

Councillor's Annual Report – South Cambridgeshire District Council

Municipal Year: 2010-11

1. General

I have now come to the end of my first year as your District Councillor, and it has certainly been a busy year. I was a member of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee, and was the Scrutiny Monitor for the Finance Portfolio. I was involved in two task and finish groups, one looking at value for money in the housing service, and the other reviewing the planning service, and making recommendations on how to improve both. I also served as a substitute member of the Planning Committee.

2. Highlights of local issues

As you know, I attend the monthly parish council meetings of my three parishes, where I give verbal and written reports on council matters that are of interest or relevance, and on local issues that I have been involved in or been asked to assist with. Being involved in the local issues is the most interesting and enjoyable part of the job!

Some of these issues include helping residents navigate their way through our complex planning system so they get to talk to the right people, and speaking on behalf of applicants and/or residents at Planning Committee meetings.

I have assisted Kingston in getting control of the allotments on Cranes Lane, and working the County Councillor Fiona Whelan in finding a resolution to the withdrawal of bus No 18 evening service which affects Kingston and Toft.

We are also on the case of the County which now wants to remove transport from the school children of Toft. The saga of the replacement of the litter bin on Toft green is ongoing but I foresee a favourable conclusion.

The issue of affordable homes in Toft is one that presents opportunities and challenges and I am pleased to be working with the Parish Council to specify the actual needs and identify potential sites.

The issue of speed thumps in Caldecote reared its head in August 2010, and Fiona and I, with the help of the Parish Council, were able to raise the matter in the public eye through the radio and print media, and in the County corridors, resulting in a visit to the Parish Council by the Highways manager and an apology for the mess that had been made.

The big issue for Caldecote was the Banner Homes application to build 97 houses in the village. I am pleased that having spoken on behalf of residents and expressed the many concerns that you had, the Planning Committee rejected the application as unsuitable for the village, and with the subsequent appeal being dismissed, the developers are now having to go back to the drawing board, and look at creating a new plan that meets the specific needs of the village. Your Parish Council and I are seeking your views on what you would like to see on the site, so please come and talk to us.

In conjunction with any further development in Caldecote is the issue of the Pumping Station. Following pressure from me, we had a meeting with Anglian Water and County council in October 2010, and I continue to keep the issue on the agenda with the Environmental Services Portfolio Holder.

May I take this opportunity once again to congratulate Caldecote Parish Council for winning the top prize in Community Pride awards 2010. It is a testament to the determination of all the Councillors and Clerks, past and present, of ensuring the village is a great place to live. Well done.

The icing on the cake must be the BT Race to Infinity, where Madingley exchange was one of the winners. As the co-ordinator of the Madingley exchange bid, I am extremely pleased that the hardwork put in by the race team paid off. My thanks to every member of the team from the villages of Caldecote, Hardwick, Coton and Madingley, and to individuals, Parish Councils and businesses that supported us with grants and printing etc. The exchange will be upgraded for superfast broadband in the first quarter of 2012, and we expect to have broadband speeds of 40 to 80 Mbps. I am also pleased that three projects were able to share the additional prize of £5000 worth of IT equipment, with the Caldecote Sports pavilion taking £1,500 of that. Well done everyone.

3. Council and Democracy

The Council was under Conservative control with a majority of 1, as the 57 elected members comprised of 29 Conservative, 20 Liberal Democrat, 1 Labour and 7 Independent councillors. This meant discussions on policies were robust indeed.

Following the retirement of Greg Harlock in July 2010, a new Chief Executive Officer was appointed. Mrs Jean Hunter; took up her new post at the Council on 27th September 2010.

Council meetings are usually open to the public, and I will encourage residents to attend where possible, to see how decisions are taken by your elected members. Minutes of these meetings are also available online via the council website.

4. Finance

One of the big issues of the year was the spending review and its impact on the finances of the council. South Cambs collects around £60 million in business rates, but does not keep any of it. This all goes to central government, which then calculates what each local authority gets according to a formula (based on needs) and redistributes as Formula Grant (FG).

