

# **South Cambridgeshire District Council – Harston & Comberton Ward**

## **Report to Harlton Parish Council May 2019**

### **Annual review**

It has now been a year since we were elected as members to South Cambridgeshire District Council and the control of the council shifted from Conservative to Liberal Democrat. So what has the Liberal Democrat-led South Cambridgeshire District Council been up to in the last year?

### **Governance**

The Liberal Democrats won control of the Council in May 2018. We are now a 30-strong group out of 45 councillors (previously 14). There are 11 Conservatives, 2 Independents and 2 Labour. We appointed an Independent Councillor as Council Chair; for good governance, we appointed a Conservative as Chair of the important Scrutiny and Overview Committee. Our seven-strong cabinet is made up of four women and three men.

### **New Business Plan**

Following public consultation, our new Business Plan covering 2019 to 2024 was published which changes the direction of the Council. We are committed to providing homes that are truly affordable for everyone to live in; to help local businesses to grow; to be green to our core; and to put customers at the centre of everything we do as a modern and caring council. Check out the new Business Plan at: [www.scambs.gov.uk/businessplan](http://www.scambs.gov.uk/businessplan)

### **Re-organising the Council**

Studies of other district councils showed South Cambridgeshire had fallen behind in the use of new technology and working practices essential to run a modern council. A review of the council recommended what would need to change to improve business delivery (focussing on business improvement, not cost-cutting).

### **Medium Term Financial Strategy**

Over the first year, we had to work with the budget set by the previous Conservative-led administration. The council recently approved the budget for 2019–20. This sets the priorities for the Liberal Democrat administration. The council no longer receives central government grants and the amount by which the Council can raise Council Tax has also been capped by the Government. The five-year financial plan has been altered to deliver more income from investments and commercialisation (with the aim of having 25% of £20 million income coming from these sources by 2024). The inherited budget shortfall of £0.5 million has already been turned into a £1 million surplus, which has gone into the General Reserve to help prepare for future uncertainties.

## **Housing**

One of administrations' priorities is the provision of more council houses and a resolve to meet agreed targets for affordable housing in new developments. We aim to build 70 new council houses per year (with even more where possible). So far in 2019, we have completed 28 new homes, adding those plus six purchased council houses to our stock. We also completed 13 shared ownership houses for sale in the last year. A new strategy for housing in South Cambridgeshire was adopted to deliver homes that are affordable, not just to buy but to live in – in addition to delivering new homes, in the right place and at the right price, we will strive to keep utility bills in these properties low by ensuring they are as energy efficient and water efficient as they can be. We will also strive to build close to places of employment to encourage walking and cycling to work as well as using public transport.

## **New Investment Strategy**

Our new investment strategy will ensure council taxpayers get the best return for the Council's financial reserves. The previous administration did not have an investment strategy against which to judge commercial opportunities to ensure they are sound but one is now in place. Cambridge Ice Rink is now close to being completed. Located off Newmarket Road on the edge of Cambridge but in South Cambs district, last autumn the council approved an additional loan to ensure the delivery of this high-quality community sporting venue that will benefit the health and wellbeing of residents. The ice pad will meet the requirements of the International Ice Hockey Federation, allowing visiting teams from around the world to play ice hockey there. South Cambs Council Tax payers will benefit from returns on the investment.

We moved quickly to put PV solar panels on the roof of Waterbeach refuse depot to obtain the Government's feed-in tariff and purchased the lease of an office block strategically placed in Cambridge Science Park, which is delivering nearly 6% net yield on a £13 million investment. We refocused the attention of Ermine Street (the Council's trading company to let homes on open market) on South Cambridgeshire and the employment catchment of the Greater Cambridge sub-region to deliver properties not supplied by current market conditions, such as rented homes for single people.

## **Better Pay to Attract and Retain Staff**

There is a relatively high number of unfilled posts within the Council, which affects customer service. Recruitment has not been helped by a squeeze on staff pay put in place by the previous administration, putting us at a disadvantage against neighbouring councils as well as the Greater Cambridge labour market. We increased pay by 3% over the past three months, while ensuring no South Cambridgeshire District Council employee earns less than real living wage. We are also considering improved non-pay employment packages (apprenticeship schemes; negotiating discounts for staff, e.g. on public transport).

The Council has become a Disability Confident employer and an officially recognised disabled friendly employer. We have agreed better maternity leave rates for staff who have premature babies. We are starting regular staff surveys to gauge employee satisfaction and to encourage ideas to improve the working environment.

## **Customer Service**

The administration has set a target of improving complaint-handling by 10%. We hope this will be exceeded. The 'mysouthcambs' customer portal is being rolled out, offering our customers the means to access Council services 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Although digitising Council services such as 'mysouthcambs' will lead to lower footfall at the Council offices, we have not forgotten customers who do not have access to, or cannot use, the internet and prefer to speak to our officers – the visitor experience at Cambourne offices will therefore be improved.

## **Shared Services**

Around 40% of the Council's revenue and 52% of its services are delivered by Shared Services in cooperation with other councils. It is apparent that when they were set up under the previous administration, insufficient attention was paid to details of governance and accountability. We are working with partners now to rectify this.

### **'Green to our core'**

The administration has pledged to become a zero-carbon district by 2050. A working group of members and officers is preparing a high-level business case for a set of energy conservation measures such as EV charging points and solar panels over our car park and on our waste depot. We intend that our Cambourne offices will be a showcase for a Zero Carbon Council and an exemplar to our residents.

### **A council with a heart**

The administration is determined to find homes in our district for five refugee families fleeing warfare in the Middle East. The Home Office previously asked the Council to help with the rehoming of refugees and two years ago the then minority Liberal Democrat group put a motion to the Council proposing this but it was voted down by the majority Conservative group. The current Home Office scheme runs until December 2019 and we hope to be able to provide homes for these five families by then.

### **Council grants**

The committee that administers Council grants has been refocussed to make it more responsive to a range of needs and interests across the district. We put more money into the mobile warden scheme across the district this year. Another increase has been promised next year. We initiated a piece of work to look at extending the scheme across the whole district and commissioned a similar piece of work on community transport.

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