

## District Councillors Annual Report 2017/18

As ever the municipal year gets underway with the Annual Meeting of Council, which is where the appointments are made to the various committees. I'm pleased that your three District Councillors were all appointed cabinet positions within the council, with Lynda as the Housing portfolio holder, Tim as cabinet member looking after Northstowe, Strategic Planning and Transport, and I continued as cabinet member for Finance & Staffing.

### **Northstowe**

Northstowe is keeping us as busy as ever, as we are now welcoming more and more new residents to this new town. The first of these new pioneers arrived last year and were present at a formal opening ceremony in May. Plans are well advanced for the Secondary School in Phase 2, and although Oakington will be outside the catchment area for the secondary school, we will be benefiting from 2 other s106 commitments from phase 2 which are the Northstowe to Girton Cycle route improvements, which will pass through Oakington, and the Dry Drayton Road Attenuation ponds.

Closure of the Airfield Road is now inevitable, with the date of closure expected to be sometime in May.

Regular Northstowe Parish Forum events take place, chaired by Tim Wotherspoon, and these are well attended and reported on by the Chair of the PC through the Parish Council meetings and the Village Journal. The focus of these meetings has always been very much towards the existing communities of Longstanton and Oakington, but I have noticed a definite shift now towards the needs of the new Northstowe residents, and this will become more the norm with more and more people moving in.

There are now pre-application discussions taking place between Homes England and the District Council about Phase 3 of this development, which is almost entirely within the current parish of Oakington and Westwick, with phase 3b being entirely in Longstanton to the north of the development. It is anticipated that an outline planning application covering phase 3 will be submitted in early 2019.

## **Finance**

As ever, the council's finances are very tight, with further reductions in government grant to deal with this year. When I became a councillor, we were in receipt of around £7.8 million of government grant per annum, but each year it has been cut and cut to the point where now it has reduced to zero.

The council have always anticipated this, and to mitigate the impact we have introduced a number of schemes to increase our income from other sources. Pre-application planning fees, trade waste, and our business hub all contribute to our income, but by far and away the most successful initiative has been Ermine Street Housing. Ermine Street was set up to provide market rental housing to the section of the community that don't qualify for social housing, and yet aren't able to get on the housing ladder by buying their own home. Ermine Street Housing are being promoted as an Ethical Landlord, providing low costs, flexible tenancies and the same care and attention we give to our social housing tenants. And in the process it is generating £1.4 million of income this year, which is expected to rise to £1.7 million next year.

Over £5 million has been saved over the last 5 years, and the budget for 2018/19 shows there is a further £450,000 to be found, rising to £1.2 million by 2022/23. This will be achieved by a combination of further efficiencies within the council, including shared services, and increasing our income from commercial activities.

Our collection rates continue to be some of the best in the country with 98.4% of housing rent, 99.4% of council tax, and 99.5% of business rates being collected over the year.

## **Shared Services**

One of our efficiency drives is to enter into a number of 'shared service' arrangements. A good example is our Waste and Recycling service, which is now being shared with Cambridge City Council and has saved around £700,000 in annual revenue. This is a tremendous achievement given our teams empty nearly 6 million bins a year.

Other services already being shared are the Home Improvement Agency, Payroll, Building Control, Legal Services, and ICT. These are being shared with a combination of Cambridge City Council and Hunts District Council.

The Planning service are also about to be shared with the City Council, which will help co-ordinate not only planning application determinations but also strategic planning through the Greater Cambridge Partnership.

## **Housing**

The Council has so far built 50 new homes and another 68 are either in build or have budget approval. Feasibility studies are being carried on a further 6 schemes which would provide over 100 new homes.

With no underpinning legislation published by the Government for Starter Homes an opportunity has been seized to agree Heads of Terms between SCambs and Homes England [formerly the Homes & Communities Agency] for a 'Northstowe' version of this type of housing. Changes mean that the 1400 starter home units on Northstowe Phase 2 will be better suited to local needs but most importantly will in the longer term provide a very significant source of funding for the Council's house building programme.

SCambs is one of the eleven councils selected by Government as Right to Build Vanguard Authorities. The Council has 819 applicants on its self build register all keen to become self or custom builders. SCambs will sell plots of land it owns having first obtained outline planning permission. 11 of 100 identified plots are being progressed. A sale has been agreed on the first plot, a further 6 are in being marketed and the remaining 5 are in the planning process. Estimated receipts for these are £1.825m and this money will be used to match fund Right to Buy receipts to build new council homes. The Council is also talking to both SME builders and volume developers to increase the availability of land available for this.

SCambs is working closely with the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority to accelerate housing delivery particularly on key worker housing to benefit nurses and teachers. Funding has been approved or is being considered for schemes that will provide in excess of 1,500 homes.

The Council has also secured funding from the Greater Cambridge Partnership [formerly The City Deal] for a modular homes pilot. Application has been made for temporary planning permission to erect a unit on land adjacent to South Cambridgeshire Hall, Cambourne where, subject to planning consent, it will be available for research and tours for a period of up to 12 months.

To help maintain its excellent record of homelessness prevention and minimal use of bed and breakfast accommodation SCambs has introduced its own Private Sector Leasing Scheme. Interest from private landlords has been positive with 9 now signed up and 20 more properties being inspected for suitability.

