

District Councillors' Milton and Waterbeach Ward Annual Report 2024

This report covers the last 12 months of activity by District Councillors Anna Bradnam, Judith Rippeth and Paul Bearpark and the Liberal Democrat-led District Council.

2024/25 Budget

In February, we steered through our budget for the 2024/25 financial year, which encompasses a diverse array of initiatives aimed at enhancing the well-being of our residents. South Cambridgeshire District Council stands on firm financial ground – a rarity among local authorities, many of which have grappled with severe budgetary constraints or even insolvency in recent times (with some more unfortunately poised to face similar challenges in the coming year).

Rather than opting for short-sighted, politically expedient measures such as freezing Council Tax, we have prioritized the enduring welfare of South Cambridgeshire's inhabitants, ensuring our ability to sustainably finance essential services in the long haul. High inflation has eroded the real value of Council funds at an alarming rate, rendering traditional funding mechanisms insufficient to keep pace.

Fortunately, thanks to prudent financial stewardship by the Liberal Democrats over the past six years, the Council has generated £7 million in revenue through its commercial investments. These strategic investments have been instrumental in bolstering our capacity to deliver the high-quality services our community deserves and have solidified our position of fiscal strength. Without these foresighted investments, South Cambs would undoubtedly face greater challenges in upholding our current standards of service provision.

Council Tax and Council Tax Support

The increase in Council Tax by the District Council translates to a mere 42p per month for a band D household, a rise that trails behind inflationary pressures. Inflation, currently standing at 4.1%, albeit lower than recent peaks, remains alarmingly high. Consequently, the Council finds itself grappling with a tangible budget squeeze in real terms.

To mitigate the impact on our constituents, we're adjusting the thresholds for assistance provided through the Council Tax Support Scheme to keep pace with inflation. This ensures that those currently eligible for support won't see their benefits diminish.

This scheme serves as a vital lifeline for the most vulnerable in our communities, offering them relief of up to 100% on their council tax obligations. It's imperative that the burden of Council Tax does not disproportionately burden the least affluent members of our society.

Across Cambridgeshire, South Cambs, Huntingdonshire, and Cambridge City, individuals can receive up to 100% relief from Council Tax, whereas East Cambs extends up to 91.5%, Fenland 80%, and Peterborough 70%. These measures underscore our commitment to fostering fairness and social cohesion across our region.

Council's Business Plan for 2024/2025

The Council's 2024/25 Business Plan has four areas of focus:

1. **Nurturing Local Enterprises and Economies:** Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the lifeblood of our communities, driving economic growth and fostering job opportunities. By facilitating their transition to eco-friendly practices, we not only fortify their resilience against climate change but also bolster our district's sustainability endeavours. Additionally, our initiatives to invigorate local high streets and markets promise direct benefits to residents, fostering a culture of community support and local economic empowerment. Support has been provided to Waterbeach Market which had an impressive 65 stalls last weekend.

2. **Ensuring Accessible Housing:** Access to safe, affordable housing is a fundamental right for all. Our commitment to delivering housing solutions ensures that South Cambridgeshire remains at the forefront of housing development. With over 1,000 housing completions annually since 2018, including a substantial number of affordable units, we're addressing the root causes of housing inequities and empowering our residents to thrive. Our ethos underscores our belief in fostering inclusive communities where everyone can prosper.

3. **Prioritizing Environmental Sustainability:** Climate change demands urgent action. Our initiatives exceed government targets, focusing on biodiversity preservation, renewable energy adoption, and water scarcity solutions. Through partnerships and community engagement, we're empowering residents to embrace a sustainable lifestyle while spearheading innovative projects like the Waterbeach Renewable Energy Network. Together, we're forging a greener, more resilient future for South Cambridgeshire.

4. **Embracing Modernization and Care:** We're committed to delivering efficient, compassionate services that meet the evolving needs of our residents. By embracing digital innovation and enhancing staff training, we're streamlining operations while ensuring the well-being of our community members. Our support for vulnerable groups, including asylum seekers and refugees, exemplifies our values of inclusivity and compassion.

In conclusion, our 2024/25 Business Plan reflects our unwavering dedication to building a thriving, sustainable future for South Cambridgeshire. Through collaborative efforts and bold initiatives, we're shaping a community where every individual has the opportunity to flourish.

Cambridge 2050

Since Michael Gove's unveiling of 'Cambridge 2040' in July 2023, the government's target has been unclear. Initial projections of 250,000 homes by 2040 have been scaled back to 150,000 by 2050. A 'growth corporation' announced in March 2024 will spearhead initial efforts, but disappointingly, local authorities will only serve in an advisory capacity, lacking voting rights or decision-making authority.

