
Report: County Councillor (Hardwick div.) District Councillor (Harston & Comberton)

Cllr Michael Atkins ANNUAL REPORT

County Council

Administration

The Liberal Democrats are now the largest group on the County Council, and together with the Labour and Independent groups form the administration.

For this year I have served as Vice-Chair of the Children and Young People's Committee.

Budget

The Council agreed a balanced budget for the 24/25 year, although this is becoming increasingly difficult for all county councils across the country (as featured recently in a Panorama episode). The budget nevertheless significantly increased funding for highways maintenance to improve the standard of roads and pavements, and Emergency planning due to the increased severity of flooding and other environmental risks. Most of the budget continues to be spent on our statutory duties of Children and Adult social care, and due to the demand and inflation pressures on these services had little choice but to increase council tax by the maximum allowable (3% general levy and 2% social care) as virtually all County and Unitary Authorities have.

Holiday vouchers and activities

The Council has continued its commitment to families in receipt of benefits or free school meals, particularly through supermarket vouchers and free activity camps during school holidays. We have also launched a new Social Care Academy called CARE which will train the next generation of social workers and apprentices to fully support families and children in need.

Quality of life

The Council ran a quality of life survey with over 5,000 responses. Most residents felt happy and safe, but over half of the young people who responded reported feelings of loneliness and issues with their mental health. This data will be vital in directing the Council's energy in the future.

Highways

The Council continued to introduce new 20mph zones where these are wanted by local residents. Alongside the larger schemes in towns such as Ely, villages including Harlton are also developing schemes, and I hope for more to come forward as part of the current round.

The state of the county's roads continued to deteriorate over a wet winter. In many cases it was necessary to provide only temporary repairs to potholes or poor surfaces due to the level of the problem. As noted above, for the coming year the budget for highways maintenance has been dramatically increased, which should enable more proactive and preventative work (such as resurfacing) to take place. Given the state of the overall network, the work this year should stop

things getting worse and bring about some improvements, but it will take many years of enhanced investment to reverse a decade long decline.

The Council reviewed its policy on weed removal, following residents' and councillors' concerns, and will resume cyclical spraying except where residents agree to manage weeds manually.

Civil parking enforcement was introduced in January 2024 across South Cambridgeshire and patrols are already taking place in identified hotspots in our villages.

Cambridge 2040/50

Meanwhile however the Government is progressing its plans for what it is calling Cambridge 2040, a huge intensification of development in and around Cambridge run by yet another layer of local government—an unelected organisation called the Cambridge Delivery Group. There are existing challenges to the carefully-thought out development proposals already put in place by the local councils in Greater Cambridge. The Environment Agency is objecting to some key developments on grounds of lack of water. The Government is proposing to get around this by introducing a system of 'water credits' and water offsetting. The location of 150,000 new houses proposed by the Government has not been confirmed.

District Council

Administration

The Liberal Democrats remain the largest group on the District Council with a majority of seats, and therefore form the administration.

For this year I have served as Chair of the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee

Budget

The district council remains on a very sound financial footing, thanks to sensible investments and strong business rate collections. It remains one of the lowest taxing authorities in the UK.

Nevertheless, the Government is planning to conduct a fair funding review in the near future which would likely remove significant income the authority. Because council tax rises are carefully limited, it is prudent for the council to make use of the rises available now to ensure that the council's funding is resilient to any changes imposed on us. We continue to offer up to 100% relief from council tax for those residents in the most need.

Growing local business and economies

The Business Support & Development Team has been continuing to support local businesses through the Visit South Cambs website, with an average of 1,874 monthly visitors in the year up to Dec 2023, alongside newsletters and webinars, and promotion of the new Green Business Impact Programme resulting in the first sign ups.

Continued support for markets and market traders is highlighted by the Council's annual Christmas Market at Cambourne with 72 traders, 5 food vans and 1,500 visitors. A number of other markets across the district are also supported.

Truly affordable housing

The Council owns and maintains around 5,600 council homes and has been working to increase the number by building or acquiring more than are sold through right to buy. For 2023/2024 around 46 new homes for rent or shared ownership were delivered, along with 66 homes for refugees, which will enter general stock when they are no longer needed for this purpose. The Council is also working with The Hill Group via the South Cambridgeshire Investment Partnership to deliver 256 new low-carbon homes in Cambourne, including 72 for affordable rent (built according to Passivhaus principles) and 30 for shared ownership.

For existing council housing, stock condition surveys have been completed to inform retrofit plans for the next 5, 10 and 15 years. In addition to ongoing work to improve properties and reduce bills for tenants, the council is currently using grant funding from the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund to bring 250 properties to EPC Band C

Green to our core

Efforts have continued to reduce the Council's emissions through works at South Cambs Hall, council home improvements, and work to reduce emissions from waste collection – the Council now has 3 electric refuse trucks and one more on order, 14 vehicles running on hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO), and preliminary works have been completed to deliver a solar panel array at Waterbeach in 2024/25 to allow the operation of more electric vehicles.

Efforts have also been made to improve biodiversity in the district. On the Council's estate, 35 trees have been planted across two sites and wildflower areas have been created on four sites. The 6 Free Trees scheme was continued, with participation from 46 Parish Councils and the Awarded Watercourse Team has delivered a project with the Wild Trout Trust to improve biodiversity in the river Shep and river Mel.

In terms of community engagement, the Council ran its first Climate Conference in November 2023. It was well attended by over 70 people from 10 parishes. It also awarded £125,000 of Zero Carbon Communities funding to 10 projects with the aim of either reducing carbon emissions or community engagement on climate and nature.

The 2024/25 budget includes significant investment in the council's recycling and waste collection service, funding for new staff to prosecute fly tippers and clear fly tipping incidents more effectively, and the expansion of the Zero Carbon Communities scheme.

A modern and caring council

Throughout 2023/24 the Council has continued to support 12 community hubs (including one at Comberton and one at Grantchester), sent out nearly 500 electric blankets in winter as part of the Council's cost-of-living support package, supported a Mobile Food hub that services 6 villages, and ran a winter advertising campaign to encourage people to claim support they are entitled to. The Council will continue to support asylum seekers and refugees, including those from Ukraine and has received £897,000 from government to support Ukrainian guests.

The Council's trial of the 4-day working week continues, where staff are expected to complete 100% of their duties by working more efficiently over four days, and in return keep their full-time pay. The Council introduced this scheme to make it more attractive for prospective employees, particularly in hard-to-fill roles in planning and waste, and to improve existing staff morale, wellbeing and retention. So far the data from the trial has been encouraging, both across existing staff, and our ability to fill posts permanently, saving over £400,000 per year from our agency staff bill.

The UK Government has, however, taken unusually close interest in the scheme, and threatened the Council with unspecified financial penalties if the scheme continues. This has unfortunately delayed our decision making on whether to make the scheme permanent. Once the financial penalties are clarified, we will engage residents in a consultation, and vote on whether to make the scheme permanent in full council.

Contact Details

Councillors and residents are welcome to contact me on any issue which is concerning them:

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