The results of the government spending review, was that the council income from national government was reduced in real terms by 15.2%. The Formula Grant reduced from £7.106mil in 2010 to £6.026 mill in 2011, giving us a shortfall of £1.08mil which will be funded from council savings account.

The District element of the council tax has been frozen for 2011/12 only, but the council then plans to raise Council tax in 2012/13 to 2014/15 by up to 3.5% each year.

Central Government has confirmed that South Cambs will be taking on £205 million of national housing debt, for the privilege of keeping all the rents from our nearly 6000 properties and sales under the right to buy and equity share schemes. SCDC is currently a debt free council, and is expected to service the debt over a period of 25-30 years from rental income and a mix of long and short term.

5. Housing

In January 2011, the Audit commission carried out a review of South Cambs District housing service and gave an overall rating of "good", stating that we understand the local housing market and are committed to meeting the needs of both settled and travelling communities. However, the report found that we need to be working more closely with private landlords to meet the needs of all the thousands of people on the housing waiting list which is as a result of the shortage of council housing.

There is a big requirement for large family homes, and we need to free up houses that have become too large for current occupants. The government is encouraging council tenants in that position to consider downsizing if their housing needs change (children flown the nest etc.).

As part of the Welfare reform, it was announced that housing benefit for new claimants will be reduced as from April 2011, and anyone finding themselves in difficulty as a result should seek advice and help from housing support quickly.

6. Localism Agenda

The Bill would devolve greater powers to councils and neighbourhoods and give local communities control over housing and planning decisions. Local communities will be given a real share in local growth, as they are allowed to manage more of the finance they generate. We will have the power to save local facilities and services threatened with closure, and the right to bid to take over local state-run services, and the power to instigate local referendums on any local issue. It should result in a more efficient and local planning system as a new system of neighbourhood local plans will be introduced, and Community Infrastructure Levy starts alongside Section 106.

7. Online Management of Council Tax, Business Rates and Benefits

A new online management system called “**My Accounts**” was launched on 4-Apr-2011, to enable residents of the district to access and manage their council tax, or business rates, or benefit payments online. To use this system, residents need to go online, and register for a login (User ID and password).

8. Planning

The new IT system came on line on 26th July 2010. Although there were teething problems with it, these have been largely resolved, and it also now includes a mapping system.

We have also seen some of the interim recommendations from the review of the planning service by the Scrutiny Task and Finish group (of which I am a member) already being implemented, and should result in improved services to the residents of the district.

9. Environmental Services

The new blue wheelie bins service been very successful, and has earned the District some money. The plastics have to go to China for recycling, but the rest of the waste is recycled here in the UK. Anyone wanting a second blue bin can request for one, and pay a small charge for the delivery. The recycling track record for south cambs is one of the highest in the country.

10. Transport

The District Council has been looking at a comprehensive transport plan for the district, which will be based on existing transport schemes/doctors runs etc running in the villages, as a means of mitigating the loss of our bus services due to the County council cuts. However, there is a long way to go yet, but perhaps something might come together under the “localism agenda”?

11. Young People

Our young people have not been left out! The Children and Young People’s Plan has been approved. This document, put together by young people for young people with the help of the council officers, is our promise that we (decision makers at district and parish levels) will consult with and listen to young people when making decisions or providing services that could affect them.

12. Conclusion

It has been a very busy and eventful year, and I am grateful for the opportunity to serve as your District Councillor. My special thanks to all my Parish Councils for the unstinting support I have been given. It has been a pleasure to work with you all, and I look forward to continuing to serve you in the future.

As your Councillor, I am here to help you. Please do feel free to contact me with comments, questions, problems, reports, suggestions or complaints. I can be contacted by phone, email, facebook, twitter or via my website as shown in the details below.

With best wishes to all for the 2011-12 municipal year.

Tumi

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