

## District Councillor's Report Jan 30<sup>th</sup> 2024 - Cllr Tom Bygott

### Northstowe's sports pavilion opens

Northstowe's brand new sports pavilion officially opened on Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> January. I attended the opening ceremony with the cutting of a ribbon, which preceded the start of the first football match. The impressive new facilities include sports pitches, a bowling green and hard surface games area, six team changing rooms - enough for three simultaneous matches, three changing rooms for referees, accessible changing rooms conveniently located near the entrance and a large clubroom.

I am delighted to see these new facilities open and ready for use for residents in the community. I am encouraging people to enjoy being active – pitches can easily be booked online via the link <https://pitchbooking.com/book/facility/c5b5f446-81f5-4cf6-a91a-89d627fed05a>, there is an email address [westernpark@elitesportsuk.com](mailto:westernpark@elitesportsuk.com) and you can find out lots more information on the pavilion's Facebook page at [www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61554659436008](http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61554659436008).

This is welcome news for Northstowe residents, who have had to wait longer than expected for these important community facilities to be delivered. Residents will have to continue waiting for many other essential facilities and services in the new town, such as the first shop and a GP surgery. Surgeries in surrounding villages have to cope with an ever increasing patient list, further straining the ability for residents to get appointments. The Co-op in Longstanton and residents living near by are also struggling with a lack of parking spaces.

### Home energy support for South Cambridgeshire residents

South Cambridgeshire District Council is part of the Action on Energy partnership which provides advice, guidance, and support on reducing carbon emissions and increasing home energy efficiency - ultimately helping people save money on their fuel bills.

Reliance on fossil fuels imported from Russia and the Middle East means that the world's energy markets have not yet recovered from the invasion of the Ukraine, and are being destabilised by attacks on shipping in the Red Sea. In January, energy bills for a typical household using gas and electricity rose by £94 a year. The next price cap will be announced on 23 February.

Not all residents may be aware of the energy-saving assistance that is available to them, including support for making their homes more energy efficient. With the colder weather and communities spending more on heating, residents have the opportunity to make full use of this assistance.

Action on Energy, [www.actiononenergycambs.org](http://www.actiononenergycambs.org), is a partnership made up of the six councils across Cambridgeshire – including South Cambridgeshire District Council - helping to support people to create more energy efficient homes, which, in turn, makes them cheaper to heat and more comfortable to live in. The partnership coordinates, and offers advice on a number of grants including:

- The Home Upgrade Grant 2 (HUG2), [www.actiononenergycambs.org/funding/home-upgrade-grant-2](http://www.actiononenergycambs.org/funding/home-upgrade-grant-2), offers funding from government, delivered by Action on Energy and can provide home energy efficiency improvements for people on low incomes with properties not heated by gas. The funding aims to make the poorest performing homes more efficient by installing improvements like insulation, solar panels, and heat pumps.
- Boiler Upgrade Grants [www.gov.uk/apply-boiler-upgrade-scheme](http://www.gov.uk/apply-boiler-upgrade-scheme) are available from the Government to replace gas boilers with cleaner heating systems.
- The Energy Company Obligation (ECO) is a Government energy efficiency scheme to tackle fuel poverty and help reduce carbon emissions. It is administered by Ofgem and promotes measures that improve the ability of low-income, fuel-poor and vulnerable households to heat their homes. This includes actions that result in reduced energy usage, such as installing insulation or upgrading a heating system. [www.ofgem.gov.uk/environmental-and-social-schemes/energy-company-obligation-eco/homeowners-and-tenants](http://www.ofgem.gov.uk/environmental-and-social-schemes/energy-company-obligation-eco/homeowners-and-tenants)
- The Great British Insulation Scheme is also administered by Ofgem. As well as supporting low-income and vulnerable households, it is also available to those living in homes with an

Energy Performance Certificate rating of D-G, and within Council Tax bands A-D in England and A-E in Scotland and Wales. It will run until March 2026.

[www.ofgem.gov.uk/environmental-and-social-schemes/great-british-insulation-scheme](http://www.ofgem.gov.uk/environmental-and-social-schemes/great-british-insulation-scheme).

