

## **District Councillor's annual report 2020**

### **The Mordens Ward**

I would like to start my report with the most recent of events. The way our communities have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic has been outstanding. Everyone has their part to play and I am prouder than ever to be a representative of your communities at this time and my thanks to all parish councils, volunteers and everyone involved in supporting their fellow residents at this time.

I would just like to reassure all that, despite the current circumstances, I am still representing you at South Cambs District Council and will continue to do so either remotely or in person when restrictions are lifted. If you or any resident are in need at any time please do get in touch via the details at the end of this report at any time, – if I can't help you personally I will be able to help you get to a person who can. It's what I stood for election to do – to do my best to support residents and that will never change whatever the circumstances we find ourselves in.

#### **Financial position of the SCDC**

The year ending March 2018 accounts are yet to be signed off (these accounts were due to be signed off back in the autumn of 2018). This does mean we know the March 2019 accounts are already late and the March 2020 accounts will most likely be late also. Though there are no financial penalties for Local Government bodies filing late accounts, there are extra external auditor costs expected. It is of deep concern for myself and many others that these matters are still unresolved.

At the February 2020 full council meeting, the budget for the 2020-21 year was set. At the 2019-20 budget I raised concerns as to the £3 million spending gap – I was uncertain as to whether it was possible to close such a substantial figure. My concerns have not been alleviated as in the 2020-21 budget there is now a spending gap of £5 million. An area of particular concern, worsened by recent events, is that the council is heavily dependent on business growth to fund this gap. Being so reliant on a third party, given that economic markets and businesses are out of the council's control, it feels to me this is a high risk strategy.

There were many things that I welcome in the budget, such as the funds to support mobile warden schemes and the £5 million set aside to make environmental improvements. I am not convinced, however, that now is the right time for the 17.5% reduction in planning services.

The council continues to increase its investment portfolio, within the year the £100 million investment strategy was revised to be increased to £340 million. I am in no way opposed to the council seeking alternative forms of income, investments in Ermine Street Housing (a residential property rentals company owned by SCDC) have proven to be steady investments that have made good returns of over £2 million in recent times. However, this acceleration into commercial property investment, among other things, at the rate that is proposed is of too high a risk in my view when it is taxpayers' money funding it. There have also been serious reservations raised on the theory of this by government and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance & Accountancy (CIPFA) with restrictions being investigated.

When balancing all these factors, both for and against, I felt that I could not support this budget nor the capital programme to invest £340 million in the next five years.

#### **Fly-tipping**

There has recently been an increase in fly-tipping through the district, with some of it witnessed by our Environment Enforcement Officers being described as 'industrial-scale'.

This is a blight for all residents and there are concerns in the current climate that we will see yet another rise. Residents can check via the link below that those who are collecting their rubbish are properly licensed.

<https://environment.data.gov.uk/public-register/view/search-waste-carriers-brokers>

### **The environment**

I'm pleased to say that SCDC have declared a climate emergency with near unanimous support. I have been proud to support our communities and the council in many of the environmental improvement initiatives that are coming through. The Zero-Carbon grants were launched this year and many parishes has benefitted from the three free trees planting promotion.

I am completely committed both personally and as your councillor in tackling climate change – but I have raised concerns as to how the money is being spent, such as on the purchase of an electric bin lorry. While I hope this will be a beneficial purchase for the council, at this time I have reservations as it will be one of the first in the UK, with previous trialling having been done in more urban areas such as Islington borough in London. My concern is that this is unproven technology and given the rural nature of South Cambs I am sceptical as to if this is the most appropriate option along with spending a further £1.8 million on improving the council building itself. I would prefer this money was spent more towards helping residents to make a cultural and habitual shift in relation to climate change, which I believe would have a larger impact on helping to lower emissions in the district than an 'exemplar' building.

### **Planning Department**

There has been much change in the way planning works at SCDC. The shared service of the Greater Cambridge Planning Service between South Cambs and Cambridge City is now established. However, during the year an external company was brought in to deal with planning procedures normally completed by officers at SCDC. We have been told this is a temporary measure to relieve pressure within the department, an issue many have been raising for some time. Concerns have been raised in relation to this decision mainly due to the lack of information councillors have been given. At September's full council meeting there were motions calling for more transparency in the planning process, including a clear audit trail of those contributing comments towards applications and being clear when an external company has been involved in an application – but these were voted down.

SCDC has been challenged at the High Court in relation to several applications and had the legality of its scheme of delegation challenged leading to constitutional changes being required. The scheme of delegation is the way in which it is decided which planning applications parish councils and local district councillors "call-in" go to committee. It was proposed at a planning committee meeting that the Joint Director of Planning and Economic Development make the decision of which applications were to come to committee. This was not welcomed by many residents, nor myself, as this leads to an impression of officers "marking their own homework". Accordingly, I voted against but this was passed five votes to four with one abstention. Subsequently this process was challenged as a constitutional change as it is believed to be only possible if agreed by Full Council, therefore at the time of writing, the matter of the scheme of delegation is yet to be resolved and any applications where a request for call in has been made are currently unable to be determined by officers.

### **Councillor allowances**

At September 2019's Full Council meeting, council debated the issue of the amount councillors will receive in allowances, in relation to Basic Allowance and Special Responsibility Allowances (SRAs) to increase from 26<sup>th</sup> September 2019. The Basic allowance has increased by 2% (£98) as is the percentage increase officers will receive.

This I believed to be an acceptable proposal, however the arrangements in respect of Special Responsibility allowances (SRAs) were not. There is an introduction of nine new SRAs, some of which are four figure sums and one being over £5,000. Other SRAs have been increased over 100% and members are able to receive not one SRA, as has previously been the case, but can now receive two SRAs. This means as the Combined Authority executive board member is the council's Leader, the amount received by the Leader of SCDC is now over £20,000 in comparison to the basic allowance of £5,010 – an increase of over 35%. One of the arguments for the increase was to make the role of being a councillor more assessable: if the substantial increase was to the basic allowance, I would have understood this logic, but to increase the SRAs means, in my opinion, this logic is lost. With all of this in mind I voted against this proposal. But the vote carried 22 votes in favour, 11 against 4 abstentions.

### **As your councillor**

As your district councillor I am on the following committees:

- Audit & Corporate Governance Committee
- Civic Affairs Committee
- Climate & Environment Advisory Group (Substitute)
- Full Council
- Employment & Staffing Committee
- Grants Advisory Committee (Substitute)
- Licensing Committee (Substitute)
- Planning Committee
- Scrutiny and Overview Committee (Substitute)

I also have responsibilities as the Major Opposition Group Leader, I sit on the Greater Cambridge Partnership Assembly and I am a substitute on the Combined Authority's scrutiny and overview committee.

### **Cllr Heather Williams**

#### **SCDC The Mordens Ward**

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