
County Councillor Report

Cllr Michael Atkins, Hardwick Division

Annual Report April 2023

Council composition

The composition of the Council has changed following: the sad death of Cllr Derek Giles; Cllr Doug Dew changing parties; and the resignations of Cllrs Cox Condron and D. Schumann. Updated numbers are as follows:

- Conservatives 26
- Liberal Democrat 22
- Labour 8
- Independents 3

By-elections will be held on May 4th for the two vacant seats.

During this time I have served as a substitute member of the Children and Young People committee, and will take up a new role in April as vice-chair of that committee. I have also represented the council on the Combined Authority's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, and on the Fire Authority.

Council Finances

The high rates of inflation in the last year, and the turmoil of the Liz Truss / Kwasi Kwarteng mini budget, increased the costs of providing council services and therefore widened the budget gap. The Council increased its portion of Council Tax in February, by 4.99% in total—2.99% for general services, and 2% for adult social care.

Adults and Health

National changes in health and care decision-making took place during the year, with the creation of local Integrated Care Systems spanning health and social care. Cambridgeshire & Peterborough created a joint Health & Wellbeing Board to replace the previous separate Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Boards.

This year has exposed the vulnerability of NHS services nationally and also locally. A BBC investigation last summer of dental provision in the UK revealed that no dental practice in Cambridgeshire was accepting new adult patients. Large numbers of patients are having to travel far afield, or pay money they cannot afford for private treatment.

Children and Young People

Funding of vouchers over the school holidays for families eligible for free school meals has continued, as has the Holiday Activity & Food programme for the children of eligible families. The cost of living crisis has seen many Cambridgeshire families reliant on such schemes.

The Council was praised by Ofsted for the work of senior leaders in Children's Services in responding to the challenge of Covid, and for maintaining continuity during structural change,

The council is still seeking residents who would like to make a difference to the life of a child or young person by becoming a foster carer.

In a piece of good news for Cambridgeshire, the council and the Government reached agreement on the 'safety valve' process to resolve the escalating deficit in the cost of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities education. The deficit was expected to grow to over £90m by 2025/26 if left unchecked, and the council was not permitted to divert funding from other sources to fill the gap. Cambridgeshire has been awarded £49m which will be used to create 463 new special school places, with a further £11.3m in capital funding to support new SEND provision on mainstream school sites. Cambridgeshire has historically received less funding per child for education than other areas.

Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion

COSMIC (Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion Committee) has continued to oversee 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 are struggling financially at the moment. COSMIC agreed to use some of the money from the fund to give a 'payment holiday' to pensioners in arrears with their water bills.

A Warm Hubs programme over the winter was funded by the NHS and administered by Cambridgeshire ACRE with fantastic support from local parishes. I was pleased to visit the Comberton hub alongside other district councillors and the South Cambridgeshire CEO last winter.

A review of the mobile library service resulted in a number of improvements, including more stops, more fuel-efficient routes, and local storage of vehicles. Cambridgeshire's Library@home volunteers were one of three voluntary organisations in the county to be given the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service—the highest award a local voluntary group can receive in the UK.

The Government is introducing a requirement for photographic ID for voters at elections. This starts with the elections in May, and will cost up to £180m over ten years, despite cases of voter identity fraud at polling stations being almost non-existent. The County Council is working with the Districts (who administer elections) to provide support.

Environment

The Council awarded the first spending from its Just Transition fund, including £2m for a business case for the first phase of the Council's plan for Cambridgeshire to reach Net Zero carbon by 2045. £2m was also awarded for flood work and nature restoration.

The County Council is working with district councils on energy retrofits in homes with poor energy efficiency.

The waste disposal contract with Thalia (formerly Amey) at Waterbeach has taken considerable amounts of council time. In addition to the odour emission works required by the Environment Agency, the new year saw new enforcement by the Environment Agency of rules on 'persistent organic pollutants in waste upholstered domestic seating'. This led to a week of the council being unable to accept unwanted sofas, futons, gaming chairs, upholstered dining seats, and other similar items. These must now be incinerated not landfilled. In addition to this, discussions are also ongoing with Defra regarding proposals to introduce weekly food waste collections.

The first households in Swaffham Prior are now receiving renewable energy from the new energy centre. Interest in this project has been considerable. Other energy projects, including the new heat system at Comberton Village College, are continuing to progress. In conjunction with iChoosr the

council ran another round of Solar Together, the group buying scheme for homeowners wanting to invest in solar panels and battery storage.

