

Cambridgeshire County Council Annual Report 2022

The Melbourn and Bassingbourn Division comprises the Parishes of Bassingbourn, Melbourn, Meldreth, Shepreth and Whaddon.

Governance and the Joint Administration

Following the Elections in May 2021 the Council now comprises 61 Councillors made up by 28 Conservatives, 20 LibDems, 9 Labour and 4 Independent. The Joint Administration (JA) formed of Lib Dem/Labour/Independent members took control of the Council with a new Joint Administration Agreement which you can view at:

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/cambridgelibdems/pages/5179/attachments/original/1620984611/County_agreement_2021_FINAL.pdf?1620984611

The Chair is Cllr Stephen Ferguson (Ind) and Sebastian Kindersley (LD) is Vice Chair. I chair the Cambridgeshire Health and Wellbeing Board and am Vice Chair of the Adults and Health Committee, which is chaired by Richard Howitt (Lab). I also sit on the Education Transport Appeals panel and am an active substitute member for Children and Young People, Communities, and Staffing and Appeals.

The County Council's move from Shire Hall in Cambridge to Alconbury took place in the autumn - but not for Full Council meetings, for which the 'Multi Function Room' at Alconbury is too small for meetings with COVID social distancing, and possibly even permanently. The Annual Meeting of the Council in May 2021 was held amid the war planes of the Imperial War Museum at Duxford and since then full council meetings have taken place at Burgess Hall leisure centre, St Ives.

The new Joint Administration has been taking stock of the Council it has inherited. We invited in a 'peer challenge' panel of expert councillors and council officers from the Local Government Association to look at the operation of the Council and advise on priorities. They did so, and came back in spring this year to update on how we were doing. We also convened an Independent Remuneration Panel, as we are required to do, to review Councillor allowances. Unlike the previous administration we agreed their recommendations unaltered.

The Council's Chief Executive retired during the year, and we appointed a new Chief Executive Stephen Moir who started in post in February 2022. Unlike his predecessor, Stephen will serve Cambridgeshire County Council only, not Peterborough too. This is part of a process of disentangling many of the joint staffing structures set up by the previous administration, so that we and they can focus on Cambridgeshire priorities.

Finance and Council Tax

The new Council inherited a budget gap of £22.2M for this year. We managed to balance the budget this time, but very significant financial challenges lie ahead. The budget gap we inherited was set to rise to £86M by 2027, and our 'peer challenge' team identified this as an issue 'of significant magnitude'.

The Council increased its portion of Council Tax in February, by 1.99% for general services, and 3% for adult social care. This was a difficult decision to take during the current cost of living crisis, but many people struggling most with increased bills and prices are those who are most likely to need council services, and likely to pay a lower council tax increase. The Council's budget for this year included a £14M 'Just Transition Fund' to tackle inequality, improve lives and care for the environment.

Whistle blowing: Farmgate

An issue dominating Cambridgeshire politics since the whistle was blown in 2018 is 'Farmgate' — the award to then County Council deputy leader Roger Hickford of the tenancy of a County Council-owned farm in Girton. The new Joint Administration took office committed to publishing the facts, and this has now happened. The subject was found by independent investigators to have broken the councillors' Code of Conduct in seven different ways, including bullying and improper use of position for personal advantage.

County Council Estate

The County Council's Farms estate extends to 33,000 acres - the biggest public sector rural estate in England and Wales. The new Joint Administration is keen to reposition this asset not just as a source of rental income (important though that is) but also as a major part of our environmental and climate ambitions.

The new Joint Administration commissioned an independent review of the Council's development company This Land. This found 'unusual' accounting practices and 'shortcomings [which] require immediate attention'. The review made a number of recommendations, most to be carried out within three months.

Adult Social Care and Health

One of the major changes the new administration made to the Council's committee system was to combine the former Adults Committee and Health Committee into a single committee, making the most of the close relationship between health provision and adult social care. The Committee has been working hard towards the introduction of the Government's Integrated Care System (ICS) across health and care providers. The Council welcomed a new Director of Public Health, Jyoti Atri. Susan's role chairing the Health and Wellbeing Board involves helping to formulate local authority and NHS joint working under the terms of the ICS.

