

# Annual Report 2023



**CLLR FIROUZ THOMPSON**

**County Councillor for Longstanton ward**

**(Including Longstanton, Northstowe,**

**Over, Oakington & Westwick)**

## Introduction

2022 will be notable as the year of the death of HM Queen Elizabeth II on Thursday 8 September. The accession of HM King Charles III was proclaimed in Cambridge two days later.

The composition of the County Council has changed since my last annual report following the death of Independent Chair of the Council Derek Giles who retired from that role as a result of his ill health, and another councillor switching parties. Cllr Doug Dew (Hemingfords & Fenstanton)

Conservatives	27
Liberal Democrats	22
Labour	9
Independents	3

left the Conservative Group in January 2023 and joined the Liberal Democrat Group. Cllr Geoff Seeff (Lib Dem) won the St Neots The Eatons seat in the by-election in February following Cllr Giles's death.

Two County Council by-elections will be held on Thursday 4 May, the same day as the District Council and Cambridge City elections, following the resignation of Conservative Cllr Dan Schumann (Soham South & Haddenham) and Labour Cllr Hilary Cox-Condron (Arbury).

## 1 The Council

- 1.1 The three-group Joint Administration of Liberal Democrat, Labour and Independent Councillors continues to run the Council. The Agreement signed by the three groups in May 2021 is scheduled for a two-year review, which will take place after this May's elections.
- 1.2 As per last year, I am still a member of the Children & Young People's Committee, no longer leading the Lib Dems on the COSMIC (Communities, Social Mobility &

Inclusion Committee). I am now a substitute instead on CoSMIC and continue to be a substitute on Green & Investment committee.

- 1.3 Outside bodies membership: I sit on the Northstowe Delivery Group, Hanson Needingworth Liaison committee and have recently joined as a board member on Cambridgeshire Music.
- 1.4 The council's Chief Executive Stephen Moir carried out a reorganisation of the senior staffing structure, and the Council has been making senior appointments. The process of disentangling joint staffing structures with Peterborough Council set up by the previous administration has been very positive.
- 1.5 The council's new HQ at Alconbury Weald was formally opened on Friday 8 July. (I remain of the view that the location is entirely wrong given the non-existent public transport links.)

## 2 Strategy & Resources

- 2.1 The high rates of inflation in the last year, and the turmoil of the Liz Truss / Kwasi Kwarteng mini budget, increased the costs of providing council services and therefore widened the budget gap.
- 2.2 The Council increased its portion of Council Tax in February, by 4.99 per cent in total—2.99 per cent for general services, and two per cent for adult social care. The Conservative opposition proposed an increase of four per cent instead, plugging the council tax gap by using up one-off funding meant for environmental projects, care, and strengthening council services.

### **3 Adults & Health**

- 3.1** National changes in health and care decision-making took place during the year, with the creation of local Integrated Care Systems spanning health and social care. Cambridgeshire & Peterborough created a joint Health & Wellbeing Board to replace the previous separate Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Boards.
- 3.2** This year has exposed the vulnerability of NHS services nationally and also locally. A BBC investigation last summer of dental provision in the UK revealed that no dental practice in Cambridgeshire was accepting new adult patients. Large numbers of patients are having to travel far afield, pay money they cannot afford for private treatment, or resort to DIY dentistry—and a resident of Ely was recently reported as having had to travel to war-torn Ukraine for dental treatment which was quicker and cheaper than that available in the UK.
- 3.3** Meanwhile the 6,000 patients at Priors Field GP practice in Sutton heard in February that the practice would be closing at the end of March, with patients to be sent to alternative practices in some cases a thirty-mile round trip away.
- 3.4** In addition to Covid, avian flu precautions were implemented across the UK during the year, with a particular protection zone centred round Pymoor after a confirmed case.

