

# South Cambridgeshire District Council – Caldecote Ward

(comprises the Parishes of Caldecote, Childerley, Kingston, Bourn, Longstowe & Little Gransden)

## Councillor's Monthly Report – January 2024

This report of previous month events is for all the Ward, so please be aware that some of the content may not be relevant to your particular Parish.

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### General

Please contact me with comments, questions, requests for assistance, reports, suggestions or complaints to do with SCDC services. These are housing need, housing repairs for council tenants, planning, benefits, council tax, bin collection, environmental health issues etc. Don't fight on your own. I am available to help you to get the best outcome possible for your situation.

Check out articles on my facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/itsCouncillorTumi> and my blog <http://www.TumiHawkins.org.uk>. What I post on there is my view and not LibDem or South Cambs official policy unless I state that it is.

**Welcome to 2024 – Happy New Year to one and all.**

### Planning Updates

#### Online Checker for Home Improvement Projects

The Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service has launched a user-friendly online checker to help home owners find out if planning permission is needed for home improvement projects such as dormer windows, fence installations, outbuildings, front porches, flue installations and more! The checker is at <https://greatercambridgeplanning.org/planning-applications/check-if-i-need-planning-permission/>. For those thinking about installing solar panels, check out the dedicated webpage for planning permission requirements at <https://greatercambridgeplanning.org/planning-applications/solar-panels/>. If still unclear, then book the free 15 minute advice pre-app session through here <https://greatercambridgeplanning.org/planning-applications/householder-and-small-business-planning-advice/>.

#### National Planning Policy Framework revision

DLUHC (Department of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities) has issued a revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) setting out the government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied. The NPPF was revised in response to the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill: reforms to national planning policy consultation response which was published today, 19 December. The Minister Michael Gove, gave a speech that day to announce the Government's planning changes.

Not surprisingly, Local Planning Authorities (LPA) were targets for lots of stick, and shady looking one or two carrots. He wants to publish league tables of performance, remove the ability to agree extensions of time to encourage councils to determine applications quickly, but ignoring the fact that the statutory periods were set donkeys years ago when planning was so much simpler with fewer requirements/study reports and other hoops to jump through. Nothing about how to increase the planning resources that LPAs need.

One carrot he mentioned is the review into the role of statutory consultees to see if they are helping or hindering the planning process – they are hindering for sure. The big announcement relevant to us is his Cambridge 2040 plans and potential creation of a Development Corporation to deliver his overly ambitious plans to turn Cambridge into the Silicon Valley of the UK.

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## **Cambridge 2040 and Development Corporation proposals**

In his speech (full transcript at <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/falling-back-in-love-with-the-future>), Michael Gove talked about 150,000 plus houses is what he wants to build in the Cambridge area between now and 2040. Mr Peter Freeman (Homes England Chief Exec) is his choice to head the Cambridge Delivery (super)Group. We still don't know who the members of this supergroup are or will be. His vision of "a new urban quarter" is to be delivered by a Development Corporation with a broadly based Board to steer its efforts". Make of that what you will.

He briefly mentioned an approach towards water and steps to help manage demand for water in new developments. But nothing about the current stalemate with Environment Agency for water to deliver sites in the current adopted local plan!!

And Michael Gove is still not talking to the Local Government leaders in the area – just announcing what he wants to do. So much for localism. The four leaders - Cambridge City Council, Cllr Mike Davey, South Cambridgeshire District Council, Cllr Bridget Smith, Cambridgeshire County Council, Cllr Lucy Nethsingha, and the Combined Authority Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, Dr Nik Johnson wrote to him to express their views and you can read their joint letter at <https://www.scams.gov.uk/joint-statement-from-local-leaders-and-the-combined-authority-mayor-on-cambridge-2040-announcement/>

## **Greater Cambridge Design and Construction awards 2023**

The annual awards scheme to celebrate Greater Cambridge's building design and construction industries is now open for submissions. The Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service and the Cambridge Forum for the Construction Industry (CFCI) are inviting entries for the Awards which celebrate the best in the design and construction of our built environment, and the skilled people who make it happen. Submissions should be made through this webpage <https://www.greatercambridgeplanning.org/design-heritage-and-environment/greater-cambridge-design-and-construction-awards>

