

FULL COUNCIL

Five motions from councillors were debated at the Cambridgeshire County Council full council meeting on 12 December 2023. Four were passed, one was not.

1. Noting the crisis in adult social care caused by chronic Government underfunding to councils, and asking officers to be ready to take advantage of any future change in Government policies. (Passed)
2. Asking the council's Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion Committee to consider actions to ensure a more diverse council. (Passed)
3. Expressing concern at the lack of availability of NHS dentistry, and committing to take action to address the problem. (Passed)
4. Complaining of confusion about highways consultations, and wanting to consult all who could potentially be affected by changes to the highway. (Not passed)
5. Welcoming options for more flexible working, and committing to promote these within the council and among local employers. (Passed)

STRATEGY RESOURCES & PERFORMANCE

Joint statement on 'Cambridge 2040' announcement

The Rt Hon Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, unveiled updated plans for the Government's 'Cambridge 2040' vision on Tuesday 19 December 2023. These include 'northwards' of 150,000 new homes around Cambridge as part of a major new expansion of the city.

The leaders of Cambridge City Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council, Cambridgeshire County Council, and the Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, said:

Despite working hard to engage constructively with Government officials since the Secretary of State's initial Cambridge 2040 announcement in the summer, it's deeply disappointing that once again Government plans for Cambridge seem to be being negotiated through the press.

We note in the latest announcement that the number of new homes put forward by Rt Hon Michael Gove MP has come down from 250,000 to 150,000, but this is still substantially more than the over 50,000 homes we have identified as needed in the emerging Greater Cambridge Local Plan (to 2040)—a number which will already be incredibly challenging to bring forward. We are ambitious for high quality sustainable, green growth but can't stress enough how vital it is that Government supports us to tackle the issues that will otherwise act as roadblocks to sustainable growth.

We have written to the Secretary of State a number of times over the past month to stress the importance of committing to sustainable growth, and to reiterate the support that is needed to enable us to plan for the homes set out in the emerging Greater Cambridge Local Plan.

This includes prioritising sustainable public transport, community infrastructure such as schools and GPs, and water shortages in this region, which are putting our chalk streams under extreme pressure—an issue which the Greater Cambridge Planning Service warned in January 2023 could delay existing plans for housebuilding if not addressed by Government. We are still waiting for responses to these questions which would detail how Government proposes to support us in delivering a proposed 50,000 or so homes responsibly, let alone 150,000.

Clarity is also needed as to who is involved in the 'Cambridge Delivery Group', what it will do, and how it will be governed. Devolution works best when local politicians are empowered to lead and deliver sustainable development and we will continue to work hard to represent our residents and ensure that Cambridge and its surrounding villages grow in a sustainable and carefully planned way.

Since the initial announcement in summer 2023 about the Government's 'Cambridge 2040' plans, council leaders and officers have begun to explore the vision for Cambridge 2040 with Government officials.

Following a visit to Cambridge by the Secretary of State in November, leaders from Cambridgeshire County, Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire District councils, the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, the Greater Cambridge Partnership, and local business wrote to urge Government to make a number of commitments—including water supply and transport—necessary to support sustainable growth in and around Cambridge.

£368,000 to help council respond to major projects

A successful bid to Government means an additional £368,000 to help the council respond to proposals for major infrastructure in Cambridgeshire.

The money will help support the council with the administration of Development Consent Orders (DCO) for schemes like East West Rail, the A428 Black Cat to Caxton Gibbet upgrade, and the Fenland Reservoir, as well as other Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs). £268,000 will bring in extra technical and specialist resource, and a further £100,000 will enable work across all these types of projects.

Consultation begins on budget proposals

Consultation is to begin on the council's proposals for its 2024/5 budget, in what is being called 'the toughest year to set a balanced council budget'.

The Government's one-year Local Government Financial Settlement announced last month does not compensate for the levels of demand and inflation that the council is faced with, particularly in areas such as children's social care, home to school transport and provision for children and young people with special educational needs or disabilities. A fair funding review for local councils promised by the Government has never materialised. And all local authorities face significant financial uncertainties as a consequence, as I reported last month.

