

District Councillor's Report Jan 28th 2025 - Cllr Tom Bygott

Local government reorganisation

The Government has announced plans for the biggest reorganisation of local government in England since 1974, the year that South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) was created. Their stated aim is to try to achieve more efficient service delivery and cost savings by reducing administrative overheads. The government says that merging councils could save £2bn. Dozens of district councils across England are set to be abolished and six counties - Essex, Kent, Surrey, Hertfordshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk - are in line to have their district councils merged into new unitary authorities in the first wave. Some councils may have their May 2025 elections cancelled if they are first in line to be abolished, but this is unlikely to be the case in Cambridgeshire.

As Sir John Maud, later Lord Redcliffe-Maud, who chaired the Royal Commission on Local Government in 1969, which influenced the 1974 reorganisation, said: "There is no evidence that local government reorganisation has ever improved efficiency or saved money." That is probably still the case today. What tends to happen is that a large number of staff are made redundant at the time of the reorganisation and then over the ensuing years, the same staff are re-hired or new staff hired until the overall level of expenditure returns to its original level. The main limit to the size of government is what taxpayers are willing to fund, rather than a fixed set of work that needs doing.

The UK has some of the most haphazardly defined arrangements for local government in the world, and this is because of central government reorganisation rather than in spite of it. Residents find it difficult to understand which tier does what, and the arrangements are different throughout England and differ again in Wales, Scotland, etc. Some counties like Cambridgeshire have a County Council and a set of District councils. Some like Buckinghamshire and Somerset have a single county-level unitary authority. Others, like Bedfordshire and Berkshire are divided into multiple district-sized unitary authorities. Some cities like Bristol are unitary and cover only the urban area, others like Peterborough include rural areas as well. Some cities like London are further divided into boroughs. In the last few years, the system has become even more complex as additional layers of elected mayors, police commissioners and various city-deal settlements were added, creating partially elected and semi-democratic quangos like the Greater Cambridge Partnership, which shares responsibility for transport with the Mayor and the County Council in an opaque and dysfunctional way.

It would be unthinkable for the United States government to announce that Delaware were now part of Pennsylvania, or that California were being broken into three parts. Similarly, Canada and Australia don't interfere with the boundaries of their provinces or states. The independence and stable boundaries of sub-national authorities is an important protection for democratic government. Those authorities need to have historical legitimacy and accountability to, and a community of interest between, their people. The most likely outcome from this process is the creation of a series of temporary and artificial entities like the former County of Humberside, cobbled together from parts of Lincolnshire and Yorkshire, never loved or respected by any of its citizens and finally abolished in 1996 after more than twenty years of campaigning by people on both sides of the river, whose only thing in common was their shared dislike of being part of Humberside.

Rural areas like areas like ours will be especially harmed as they are carved up and brought within the sphere of influence of their nearest city. Since cities tend to have worse social problems than rural areas do, the concerns and needs of our villages will be seen as insignificant in comparison to the much more serious issues being encountered in the inner cities.

The UK is one of the most centralised countries of its size in the world, especially so with the asymmetric governance of England. When a country has a central government that has no respect for its internal boundaries and doesn't allow them to become settled and permanent over time, it opens the way for political parties to game the system and move the boundaries for their own electoral advantage.

This is harmful for democracy.

Bus Franchising

More than 1,600 responses were received in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority's (CPCA's) statutory bus franchising consultation, which ran between 14th August and 25th November 2024. Now that the consultation has closed the CPCA will compile and publish a report setting out its response to the feedback. The Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough will then make a decision on how to reform buses, currently planned for early February 2025, however this date may be subject to change.

The consultation compared two ways to reform buses: a franchising solution and an Enhanced Partnership approach. Under a franchised network, the CPCA would contract bus operators to run services on its behalf but have control over the routes, frequency, fares and overall standards of the region's buses. An alternative Enhanced Partnership solution, while producing benefits over the current bus service, provides less control over the routes, frequency and overall delivery of the services.

Buses in Cambridgeshire are operated by private companies, the largest of which is Stagecoach. Many services are run commercially and are subject to being withdrawn or reduced in scope if they are not profitable, although some routes are publicly subsidised. According to the BBC: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-67568458, the CPCA stepped in to save 23 bus routes in October 2022 after Stagecoach said it could no longer run them. It reviewed 19 subsidised bus routes, including one that cost £124.83 per passenger; the 7A, which runs between Duxford, Sawston and Whittlesford. It carried 771 passengers in 2022/23.

The profitability of bus services is being squeezed by low bus fares and the rising cost of living, including the difficulty of finding drivers willing to work for low wages. Even if the franchising policy proceeds, there will still need to be some economic solution found between raising bus fares or increasing public subsidies. In the long term, some form of automated public transport will need to be developed as bus services continue to decline.

Apple trees in Coton Orchard

The Cambourne to Cambridge (C2C) Guided Busway is planned to cross the Coton Orchard, just west of the M11, requiring trees in the orchard to be cut down. An application has been submitted asking for a provisional Tree Protection Order (TPO) to cover 12 Bramley apple trees in the orchard that are threatened by plans for the new busway. The plans for the new busway have been put together by the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP).

Papers published by the district council state that while an assessment concluded the trees could be considered for a TPO, officers have not recommended for an order to be issued. A tree officer at the district council recognised in their report that the Bramley apple trees in the orchard are "unique examples of the species" and contribute to the ecological value of the site as recorded on the Woodland Trust Ancient Tree Inventory. However, it was stated that a TPO on its own would not protect the trees from the development of the busway as a TPO can be overruled by a planning decision. Councillors are due to meet on January 15th to decide whether the TPO should be issued.

Planning permission for 4,500 dwellings at Waterbeach

South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) has issued planning permission for 4,500 dwellings at Waterbeach to RLW Estates. The outline planning permission includes development of business, retail, community, leisure and sports use, as well as new primary and secondary schools, in addition to a sixth form centre. Together with the earlier approval given for up to 6,500 new dwellings to developer Urban&Civic, the permission will complete development of the new town at Waterbeach, identified in the District Council's 2018 Local Plan.

Discussions to agree details relating to infrastructure requirements, and more recent water supply issues in our area, had caused the planning permission to be delayed. The application was considered by the Planning Committee in January 2021, where it was agreed that permission should be granted. However, concerns about water supplies and the adequacy of the plans from Cambridge Water to meet future demand, resulted in the Environment Agency objecting to the application. Through the

work of the Water Scarcity Group, established last year, agencies across the area, including the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service, have been working to resolve the Environment Agency's concerns. In November 2024, the Environment Agency replaced their objection to the Waterbeach application with a recommendation that conditions be imposed. The permission also requires Waterbeach Railway Station to be relocated prior to any of the new homes being occupied.

Cllr Tom Bygott
cllr@bygott.net
07765 475 513