

Councillor Peter McDonald Duxford Division & Ward:
District Councillor for Parishes of Duxford, Hinxton, Ickleton, Babraham, Pampisford.
County Councillor also for Foxton, Fowlmere, Shepreth, Thriplow, Heydon, Chishills, Whittlesford

Parish Council Report March 2024

South Cambs District Council

Budget

The plans retain the Council as one of the lowest taxing authorities in the country, with a £5 per year increase for the average band D home, equivalent to a below inflation rise of around 3%.

In addition, a budget of £519,000 has been agreed as part of the Council's continued Digital Transformation work – which aims to make services even more accessible to residents in a way that works for them. This will fund the software and staffing costs needed to make it easier for customers to get the help they need.

The Council only retains around 7.6% of the Council Tax it collects, with the rest being passed on to other organisations who provide key services to the public.

With price inflation remaining at around double the Bank of England target of 2%, a £5 per year increase, or 3.1%, in Council Tax for the average band D home was agreed to ensure essential frontline services continue to be delivered effectively. The rise sees the average band D home charge for South Cambridgeshire District Council become £170.31 per year. This is an increase of around 10p per week. This rise continues to maintain the Council's position in the lowest 25% of taxing District Councils in the country.

To deliver 75 new Council homes for rent and shared ownership – the Council has around 5,600 homes for rent.

Over £1million to be spent on improving the insulation and heating for existing Council housing.

More than £500,000 to be spent on services to prevent homelessness.

To maintain the Council's housing stock to a high standard, and to build more Council houses, Council rents are having to raise by 7.7%. The Council cannot subsidise its housing from Council Tax income.

'Cambridge 2040' update

We expect an announcement this week.

Support for Ukraine update

Grants totalling more than £13,000 have been awarded for activities to help Ukraine guests settle into South Cambridgeshire and forge friendships. In addition, more than £102,000 has been given to support English tuition to help Ukrainian guests develop communication skills.

The funding is part of a wider £500,000 package of support provided by South Cambridgeshire District Council since the Homes for Ukraine scheme began, including helping guests achieve independent accommodation, a furniture package scheme and a

Contact Details: E mail: cllr.mcdonald@scambs.gov.uk or peter.mcdonald@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Telephone 07912 669092

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recently-launched landlord incentive scheme. Funding comes from the Government tariff received for every guest who arrives in the area.

Four-day working week update

A new report has been published on the four-day working week trial that began in January 2023, detailing the current arrangements, the cost savings achieved so far, and recommendations for the end of the current trial period in March 2024. The Council has been shortlisted as a finalist in the iESE Public Sector Transformation Awards and for a Local Government Chronicle (LGC) Innovation award, both for the four-day week trial. So far, the trial has shown significant success, with most of the Council's performance indicators demonstrating sustained high standards or gradual improvement.

In the planning service there have been significant improvements during the trial in the average time to determine planning applications. The main purpose of the trial was to improve recruitment and retention, reducing the high cost of employing temporary staff for positions that should have been filled permanently, with the additional benefit of bringing in more dedicated permanent staff. Annual cost savings of c.£300k have been achieved, helping to avoid cuts in the face of below-inflation Council Tax rises and reduced funding from central government. The new four-day bin collection schedule will mean there is no disruption to our bin collections over Easter. The Costs and Savings are below

-	Savings £	Costs £
Reduced agency expenditure	483,000	-
Waste service revenue related to extra rounds*	-	132,000
Discontinuation of recruitment and retention incentives Waste Service	53,000	-
Revenue contribution to two extra vehicles	-	75,000
Additional cleaning staff	-	13,000
Total saving/cost	536,000	220,000
Net saving	316,000	-

* Includes staffing and maintenance for two vehicles and two hours flat pay per week for drivers.

<https://scams.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s134549/Appendix%20A%20Four-day%20week%20update.pdf>

County Council Report

Secondary School Places

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A greater percentage of Cambridgeshire students will be going to their first choice secondary school this September. A total of 87.9 per cent have been offered a place at their first choice school – up from 87.1 per cent last year.

The proportion offered a place at their first, second or third preference school has also risen – from 95.4 per cent in 2023 to 95.8 per cent this year.

The total number of places offered this year was fewer than last – 7,220 compared with 7,413.

Year 6 students hear this week (1 March) which secondary school has offered them a place for September 2024.

Half Term Vouchers

More than 23,000 supermarket vouchers were distributed during the February half term to eligible families in Cambridgeshire.

Cambridgeshire County Council has continued to run the existing scheme using the Household Support Fund from the Department for Work and Pensions.

Eligible families were automatically sent a £15 voucher for the week via email or text at the beginning of the half term holiday, with the voucher being valid at a choice of 11 supermarkets. A total of 23,288 were distributed.

The current round of Government funding will end on 31 March, but the county council agreed at its meeting on 13 February to invest £3m of its own money to continue the holiday supermarket vouchers for those children most in need.

The recent quality of life survey of over 5,000 residents in Cambridgeshire showed that 86 per cent of residents were concerned about cost of living increases.

Free data SIM cards for low income households

A reminder that Cambridgeshire Libraries are part of Good Things Foundation's National Databank, O2 and Vodafone scheme, which makes free data SIM cards or vouchers available to anyone aged 18+ from a low-income household. Recipients can self-declare as eligible, and the support is available for a maximum period of twelve months. The data can be used with any SIM-enabled device. This offer is available at a range of libraries.

The Busway

Safety works are under way on the Guided Busway to allow the busway to return to full, two-way operation. Since February 2022, a section of the Guided Busway in one direction has been closed between Cambridge Railway Station and the Cambridge Biomedical Campus. A temporary fence was installed whilst an independent safety review was in progress, and following ongoing communications with the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) and as part of continuous safety reviews on the busway.

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Since then, the county council has been working with the bus operators and emergency services to risk-assess and design a fence to be installed next to the upstand along sections of the southern busway. It has been specifically designed with removable sections to allow for safe evacuation. This work is being carried out in sections to minimise disruption to passengers. Contractors are working seven days a week and the busway and maintenance track are currently programmed to re-open on Saturday 30 March.

Peter McDonald March 3rd 2024