

District Councillor's Report Feb 25th 2025 - Cllr Tom Bygott

Five Year Land Supply

In December last year, the new government issued a new set of targets for the number of houses built in each local authority area. These targets came into effect immediately and the joint housing target for Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire has been set to just over 12,100 homes over five years. The number of houses in the two authorities' combined housing supply for the five-year period from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2029 is 11,190, which is 910 dwellings short of the target. In planning terminology, this means that South Cambridgeshire has 'lost its Five Year Land Supply'.

Meeting central governments housebuilding targets protects a local authority area from speculative developments and ensures that new development occurs in the most suitable places that have been carefully reviewed in the preparation of the Local Plan. Without an adequate Five Year Land Supply, it is much easier for property developers to apply to build unsuitable, low quality developments in places that are not suited to development, and to win a planning appeal should their shoddy development not be approved.

Local government reorganisation

As I mentioned last month, the UK Government has announced plans for the biggest reorganisation of local government in England since 1974. Dozens of district councils across England are set to be abolished. A deadline was set in January for councils to volunteer to become part of larger unitary authorities. The Government has not publicly disclosed a comprehensive list of councils that submitted proposals for local government reorganisation by the January deadline. However, several councils have publicly announced their actions: (1) East Sussex, (2) Dorset, Somerset and Wiltshire and (3) a joint letter from Essex County Council, Southend-on-Sea, and Thurrock.

All councils will receive a further invitation to submit proposals by spring and autumn 2025, ready for the first wave of new unitaries to be set up to commence operations in 2027. We are continuing to work with council officers to ensure everyone is up to speed on new updates. At the time of writing, no councils in Cambridgeshire have made public announcements and it's likely that the county elections here will proceed as planned.

Four day week referendum

In my group's alternative budget proposals, we have called for a referendum on the 4-day working week at the council. We believe the public consultation document produced by the council's ruling group is inadequate, as it does not even ask residents if they agree with the 4-day week – or if they are happy to pay for it. That is why we are calling for a referendum for South Cambridgeshire's residents to decide once and for all if they want to continue paying their council to be paid 5 days per week but only work 4 days.

Given that the number of children being born in the UK continues to fall, there are profound economic changes that will come about because of this demographic problem. This has moved beyond just Europe, North America and North East Asia and sub-replacement fertility is now affecting the majority of countries across the world. There will be an ever smaller working proportion of the population to fund a retirement for those in old age. That means that we need to (1) increase productivity through technology, (2) work for more years before retiring and (3) work more hours every week. The UK is falling far behind other countries in productivity growth and delays to the retirement age are being resisted. That makes it more likely that the Government will feel under economic pressure to increase immigration far beyond its current record levels, and that means ever more housebuilding in the Cambridgeshire countryside.

While more maternity and paternity leave would be beneficial for this problem, alongside opportunities for flexible working for families with young children, a generalised gift to the whole working population of increased leisure time, as appealing as that might be, is counterproductive in our current economic and demographic circumstances. An increase in wages, on the other hand, would be a positive step.

Annual report to tenants and leaseholders

There are a number of things in this report that are concerning for our tenants and leaseholders within South Cambridgeshire. In several areas, South Cambs District Council is bottom of the pile compared to other local authorities when it comes to the people for whom the services exist – our residents. This report can be found on the council's website at www.scambs.gov.uk/housing/information-for-council-tenants/tenant-news-and-involvement/tenant-and-leaseholder-news.

This news is particularly alarming, especially when you consider this report was compiled under the auspices of a 4-day working week. To rank so low for resident feedback is disappointing.

Improving Complaint Handling: Effective complaint handling is crucial for any organisation, particularly in public services like housing management. Recent survey results reveal that South Cambridgeshire's approach to managing complaints is falling behind compared to other organisations, with a satisfaction rate of just 29%. This puts the local authority among the lowest scorers, with the lowest satisfaction rate across other organisations being 28%.

Resident Involvement: When it comes to whether the landlord listens to tenants' views, only 54% of residents were satisfied. Unfortunately, when compared to similar organisations, South Cambridgeshire ranks among the lowest in tenant satisfaction related to the landlord's responsiveness and follow-through on tenant feedback.

Increased electric vehicle charger funding

Funding for electric vehicle chargers has increased from £5,000 to up to £12,000 per project. The grant is open to parish councils, community groups and charities for public EV chargers in car parks associated with community buildings and village halls.

We are pleased to see increased funding for these projects. We understand funding is unfortunately not guaranteed to be available into the next financial year, so we would encourage all interested local organisations to apply as soon as they can on the council's website at: www.scambs.gov.uk/climate-emergency-and-nature/grants-funding-and-community-support/electric-vehicle-charge-point-grant.

Cllr Tom Bygott
cllr@bygott.net
07765 475 513