

## **Annual District report to Parish Council 2025**

I have served as a District Councillor since 2015, initially representing Fulbourn and, since 2018, the Fen Ditton and Fulbourn ward. This ward covers eight villages: Fen Ditton, Fulbourn, Great Wilbraham, Horningsea, Little Wilbraham, Six Mile Bottom, Stow cum Quy, and Teversham.

At South Cambridgeshire District Council, I sit as an Opposition Councillor and currently serve as Chair of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee.

I continue to support residents on a wide range of local issues, including housing, planning (both major developments and smaller applications), road safety, flooding, youth services, benefits, and local maintenance. I attend Parish Council meetings across all eight villages and regularly take part in community events, such as Patient Participation Group meetings, library coffee mornings, village markets, litter picks, and resident-led group discussions on local concerns.

Each month, I produce a report highlighting new consultations, grant opportunities, and other useful information for residents and Parish Councillors. These reports are available to any resident upon request.

This past year has been another controversial one at the District Council. The ongoing implementation of the Council's "Four Day Week" remains a point of significant debate. Although the official trial ended in March 2024, staff continue to work four days a week while being paid for 37 hours (5 days)—a move that has not yet been formally approved by all councillors. Meanwhile, remote working has become so widespread that the Council offices are often nearly empty.

In its latest budget, the Council has allocated £3,211,000 for management, analysis, performance, and transformation activities. While the Council has multiple income streams, it plans to raise £12.2 million from Council Tax in 2025–26. This means more than a quarter of the money collected from residents will go toward these internal functions.

At the same time, the Government has announced major reforms to local government structures in England. These include the potential abolition of District Councils, with the goal of creating new unitary authorities that combine both district and county functions and serve populations of at least 500,000. If this goes ahead, much of the current spending on internal restructuring and analysis at South Cambridgeshire may end up having been wasted.

## Finance and Budget

The council held its budget meeting on 25 February, where the opposition scrutinised the administration's budget proposals for 2025/26 and proposed an alternative budget. It included proposals to bolster planning enforcement, environmental crime and tackling fraud, amongst other things.

In the alternative budget, the opposition called for a referendum on the 4-day week. In over two years of this 5 days' pay for 4 days' work scheme, residents have paid for over 104 extra days' holiday for council staff. The 4-day week consultation was open until Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> March. However, the consultation failed to ask if residents are happy with paying their council not to work. This is why the opposition called for a referendum – to finally give residents a say. As an opposition, we were disappointed but not surprised that the administration rejected our calls for a referendum.

In scrutinising the administration's budget plans, the opposition opposed proposals to increase Council Tax by the legal maximum amount of £5.09 for a Band D household because we, the opposition group, do not feel it is right to raise taxes whilst residents must continue to pay for council staff not to work. The group opposed the 2.7% increase in affordable rent and the 4% increase in shared ownership rents for the same reason. How is it right that residents are being asked to dip into their pockets more and more, when council staff are only working 32 hours but being paid for 37 hours?

We expressed our concern at the £46 million increase in borrowing when interest rates – the cost of borrowing – remain incredibly high. Additionally, by our calculations, the administration's Transformation programme has cost over £10 million, yet only saved £1.7 million.

The things in the budget meeting that we did support were the Localised Council Tax Support Scheme to ensure there is support for those who are struggling. We supported the Housing capital budget which looks to increase the number of houses owned by the council. We were pleased to see indications that, while our alternative budget was voted down, it looks as if our proposals around fraud and envirocrime may be taken forward.

Following a question asked at the Scrutiny and Overview Committee, the following figures have been provided for the upcoming year's budget for management and 'transformation' related activities:

Corporate Management	£737,000	CEO salary, subscriptions, Annual Accounts + audit, peer review
Data Team	£188,000	Support, co-ordination and implementation of

		data strategy initiatives
Policy and Performance	£241,000	Plan production and monitoring, KPIs, surveys and consultations
Central Support Services	£122,000	Central expenses including printing and postage
Digital Transformation	£804,000	*
Transformation	£1,119,000	**
<b>Total</b>	<b>£3,211,000</b>	

\* "This service specifically deals with the move to enable residents to interact with the Council using the online portal on a 24/7 basis. Digital transformation aims to create and improve services for its local individuals and communities, by utilising technology and improving processes."

\*\* "The costs of staffing and related items deal with service reviews and efficiencies. The transformation team offers tools, resources, and support to services at every stage of the transformation activity to fundamentally change systems and processes to achieve measurable improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, and resident satisfaction in a modern society."

