

Parish AGM Report 2021 The Mordens Ward

NB This report was received on 25th May 2021, with a note from Heather:

I have been having issues with my council email again unfortunately and I'm aware some have not received my AGM report which I'm resending now in the hope it reached everyone this time, please let me know if you are missing anything from me as is likely to have been caught up in this latest IT issues.

I would like to start my report by thanking all residents for the way they have supported each other during this pandemic, it has been a very challenging time for us all but hopefully the end is nearing and we can meet together in person once more.

Via a new virtual world I have continued to represent you at South Cambs District Council and will continue to do so, the most recent of meetings being of the planning committee which lasted for over 9 hours!

As parish councillors will be aware, we are due to soon return to in person meetings, a little earlier than many would have liked including myself.

I have made the decision, after discussing the potential impacts of this with my family, that I will attend physical meetings at the District and Parishes but this is not an easy decision for councillors to make and I will fully respect if others do not feel able to.

Thakeham Housing proposal update

There has not, at the time of writing this report, been any official submission by Thakeham to the District Council. Thakeham have claimed a delay in their submission time due to covid but that they will be submitting proposals in the call for sites for the next Local Plan.

Many people such as myself have been looking at what methods the developers have to pursue this project. My research has shown that Thakeham have no option at present but to go through the normal local planning process, I have made it clear also that this proposal should receive no special treatment.

This has been supported by South Cambs Director of planning who has also stated that he is unaware of any mainstream mechanism, other than the local plan process, that would enable the delivery of these proposals.

Chris Pincher, Minister for Housing, has confirmed in a response to a written question in parliament about Thakeham that "Should an application for planning permission come forward it will be dealt with in the usual way".

Government have also confirmed that they have no plans for a New Town in South Cambridgeshire. As a member of the Planning Committee and a voting member of the council on the Local Plan it is crucial that I do not pass any judgement or comment on my own personal views of this proposal if I am to not become pre-determined and thereby lose my vote.

I believe that the best meaningful way I can serve residents is to ensure that I am able to vote when the time comes.

Local Plan

It has been stated that the next stage of the next local plan will be starting around the Summer/ Autumn of this year. I would encourage all to respond when the consultation opens as this document really does have an impact on our villages and lives. It will state where and how development should take place.

There will be many areas from of policy that will be consulted on such as environmental, layout, scale, design and affordable housing provision etc, along with a special strategy that will dictate where the majority of development will be happening over future decades.

Financial position of the SCDC

The year ending March 2018 accounts were signed off just before Christmas 2020 (these accounts were due to be signed off back in the autumn of 2018).

Work has begun on the audit for the 2019 year end accounts and it is likely that the council will not be on time with its accounts reporting until the 2022 year end.

Though there are no financial penalties for Local Government bodies filing late accounts, there are extra external auditor costs being of 6 figure sums for the 2018 accounts and likely additional costs for the future years that are delayed.

It is of deep concern for myself and many others that the District council will take so long to get on time with its audits, I continue to raise this at meetings and along with questioning the officer resources available given this and staff turnover have been sighted as the reasons for many delays along with resources issues from the external auditor.

The budget for 2021-2022 was agreed in February. There were elements that I welcome for example the resources towards homelessness prevention and supporting businesses and communities through the Covid recovery. However, on balance, there were too many elements that I was uncomfortable with and therefore voted against the budget. Below are some of the reasons as to why I voted against:

- The accumulative borrowing figure on the four-year forecast is nearly £420m – this is a 95% increase in the Council’s debt over the four-year forecast, a rate that I personally believe is unsustainable given the limit the council has set itself is £511m (though this can be exceeded in the short term).
- There is a budget gap of nearly £6m with over £4m intended to be filled with growth.
- The Budget pressure figures forecast were significantly lower than the actual figures that we were comparing it to, so am concerned this is not overly realistic.

The council continues to increase its commercial investment portfolio, under its £340 million investment strategy. The Council has entered into financial Limited Liability Partnerships with Hill Group and Balfour Beatty to the sum of £140 million as part of the investment strategy.

As these decisions are taken with the press and public excluded I am legally limited as to what I can say, however I can say that I did not support this and my main reasons are that I believe there are real issues of conflicts of interest as the partnerships will be looking to develop land and will be applying to the District Council for planning permission.

While this is Legal, I fear for the perception of this given a recent report from an independent planning advisory service from the Local Government Association spoke of a “Lack of Trust” in planning at South Cambs. I do not feel that these partnerships will restore that trust and at the same time it is a lot of money, taxpayers and future loans that will be needed to fund this project to be investing.

The environment

The District Council has recently published its Doubling Nature Strategy, and I’m pleased to say that on environmental issues at South Cambs there is rarely a time where there is not cross-party support.

On such an important issue its important that we put any other differences aside and all play our part to help in solving this problem. I am looking carefully, while the next local plan is being developed, as are others at the real implications’ development is having on our water. It has been an incredibly difficult year for flooding and yet there are also rivers that completely dried up last summer.

Planning

It has been another difficult year for planning at South Cambs, when writing this report 90% of my case work is in relation to planning. No one at the moment is benefitting from this situation, the residents, the parish councils, the applicants, or the officers.

This year has seen an embarrassing situation with the District Council affectively having to take itself to court to quash its own decisions, and this cannot carry on.

As part of the Planning Advisory Services report a group has been formed, of which I sit on, to try and implement the recommendations, a link to which is below.

I hope that we will be able to find ways to improve this service but I do believe that the key reason as to why planning is in a pickle as one council called it at a planning meeting, is a lack of planning officers. I will continue to raise this and while I'm pleased that this year much of the previous years near £1m budget cut has been restored, we need the rest of it and more if residents are to get the service they deserve.

[Appendix A - Peer Review Final Report 2020.pdf \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#)

At the budget meeting I proposed an amendment that saw a reduction in councillors allowances and communications budget to enable the long term employment of an extra planning enforcement but unfortunately this was voted down as there was not considered a need for it, below are the case figures which I believe show why it is, full stats are available at [Appendix 1 - Cases received and closed 10 Feb 2021 Committee.pdf \(moderngov.co.uk\)](#).

Month – 2020	Received	Closed
2020 - YTD	473	190
2019 - YTD	615	641
2018 - YTD	670	651
2017 - YTD	602	563

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)
- Anti – Bullying Task and Finish Group (Chairman)
- Planning Committee Development Group

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.

Political Balance of South Cambs District Council

The Current Political Balance of SCDC is:

Liberal Democrats	27*	
Conservative	11	
Labour	2	
Independent	1	
Vacancy	4	(Due to resignations of 3 Lib Dems & 1 Ind)*

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* In local by-elections on 6th May 2021, all four seats were won by the Lib Dems, increasing its control at SCDC to 31 seats.