### **4 Children & Young People**

- 4.1** Funding of vouchers over the school holidays for families eligible for free school meals has

continued, as has the Holiday Activity & Food programme for the children of eligible families. The cost-of-living crisis has seen many Cambridgeshire families reliant on such schemes.

- 4.2** The Council was praised by Ofsted for the work of senior leaders in Children's Services in responding to the challenge of Covid, and for maintaining continuity during structural change. Most children in need and those with a child protection plan were supported well.
- 4.3** On 8 March committee approved the Round 2 of the Pseudo Dynamic Purchasing System (PDPS) to delegate responsibility for awarding and executing the contracts for the provision of early years and childcare starting April 2023 – April 2024 to the Director of Education, this included the Early Years provision at second primary school in Northstowe Education Campus.
- 4.4** We attempted to start a walking bus for Hatton's Park School in Longstanton to commence from the Pavilion, but due to the shortage of adult volunteers this project is now on hold.
- 4.5** Northstowe Secondary College and Over Primary School were visited by Ofsted in the last month and are awaiting their inspection results.
- 4.6** In a piece of good news for Cambridgeshire, the council and the Government reached agreement on the 'safety valve' process to resolve the escalating deficit in the cost of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities education. The deficit was expected to grow to over £90M by 2025/26 if left unchecked, and the council was not permitted to divert

funding from other sources to fill the gap. Cambridgeshire has been awarded £49M which will be used to create 463 new special school places, with a further £11.3M in capital funding to support new SEND provision on mainstream school sites. Cambridgeshire has historically received less funding per child for education than other areas.

**4.7** The council is still seeking residents who would like to make a difference to the life of a child or young person by becoming a foster carer.

**4.8** The council is also seeking Volunteer school appeals panel members, full training given.

## **5 COSMIC**

**5.1** COSMIC (Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion Committee) has continued to oversee the Household Support Fund, which supports people experiencing immediate financial hardship to pay for food, household energy or other essential items. An increasing number of families are struggling financially at the moment. COSMIC agreed to use some of the money from the fund to give a 'payment holiday' to pensioners in arrears with their water bills.

**5.2** A Warm Hubs programme over the winter was funded by the NHS and administered by Cambridgeshire ACRE with fantastic support from local parishes.

**5.3** A review of the mobile library service resulted in a number of improvements, including more stops, more fuel-efficient routes, and local storage of vehicles.

Cambridgeshire's Library@home volunteers were one of three voluntary organisations in the county to be given the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service—the highest award a local voluntary group can receive in the UK.

**5.4** The Government is introducing a requirement for photographic ID for voters at elections. This starts with the elections in May and will cost up to £180M over ten years, despite cases of voter identity fraud at polling stations being almost non-existent. Around two million voters in the UK do not have the right form of ID to enable them to vote—they can apply for free Voter Authority Certificates, but applications for these are extremely slow and many people are likely to find themselves deprived of their right to vote on 4 May. We have been working with County Council officers on ways in which the council can support the effort to ensure the many people without the required photo ID apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate so that they are not denied their right to vote. A LibDem motion was agreed at Full Council.

## **6 Environment**

**6.1** The Council awarded the first spending from its Just Transition fund, including £2.175M for a business case for the first phase of the Council's plan for Cambridgeshire to reach Net Zero carbon by 2045. £1.75M was also awarded for flood work and nature restoration.

**6.2** On the hottest day on record in the UK, Joint Administration members of the County Council voted to sign Zero Hour's Nature & Climate Declaration, while the tarmac melted in the council car park outside the building.

