

## **Melbourn Parish Council November 2020 - District and County Councillor Report**

### **Local:**

**Drains:** As previously reported, County Council is no longer doing 'routine gulley maintenance' – i.e. not clearing drains on a regular scheduled basis. That this is the case is a matter of deep concern: our drains, roads, pavements and other elements of highways infrastructure are in a state of 'managed decline' with nowhere near the funds needed to bring them up to an acceptable standard. This year an already stretched workforce has been further challenged by the secondment of a number of staff to Covid response. The upshot is a system that's not working properly. Susan is working with officers to take forward parish council concerns and suggestions. Sadly the financial situation is not expected to improve (see below).

Thanks to everyone who's been reporting faults on the County website, which is important to do for the sake of establishing a public record.

<https://highwaysreporting.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/>

### **Path to Meldreth Station**

Susan and Jose are working with County and District Council officers and Govia Thameslink Railway now that the Melbourn Science Park S106 contribution has been activated. This will be a challenging but important project for a much-needed improved access to Meldreth Station, for a widened path and ramp to the London platform.

### **Restricted access roads in Melbourn**

At long last we've received some feedback from County Highways and hope to bring some initial information to the Futures Group working party shortly.

### **'Nottingham Knockers'**

We recently received reports that 'Nottingham Knockers' have been operating in different areas of the county. Nottingham Knockers are traders who sell items from a bag on the doorstep, typically cleaning products such as dusters, sprays etc. They usually tell a story that they are former prisoners who are rehabilitating themselves and getting back into work in order to appeal to residents' emotions and get them to purchase their wares.

Items are usually overpriced and often just shy of ten pounds each so that if anyone does agree to buy, they have to find a note to pay. This helps criminals to identify addresses where cash may be kept in the house and therefore prime targets for future distraction burglaries and other crimes. Please spread the word about this to any vulnerable people you may know and please remind them that it is quite acceptable not to answer the door to cold callers.

### **Cambs County Council**

#### **First Budget Thoughts**

A lengthy and fractious meeting of the County Council's General Purposes Committee last month considered the development of the Council's budget for next year. The prospects are not good. Even if the battle against COVID goes well, the Council will need to find savings of £40M in the financial year starting next April. If COVID goes badly then the savings needed could be over £82M.

It is unlikely that the Government will come to the rescue with £82M. And unless there is more cash coming Cambridgeshire's way, the options available to the Council will mainly be 'efficiency savings', cuts to services, increased fees and charges, commercial investments, and council tax.

(Commercial investments are not working so well at the moment - the money put into buying student accommodation in Cambridge and leisure facilities in Wisbech isn't making great returns in a pandemic.)

Lines are being drawn ready for the political arguments that will last through to February's budget meeting and beyond. The predictions we're been given so far assume that councillors running the council will go for an increase of two per cent in council tax for adult social care (a service facing huge increases in need), but zero council tax increase for general services.

We don't yet know what maximum council tax increase the Government will allow this coming year. In the past few years, councils have been allowed to set rises of around two or three per cent without having to conduct a ruinously expensive referendum - and the Government generally assumes councils will do that. Assuming the maximum this coming year is of a similar level, it might be considered sensible to start building that figure into the calculations. (If the Council were to try to bridge the whole of a £40M funding gap by way of council tax increases, the rise would have to be about 15 per cent, and absolutely nobody is suggesting that.)

Administration councillors are talking about council tax rises being their last resort after every other option. The opposition view is that while nobody relishes higher council taxes, cutting services and increasing charges will affect the most vulnerable population the most, and assuming an increase in council tax of a couple of per cent at this stage would help bridge that gap (albeit only partly in the scheme of the financial problems unfolding). Opposition councillors suggested, not unreasonably, that the Council considers raising council tax as one of the ways to address it.

The administration has been vocal in recent years about not raising council tax, but at the same time squeezing budgets. The Council is now approaching Government to ask for more financial support. Government will want to see the Council doing all it can to bridge its own gap - and appearing to resolutely stand against raising council tax at all probably won't persuade the Government of the urgency of the Council's case.

The Council has been asking the Government for 'fair funding' for many years with little to show for it, and there's no reason to assume they will have any better luck this year when COVID has already devastated the economy, and Brexit in a couple of months' time will compound the situation.

### **What does my Council Tax buy?**

Councillors often get asked "What does my Council Tax buy?" You may be aware that when a child comes into care, the County Council becomes that child's Corporate Parent. This means we have the collective responsibility as a Council, ie elected members, employees and partner agencies, for providing the best possible care and safeguarding for the children who are looked after by us until the age of 25.

Latest data shows we have 714 children in care for whom we are responsible. 74 of them are unaccompanied children seeking asylum and 229 are in long term placements or foster homes. Sadly long-term placements and foster home care is declining – mostly due to Covid – and so if you are interested in fostering do please get in touch! 65 are disabled and 77% come from a white ethnic background. At any one time between 20 and 30 of these children are 'missing'. The good news is that the number of adoption orders granted is up by 15% and increasing.

The County Council's appeal for foster carers reads:

"The number of people who enquired about fostering in September and October has dipped, with the immediate need being for teenagers and brothers & sisters.

The myths surrounding the care of teenagers can often discourage people from fostering when in reality what they need are families who are empathetic, caring, resilient and open minded.

Around 154, 13-18-year-olds across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are in need of caring & supportive families.

During COVID-19, we are taking all the necessary steps during the fostering process to follow the government advice, for example, we can conduct initial visits virtually and have made arrangements to do so. If your application progresses then we will discuss the next stages with you which will include a face to face visit as part of the assessment process, this will adhere to the social distancing rules at all times.