The Examination into the planning application by Sunnica for the large solar farm between Burwell and Red Lodge began in autumn 2022.

Anglian Water and Cambridge Water announced in the autumn their preferred location for a new reservoir in the Fens, north of Chatteris, to come onstream in the late 2030s. A planning application will come in due course and progress through a number of stages. It will be a decision for the Secretary of State through the Planning Inspectorate, as with other major infrastructure schemes.

The council has published an interim Tree Strategy, which it will revise once it has baseline information about what trees the council has, where they are, and how the council can expand and improve its tree assets.

We agreed a motion to the Full Council calling for managed divestment by the council's Pension Fund from fossil fuels.

The county council plans to fit street lighting with energy-efficient LEDs. The council spends £3.3m a year on energy for street lights, and this sum will pay back in under six years.

Transport and Highways

The condition of Cambridgeshire's roads and pavements remains a serious challenge. This situation has been building for many years in which the council's approach was one of 'managed decline'. However, recent extreme weather has speeded up that decline very significantly. The peaty soil under the road surface has shrunk in hot dry weather, and expanded in wet weather, causing the surface to crater and split. Adding more tarmac to level the surface simply increases the weight and makes matters worse. The severity and extent of the problem is far beyond the maintenance budget of the council, so simply 'freeing up some money' is not an option. The council has been actively engaging with the Department for Transport to seek their support and funding.

The freezing spell over winter caused many road and pavement surface defects, and failure of pothole repairs. Because of the widespread extent, many were treated with temporary repairs which suffered in the further temperature fluctuations. Residents should continue to log potholes on the reportit website, and our local highways team are working hard to assess these and prioritise for treatment. The council now has three 'dragon patchers' (all-in-one pothole machines) working round the clock and further reviews will hopefully improve the quality of repairs carried out by our contractors and the level of service provided.

The council used a data interpretation and modelling tool to identify a 'Safe and Dry' programme of 115 locations where work was needed to improve flood resilience, and work began on the first fifty of these locations. The council is also undertaking a two-year programme to clean and plot all gullies and surface drainage features to improve highways drainage management into the future.

The new funding pot for 20mph schemes has attracted a large amount of interest and I am expecting bids to be submitted from several of our parishes.

In September 2022 Stagecoach gave six weeks' notice of its intention to withdraw from a large number of bus routes. The Combined Authority pulled together a tender process at very short notice, and was able to find new providers for most of those routes, though there have been changes in frequency and extent of several of them. Additional funding was diverted to support these routes, and the Mayor has decided to levy a precept which will be added to the council tax to ensure the stability of these services for a further year.

Major Infrastructure (inc. GCP)

STZ: In autumn the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) consulted on its proposals for improved bus provision and active travel in the Cambridge area, which it proposed to fund through a charge for driving in a 'Sustainable Travel Zone' between 7:00AM and 7:00PM on weekdays. The results of the consultation will be published later this year. I am particularly keen to see the results and understand how our widely-held desire for better bus services can be best brought about.

C2C: The Council has approved the submission of a Transport and Works Act order to the Secretary of State for this scheme. This followed extensive debate in the chamber, including contributions from members of the public and parish councils. I'm very grateful to everyone who made the trip to Alconbury to make their voices heard. I supported an amendment to delay approval of the scheme to enable a comparison between it and the CPPF on-road route, but sadly this was not supported by a majority of councillors. I subsequently supported the progression of the scheme to this next stage. My speeches explaining my decisions are available on my facebook page (below), and the debate as a whole can be watched on youtube at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwbAi8Q9e5Q> from around the 32m mark. We expect that the secretary of state will hold a public inquiry into the scheme before making their decision. If you wish to show your support for the on-road option, you can get in touch with Cambridge Past Present and Future (CPPF) who are spearheading this work via <https://www.cambridgeppf.org/appeal/save-the-coton-green-corridor>

Progress continues to be made on the Greenways cycle schemes, including an improved surface on the M11 bridge part of the Comberton scheme. I am expecting accelerated delivery of these over the next two years, subject to resolving remaining concerns e.g. in Grantchester.

The whole year has passed without any further substantive details about the East-West Rail scheme, although the Westminster government has recommitted to the delivery of this project. An announcement on the final route is expected in May.

Contact Details

Councillors and residents are welcome to contact me on any issue which is concerning them:

<p>Cllr Michael I. Atkins matkinslibdem@gmail.com https://www.facebook.com/cllrmichaelatkins 07968 264637</p>