- 6.3** The County Council is working with district councils on energy retrofits in homes with poor energy efficiency. A number of Cambridgeshire residents including in Little Downham received individual invitations to apply for this.
- 6.4** The public inquiry into the proposals for an incinerator at Wisbech took place in February. Cllr Lorna Dupre attended and made a representation on behalf of the county council, urging that the application be refused.
- 6.5** After a year of campaigning as LibDem Councillors and taking a motion to CCC full council regarding the A14 Tree disaster. National Highways have informed us that they planted 800k saplings along the A14 and 70% of which died, that is 560k trees! National Highways had committed to replant the trees over 5 years, but they dragged their heels during planting seasons, it didn't go to plan. The good news: Following our tireless campaigning they have reset the clock to start the 5 years of work again from Autumn 2023 and have committed to a new approach focused on tree success rate rather than just number of trees planted. Sky news covered the story and their podcast covered all the issues surrounding this national tragedy.
- 6.6** The waste disposal contract with Thalia (formerly Amey) at Waterbeach has taken considerable amounts of council time. In addition to the odour emission works required by the Environment Agency (EA), the new year saw new enforcement by the EA of rules on 'persistent organic pollutants in waste upholstered domestic seating'. This led to a week of the council being unable to accept unwanted sofas, futons, gaming chairs, upholstered dining seats, and other similar items. These must now be incinerated not landfilled. In addition to this, discussions are also ongoing with Defra regarding proposals to introduce weekly food waste collections.
- 6.7** The first households in Swaffham Prior are now receiving renewable energy from the new energy centre. Interest in this project has been considerable. Other energy projects (solar panels on Park & Ride sites, North Angle solar farm, and replacement of gas and oil boilers in schools and in the Council's own premises around the county) are continuing to progress. In conjunction with iChoosr the council ran another round of Solar Together, the group buying scheme for homeowners wanting to invest in solar panels and battery storage.
- 6.8** In the original plans for Northstowe Phase 1, a Household Recycling Centre (HRC) was planned to comply with the size of the town. Following CCC Planning Committee on 16 November 2022, permission was granted for the Milton HRC to be redeveloped and expanded, therefore a site would no longer be required in Northstowe but S106 funds will still be required. Following this permission CCC planning officers consulted with the Planning Casework Unit for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (DLUHC) on behalf of the Secretary of State, who confirmed that they are not calling in this planning application and are content for CCC to proceed. CCC waste officers will look to use the funds secured in the Northstowe Phase 1 S106 to help implement this permission for Milton HRC and as part of that discuss a deed of variation to allow consideration of an alternative land use for the current proposed HRC site.

**6.9** The Examination into the planning application by Sunnica for the large solar farm between Burwell and Red Lodge began in autumn 2022. Cllr Lorna Dupre attended the Examination and spoke about the size and scale of the application, the impact on rural communities, food security, soil quality, biodiversity, transport, and public rights of way.

**6.10** Anglian Water and Cambridge Water announced in the autumn their preferred location for a new reservoir in the Fens, north of Chatteris, to come onstream in the late 2030s. A planning application will come in due course and progress through a number of stages. It will be a decision for the Secretary of State through the Planning Inspectorate, as with other major infrastructure schemes.

**6.11** The council has published an interim Tree Strategy, which it will revise once it has baseline information about what trees the council has, where they are, and how the council can expand and improve its tree assets.

**6.12** We received details of the County Council's carbon emissions for the year. There was a significant reduction in the early stages of the pandemic, due to construction work (in red) ceasing, but this is likely to increase again in future years.

**6.13** We agreed a motion to the Full Council calling for managed divestment by the council's Pension Fund from fossil fuels.

**6.14** The council ran a #LetsGetOutdoors campaign over the summer to encourage residents to make use of Cambridgeshire's fantastic parks.

**6.15** Project Gigabit contract for Cambridgeshire is cabling up the county with high-speed broadband infrastructure, causing unfortunately many roadworks alongside other utilities.

## **7 Highways & Transport**

**7.1** The condition of Cambridgeshire's roads and pavements remains a serious challenge. This situation has been building for many years in which the council's approach was one of 'managed decline'. However, recent extreme weather has speeded up that decline very significantly. The peaty soil under the road surface has shrunk in hot dry weather, and expanded in wet weather, causing the surface to crater and split. Adding more tarmac to level the surface simply increases the weight and makes matters worse. The severity and extent of the problem is far beyond the maintenance budget of the council, so simply 'freeing up some money' is not an option. The council has been actively engaging with the Department for Transport to seek their support and funding.