People who believe they can make a positive difference are encouraged to contact both council's today. All carers receive training, 24-hour access to support, along with allowances and the assessment process normally takes between 4-6 months. You will need to be over 21 and have a spare bedroom in your home.

Cambridgeshire County Council encourage you to find out more about fostering, visit: [www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/fostering](http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/fostering) email [fostering@cambridgeshire.gov.uk](mailto:fostering@cambridgeshire.gov.uk) or call 0800 052 0078 or text FOSTERING to 60777."

### **Bus Services**

It will be no surprise that bus operators are really struggling during the pandemic. Passenger numbers have dropped even lower than earlier in the year, currently running at about 30% of pre-Covid numbers. Operator costs are running at 95% of pre-Covid levels which is obviously not sustainable and of course we are advised to avoid public transport unless we have no choice.

### **Solar Together Cambridgeshire**

The collective purchasing scheme for Cambridgeshire residents to invest in solar panels and/or battery storage, has got off to a great start, with nearly 6,000 households signing up – much higher than initially anticipated. The winning supplier is Greenscape Energy, with an average discount of 30% versus typical market pricing. The scheme is still accepting further registrations, so if you want to sign up, here is the link: <https://solartogether.co.uk/cambridgeshire/home#>

### **South Cambs District Council**

#### **Electric Bin Lorry**

SCDC is very pleased to finally be trailing a new electric bin lorry with a view to gradually exchanging the whole fleet of refuse vehicles as part of its work to become a zero carbon authority.

#### **South Cambs DC Planning Service**

We have been working very hard indeed to improve the new shared planning service which is joint between South Cambs and Cambridge City. Things are moving well in the right direction and the processes are getting quicker and more efficient. We now have ONE validation process – streamlined – for both authorities which has successfully conquered the historic backlog. The team are now working toward reaching the target of 5 days to validate an application.

### **New Business Grants**

Businesses premises forced to close as a result of CV restrictions are to be eligible for government grants of up to £3000 per month. To be eligible you have to be paying business rates but we are expecting further guidance on discretionary grants which we hope will be available to those businesses that are experiencing serious hardship or have had to close but do not meet the criteria of the main grant pot. All the latest information is on the website which is updated daily. You can also get regular updates by registering for our Open For Business Newsletter which will be updated every time significant new guidelines are issued. If you have any queries that are not dealt with on the website do not hesitate to email [openforbusiness@scambs.gov.uk](mailto:openforbusiness@scambs.gov.uk) to make contact with our specialist business support team. Any businesses who believe they are eligible can find information on how to apply, along with eligibility criteria, [via the Council's website](#).

### **Community Grants**

South Cambs DC has made further money available to help community groups remobilise to deal with the second lockdown. These are small amounts of money in the first case but if your community has special circumstances you can apply for additional funding to help you meet your community's specific needs.

### **Government's Planning White Paper**

The consultation on the government's Planning White Paper (PWP) closed earlier this month.

The PWP is thin on detail and ignores opportunities to address the inadequacies of the National Planning Policy Framework or the very damaging consequences of new permitted development rights. Nor does it pay heed to Government putting its own planning inspectorate in order which was partly responsible for the 4.5 years it took to approve the current South Cambs local plan resulting in 2 years of no five-year housing land supply and 4000 unplanned houses built with no financial contribution to the communities in which they were sited.

The Government loves to play to its audience and its 'Build Beautiful Commission' does just that. But if a national design standard to deliver 'beauty' results in houses with no reference to local, indigenous architecture then we have countrywide 'cookie cutter' developments. Moreover, there is little mention of standards, climate change, or homes that support health and wellbeing - all the things that really matter to people.

The last 15 years has seen a 50% decline in small and medium sized builders and developers and though they often build better, build quicker and build cheaper they will need help to purchase our very expensive land. If the government is not going to give them that help councils need to have the powers and resources to do so.

Additionally, the proposal that no affordable housing will be required for developments of less than 50 units will preclude any new affordable homes in many of our villages, depriving people of the choice to live where they want to live - often close to family, support networks or jobs.

Housing Minister Mr. Pincher was quite convinced that parish councils and residents would be so delighted that they were to play a full part in local plan formation that they would not mind that this would be the point at which their voices ceased to be heard. Once 'zones' are created development could go ahead. Our view is that the parish council and resident voice adds hugely to the evidence for and against development.

This White Paper appears to be a 'developers charter', removing democracy from planning, silencing local voices, and centralising decision making.

## **Police**

### **Policing Changes**

Cambridgeshire's Chief Constable has announced changes to policing in order to assist in saving £1.7 million in 2021/22. Included in the cuts are the reduction of PCSOs from 80 to 40, but with a single role profile and improved alignment to their team and they will cover all 28 neighbourhoods in the county to deal with the issues that matter most to the local community. Also going is the community safety team resulting in the reduction of six community safety officer posts and the closure of nine enquiry offices (NOT the police stations), with the implementation of a team of police officers to provide people in each local authority area with an appointment-based service to allow members of the public to make an appointment to speak to an officer.

Chief Constable Nick Dean said: "We have had to make some incredibly difficult decisions over the past 12 months when considering how we balance the needs of the community and the policing service we provide, with being able to manage within the budget we have – we simply could not continue with the existing neighbourhood policing model with the budget constraints we currently face, and are likely to have in the coming years.'

### **Volunteer Police Cadets**

The police are encouraging young people between 13 and 18 to join the Volunteer Police Cadets. The aim is to encourage the spirit of adventure and good citizenship to anyone wishing to support their community and gain an understanding of policing. It is not to recruit police officers for the future. If you are interested and can spare three or more hours per month, please contact [Cadets@cambs.pnn.police.UK](mailto:Cadets@cambs.pnn.police.UK)