The COVID pandemic has had a devastating effect in terms of loss of life, long-term health challenges, and the emotional impact on families. Workforce challenges in health and care are acute, as people are reassessing their careers and life choices. International recruitment has been adversely affected first by Brexit and then Covid. The Council has worked extensively with partner agencies to support the COVID effort, though with all precautions now removed in England case numbers have surged in recent months.

The Joint Administration has adopted a 'health in all policies' approach. We are 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 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. National Insurance rise funding will be prioritized for addressing hospital waiting lists arising from the pandemic.

Children's Services

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.

The national shortage of HGV and other drivers means the County Council has faced challenges in both home to school transport and school catering during the year, adding still more pressure for staff on top of Covid.

Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion

This new 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 is struggling financially. It runs what was the Innovate & Cultivate Fund, now Cultivate Cambs, funding community support activities. It also drew up a Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy.

Environment & Green Investment Committee

This new committee is responsible for climate change and renewable energy, strategic planning, flood and water, biodiversity, waste, antiquities, and surprisingly digital infrastructure and broadband. The committee developed two important strategies this year – a revised Local Flood Risk Management Strategy, and an updated Climate Change & Environment Strategy which sets a new and more ambitious target for a net-zero carbon Cambridgeshire by 2045. We are also working on a Cambridgeshire Decarbonisation Fund and Local Area Energy Planning. 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.

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.

Highways

The new Council is facing up to the policy of 'Managed Decline' of Cambridgeshire's highways network left by its outgoing administration. The legacy of a failure to invest for the long-term is

painfully evident in every community. Not least of these was the atrocious state of the county's 100,000 gullies, for which a lack of cyclical maintenance contributed to the flooding of winter 2020/21. These are now being mapped and cleared, including one which was in such a bad state a metal detector was required to actually find it. Surface treatments of various roads and pavements are being planned for the next two years. Recovery of the highways network will take time, particularly in an era when public finance is more challenged than ever.

The Council has established a new funding pot for local communities to bid into for 20MPH zones, to make these more widespread and easier to obtain. The Council has been focusing on Active Travel, with the aim of improving infrastructure for pedestrians, cyclists, and equestrians. A new Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan is in progress.

Combined Authority

A new Mayor was elected in May 2021 which led to the scrapping of the CAM Metro and the '£100K homes' project. The Combined Authority's Climate Commission published its ambitious report; the Government announced there would be no more money for affordable housing and snubbed the Combined Authority's bus improvement plan. A new Chief Executive was also appointed, and the Combined Authority has decided to make its permanent home in offices in Huntingdon.

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Greater Cambridge Partnership

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 from the wider area into the city. These consultations are still ongoing. One of the options on the table is some form of congestion charging to pay for better public transport.

Fire Authority

County Councillors chair and provide representation on the Fire Authority. A recent Government inspection of the service looked at three main areas – how effective it is, how efficient and how well colleagues are looked after – and found the Service continued to be rated Good; putting us among the best performing fire and rescue services in the UK.

Parishes

Locally I continue to attend Parish Council meetings as and when I can – they are an important place for opinions to be aired, information shared and problems solved. I work on a wide range of casework and coordinate several transport groups including the Cam Vale Bus Users Group, the A10 Corridor Cycling Campaign and the Meldreth Shepreth and Foxton Community Rail Partnership looking after the interests of small station services between Royston and Cambridge. I coordinate the Melbourn and Bassingbourn Practical Solutions Groups that seek to support young people in the community through the portal of the village colleges, and I am part of a team of local councillors

ensuring that Thakeham cannot proceed with its plan for a new town of 25k houses obliterating 9 local villages.

It has been a pleasure to work with the Parish Council on many different issues throughout the year. I always welcome feedback, casework and the opportunity to serve residents of the parish as your County Councillor.

County Councillor Susan van de Ven