## **Award for Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service (GCSPS)**

The GCSPS won 'Best Local Authority' award at the recent Thornton Education Trust (TET) Inspire Future Generations Awards. We are recognised as one of the few UK Local Authorities that commits resources to ensure effective youth engagement. Judges were particularly impressed by GCSP's pioneering methods for approaching youth engagement and architectural education to deliver social value. In addition, one of the YES team secured the title of 'Individual Youth Engagement Practitioner of the Year.'. This recognises his profound experience and extensive knowledge in the field of youth engagement and for going the extra mile to engage children and young people who are often underrepresented in the architectural design and engagement process. I was proud to support the team at the award ceremony. <https://www.scams.gov.uk/latest-award-for-greater-cambridge-shared-planning-as-youth-engagement-service-praised/>

## **Governance/HR**

### **4-Day Week (4DW) Trial and Best Value Notice**

The former Minister Lee Rowley, before he got moved in the last reshuffle, issued South Cambs with a Best Value Notice (BVN). Notices of this type were issued to three other local government bodies but for concerns such as an unrealistic budget, significant governance weaknesses and major cultural problems. None of these apply to South Cambs which is in a strong financial position and is acknowledged to be well run and high performing.

The BVN requires the Council provides the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) with extensive data on a weekly basis for the next six months. This covers staffing, costs, service delivery, performance, and resident feedback. Instead of using the data that

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the Council is collecting anyway, Rowley decided to ask for data that is so unusual – 80 questions totalling 186 individual answers. Some are also historical data. Talk about asking for everything and the kitchen sink. At an Extraordinary meeting in November, SCDC Councillors agreed the Council will answer those questions and provide the data. The trial continues in the meantime.

The South Cambs offices remains open 5 days a week, and the Contact centre is open longer hours than before the trial. The out of hours emergency response officers are available 24/7 for issues such as homelessness and dangerous structures.

At the Extraordinary Council meeting last month councillors heard that staff turnover and staff sickness was down, and recruitment had seen clear benefits with almost 100 new staff joining the Council in 2023. The performance of services across the board during the trial was encouraging – including in the waste service, which joined the trial more recently and is seeing more than 99% of bins collected on-time every week. Thanks to the improvement in recruitment, the amount expected to be spent on agency staff cover this year is hundreds of thousands of pounds lower than it would otherwise have been.

The 4 Day Week is helping the council to retain and recruit planners needed to respond to the Government's own vision for this area in terms of growth.

SCDC has received strong support from other local authorities across the political spectrum, including all five Suffolk district councils, Central Beds and SCDC's partner in Shared Services Cambridge City Council.

### **Corporate Peer Challenge Report**

The Council has recently published the Peer Review conducted in the first week of November by the Local Government Association (LGA). It is not an audit as some claim, but a friendly scrutiny which I can confirm as I have been involved as member of peer team in three Planning specific peer challenges over the past 15 months at other district councils. The administration invited the LGA to undertake the review as part of its commitment to continually reviewing and improving services. The authors of the report identified various strengths for the council and sought to act as a critical friend, suggesting areas for development, so that the council can continue to thrive. The four-day Working Week was not within the scope of the Corporate Peer Challenge.

The report praised the Council's high levels of engagement with communities, especially surrounding the 'Greater Cambridgeshire Local Plan' and praised the 'Statement of Community Involvement' consultation. The review noted the positive working culture within the Council and recognised the improvements made to this since 2018. It praised the leadership team and the CEO throughout.

The review recognised the Council's focus on being performance led and highlighted several successful practices (such as KPIs emerging from Overview and Scrutiny). It further suggested that KPIs should be incorporated into specific dashboards and that further KPIs should be generated in certain areas. The report clearly state that Council is in a strong financial position, is well managed with an enviable record of delivery - such as being the district with the highest number of visas issued under the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

The review identified that in our business plan we have focussed on four core areas - **'housing that is truly affordable for everyone to live in'**, **'being green to our core'**, **'growing local businesses and economies'** and **'a modern and caring council'**. Throughout the report 'being green to our core' was highlighted specifically as being well embedded as a priority for the council and highlighted there being clear leadership in this area. The review suggested reinforcing the council's overall vision by reviewing our business plan to ensure there is a more consistent narrative,

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especially in the context of the many layers of Government in Cambridgeshire so that the voluntary and community sector and parishes can work closer with the Council on shared objectives.