**7.2** The council used a data interpretation and modelling tool to identify a 'Safe and Dry' programme of 115 locations where work was needed to improve flood resilience, and work began on the first fifty of these locations including 3 areas in Oakington. The council is also undertaking a two-year programme to clean and plot all gullies and surface drainage features to improve highways drainage management into the future.

**7.3** The freezing spell over winter caused many road and pavement surface defects, and failure of pothole

repairs. We encourage residents to report faults online.

- 7.4** South Access Road West (SARW) to become open has had several issues raised by the County Council to pass its Road Safety Audit (RSA) 3 after completion. Sisk Homes England's contractor are working on these issues but taking a lot longer than expected. Homes England announced at March Forum that the SARW will be open this July, so I will work with the county officers to ensure that we can meet their deadlines and ensure RSA inspectors can go in to view the details in time. There is also concern on the speeding on this road when it opens, speed limits proposed are 70mph on the SARW, 40mph on the rural areas, then 30mph into Northstowe Town and 20mph around the Education Campus. Speed enforcement by Police is possible on the SARW with the completion of Traffic Regulation Orders; Homes England have been asked to consider speed management within the development where roads are not to be adopted at this time – this will need to be highway standard compliant.
- 7.5** Patching of the local roads took place on School Lane and Home Farm Road in Longstanton, B1050 Hattons Road and Longstanton Bypass. Next phase will take place beginning of June (weather permitting), alongside all junctions will be treated with the Gripfibre Dressing, all white lining replaced within 28 days and all studs/cats' eyes replacement.
- 7.6** Northstowe links to Longstanton Park and Ride were completed in January, one to the water park and another to Phase 1, but we are still awaiting Balfour Beatty to store their lantern, but there has been a supply issue.
- 7.7** The A14 upgrade ramps on the bridge of Bar Hill roundabout continue to be a problem, even after patching, the A1307 bridge leading to B1050 is looking to be repaired soon. Currently signs are up to forewarn the road users. County officers are working with National Highways to review.
- 7.8** With the A14 Legacy fund, Local Highways Improvement and Northstowe Section 106, Oakington & Westwick Parish Council were able to put in place 20mph zone and speed calming throughout the main roads in Oakington. Westwick footpaths were also resurfaced.
- 7.9** The development by the council of a South Cambridgeshire Transport Strategy is pencilled in for 2023.
- 7.10** The Highways & Transport Committee agreed a new Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan. The proposals in it are currently unfunded but include options for cycling routes in Longstanton - most respondents felt a safe cycling route was needed to link Longstanton to Over and Swavesey that provided a safe way to cross or avoid the B1050. Oakington - most respondents discussed the need for links to Dry Drayton, Cottenham, and Bar Hill, particularly along Dry Drayton Road and Oakington Road. These respondents indicated that cycling in these areas was unsafe due to the high speeds of motorised vehicles and the narrow road.
- 7.11** The county council plans to fit street lighting with energy-efficient LEDs. The council spends £3.3M a year on energy for streetlights, and this sum will pay back in under six years.
- 7.12** Heavy Goods Vehicles working group have produced a new policy and

criteria against which to judge applications for weight limits in villages. A number of applications have already come forward. The new funding pot for 20MPH schemes has attracted a large amount of interest.

**7.13** The county council has applied for powers under the traffic management act part 6 which will allow us to enforce more moving traffic offenses within South Cambs without requiring the police.

**7.14** Oakington & Westwick Parish Council have put in a Local Highways improvement bid alongside Girton Parish Council to combat the speeding between the two villages, some of the budget will be funded by the Northstowe S106.

