

Cllr Thomas Bygott

2023-24 Annual Report to Northstowe

April 2024

Introduction

Thanks to everyone in the village for your support since being elected to serve you in 2022. It is an honour to be your representative and, as always, I am happy to assist if you have an issue with the District Council or need some advice.

South Cambridgeshire District Council is one of several layers of local government and sits between the Parish and County levels. It covers 105 villages and the two towns of Cambourne and Northstowe. Although SCDC collects Council Tax on behalf of other local authorities, only a portion of this is collected for the district. The breakdown for the average (band D) property in Northstowe, following the budget meeting in February, is:

Authority	2023-24 band D	2024-25 band D	Change
Cambridgeshire County Council	£1,542.87	£1,619.82	+4.99%
South Cambs District Council	£165.31	£170.31	+3.02%
Cambridgeshire Police Commissioner	£272.52	£285.48	+4.76%
Cambridgeshire Fire Authority	£79.92	£82.26	+2.93%
Cambridgeshire + P Combined Authority	£12.00	£36.00	+200.00%
Northstowe Town Council	£86.09	£85.11	+11.60%
TOTAL	£2,158.71	£2,289.95	+6.08%

My group put forward an alternative proposal that included freezing the Council Tax; removal of the second Special Responsibility Allowance for councillors; bolstering planning enforcement and fly tipping; introducing a Tackling Rural Isolation officer; and scrapping the four-day week to get the best value for money. Unfortunately, the ruling group unanimously rejected our amended proposals. Details can be found at: <https://scams.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s134516/Conservative%20Group%20Budget%20Proposal%20for%202024.25.pdf>

For anybody who is struggling with the cost of living, please remember that there is support available so you do not have to suffer alone. For more information online, please see the cost of living support page on the council's website: www.scams.gov.uk/cost-of-living-support

Financial position of South Cambridgeshire District Council

The Budget for 2024-25 was agreed in February. There were a number of proposals I supported, including continuing the Localised Council Tax Support Scheme and additional funding for Ermine Street Housing. Unfortunately, however, there were too many elements that I was uncomfortable with and I voted against the Budget. Below are some of the reasons for my decision:

- The administration's budget gap is now almost £4.5 million. We warned last year that this gap would increase if the administration did not change direction – and it has increased. I deemed it irresponsible that the administration is still trying to live beyond the council's means, and was uncomfortable with further increases to borrowing and debt.
- The Budget included increasing the Council Tax by the legal maximum amount, and increased affordable housing rents by 7.7%. I felt this was inappropriate given that many residents are struggling with the cost of living.
- The Budget included increasing councillor remuneration and a second Special Responsibility Allowance for councillors. I was extremely disappointed that the administration voted to give councillors a 5% pay rise whilst putting up Council Tax and rents for residents. Personally, I don't think that elected representatives in any tier of government should be allowed to set their own pay; it should be permanently set as a fixed proportion of staff salaries, however councillors are currently required by law to vote on their own allowances every year.

Four-day week update

2023 was a year of significant change at the council with the introduction of the four-day working week trial. This has been in place since January 2023 for desk-based staff, who have been working 30 hours a week, and since September 2023 for bin collectors, who have been working 32 hours a week. Since November 2023, the council has also been issued with a Best Value Notice by the government, reflecting concern that the four-day week is not delivering value for money for residents. The council is required to submit historical and weekly data on four-day week performance under the Notice, which is available to view at: www.scams.gov.uk/your-council-and-democracy/best-value-notice-data-requests.

I have been determined in my opposition to the four-day week trial from the beginning. I do not believe it is right that residents are paying five days', for only four days' work. I have consistently questioned the lack of financial business case done in preparation for the trial, despite the significant expense on legal advice to make the trial work and the £3.3 million salaried hours unworked across the entire year.

The lack of transparency has been concerning and frustrating. It has felt nearly impossible throughout this trial to get answers to questions, and it made me extremely uncomfortable to discover that independent reports on the four-day week had been tampered with.

A Cabinet meeting in February brought new suggestions for the four-day week, which gained the administration's approval. I am pleased to see the harmonisation of working hours between desk-based staff and waste crews to 32 hours a week, and have opposed the linguistic and operational discrimination that I believe has happened

between blue and white-collar employees since the start of this trial.