You can find out more and read the full report at <https://www.scams.gov.uk/corporate-peer-challenge-report-published/>.

## **Housing**

### **Make Things Right update**

In March 2023, Michael Gove MP the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities, launched the government's "Make Things Right" campaign which urges social housing tenants to complain about substandard housing. So anyone who lives in Social Housing should know their rights and how to complain. To get an issue fixed Step 1 is to report it to the Landlord. Then if not fixed Step 2 is to Complain through the landlord's complaint process. If you're not happy with the final response from the landlord, Step 3 is to Escalate to the Housing Ombudsman. Learn more from this webpage <https://socialhousingcomplaints.campaign.gov.uk/>

### **SCDC Housing Maintenance**

Just over a year ago SCDC entered into a completely new contract with Mears for the repair and maintenance of the council's social housing portfolio. A full contract review has now been conducted which shows that performance over the previous contract has improved significantly. Mears have put in additional measures to improve their performance, including operative upskilling and additional contractor support from central teams and subcontractors. Overall tenant satisfaction is high, with 93% of residents reporting satisfaction with the service they have received. Complaint numbers have been low and when they have been received, they have been fully investigated. The council will continue to monitor Mears' performance closely to try to drive standards higher still. The main findings are presented here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbGKtRu9mPA>

## **Finance**

### **Audit**

The latest audit is being signed off at a time when the vast majority of councils are behind on the audit due to big problems with the capacity of the auditors we are required by law to use. The joint planning service (Cambridge City and South Cambs) is reported that its spending is close to budget - whereas this time last year it was £250,000 over. We were assured that this was due entirely to the benefits of the 4 Day Week trial which has meant that we have recruited into a significant number of planning roles which had been notoriously difficult to fill and very expensive to use agency staff to fill.

### **Correction of Fake News on Council Finance**

A Labour MP made a statement in the House of Commons last month naming councils which were allegedly bankrupt and had issued S114 notices. And he mentioned South Cambs as one of them. The Council wrote to him immediately asking for the record to be put straight and have had an apology from him.

In addition, a media rag made claims that South Cambs had a debt that is 21.8 times its spending power. Again fake news and sloppy researching-but that's what rags do. The figure they'd latched on is the £205 million that the District had to pay to the Government in March 2012 to enable the Council keep its social housing stock and all the rent from it!! And its completely within the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) which is ringfenced solely for the Housing. It is completely separate to the General Fund Account used for running the council. The HRA debt is serviced exclusively out of the rental income from the housing portfolio. Read it for yourself at [https://www.scams.gov.uk/media/2364/tenants\\_newsletter\\_a5\\_ssept\\_2012.pdf](https://www.scams.gov.uk/media/2364/tenants_newsletter_a5_ssept_2012.pdf)

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## **Shared Prosperity Fund**

SCDC will receive over £1m from this government scheme to allocate as grants to business and community schemes. We are currently discussing how big these grants could be (probably up to £100k) and what sort of schemes we should be targeting.

## **Community and Wellbeing**

### **Parking Enforcement in South Cambs**

New Civil Parking Enforcement (CPE) powers in South Cambridgeshire will be given to Cambridgeshire County Council following Parliamentary approval.

Earlier this year an application was submitted to the Department for Transport (DfT) to enable Council Civil Enforcement Officers (CEOs) to issue Penalty Charge Notices for the majority of on-street offences such as parking on double or single yellow lines. Previously only the Police could do this. We expect benefits to include increased compliance with parking restrictions which in turn would improve traffic flow, road safety and lead to a reduction in obstructive and dangerous parking. It will also support economic growth in the district.

Following the decision by Government, the CPE scheme in South Cambridgeshire officially comes into effect on 19 December 2023. To give people notice and a chance to find a more suitable parking place, notices were placed on vehicles parked in some areas where parking is in the greatest demand, such as commuting and shopping areas. Throughout January, a Warning Notice will be issued to people who continue to park where there are restrictions– this looks like a parking ticket but there is no fine attached. Penalty Charge Notices will be issued from 1 February which will mean a fine of between £50 and £70, depending on the severity of the offence.

