

Annual Report 2021

A report on Cambridgeshire County Council from Cllr Sebastian Kindersley

Foreword

The last twelve months have been the strangest of all the 22 years I have been a Councillor. Life, personal and communal, has been dominated by the Covid virus but, at the same time, every effort has been made to 'keep things going'. The County Council has continued to function and most of its scheduled meetings have taken place, but by Zoom or Microsoft Teams.

The two major issues that have taken up most time in the past 12 months have been East West Rail and South West Cambridgeshire.

I chair CamBedRailRoad and over the last 3 years we have promoted a proper assessment of a Northern Approach into Cambridge alongside East West Rail's ideas. We have pushed EWR away from a Bassingbourn route and have most recently persuaded EWR that a station north of Cambourne is the way forward. EWR is currently consulting on a preferred route that runs from North Cambourne through the South Cambridgeshire countryside to Shelford with a 7km embankment 80 metres wide and 10m high which will have a considerable impact on all our lives. Now working with Cambridge Approaches we continue to press for a fair assessment of the Northern Approach most recently with a meeting with the Rail Minister.

Another threat to this area comes in the form of proposals from a West Sussex speculative development company Thakeham which is proposing to create a new town sprawl of 25,000 homes between and encompassing the villages of Shepreth, Melbourn, Meldreth, Whaddon, Bassingbourn, Wimpole, Orwell, Barrington and Foxton. The new town, dubbed 'South West Cambridge,' would be half the size of Cambridge and would profoundly change the hinterland of a multitude of villages and eradicate the rural nature of much of South Cambridgeshire.

The developer has missed the deadline for the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan's 'Call for Sites,' in spite of having spent the past two years preparing its scheme, during which time it will have been fully aware of the South Cambridgeshire Planning process. It now proposes a late submission in the Call for Sites – promised by Easter but still awaited. I am part of the South West Cambridgeshire Action Group and you can see our campaign at <http://www.swcaq.org.uk/>

At the time of writing, there seems to be the possibility of a return to 'normal' in the next few weeks but we do not yet know if the new normal will be like the old normal or whether certain procedures will be changed indefinitely. My main report follows below and contains no surprises as I have been reporting to Gamlingay Division Parish Councils every month and keeping in touch as necessary between meetings.

I stand for re-election this May and – whatever the result - I would like to thank parish councillors and clerks for their work for the local community and to say how much I have enjoyed working with them.

Keeping you informed

It is all too easy for councillors to become engrossed in their work on committees and lose touch with the people they represent. That is why I attend monthly Parish Council meetings, and provide all residents with up-dates online as appropriate. I quite understand that not everybody shares my political perspective nor my interpretation of national developments but I have tried to engage constructively with any residents who have raised issues with me.

Full details of the County Council structure, committees and meetings with reports can be seen on-line at www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk. Full Council meetings are web-cast.

1. The political balance of the Council

The political composition of the 61-member Council now stands as:

35 Conservatives, 16 Liberal Democrats, 7 Labour, 2 'St. Neots Independents', 1 Independent.

The Council has seven decision-making committees. with a Conservative majority on each committee and every Committee chaired and vice-chaired by a Conservative. The committees are:

- Adults
- Children and Young People
- Commercial and Investment
- Economy and Environment
- Health
- Communities and Partnerships
- Highways and Community Infrastructure

The overall political and financial direction of the Council is in the hands of the General Purposes Committee comprising 15 members. This is chaired by the Leader of the Council who is also the Leader of the Conservative Group.

In addition there are several more smaller committees covering, for example, Planning, Audit and Accounts, Constitution and Ethics, Pensions, Staffing Appeals. All the committees are chaired by Conservatives except Audit and Accounts which is chaired by a LibDem.

2. Council officers and Council offices

The Chief Executive, Gillian Beasley, is shared with Peterborough as part of the policy of reducing back office costs and several other senior posts are also shared with Peterborough. The trend of recent years to reduce council staff, has continued. The CCC HQ building, Shire Hall, has been closed and emptied prior to being re-developed for other purposes, and the County Council will move to new buildings in Alconbury Weald, probably from September 2021. The new buildings will be more economical to run but, being on the western edge of the Council area, there will be increased travel costs and time for staff, and more road pollution.

3. What the Council provides

- Social services to children and young people, older people, people with mental health problems, physical and learning disabilities;
- Planning of school places and some support for schools (although the funding for day-to-day running comes from central government); Coordinated Early Years provision, nurseries etc.;
- Libraries;

Road maintenance; road safety measures;
Growth and wider development issues;
Trading standards; waste disposal and recycling centres.
The former responsibility for overall transport strategy is gradually being taken over by the Combined Authority.

4. The key issues faced by Cambridgeshire County Council: reduced funding, increasing costs, increasing demand, Covid paralysis

The reduction in general grants from central government has continued except that some extra money has been made available for Covid measures. The Local Government Association, a cross-party organisation, has been ringing alarm bells recently about the greater financial burden placed on local councils and several have become insolvent.

County Councils have the flexibility to increase tax levels (see below) without having to call a referendum. The demand for services is increasing as the proportion of the population needing adult social care support increases.

Although the total number of under-fives is not increasing at the moment, the severity of need of an increasing proportion is placing greater demands on a hard-pressed service. The general pattern is for the cost of providing services to rise above general levels of inflation.