Despite uncertainties, our administration advocates for local voices in planning decisions and emphasizes the necessity of infrastructure improvements like transport, schools, and healthcare facilities. Environmental concerns, particularly water scarcity, remain a focal point. Progress has been made, with government support for key developments like Bourn Airfield, Waterbeach, and the Cancer Research Hospital. However, substantial efforts are required to address water scarcity adequately, aligning with both our local plan and Gove's ambitious vision. As we await further details on Cambridge 2050, we are committed to keeping the three ward parish councils informed and ensuring community input shapes our collective future.

Four-day week trial

Since January 2023, the Council embarked on a trial of a desk-based four-day workweek, initially for three months. Following an independent evaluation of performance data in May 2023, Cabinet extended the trial by an additional year, concluding in March 2024.

Simultaneously, a three-month trial for waste crews was initiated in response to complexities in reorganizing bin collection routes across Greater Cambridge.

Under this model, officers are expected to fulfill 100% of their workload in 80% of the time, receiving full pay. The trials aimed to address recruitment and retention challenges exacerbated by the high cost of living in Greater Cambridge. Similar trials are underway globally, including in the UK, Ireland, and the US, with governments like Scotland and Wales also considering such initiatives.

Preliminary findings indicate a £434,000 reduction in agency staff costs because the new working arrangement has attracted highly qualified staff to the council with no statistically significant decline in service quality. Surveys reveal notable improvements in staff well-being, both mentally and physically. However, the government's 'best value notice' in November 2023 expressed opposition to the four-day week, prompting a consultation on future funding settlements for local authorities. Despite widespread opposition to financial disincentives in the consultation results, the government has persisted in its stance.

The Council awaits clarity on potential financial ramifications before proceeding with a consultation on the four-day week's permanency. Once completed, an evidence-based decision will be made by councillors, with no predetermined outcome. Our commitment to informed decision-making underscores our dedication to the well-being of staff and the efficiency of our services.

East West Rail

In June 2023, the government announced the route for the East West Rail project, confirming that their preferred route was the southern route so the northern route through our area, would not be used, alleviating concerns about the impact it could have had.

Community Forums and Events

Regular community forums were held in Waterbeach to provide planning updates from the council, development updates from Urban&Civic, and presentations from guest speakers such as the Police and Crime Commissioner.

Warm Hubs and Cost of Living Support

From October 2022 to March 2023, the council funded Warm Hubs across South Cambridgeshire to provide heating spaces for residents during winter, with nearly 10,000 attendances recorded. This initiative transitioned into Community Hubs. The council also provided training for professionals and volunteers on available cost of living support resources in early 2024.

Waterbeach Greenway and Waterbeach-Cambridge Transport Scheme

A consultation was held on proposals for a Waterbeach Greenway walking/cycling route and a high-quality public transport route/guided busway between Waterbeach and Cambridge. The feedback from the Greenway consultation will be considered at the October 2024 meeting of the GCP Assembly and a recommendation provided to the GCP Board in November.

Civil Parking Enforcement

After years of the police not enforcing parking violations, new powers were granted for civil parking enforcement officers to issue fines in South Cambridgeshire, starting in November 2023 after an initial grace period lasting until 1st February of issuing warnings.

Housing and Development

The council secured funding for additional refugee and temporary accommodation homes to increase its social housing stock. Both City and District councils maintained a 5-year housing land supply over 2023-2028. Right-to-buy receipts were allowed to be retained for two years to aid building replacement homes. The government announced plans called 'Cambridge 2040' impacting development in the area.

Environmental Initiatives

Community groups received grants for eco-friendly projects like installing solar panels and energy-efficient lighting. The council offered grants to install public EV chargers at community buildings. Six free trees were provided annually to parish councils for planting projects. With the support of Anna, Judith and Paul a numbers of schemes were successful in obtaining funding for low carbon initiatives that also save money.

Other News

A program was launched allowing the council to replace some five-day waste collection routes with four-day routes.

The council's grants program provided funding to over a dozen voluntary/community support organizations working on issues like mental health, disability transport, and poverty.

Cllrs Paul Bearpark, Anna Bradnam and Judith Rippeth

Appendix: Which Council does what?

	County	District	Town/Parish
Adult social care	•		
Allotments			•
Building regulations		•	
Births, deaths and marriages	•		
Burials, cremations and cemeteries		•	•
Children's services	•		
Community safety	•	•	
Concessionary travel	•		•
Council tax and business rates		•	
Consumer protection	•		
Economic development	•	•	
Education and related services	•		
Elections and electoral services		•	
Emergency planning	•	•	•
Environmental Health		•	
Fly tipping clearance		•	
Highways, roads, pavements, footpaths, Public Rights of Way	•		
Housing and homelessness		•	
Housing benefits		•	
Litter, bins, street cleaning		•	
Libraries	•		
Licensing		•	
Local planning		•	[•]
Markets and fairs		•	•
Parking	•	•	•
Parks		•	
Public toilets		•	•
Trading standards	•		
Trees	•	•	[•]
Waste and recycling collection		•	
Waste disposal and public tips	•		

[•] – Parish council is a consultee but has no formal powers