## Housing

The District Council owns and maintains around 5,700 council houses. There are a further 6,100 council houses or houses managed by registered social housing providers in Cambridge City. Last year, the two councils adopted a Greater Cambridgeshire Housing Strategy for 2024 to 2029. This focuses on addressing demographic changes, tackling homelessness, and supporting first-time buyers through initiatives like First Homes.

South Cambridgeshire District Council has recently carried out a stock condition survey which will enable the council to undertake a costed 5,10 & 15 year plan in terms of prioritising works. To date, the council has fitted a number of solar panels to its homes as well as ongoing insulation works and is committed to bringing all council houses up to a minimum Energy Performance Certificate rating of Band C by 2030. The councils will be implementing requirements arising from the new Social Housing (Regulation) Act and the new regulatory consumer standards that came into force in April 2024.

People wishing to rent council homes can apply through the Home-Link website [www.home-link.org.uk](http://www.home-link.org.uk), the choice-based lettings scheme for all council and housing association homes in Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk. Other types of properties such as extra care and equity share properties may also be advertised there. Decisions are made impartially by officers using objective criteria, and

councillors can provide advice but can't influence a decision in favour of any applicant.

Last year's annual report to tenants and leaseholders was published recently and has concerning for our tenants and leaseholders within South Cambridgeshire. In several areas, South Cambs District Council is bottom of the pile compared to other local authorities when it comes to the people for whom the services exist – our residents.

This report can be found on the council's website at

[www.scambs.gov.uk/housing/information-for-council-tenants/tenant-news-and-involvement/tenant-and-leaseholder-news](http://www.scambs.gov.uk/housing/information-for-council-tenants/tenant-news-and-involvement/tenant-and-leaseholder-news).

This news is particularly alarming, especially when you consider this report was compiled under the umbrella of a 4-day working week. To rank so low for resident feedback is disappointing.

### **Improving Complaint Handling**

Effective complaint handling is crucial for any organisation, particularly in public services like housing management. Recent survey results reveal that South Cambridgeshire's approach to managing complaints is falling behind compared to other organisations, with a satisfaction rate of just 29%. This puts the local authority among the lowest scorers, with the lowest satisfaction rate across other organisations being 28%.

### **Resident Involvement**

When it comes to whether the landlord listens to tenants' views, only 54% of residents were satisfied. Unfortunately, when compared to similar organisations, South Cambridgeshire ranks among the lowest in tenant satisfaction related to the landlord's responsiveness and follow-through on tenant feedback.

### **Planning**

SCDC oversees planning policies and development projects through the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2018, guiding growth until 2031. This plan ensures housing, commercial development, and infrastructure projects align with sustainability goals and community needs. The council collaborates with Cambridge City Council through the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service, managing planning applications and large-scale strategic developments. Key planning priorities include ensuring new developments incorporate public transport provisions, green spaces, and sustainable building practices.

The council has faced challenges in balancing housing expansion with the provision of amenities. Cambourne's situation has highlighted concerns regarding developers not delivering agreed-upon community infrastructure. In

Northstowe, the situation is even more difficult with the GP's surgery still many years away and not a single shop in operation within the development.

### Environment and Waste

SCDC is committed to environmental protection and sustainability. The council's Zero Carbon Action Plan aims to reduce carbon emissions, promote renewable energy, and enhance biodiversity across the district. Initiatives include tree planting schemes, sustainable drainage projects, and incentives for homeowners to improve energy efficiency. The council also enforces environmental regulations to reduce pollution and protect natural habitats.

SCDC has awarded over £360,000 to nine local organizations as part of its Net Zero Villages scheme. These funds support climate-friendly initiatives such as community solar panels, electric vehicle charging points, and energy efficiency improvements in public buildings. The council continues to monitor air quality and promote green infrastructure projects to enhance sustainability within new developments.

Waste collection SCDC operates a joint waste collection service with Cambridge City Council, ensuring efficient and sustainable waste management. Residents receive kerbside collection services for general waste, recycling, and garden waste. The council promotes recycling initiatives and provides guidance on waste reduction.

*Thank you for taking the time to read my report; if you have any questions or want to discuss any of the issues raised email me on [graham.cone@councillor.online](mailto:graham.cone@councillor.online) or ring 07595 361 285 (please leave a voicemail if I am unavailable) **Councillor Graham Cone***