5. Council Tax

The government has again capped the levels by which local councils can increase tax for 2021-22:

3% over two years towards Adult Social Care and 1.99% towards other services

Cambridgeshire CC has decided to limit the social care increase to 1%, followed by 2% next year and 1.99% for other services.

So, for the coming year 2021-22, the total 2.99% increase will cost a Band D household an extra £54.22 per year. Over 60% of households in Cambridgeshire are in the lower bands A-C. In round figures, every 1% brings in about £3 million to the Council

Since capping was introduced in 2014, the Council has not made use of the full flexibility allowed by central government. As a result of the compounding effect of those decisions, the Council's income is much less than it would have been.

6. Services for older people

More and more people are living longer and, in the main, healthier lives. When they do become dependent, the cost to the Council is very considerable. The Council's aim is to enable more people to live longer at home and be supported there rather than going into sheltered accommodation.

The policy of 'Transformation' is based on a significant reduction in personnel together with higher expectations on the voluntary sector and an assumption of a willingness on the part of beneficiaries to accept new ways of being supported. While there is obviously merit in trying to find new ways of providing services, there can be no disguising the fact that provision will get worse for some and this is a matter of great concern, both locally and nationally.

7. Transport and Highways

- A Road maintenance and footpath repair are the most frequent source of complaint from residents.
- B The impact of the decision by the County Council to reduce the drain clearance process was cruelly exposed by the recent flooding incidents across the County.
- C The work on the new A14 is nearing completion, and this produces knock-on effects on the rest of the road system. Highways England is responsible for the maintenance of motorways and trunk roads but most A and B roads are maintained at the expense of the local authority which is designated as the 'Highways Authority'. The Highways Authority receives a grant from central government towards those costs.

Proposals are coming forward for the dualling of the A428 from the Black Cat roundabout to Caxton Gibbet. The proposed new road does not go through the Gamlingay division but residents definitely use it!

8 Education

All Cambridgeshire secondary schools are now 'academies' which means that the Council has no jurisdiction over them. The disruption of the last few months has caused the suspension of Ofsted inspections and of conventional examinations so it is not possible to make a comment on the success of Cambridgeshire schools against national benchmarks. Only a small minority of primaries have become academies.

The County Council retains responsibility for the 'well-being' of children in academies though it has no formal role in intervening if things go wrong. Central government grant to Cambridgeshire improved in 15-16, and has been maintained. A 'National Funding Formula' published in September 2017 was a small move in the right direction. Costs in schools have increased at a higher rate. Independent researchers confirm that, **in real terms**, funds available to schools have been cut by 9% since 2010.

The major topic this year, as last, is that funding for children with special needs has not kept up with the demand. The 'High Needs Block' in Cambridgeshire now has a deficit of £28 million, and a similar pattern is seen in other counties so this is a national problem.

9 Climate Change

The County Council, in common with many others, is beginning to take this seriously and is beginning to develop a Strategy to reduce energy consumption. The particular problem for Cambridgeshire is the massive expansion of housing and population. Cambridgeshire is, mainly, an attractive place to live and though house prices are rising, they are good value compared with the London area. A rapidly increasing population puts pressures on many services which use energy but I am sure we will see new ideas coming forward.

10 Combined Authority

Since May 2017 there has been a 'Combined Authority' for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough with James Palmer (Con.) as Mayor. The combined authority comprises:

Peterborough City Council (a unitary authority), the district councils of Huntingdonshire, Fenland, East Cambs, South Cambs and Cambridge City, and Cambridgeshire County Council.

The Mayor has a Cabinet comprising the Council Leaders from all the constituent councils, i.e. five Conservatives, one Labour and one Lib Dem, and there is also a scrutiny panel. Some people claim that the introduction of a Combined Authority makes it unnecessary to have County and District Councils as well as parish councils and perhaps one of the layers of local government could be pruned to save costs.

The Mayor has also been offered greater scope by central government in order to 'level up' to the Metro Mayors in the North of England. This means adding adult education and the development of a university in Peterborough among other projects as well as oversight of strategic housing development. The next Mayoral election will be on May 6th 2021.

11 The future for local government services and the implication for communities

- A It is now becoming increasingly clear that the structure and funding of local government as we have known it for many years has changed and will continue to change. Central government has been decreasing its grants to local councils with the expectation is that services will be 'transformed' and local groups - parish councils, voluntary groups – will have a bigger role in supporting those people in the early stage of needing help.
- B The County Council has continued to make savings in its procedures and in increasing income. For example, it has set itself up as a property company and is trying to sell off some of its land holdings for housing. Plans for moving HQ offices out of Shire Hall in Cambridge to a new building in Alconbury Weald are coming to fruition.

12 National uncertainty

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that we face, as a country, greater uncertainty than most of us can remember in a lifetime. It is already becoming apparent that the process of Brexit will be much more complicated than previously claimed by national politicians. We frankly do not know what the implications will be for the country economically nor for us, the general public, in our everyday lives. Problems for fishermen, farmers and for some industries are emerging.

Climate change, still disputed by some, appears to be confirmed as an international trend with local implications for changes in our daily pattern of behaviour.

And then we have the recovery, we hope, from Covid. If the vaccination programme continues to go well, we may be safer but we do not yet know what the impact will be on many aspects of our social and communal lives.

Sebastian Kindersley