

CLLR FIROUZ THOMPSON

Council composition

- Liberal Democrats 23
- Conservatives 22
- Labour 9
- Independents 4
- Non-aligned 3

County Council

The Council has completed its third year as a Joint Administration, which has seen a successful partnering of Liberal Democrats, Independent and Labour Groups.

The County Council is the statutory Local Authority for Highways, Social Care, Education, Waste and Recycling, Libraries and Leisure, Registration services (births, deaths, marriages), and Public Health. It also convenes citizenship ceremonies.

The County Council is a partner organization on the Cambs and Peterborough Mayoral Combined Authority, which was created in 2017. It assumed the Transport Authority remit that previously sat with the County Council.

The County Council, together with South Cambs District and Cambridge City Councils, is a partner on the Greater Cambridge Partnership. The GCP is a time-limited body with the remit of dispersing government funding for infrastructure in this high growth area.

The Council key service committees also cover Environment and Green Investment, and Assets and Procurement. The council declared a Climate Emergency in 2019 and has developed a Cambridgeshire Net Zero 2045 action plan. The council has a Health in All Policies approach to all of its work, in an effort to address the wider determinants of health inequalities which are pronounced across the county and exist within all localities.

Social care is demand-led, with expenditure on a mixture of preventive and means-tested care; this accounts for 70% of the council's net budget. Good work has been done to bolster the social care workforce, both via rolling out the Real Living Wage and supporting our providers to do so; developments of the Care Academy supporting professional training and development, and the creation of new work around 'care micro-enterprises', new small, localized care businesses that offer both new employment opportunities and also new choice in care provision for those who need it.

Highways is the service perhaps most in the public eye as we all encounter it every day, the network consists of some 2,600 miles of roads and over 1,800 miles of rights of way. The well-known 'managed decline' of the Highway Network over many years has left the network in very poor condition and the service in a state of fire-fighting. Government provides 33 times more funding to the national highway network than it does to Local Authorities for their highway networks. Workforce is challenging too with a thin officer corps covering a massive brief; our Local Highways Officer covers 35 villages, for example. Extra funding would be welcome, but we also need the workforce to be able to spend it. This is a predicament common to local authorities and there is competition with national transport projects. Huge efforts are underway to introduce cyclical maintenance where none existed, for example on gully emptying, but turning round a network allowed to decline so severely, with limited resources to do so, will take time.

Cambridgeshire's population is growing far above the national average, which puts very significant additional pressure on demand led services. This trend is set to accentuate as National Government is looking to expand the Cambridge area by a very significant degree, through a Development Company, in a scheme known as Cambridge 2040/50 depending on the speech of the day. 'Cambridge' in this scheme has not been defined though it is assumed to mean South Cambs at least.

Water scarcity and a poor public transport network are the headline factors of concern around growth, even at the rate laid out in existing local plans.

Income is via a combination of government grants and council tax.

BUDGET 2024-25

The budget seeks to bridge a potential funding gap for the coming year of £23m in County Council funding for 2024/25 as a result of inflation and other factors. This has now been closed to c.£2m.

The revised proposals focus on sustaining social services, continuing to provide free school meal vouchers for eligible children during holidays, progressing the council's commitment to pay the real living wage to people providing adult social care, and prioritising highways and cycleways maintenance across the county. However, even with a proposed council tax rise of 4.99% – 2% of which will be dedicated to adult social care services – the combination of demand for services, inflation and the ending of some government grants will still leave a £2m gap in the 2024/5 budget.

Included in the proposals for the coming year are for the council to:

- Invest £57 million to sustain children's and adult social care services.
- Further the Council's commitment to the Real Living Wage, which has increased to £12ph outside London, to take account of the Government uplift of the legally enforceable Living Wage, being paid by adult care providers.
- Prioritise £3m to continue to provide holiday food vouchers for all children eligible for free school meals, despite the government support being likely to end in the next financial year.
- Invest £2.2m to deliver other anti-poverty initiatives – such as support to make sure that vulnerable people are claiming all the welfare benefits that they are entitled to.
- Put £1.3m into delivering more accessible libraries to support vulnerable communities.
- Prioritise investment of £23m into making highways, footpaths, and cycleways safer – on top of a recently announced government allocation of £2.3m. This will be to deliver improvements which both repair and prevent potholes, deliver improved drainage schemes, and reinstate cycleway maintenance and weed clearance.
- Put additional funding into schemes for people experiencing mental health issues to prevent them reaching crisis, particularly focussing on younger people.

The proposals include an increase of council tax by 4.99%, the maximum permitted by Government before a public referendum is needed – with a total of 2% of this increase dedicated to adult social care services across the county, and £17.6m of identified additional savings – from areas such as:

- moving to LED streetlights which are set to deliver £1m in energy savings each year.
- £1.5m across the next three years from rationalising the council's office accommodation.
- more than £2m from reviewing the highest cost children's placement costs, and home to school transport routes – to bring children closer to home and reduce travel time.
- £0.5m from driving down the amount of bad debt.
- reviews of income raised by permits and parking charges are also proposed to raise just under £1m.

Committees and Outside Bodies

My responsibilities are serving on:

- Children and Young People Committee
- Environment & Green Investment Committee (sub)
- Communities, Social Mobility, and Inclusion Committee (sub)

Outside Bodies member

- Cambridgeshire Music Board
- Northstowe Delivery Group
- Needingworth Liaison Committee

CONTACT DETAILS

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about the above, or any other matters.

Firouz Thompson, County Councillor for Longstanton, Northstowe, Over and Oakington & Westwick

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For those on social media we have highly active Facebook groups:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/2066298150052161/> - Longstanton, Oakington and Northstowe

<https://www.facebook.com/libdems3rdMay18> - Over & Willingham