The council is looking to support vulnerable people and improve highways maintenance, while still seeking to bridge a remaining £2M gap—even with a proposed council tax rise of 4.99 % (2% for adult social care services, and 2.99 % for general services).

The Strategy, Resources & Performance Committee received and considered draft budget proposals at its meeting on Tuesday 19 December. The council's service committees will consider these at their various meetings in January. An online public survey has been launched and is open until Tuesday 16 January <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/budget-consultation-2024-5>

The Strategy, Resources & Performance Committee will make a final budget recommendation at its meeting on Tuesday 30 January for Full Council to debate on Tuesday 13 February.

The draft proposals have been shaped by views gathered in the council's first Quality of Life Survey conducted over the summer. They focus on sustaining social services, continuing to provide free school meal vouchers for eligible children during holidays, progressing the council's commitment to pay the real living wage to people providing adult social care, and prioritising highways and cycleways maintenance across the county.

Potential savings have been identified to help bridge the funding gap. These include:

- Moving to LED streetlights (£1M in energy savings each year)
- Rationalising office accommodation (£1.5M in the next three years)
- Reviewing the highest cost children's placement costs, and home to school transport routes

(more than £2M)

- Driving down the amount of bad debt (£0.5M)
- Reviewing income from permits and parking charges (Just under £1M)

While these measures are unwelcome, they are not on the same scale as some councils (for example neighbouring Suffolk County Council is slashing 100% of its arts funding, and making significant cuts to the social care budget). The system really isn't sustainable but we are managing nonetheless to maintain stability in exceptional circumstances.

ADULTS & HEALTH

Covid isn't over

Covid is far from over – and anyone reading this will probably know several people currently with it, or flu or respiratory syncytial virus (RSV). Our EU neighbours now seem to be able to purchase over-the-counter or online multi- tests which test for covid, flu, and RSV on a single test cassette. It's not clear why we can't have this but we have put a question to our Director of Public Health to understand what the hold-up is in making these available in the UK and look forward to the response.

Preventing falls

Falls and related injuries are a common and significant problem for older adults and a major public health issue. Falls are a major cause of disability and injury-related death in people aged 75 and over, and have a large impact on quality of life—and as our population ages, this will become even more of an issue.

Around one in three people over 65 years old and half of those over 80 experience a fall at least once a year. In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough in 2022/23, there were 2,699 emergency admissions due to falls and 1,015 admissions due to a hip fracture. The estimated combined total cost of these hospital admissions was £16.3M, an increase of over £1.9M on the previous year. These costs do not include wider health and social care costs such as primary care, ambulance, or adult social care costs.

Cambridgeshire County Council's Adults and Health Committee has endorsed a three-year Falls Prevention Strategy and detailed delivery plan, working with a multi-agency Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Falls Prevention Strategy Group.

The strategy includes a number of interventions that have been shown to be effective at preventing some falls and fractures, and its intended outcome is a reduction in the rate of hip fracture admissions, and an improvement to the quality of life of older adults who experience a fall or fracture.

COSMIC

Supermarket voucher scheme continues in Christmas holiday

The council's supermarket voucher scheme continued to operate in the Christmas school holiday for all eligible families in Cambridgeshire. The scheme will run until the February 2024 half term, using the Household Support Fund from the Department for Work & Pensions topped up with additional funding provided by the council.

Over 20,000 vouchers were claimed in the October half term alone. Over 70% of families said the vouchers had helped them cope with the rising cost of living. More than half said the scheme had reduced the need for them to seek other sources of support in the school holidays such as food banks.

Total spend in the October half term week was £317,000, with this expected to more than double to £660,000 in the two-week Christmas holiday. In addition to the holiday voucher scheme, there is further support available in response to the cost of living

Libraries offer a helping hand to stay connected this winter

A successful pilot scheme offering free mobile SIM cards to those unable to afford internet access is now available in eleven of Cambridgeshire's libraries, including Ely. Cambridgeshire Libraries have signed up to the National Databank, an initiative run by Good Things Foundation which provides free mobile SIM cards to anyone over the age of 18 who is on a low income. The SIM cards are donated to the National Databank by Virgin Media, O2, Vodafone and Three.

