

South Cambridgeshire District Council – Harston & Comberton Ward

Report to Barton Parish Council September 2019

July Full Council

The Council met twice in July.

At an extraordinary meeting on 4th July, the council approved the appointment of a new Chief Executive, Liz Watts. Ms Watts is the former East Herts Council Chief Executive and previously to that held several senior roles elsewhere in local Government. Prior to her work in the public sector, she worked with asylum seekers in London and as part of the post-war peace process in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where she was based in Sarajevo for eight years.

At the regular council meeting on 18th July, the council passed two motions. One motion aimed to double the area of rich wildlife habitats, tree cover and accessible green space in South Cambs laid out measures including the development of a mandatory biodiversity net gain policy and directing developers to use the Developing Nature Toolkit to use in planning new developments, as well as identifying areas for tree planting for carbon sequestration, flood management, air quality improvement and other environmental services.

The other motion, proposed by Ian, instructed the council to make representation to the Secretary of State for Education and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, calling for them to take action to reverse, in full, the real-terms cuts to per-pupil school budgets since 2015 – meaning schools in South Cambridgeshire would receive £3,837,946 additional funding in 2020 – and fix the historic underfunding of Cambridgeshire schools by putting in place genuinely fairer funding through the National Funding Formula. Though the District Council is not directly responsible for education, schools are an important part of the communities we represent and the funding pressure they are under is beginning to damage those communities.

Both motions were supported by the opposition.

Cambourne to Cambridge Decision Postponed

The Greater Cambridge Partnership was due to bring forward the final proposals for the Cambourne to Cambridge bus way in October, but this has been postponed to the December meeting as GCP officers attempt to address some of the gaps in the business case. We very much doubt they will achieve in 2 months what they have failed to prove in 4 years, but the delay does mean we will likely know the route of the East West Rail project before a decision is made. One proposal for the East West Rail route, supported by the district council, would see a route via Cambourne that potentially undermines the business case for the busway.

No drought yet

Within the Cambridge region we continue to experience lower than average levels of rainfall. This is now starting to generate concerns among the public, relating to levels within watercourses and the local environment.

We have seen a press release from Cambridge water which can be seen here:
<https://www.cambridge-water.co.uk/news/update-on-water-resources>

The leader of the council is also meeting with officers to see what role the District Council can play in the short term, and also develop a longer term strategy.

Cambridge Ice Rink

We now have a new ice rink in South Cambs. The company building this had quite a lot of money from the university but South Cambs Council was able to make them a pretty large loan when they overran their budget due to finding lots of unexploded bombs on the site (which is on the old military airfield run by Marshalls in Cambridge). We made the loan because we felt that this would be a significant attraction to the residents of South Cambs. Let us know what you think of it.

New Council Houses

The District Council bought 144 new Council houses last month (81 at Northstowe and 63 at Sawston) for £24m, which is great news. The money comes from the reward government gives us for building new market homes - new homes bonus - as well as the receipts we get from people using their council houses under the Right to Buy Scheme. We are aiming to build or acquire over 70 council houses each year and so far have exceeded our targets.

Local Authority Funding

The keenly awaited Spending Review has now been postponed by Government and so local authorities have to battle on for a further year with the inadequate amounts of money they have been struggling with since the advent of austerity. The expectation was that there would be a reallocation of business rates between Government, district and county councils with the aim of addressing the crisis in health and social care. What moving money from district to county councils fails to address is the need for more money for district councils to develop the work they do in preventing people becoming ill and a burden on social care through public health, high quality building standards, council housing and homelessness prevention - to name but a few.

The recent announcement means that the three-year Comprehensive Spending Review - which was due to be delivered in the autumn - will now be held in 2020. The Spending Review, which ordinarily sets Whitehall budgets for a three-year period, was due to cover the period 2020-2023, but will now not begin until April 2021.

There is currently no certainty of funding for local government beyond this financial year, though there are indications that Government will increase public spending and investment, with an expected review of funding for adult social care. Questions do, however, remain over areas which are potentially crucial for District Councils:

- The continuation of funding streams such as the New Homes Bonus;
- The impact of the Fair Funding Review on distribution of funding – with District Council's expected to be losers;
- The impact of the new business rates retention system and associated changes;
- The overall level of funding for the sector.

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