

District Councillor's Report March 26th 2024 - Cllr Tom Bygott

Funding for digital software to improve planning processes

Greater Cambridge Shared Planning has secured £100,000 of funding from the Department of Levelling Up, Homes and Communities (DLUHC) in the latest Digital Planning Improvement round.

The DLUHC Digital Planning Programme is a government initiative to further support local planning authorities to improve digital services. It aims to enable a modern and efficient planning system in England, shifting a documents-based system to one that is data-driven, standards-based and powered by modern user-centred products and services. The Digital Planning Improvement Fund is providing 43 planning authorities with £100,000 each to support the adoption of modern planning practices within planning data, digital capabilities and development management software.

Each of the 43 authorities who were successful in this round of funding will embark on a five step process that includes joining the Open Digital Planning community, <https://opendigitalplanning.org/> and publishing the first four spatial datasets (Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings, Tree Preservation Orders and Article 4 Directions) to the Planning Data Platform, www.planning.data.gov.uk. This is an online platform, currently under development, to collect planning and housing data from local planning authorities across England, transforming it into a consistent format and making it available to anyone to view, download or analyse.

Greater Cambridge Shared Planning (GCSP) is a partnership between South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City Councils. The funding will enhance GCSP's digital capabilities and development management software, facilitating smoother operations and better integration of planning data. These upgrades will make planning processes faster and more efficient, which will directly benefit residents and other planning applicants. Moreover, it will enable GCSP to prepare for forthcoming legislation, ensuring compliance and readiness for future regulatory changes.

Four-day week update

We are continuing to scrutinise the four day working week trial at South Cambridgeshire District Council that is being carried out by the administration of the current ruling group.

A wellbeing survey completed by 328 staff showed that almost 100 staff are working more than four days a week. Of those, 11% said they worked up to one additional hour, 53% working two to three additional hours, 17% working four to five additional hours, 5% working five to six additional hours and 14% working six or more additional hours a week.

This means that performance is being propped up by some staff working more than four days a week – which is not fair to those staff members and is dependent on their continuing good will. Performance in seven out of 16 working areas has stagnated or declined during the trial, showing staff are struggling to fit all their work in to four days.

The ruling political group repeatedly assured us that any drop in performance would stop the four-day week trial. Yet on Tuesday 12 March, their Cabinet voted to continue the trial. The trial had begun in January 2023 and has been extended twice. It had been planned that the trial would conclude in March 2024 and that councillors would get a vote on whether to make the trial permanent. However, the full set of councillors, including myself, have never had an opportunity to vote on whether to hold this trial. In February a report by the Employment and Staffing Committee recommended that before the vote there should be a consultation, and that the consultation should only be carried out once the council understood “the full implications of any proposed changes” by the Government, which is investigating a change to the rules to prevent schemes such as the Four Day Week.

We will continue working hard to ensure residents get what they are paying for – that is, five days' work for five days' pay. We are analysing the data sent to the government each week and will continue to hold the administration to account over their reckless social experiment.

Increased fines for fly tipping

In July 2023, the government announced that maximum fines for fly tipping, littering, household duty of care offences, and graffiti would be increased to help reduce the issues of environmental crimes and target the worst offenders.

The new fines for South Cambridgeshire which come into force on 1 April 2024 are:

- Fly-tipping Fixed Penalty Notices will increase from £400 to £700. The government maximum is £1000.
- Littering or graffiti fines increase from £150 to £400. The government maximum is £500.
- Breaching a household waste duty of care increase from £400 to £600.

Fly tipping is a blight on our beautiful countryside. We are encouraging people to dispose of their waste responsibly to prevent environmental destruction and landscape damage – whilst also avoiding a hefty fine.

Grants for community groups and parish councils

South Cambridgeshire District Council has enabled all of its available grant schemes to be searched in one place using the GrantGrabber service, <https://funding.idoxopen4community.co.uk/supportcambs>. This was developed by Support Cambridgeshire, a partnership funded by Cambridgeshire County Council, bringing together infrastructure organisations who work together to support community groups and organisations across Cambridgeshire.

The GrantGrabber Service is now available as a self-serve facility for any voluntary and community groups and Parish Councils wishing to search for funding opportunities for community projects. The scheme enables users to search online for a wide range of funding sources and other information at any time of the day.

For further information on receiving a grant for a community project from the council, please visit the council's webpage: www.scambs.gov.uk/community-development/grants/

The Support Cambridgeshire organisation aims to deliver better outcomes for local organisations across the county, with the expectation of a more robust and more vibrant voluntary and community sector. More information about it can be found at: <https://supportcambridgeshire.org.uk/about/>

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