



Annual Report 2023-2024  
from Sawston Ward Liberal Democrat District Councillors  
**LIBBY EARLE** and **BRIAN MILNES**

**Council created in local government reorganisation 50 years ago**

District Councils were created 50 years ago this year, in an overhaul of local government. Here, the Rural District Councils of South Cambridgeshire and Chesterton were merged into one.

A celebration event was held recently at South Cambs Hall where some of our longest serving staff and former Councillors including David Bard and Kevin Cuffley from Sawston were in attendance.

**Four day week**

The Council's trial of an innovative 4 day working week is now being evaluated.

Although the Government has asked Councils to innovate and conduct transformation exercises, it has expressed a resistance to this form of innovation. Perversely it is threatening some form of vague financial penalty for a programme that has seen clear financial benefits.

The four-day week has seen long hard to fill roles been appointed, better staff retention rates and much reported improvement in well-being. Delivery of services has been widely maintained or even improved. This is reflected in similar trials in commercial organisations where many trials have been made permanent.

As of writing, we are awaiting the conclusion of a Government *Best Value Notice*, where we have provided copious amounts of data that support the assertions above.

**Civil Parking Enforcement**

Sawston residents and visitors may have seen the results of the introduction of Civil Parking operators, having taken over the previous powers of the Police, who had abandoned that part of their responsibilities.

This has resulted in many tickets being issued, particularly in the vicinity of the Post Office, Mill Lane and other places where inconsiderate parking abounds. Adherence to Yellow line restrictions has improved though the continued issuance of Parking Fixed Penalty Notices suggests not everyone has "got the message".

This new enforcement scheme is across the entire District, and has been financially supported by the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP).

## **Minister Gove's "Case for Cambridge"**

In July 2023, Michael Gove announced an idea of trebling the size of Greater Cambridge (the City and South Cambridgeshire) by increasing local housing (in a yet-to-be-determined area) by 250,000 (!) homes by 2040! All while re-classifying the local Green Belt.

The background to this is the Government has a heavy reliance on the economic fortunes of this area. This being a key part of the Treasury's "Golden Triangle" of wealth generation: Oxford > London < Cambridge. That importance will continue beyond a change in national Government.

In the meantime, the Local Planning Authorities (City and South Cambs) are part way through devising their next local plan which was aiming at a more modest 50,000 homes by 2041. This is compromised by many constraints, chief of which is water availability, which we have alert to, for many years.

There is no obvious way that Gove's desire to set up a Development Corporation to manage his (now scaled back) plans (150,000 / 2050) can work without the involvement of our revamped and award-winning planning department. But there is currently no offer to include them. So much for devolved government!

## **Finances in good order**

In marked contrast to many Local Authorities, South Cambridgeshire's finances are in good health. And we have now caught up with producing reports finally resolving a problem inherited in 2018 when the new Lib Dem administration discovered a stream of issues, only now finally resolved.

Six years ago, we embarked on a property purchase programme, now curtailed by the Government, but which created a substantial portfolio of high-demand commercial properties that has produced a substantial income stream, which has given us a buffer against the ever-decreasing financial settlement from central Government.

The District Council's immediate finances are secure, but we still need to continue to increase our efficiency through continuous improvements and transformation plans. We maintain a Council Tax precept in the lowest cost quartile of Districts across the country.

## **Green to the core**

Whatever your beliefs about the cause of climate change, there is no denying the repetitive nature of record high temperatures and the increasing frequency and severity of exceptional weather events. Both last October and this February were the warmest and wettest on record.

At the same time as worrying about the depletion of our precious aquifers on which we rely, we are struggling to get rid of the rainfall accruing in the region and pump it out into the Wash. A new Fens reservoir is in the planning, but is not likely to come on line until around 2035. What a pity the water companies didn't invest in the infrastructure after privatisation. (There have been no substantive reservoirs built since 1989.)

We are pleased to be walking our environmental talk. Upgrading our housing stock, ever-increasing at around 100 new homes per year, and building new affordable housing to Passivhaus standards. South Cambs Hall has been overhauled with new glazing units, ground-source heat pumps and Solar panels in our car-park (with Electric Vehicle Charging Points). Over the last five years we have also given over £½m in Zero Carbon community grants, and this year's scheme is now open.

Best Wishes, *Brian* and *Libby*