However, we are now in a situation where the trial has ended – and yet officers continue to only work four days, for five days' pay, while the evidence is reviewed. 80% of councillors, and residents, have still been denied a vote on the four-day week. I am deeply concerned that a recent report has shown the longer this continues, the harder it will be to get back to a five-day week. I am concerned this social experiment will have led to significant disruption and demoralisation. I am frustrated that the administration clearly did not plan for this beforehand – leaving its own hands tied.

I am continuing to ask questions, scrutinise the data, and speak out in my opposition to the principle of asking taxpayers to fund five-days' pay for only four-days' work.

Corporate Peer Review 2023

The council participated in a Corporate Peer Review by the Local Government Association (LGA). The last peer review took place in 2020, reviewing the council's Planning Committee. The full report can be viewed at: www.scams.gov.uk/media/nbah2kxw/20231213-south-cambridgeshire-dc-cpc-report.pdf.

I was pleased to see that the council is performing well for household recycling rates, and that the Audit and Corporate Governance Committee was described as being effective. However, the report also recommends important areas where the council needs to improve. I will be closely monitoring how the administration acts on these recommendations, which include:

- Accelerating the closure of outstanding accounts. Since the review, the council has signed off its 2021/22 accounts, but we are still well behind where we need to be.
- Communicating impactful decisions promptly. The report found that important decisions including the four-day week were not communicated effectively or promptly by the administration, which has a worrying impact on the council's culture and transparency.
- Improving responsiveness to member engagement. Councillors reported that access to officers was more difficult since hybrid working has been implemented – undoubtedly worsened by the four-day week working pattern.

Fly tipping

I was disappointed to see only one fine issued for over 500 incidents of fly tipping in South Cambridgeshire. Fly tipping is a blight on our beautiful countryside and residents have been crying out for a crackdown for some time. I am therefore glad to see that Fixed Penalty Notices for fly tipping will increase from £400 to £700 from 1 April 2024.

The administration's budget proposed to employ an additional envirocrime officer, whose role is to tackle environmental crimes like fly tipping. However, given that we only have one officer at the moment, I felt that two officers were still not enough. Our budget amendment proposed an additional envirocrime officer to take the total to three, but this was unfortunately rejected by the ruling group.

Parking enforcement

Cambridgeshire County Council was given new Civil Parking Enforcement powers, which include South Cambridgeshire and have been enforced since 1 February 2024. Fixed Penalty Charge Notices will now be issued for illegal parking, with fines between £50 and £70 depending on the severity of the offence.

Illegal parking is a danger to us all, causing obstruction to pedestrians on the pavement and to emergency vehicles who need to get through our roads quickly. I was pleased to see these new enforcement powers against illegal parking, and have encouraged residents to always check the signs and restrictions where they are planning to park to avoid paying fines.

As a rural district that suffers from inadequate public transport, driving is an essential activity, rather than the luxury that it is in the centres of large cities. Whilst I want to see existing laws enforced, such as parking across other people's driveways, blocking pavements or at bus stops, I want to preserve our freedom to park in most streets without having to pay.

Road charging

In September at the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, the Leader of SCDC voted to support road charging. In November's Full Council meeting, my group submitted a motion which stated: 'This Council is opposed to any form of road charging in Cambridgeshire.' The ruling group unanimously rejected our motion, refusing to withdraw road charging from the table in Cambridgeshire.

I was extremely disappointed that the administration failed to rule out road charging in Cambridgeshire – especially when a majority of residents opposed the now abandoned congestion charge.

We have been consistent in our view on road charging – and that is a firm 'no' to a regressive charge on drivers, threatening to harm the most vulnerable in our society. I am working hard to ensure that road charging stays firmly away from Cambridgeshire, and can only hope that other parties reach the same conclusion.

I proposed the first motion at the District Council against the Congestion Charge in February 2009 and it is sad to see that after fifteen years the residents of our district are still being threatened by this foolish type of scheme, and that the many confusing and overlapping authorities that have responsibility for transport in Cambridgeshire have been unable to come together to support a proper solution that would actually help local people, such as an underground metro, to Cambridge's congestion problems.

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