They are then supplied to members of the National Digital Inclusion Network, including the eleven Cambridgeshire libraries, to be passed on to those in need of data.

Life-saving defibrillators installed at thirteen council sites

Life-saving automated external defibrillators have been installed at thirteen county council offices for use by local communities as well as county council staff and visitors. The venues include Noble House in Ely, off Angel Drove. The council purchased the units, but all installations were carried out free of charge by the county council's maintenance contractor GSH as part of their commitment to support social value in Cambridgeshire.

ENVIRONMENT & GREEN INVESTMENT

Network Rail signs up to County Council biodiversity site

Network Rail is the first investor in the council's pioneering biodiversity and habitat restoration scheme at Lower Valley Farm in Fulbourn. Arable land is being transformed into a one-of-a-kind 345-acre biodiversity net gain site.

Council land there will be used to replace habitat lost due to construction of the new Cambridge South railway station at Cambridge Biomedical Campus. From January 2024, legislation comes into effect requiring new developments in England to not only provide for nature lost as part of works but to achieve a minimum biodiversity net gain of 10%. As part of the Cambridge South Infrastructure Enhancement scheme, Network Rail has purchased 65 biodiversity units at the Fulbourn site to create an environmental legacy that will complement their creation of Hobson's Park on the Campus.

The Lower Valley Biodiversity Site is part of the council's commitment to a greener Cambridgeshire and helps tackle the ongoing country-wide nature crisis. It also supports the council's aim to become a net zero county by 2045, five years ahead of national targets.

Change to access at Royston and Thriplow recycling centres

Cambridgeshire residents now need to apply for a digital permit to use Royston Household Recycling Centre in Hertfordshire. The change comes following the announcement last year that Hertfordshire County Council would be adopting a policy restricting access to non-residents at Hertfordshire's network of sixteen recycling centres.

However, the county council has reached an agreement with Hertfordshire County Council that enables continued cross-border access to Royston Household Recycling Centre for Cambridgeshire residents living close to the county boundary, whilst allowing Hertfordshire residents access to Thriplow Household Recycling Centre in South Cambridgeshire.

Resident-only policies are becoming increasingly common across the region and indeed the country, with many neighbouring counties having had this policy in place for some time.

Sunnica further delay

A decision on the Sunnica application for a large solar farm spanning East Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk has already been postponed from September to December. It has now been postponed again, to Thursday 7 March. This may mean no decision this side of a General Election.

HIGHWAYS & TRANSPORT

Electric vehicle charging

An estimated 10,000 public electric vehicle charge point sockets will be needed across Cambridgeshire by 2030, as motorists choose electric vehicles over more polluting petrol and diesel cars. The sale of new petrol and diesel cars is set to be banned by government from 2035.

Using up to £5M in Local Vehicle Infrastructure (LEVI) funding, the council is working with the Combined Authority on how to meet this need, with fewer than 500 public charge points currently installed. Officers will develop a plan informed by technical mapping and seek public engagement to find suitable charge point locations. They will report back to the Highways and Transport committee in March, prior to a decision by the Environment and Green Investment Committee later in 2024.

Civil parking enforcement starts in South Cambridgeshire

New Civil Parking Enforcement powers are now in effect across South Cambridgeshire following a decision by Government. Drivers are now far more likely to receive a fine for parking incorrectly where there are restrictions, such as on single or double yellow lines.

Meanwhile on the Combined Authority

Despite the Code of Conduct complaint against Mayor Nik Johnson having been resolved, the leaders of East Cambridgeshire and Fenland district councils are continuing to make accusations against the Mayor which are not based on any information which is in the public domain. It has been reported that Mayor Johnson is now initiating a Code of Conduct complaint against Cllr Anna Bailey over her behaviour in this matter. The broader issue is whether there is sufficient confidence in the new governance arrangements to give Government the grounds to reinstate funding, which will benefit the region. The signs are looking positive for this, and improvement efforts continue.

Cllr Edna Murphy
County Councillor for the Bar Hill division