Find out more about the funding schemes and advice available on the Action on Energy website. Simply visit the 'Get in Touch' page and complete the short Grant Funding Application Form at: [www.actiononenergycambs.org/action-on-energy-grant-funding-application-form](http://www.actiononenergycambs.org/action-on-energy-grant-funding-application-form).

## **Failure of Cambridgeshire County's policy on weeds**

Late last year I wrote about how the Cambridgeshire County Council had changed its policy on spraying weeds, allowing weeds to get out of control, destroying roads and gutters, and storing up future maintenance problems. A petition with 1,797 signatures calling on the County Council's ruling rainbow alliance to reconsider its no-spray policy was presented to the County's meeting on 17th October. The Council then voted against a motion to return to a proactive weedkilling policy.

At a meeting on January 23rd, council officers apologised for the way the policy change was handled and admitted the county council did not engage effectively with other councils and people in the county. Cllr Alex Beckett, chair of the Highways and Transport Committee, said: "I don't think we got this one right. It was good to be having a more targeted approach and to be doing what a lot of our communities want to do. I know some of our communities want less chemical weed removal, but that obviously did not quite work everywhere."

The County Council said at the time of the change that it would save the authority £120,000 a year, would reduce its carbon footprint and would reduce the use of "potentially harmful chemicals". However, a review found many people were unhappy with the change and that the policy was not delivering the benefits hoped for. A report published by the county council said the net saving of the change was around £101,000, lower than expected, with more money now needing to be spent in the coming year to clear weeds that have built up. It added that the need for council officers to travel out more frequently to physically remove problem weeds meant there had also not been the reduction in carbon emissions hoped for.

The report also said a survey had shown that a majority of respondents were unhappy with the results of the change. The county council is now planning to reintroduce chemical weed killing in built up village and town areas with 40mph speed limits or below, for a minimum of twice a year.

## **Tax increase to pay for subsidised £1 bus fares**

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) is due to set its 2024-25 budget at a meeting on 31st January. The Mayor Nik Johnson is proposing to increase the Mayoral General Precept to an annual charge of £36.00 for a band D property and, based on forecasts from the areas' collection authorities, this would raise around £10.9M in 2024-25. This would fund an increased precept contribution to passenger transport from £3.624M to £11.036M.

The centrepiece of this is a proposal to cut bus fares in half to £1 for a single journey across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The combined authority said its survey about increasing the precept, which would work out at about £24 for Band D properties, was backed by the majority of the 450 respondents.

The mayoral precept was first added to council tax bills in April 2023 at a cost of £12 for a band D property. The proposed increase to £36 would come into effect from April 2024. It was initially introduced to help subsidise a number of bus routes across the county that were no longer being run by commercial operator Stagecoach.

According to the BBC: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-67568458](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-67568458), the Combined Authority (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 costs £124.83 per passenger; the 7A, which runs between Duxford, Sawston and Whittlesford. It carried 771 passengers in 2022/23.

What our public transport system needs is investment and subsidising bus fares is not an investment, because as soon as the subsidy stops, services are withdrawn and there is no lasting impact of the spending. The rising cost of living means that salaries, especially for the lowest paid workers need to rise, and this includes bus drivers. According to glassdoor.co.uk, the average hourly pay for a Stagecoach bus driver in Cambridge was £12-13 per hour in 2022. This is only just higher than the National Living Wage, £11.44 per hour from this April, despite our local area being one of the most expensive parts of the country to live in. As wages rise, bus fares also need to rise, and if people aren't willing to pay higher bus fares, bus services will become more and more economically unviable. The bus network is highly labour intensive and it is in a long term process of decline.

The need to make public transport less labour intensive is why autonomous technology is being used in so many new metro systems around the world and why many existing ones, such as the Paris Metro, have a systematic plan to upgrade existing lines to driverless operation. By cancelling the Cambridgeshire Autonomous Metro (CAM) project, the Mayor has wasted his four year term in office and is throwing taxpayers' money at a bus subsidisation project which is doomed to fail.

Cllr Tom Bygott  
cllr@bygott.net  
07765 475 513