**7.15** In autumn the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) consulted on its proposals for improved bus provision and active travel in the Cambridge area, which it proposed to fund through a charge for driving in a 'Sustainable Travel Zone' between 7:00AM and 7:00PM on weekdays. The results of the consultation will be published in the late spring, and the GCP needs to listen to the concerns of residents. The current proposals are not fair or equitable for South Cambs residents and should not be implemented. It is wrong to penalize people who drive when there is no viable public transport alternative. What is needed is action to address the decades of decline in public transport inflicted by successive Governments and local councils.

**7.16** Working with Starship technologies, we've seen autonomous delivery robots deployed on the streets of Cambridgeshire. Having first seen

them in Cambourne I was happy to be able to look at them for Northstowe. We are currently liaising with L&Q as the roads are all private, owned by different house builder and a different contract needs to be in place.

## **8 Other**

**8.1** Northstowe Resident Survey has now been published. Cambridgeshire Insight - Housing & Planning - Housing priorities - New homes & communities. This survey took place between July and September 2022 and was posted to 1,095 households in Northstowe. 384 responses were returned giving an overall response rate of 35%. This survey aims to find out about households in newer communities in order to assist in informing future planning decisions and service provisions for new developments.

**8.2** Anti-social behaviour in Northstowe were raised and dealt with in partnership with County Council, South Cambs, Northstowe Town Council and new Youth Development officer and the Police. Please keep reporting.

**8.3** The noisy motorbike in my ward, was finally given a warning by police this week, after never ending complaints from residents in all villages. I spent the last few days going back and forth with residents to capture the evidence as per the request of the police officer to took up the case.

## **9 Combined Authority**

**9.1** The Combined Authority has had a somewhat turbulent year, including an attempt to depose the elected Mayor of Cambridgeshire & Peterborough (dubbed the Fenpowder Plot) which was unsuccessful. Most significantly, the

auditors (EY) wrote to the Authority in June expressing concerns about the functioning of the Combined Authority, and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities has become involved, setting some clear requirements for improvement. The Combined Authority has agreed an Improvement programme with a package of external support, and an Independent Improvement Board has been established.

**9.2** In September 2022 Stagecoach gave six weeks' notice of its intention to withdraw from a large number of bus routes. The Combined Authority pulled together a tender process at very short notice, and was able to find new providers for most of those routes, though there have been changes in frequency and extent of several of them. Additional funding was diverted to support these routes, and the Mayor has decided to levy a precept which will be added to the council tax to ensure the stability of these services for a further year. The Combined Authority really needs to move ahead with a system of franchising of local bus services, which would give democratic control of routes, timetables, and fares, but to do this it needs to find sources of large amounts of income, and in any case franchising would take around five years to implement. Meanwhile the Combined Authority is finalising a Bus Strategy for submission to Government.

**9.3** Since November, I have been working with Stagecoach on the new 5A route put in place with Combined Authority as the original time table did not stop at Swavesey Village College bus park and the timings did not match up with

the school pick/drop off. Since Feb the bus now stops at the bus park for SVC and the timings have been slightly amended. We just need a way to ensure that the timetables are at the bus stops and need to encourage the residents to start using this bus route again. A meeting with Parish Councils in Over and Willingham is to be scheduled.

**9.4** Citi6 Bus Service from Cambridge to Oakington, I also worked with Stagecoach and Oakington & Parish Council to ensure that later buses were available to ensure commuters are able to use the buses to return home, an extra 3 times were added: 17:20, 17:50 and 18:20.

**9.5** The Combined Authority remains starved of resources by the Government compared to other Combined Authorities. It received no money for its Bus Service Improvement Plan, and very little active travel funding. The Government also decided there would be no more money for affordable housing for any Combined Authorities.

**9.6** The Combined Authority's Local Transport & Connectivity Plan, on which many other local transport plans depend, is being finalised.

**9.7** Now that it has no money for, and therefore no real role in, housing, the Combined Authority has reorganised its committees into new 'thematic committees' including (for the first time) the environment.