

South Cambs District Councillors' (SCDC) report – November 2023

More affordable houses

Contracts are about to be agreed on the supply of more affordable houses in Sawston. These are to be on the Tudor Meadows development off Babraham Road. The SCDC-commissioned properties will be alongside alms-houses commissioned by the John Huntingdon Charity, which will further extend the availability of affordable housing. A mix of properties is planned by the Council, comprising a combination of one and two bed units along with some larger three and four bed houses. 47 SCDC properties in total are on the way, with roughly half and half for affordable rent and shared ownership. These are, of course, in addition to the properties already released over the last year by SCDC and confirm the council's commitment to providing more affordable housing for residents.

Cost of Living Support

As we go into the winter it seems that inflation is gradually easing. However the rises over the past months have left prices high and still presenting difficulties to many. Against this backdrop it's perhaps surprising that, nationally, 25% of means-tested benefits go unclaimed. So, even if you don't think you are eligible to claim anything, it's worth taking a few minutes just to [check here](#).

South Cambridgeshire District Council is coordinating a programme of advice and support to help residents with the rising cost of living. The [page linked here](#) provides further information on the services and support available, including help with accessing support, as well as useful tips and advice.

Winter weather advice

Winter weather, with its impact on the most vulnerable, is almost upon us. Whilst extremes of frost and snow now seem to be more infrequent, even temperatures that appear to be mild (4°C–8°C) can have negative consequences, particularly for the most vulnerable.

The [Cold Weather Plan](#) for England aims to prevent the major avoidable effects on health during cold weather periods by raising awareness and sharing guidance to protect vulnerable people such as the elderly and those living in fuel poverty. This includes:

- heating the home, or the parts of it being used, to above 18°C
- staying warm by dressing in multiple thin layers,
- having regular hot meals and drinks
- moving around as this keeps the blood flowing around the body
- planning ahead and keeping in touch with the weather forecasts and cold weather alerts

It is also really important to look out for others. Everyone likely knows someone who might be vulnerable, and you can help out by checking they are managing. We also know that cold weather can mean some people become isolated, so it may be that a chat and a friendly face is all they need.

The autumn storms have reminded us that, being in a low-lying area, we have a risk of flooding. Many places not hitherto affected in this way were caught out during storm Babet and so it's worth giving some thought to this eventuality and making some preparations. The [Government flood risk service](#) gives a detailed map of the risk for Sawston, street by street.

SCDC has useful advice on the [flooding page of its website](#). There is a useful list of things residents can do in advance under the 'Be prepared for flooding' section. This includes the very sensible measure of signing-up for flood warnings.

There are a number of agencies and companies involved in flood management and it can be confusing to work out who deals with what. On the same SCDC website, there is a list that residents can refer to for help.

Local authorities do not *ordinarily* provide sandbags as it is the responsibility of residents to protect their own properties from flooding. However, SCDC will help vulnerable residents, such as the elderly who do not have friends, family or neighbours who can help them quickly in an emergency.

Four-day week

Since early 2023 SCDC has been trialing a four-day week for council employees. This was instituted because the council was experiencing difficulty recruiting, and retaining, staff. The current labour market, with very low unemployment, meant SCDC was finding it difficult to compete, in terms of pay and conditions, with the private sector. This resulted in the use of expensive agency staff to fill critical vacancies and maintain services. Since the trial was implemented in January, SCDC has been able to fill vacant posts and very significantly reduce spending on agency staff. Staff satisfaction levels have been high and sickness levels reduced, whilst service levels have been maintained.

Interest in the trial has been high, not least from central government in Westminster. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has expressed concerns about implementing such a radical change to accepted local government working conditions. This is, perhaps, understandable because of the potential wider implications across local government and, possibly, other areas of public service. SCDC has accordingly been served with a "Best Value Notice" and is required to provide very detailed weekly data to the government. SCDC is confident that this additional data will serve to underline the positive effects of a four-day working week, for both residents and staff, and looks forward to presenting the outcomes of its year-long trial in due course.

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