citizens in obtaining settled status and voting rights, as well as a range of public services from libraries to mortuaries.

COSMIC makes decisions about 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. The committee is also responsible for developing one of the Joint Administration's major commitments - decentralisation of Council services and decision-making, to bring the Council closer to communities and make it more locally accountable. More on this to follow over the next year.

Environment

The Council's high-profile scheme to get the community of Swaffham Prior off oil and onto a new renewable energy community heating system continues to progress well, with a £3.2M Government

grant awarded. Other energy schemes include the installation of solar panels on Park & Ride sites, small-scale solar farms with private wire connections to commercial customers, and replacement of gas and oil boilers in schools and in the Council's own premises around the county. We have also run another round of Solar Together, the group buying scheme for homeowners wanting to invest in solar panels and battery storage. The Council's recycling centres at Milton and March are also in the early stages of plans for upgrades.

Waste has been contentious, with unpopular commercial applications for incinerators at Wisbech and Woodhurst, very expensive odour control measures required to the Amey facility at Waterbeach, and uncertainty about the Government's intentions following several consultations on extended producer responsibility, deposit return schemes, and recycling.

The Climate Change & Environment Strategy sets a new and more ambitious target for a net-zero carbon Cambridgeshire by 2045, aiming to work with businesses and communities to bring this about. We are also working on a Cambridgeshire Decarbonisation Fund and Local Area Energy Planning. Council Leader Lucy Nethsingha is leading plans for a 'Cambridgeshire COP' following the high-profile international COP26 climate negotiations in Glasgow.

As every year, the Council published its carbon footprint report. COVID meant 2020/21 was an unusual year, with not only less travel but also less construction, two of the biggest greenhouse gas contributors. The shrinkage in our carbon footprint is likely not to be sustained next year.

We invested an additional £109K over last winter to undertake urgent repairs to various biodiversity sites, as well as to begin a biodiversity audit of the Council's land to set a baseline for our commitment to increase biodiversity in Cambridgeshire. We have also promoted, and taken part in, the Queen's Green Canopy initiative to mark the Platinum Jubilee.

Transport

The new Council is facing up to the many challenges it has been left. Not least of these was the atrocious state of the county's 100,000 gullies, whose lack of maintenance contributed to the flooding of winter 2020/21. These are now being mapped and cleared.

We have established a new funding pot for local communities to bid into for 20MPH zones, to make these more widespread and easier to obtain. I know this will be of interest to many villages and further detail will be forthcoming in the next few months.

The Council has also been focusing on Active Travel, with the aim of improving infrastructure for pedestrians, cyclists, and equestrians. A number of schemes in our villages are being taken forward after several rounds of input, and I expect them to succeed in their aims without causing undue inconvenience.

Traffic in Cambridge is set to grow by 30 per cent in the next ten years, and there is a serious lack of funding for public transport. Without this, many people who cannot drive, or cannot afford to buy, insure or fill up a car, are left with limited or no options for travel. The Greater Cambridge Partnership has been consulting for some time on ways to relieve traffic congestion in Cambridge and improve public transport into the city. These consultations are still ongoing. One of the options on the table is some form of congestion charging to heavily subsidise better public transport.

The results of the independent audit of the C2C busway were published earlier in the year, and while broadly supportive of the scheme and its work, did note that there are a number of new factors which could influence the design and use of the busway, such as the end of the CAM concept and

the proposed East-West Rail. As a consequence, the proposed route has been changed after it leaves Hardwick to be on- instead of off-road as far as Madingley Mulch Roundabout. The GCP are also re-examining whether improvements can be made on Madingley Road itself; whether in time these are a suitable alternative to the current off-road proposals will be contested over the next year or so. The Environmental Impact Assessment is due to be published later this year.

District council elections May 2022

Elections to South Cambs District Council (alongside some contested Parish Councils) took place earlier this month – the representation for our villages is now as follows:

Coton, Barton, Comberton, Grantchester, Harlton (H&C Ward): Myself, Lisa Redrup and Ariel Cahn
Hardwick, Toft (Hardwick Ward): Lina Nieto
Madingley (Girton Ward): Corinne Garvie and Richard Stobart
Eversdens (Barrington Ward): Aidan Van De Weyer
Caldecote, Kingston (Caldecote Ward): Tumi Hawkins

Congratulations to all these Councillors, and many thanks to those of you who supported the smooth running of elections – I know our villages halls were put to good use to enable people to vote, for example. I haven't found an overall turnout statistic but for most wards it was close to 50% which for local elections is pretty fantastic.

The new District Council consists of 37 Liberal Democrats and 8 Conservative councillors; the Liberal Democrats (including myself) will therefore form the administration of the Council for the next four years.

On a personal note, I hope to provide parishes with a more complete picture and level of service now that I am involved in both tiers of local government. I have agreed with my new ward colleagues that I will focus my parish work in areas I already represent at the County, as you would expect.

Highlights - news of interest in April

A report carried out by the MRC Epidemiology Unit (University of Cambridge) into 'No Car zones outside Schools' found that they improved safety and encouraged levels of walking, cycling and scooting. Where there is local support, the Council will be keen to roll these out further.

The County and District have been working closely together to assist Ukranian refugees to settle in our area. South Cambs is now hosting several families and individuals and the council is providing a high level of support to those people and their hosts.

A new website has been launched to celebrate our local parks at <https://www.cambsopenspace.co.uk/parks>. There are six parks in our district, including two nature reserves, so do take a look if this is of interest. I would also highlight Hardwick Wood, run by the Wildlife Trust, as a fantastic local amenity.

Contact Details

Councillors and residents are welcome to contact me on any issue which is concerning them:

<p>Cllr Michael I. Atkins matkinslibdem@gmail.com https://www.facebook.com/cllrmichaelatkins 07968 264637</p>