### **Action for Happiness**

The Action for Happiness theme for January is at <https://www.actionforhappiness.org/calendar> - **Happier January**. The focus is “*Let’s start the new year happier*”. Have a look at the daily calendar which has some really good ideas for action on a daily basis.

### **SCDC Help for residents through the cost-of-living crisis**

Last month, I reported on the SCDC initiative to help with the cost-of-living crisis by offering a free electric blanket / electric throw, which cost a fraction to run than central heating. Four other areas of support are Benefits, Household Support Fund, Food support and Saving energy and money. Please go to the website at to [www.scambs.gov.uk/cost-of-living](http://www.scambs.gov.uk/cost-of-living) to see what is on offer and how to claim. If you have questions or need help applying then email [duty.communities@scambs.gov.uk](mailto:duty.communities@scambs.gov.uk) .

### **South Cambs Hall**

Like most local authorities South Cambs now encourages hybrid/home working which means that large offices are no longer needed in the way they were. We have therefore moved all of our staff onto the first floor of the Cambourne offices and are converting the ground floor as space for businesses and community groups to conduct their businesses and hold events. It is hoped that this will encourage new start-up new business as well as helping existing businesses through a programme of support events as well as networking. The new space will be open on 24th April 2024.

### **Potential benefits entitlement**

South Cambridgeshire District Council is making a big push to raise awareness of benefits entitlement. It’s estimated that around 25% of benefits go unclaimed. Here’s an easy-to-use on-line Benefits Calculator: <https://entitledto.co.uk>

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## Local Climate Action Conference

SCDC's Climate Action Conference was well received by the 80+ people who attended. See the video commissioned for the event at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PXr9YIKUp0U>.

The Zero Carbon Communities grants have provided over £500,000 in funding locally since it was launched four years ago. Designed to equip community groups to take climate action at a local level, the grants have helped upgrade community buildings, educate people about their carbon footprint, and help nature recover in the district. The conference was so well received we expect it may be held again in future with different but related content.

## Homes for Ukraine: Appeal for support with Landlord Incentive scheme

This is a scheme where landlords who provide properties in South Cambridgeshire to Homes for Ukraine guests and who are resident in South Cambridgeshire qualify for a financial incentive. The level of incentives depends on the size of the property, and whether they it's at market rent or at the local housing allowance rate. Under the standard arrangements the landlord must provide a minimum 6-month tenancy from the outset but if 12 months is offered initially, then incentive is double the amount for a 6-month tenancy. See table below for relevant figures.

Number of bedrooms	Market rent incentive	LHA rate incentive
1 Bedroom	£1,140	£2,280
2 Bedroom	£1,300	£2,600
3 Bedroom	£1,350	£2,750
4 Bedroom	£1,410	£2,820

After the initial term expires, landlords can receive a further payment if they offer to renew the tenancy. Anyone who is interested in joining the scheme can find out more by emailing the team on [HFULiaison@Scams.gov.uk](mailto:HFULiaison@Scams.gov.uk) or calling 01954 713411

## Diary Dates

Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> January 2024: Planning Committee.

Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> January 2024: Scrutiny and Overview committee

Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2024: Audit and Corporate Governance Committee

## Casework

Please do feel free to contact me with comments, questions, problems, reports, suggestions or complaints to do with SCDC services. I will help as best I can

You will find the current and past reports on my blog at <https://tumihawkins.org.uk/caldecote-ward/reports/monthly-reports/2023-24-monthly-reports/>. Feel free to read, share and/or download.

*Tumi*

Tumi Hawkins  
3 January 2024

<b>Email me @:</b>	<a href="mailto:tumi@tumihawkins.org.uk">tumi@tumihawkins.org.uk</a>
<b>Read my blog at:</b>	<a href="http://www.TumiHawkins.org.uk">http://www.TumiHawkins.org.uk</a>
<b>Twitter:</b>	<a href="https://twitter.com/CouncillorTumi">@CouncillorTumi</a>
<b>Facebook</b>	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/itsCouncillorTumi">@itsCouncillorTumi</a>
<b>LinkedIn</b>	<a href="https://www.linkedin.com/company/TumiHawkins">TumiHawkins</a>
<b>Call me on:</b>	07802 323269