## **Planning**

The council's planning service continues to be a real challenge as the number of planning applications greatly exceeds the number of people we are able to recruit to deal with them.

Add to this the challenges with the new local plan and it all adds up to a department which is really stretched.

South Cambs are working hard to produce a new Local Plan (the new name for the document setting out all our planning policies) to take over from the previous LDF, which was adopted back in 2007.

Part of this process involves the new plan undergoing an Examination In Public, which is carried out by a Planning Inspector. This examination was progressing well until March 2015, when the Inspector conducting our examination called for additional work to be done to ensure we have taken into account house prices and affordability when assessing the number of new homes needed.

Since then we have had a number of other requests for further work to be done by the inspector, and with each request comes the need to conduct further public consultations, which all adds to the delays. However, we have finally reached a point where all the work is now complete and we just await the final report from the inspector to tell us if the plan is sound, in planning terms, and ready for adoption.

The delays have caused some problems in the district, and locally Cottenham has been subject to large additional housing developments which have been allowed due to the council not having a 5 year land supply. It is hoped that once the Local Plan is adopted, this loophole will be closed, although it is possible for this situation to arise again should there be another downturn in housebuilding.

Despite the planning service being at capacity, we've managed to improve our performance of determining planning applications. Back in 2016 we are only

determining 67% of (non-major) planning applications within the 8 week target, but we've managed to improve on this and are now determining 87% of non-major applications within target, which puts us among the highest performing authorities in the country. (Major applications are currently running at 94% within the 13 week target).

## **Boundary Review**

The Local Government Boundary Commission is responsible for ensuring appropriate local government representation at both Parish, District and County levels. They have a set of quite complex rules which they apply to local authorities, such as how many electors per councillor there are, how big each ward is, where the boundaries are, and how many councillors there are in a council.

Due to the growth of some of our wards (particularly Histon and Impington), we have broken one of the rules relating to the number of electors per councillor, and this has prompted the boundary Commission to undertake a full review of all the wards in our district.

At the same time, we were required to look at the number of councillors we had, which at 57 is rather on the high side. As a result, the council has agreed to reduce the number of councillors down to 45, which of course means many of the wards will change by having fewer councillors looking after them. In addition to this the ward boundaries will also have to change to ensure the council remains within the Boundary Commissions rules on numbers of electors per councillor.

The result locally is that the Cottenham ward will change from being a 3 member ward, covering Cottenham, Rampton, Oakington & Westwick, to a 2 member ward covering just Cottenham and Rampton.

Oakington will become part of a new 2 member ward which will comprise Oakington & Westwick, Longstanton, and Northstowe. Of course as soon as Northstowe begins to grow, it will undoubtedly trigger another boundary review (as the ratio of electors to members will be no longer meet the criteria) and things will all change again. This is one of the prices we have to pay for living in a growth area.

In tandem with these changes the council have also resolved to change the election arrangements. Up to now we have always elected our council in thirds. That is, each year, for 3 years, a third of our councillors are up for election, with no district elections in the fourth year. From 2018, when the changes will come into effect, the council will have all out elections, every 4 years.

### **Community chest**

The hugely successful Community chest scheme has now been replenished with over £50,000 of funding for 2018/19 and is open for applications again.

We've done really well from this scheme locally since its inception, with 15 schemes having gained a total of around £15,000 funding.

I'm pleased to see the parish is out of the blocks quicker than Usain Bolt this year with an application in for £1,000 for the flower planters the EAG hope to place around the village.

Awards are given on a first come first served basis, and when the budget is spent, then that's it until next year.

### **Devolution**

The government have been promoting the idea of devolution for some time now, and as a result we now have the creation of a new combined Authority, together with a directly elected mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

The Combined Authority have been allocated specific pots of money for various things, including £70m for housing within the city of Cambridge and a further £100m for housing in the areas of Cambridgeshire where affordability is most acute, and nowhere is it more acute than South Cambridgeshire.

The money will be used to accelerate housing delivery in developments that have already been allocated in the local plan, but are stalled due to either viability issues, or infrastructure needs.

## **New initiatives**

The council has this year introduced a number of new initiatives. One such scheme is the idea of providing path and street sweeping equipment for parish councils and voluntary groups to borrow for use round the parish. The idea is that South Cambs will drop the equipment off on a Friday evening, and then pick it up again the following Monday morning.

Following on from the hugely successful Community Chest scheme we have now introduced a Green Energy fund. This will provide grants for parishes and community groups of up to £3,000 for green energy schemes such as LED lighting, building insulation, solar panels and the such like. It will be run along the same lines as the Community Chest scheme, in that it is allocated on a first come first served basis, and the annual budget is £56,000 which when it is used, applicants will have to wait for the next financial year.

In addition to this we have also introduced a Green Energy loan scheme, allowing Parishes voluntary groups and individual householders and businesses the opportunity to apply for a loan of up to £10,000 for similar Green Energy Schemes. Loans will be provided interest free except for businesses where the interest will be 6%.

We have also introduced an apprenticeship scheme and aim to recruit 11 new apprentices each year for the next 3 years.

I hope this report gives you a flavour of the work the District Council has been undertaking over the last 12 months, and I would like to pay particular tribute to the help and support we have received from all 3 Parish Councils over the last 12 months, and the hard work and help given by the respective Parish Clerks.

Simon Edwards