

District Councillor's Report July 25th 2023 - Cllr Tom Bygott

Four day working week

South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) hit the national headlines recently with stories on the BBC, ITV, The Daily Telegraph, The Guardian, The Daily Mail and other media outlets regarding its controversial trial of a four day working week on full pay for its office staff. South Cambridgeshire is the first council in the UK to experiment with introducing four-day working week. There is a 4-Day Week campaign group, and a handful of private companies have experimented with it; a recent trial included 61 companies, but this is an infinitesimally small fraction of the estimated (at the start of 2022) 5.5 million private sector businesses in the UK and even of the approximately 43,600 business with 50 or more employees.

Local Government Minister Lee Rowley warned SCDC in a recent letter that giving staff an extra day off each week is unlikely to provide value for money to taxpayers. He said: "Whilst some private sector organisations may choose to experiment with their own capital and capacity regarding 'four-day working weeks', local government should not do the same." He said such an approach could breach the council's legal duties under the Local Government Act. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities will "shortly be issuing clear guidance" on the matter, he added.

Despite receiving this warning, the leadership of the council are continuing with their experiment and its extension to bin collection crews. The trial will start later in the summer and will mean that collection days for many villages are changed as Monday is the new 'day off' for all collection staff. The Council has advertised for extra collection crews, as employee numbers need to be expanded to do five days' work in four. The direct cost to council taxpayers of having to employ more staff and buy more bin lorries to collect waste in four days rather than five would be over £100,000 in the first year, rising to over £200,000 in the second year. The council claims to be able recover these increased costs through lower levels of staff absence and reduced use of agency staff. As I have said previously, I am sceptical of the arguments put forward by the council administration and do not support the trial.

The council has not been operating a regular office working environment since Covid, having kept the overwhelming majority of office staff working from home every day. Many private sector businesses have increased home working since then too, but many also have one or two days in the week when staff go in. Face to face contact is important for productivity and employee morale, especially for newer or younger staff who need to learn their roles from more experienced colleagues. Councillors don't have access to a list of home telephone numbers for staff, and this means that matters that could be resolved with a quick telephone call must now become long drawn-out email correspondences.

Disruption to Guided Busway services

Guided Busway Route B, which travels from Longstanton Park & Ride to Cambridge via Cambridge North Railway Station is currently operating a diversion as Milton Road is the site of works to move a gas main that will restrict traffic to one lane. The works between Union Lane through to Downham's Lane are expected to continue until the end of August, but the bus diversion is expected to last until July 21st if the works can be carried out on time.

The diversion involves city-bound buses continuing as normal to Cambridge North Station, where they turn around and return up the busway to Orchard Park. They then follow the Route A onto Histon Road but then turn left onto Gilbert Road before heading back onto Milton Road. This adds a considerable extra distance and time onto the journey. For example, the distance from the Busway/Station Road junction in Impington to the Histon Road/Kings Hedges Road junction is eight times the distance by bus than the shortest road distance between them.

The gas main is being moved as part of the Greater Cambridge Partnership's Milton Road scheme. This aims to fit car, bus and bicycle space onto a narrow road that was not laid out to have dedicated space for all of these uses, and this has resulted in all the trees along the road being clear-felled in an effort to make extra space.

Cambridgeshire quality of life survey

Cambridgeshire County Council has launched a survey to understand residents' views on the quality of their lives. The annual survey aims to track the responses over time to see how changes to council decisions and policies – and the work of other public sector bodies in the county - affect people's views, and to give Members vital insight when they make business planning decisions.

In addition to an online survey, they will be pro-actively calling 5,500 residents. The 15-minute telephone survey – run by an independent market research company Thinks Insight and their partner Team Search - aims to speak to 1,100 people aged 18+ living in each of the five Cambridgeshire district areas – broadly representing each area's population. In addition, they will talk to people from specific groups who are less often heard from, including people who may have been homeless or are from migrant or Gypsy/Roma/Traveller communities. The Council is also planning a specific piece of work with younger people via youth engagement teams.

The online survey is available until Friday 4th August, and can be filled out at: www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/council/quality-of-life-survey. They have not provided a way for residents to request a paper copy.

Digital switchover: replacement of copper telephone lines

The Local Government Association (LGA) has recently launched a toolkit for partners to use to raise awareness of the digital switchover for their residents and communities. It can be accessed at: www.local.gov.uk/our-support/cyber-digital-and-technology/digital-switchover/digital-switchover-partner-toolkit.

The telecommunications industry is replacing all old copper telephone lines in the UK, and it hopes to upgrade to a fully digital internet-based service by 2025. Councils have a critical role to play in the digital switchover to implement the solutions required to support residents and prevent impact on their day-to-day lives. Devices such as personal alarms and health monitoring systems, as well as plug-in telephones could be affected. The toolkit contains resources to use on social media, plus draft copy for websites and bulletins. The LGA has also recently added to the toolkit a poster with space for a partner logo and space for a few lines of local contact information to help councils with communications locally. This first wave of communications aims to educate those around 'telecare' users. The next stage is to have a printable newsletter template for partners to distribute directly to residents who may be digitally excluded, or for use in libraries and community hubs. Department for Science, Innovation & Technology (DSIT) will be talking about the digital switchover and the LGA will highlight their toolkit at DLUHC's Local Comms meeting next week. Councils should visit the LGA's digital switchover hub linked above if they are interested in the toolkit. If you any questions, please contact: socialcaredigital@local.gov.uk

Cllr Tom Bygott
cllr.bygott@scambs.gov.uk
07765 475 513