

Cllr Thomas Bygott

2024-25 Annual Report for Northstowe

April 2025

Introduction

Thanks to everyone in Northstowe 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. The breakdown for the average (band D) property in Northstowe, following the budget meeting in February, of the Council Tax collected is:

Authority	2022-23 band D	2025-26 band D	Change over 3 years
Cambridgeshire County Council	£1,469.61	£1,700.64	+15.7%
South Cambs District Council	£160.31	£175.40	+9.4%
Police and Crime Commissioner	£257.58	£299.43	+16.2%
Cambridgeshire Fire Authority	£74.97	£87.21	+16.3%
Cambridgeshire + P Combined Authority	0	£36.00	Inf
Northstowe Town Council	£86.09	£105.69	+22.8%
TOTAL	£2,048.56	£2,404.37	+17.37%

It has been another very controversial year at South Cambridgeshire District Council, with the continuation of the Four Day Week, where staff are being paid for 37 hours to work 32 hours. The trial officially ended in March 2024 but, a year later, staff continue to work 4 days a week - which has not yet been approved by all councillors. Working from home is now so much the default practice that the council's offices are usually almost empty.

In the coming year's budget, the Council aims to spend £3,211,000 on management, analysis, performance and transformation related activities. While the council does manage a number of different budgets, and has several sources of income, it will raise £12.2M in 2025-26 in Council Tax. £3.2M is more than a quarter of the money that will be raised from you as a Council Tax payer.

The Government has announced sweeping changes to local government in England and it is likely that the District Council will be abolished, rendering much of this money spent on analysis and transformation as probably having been wasted. They aim for all councils in England to become unitary authorities (combining District and County functions) with a population of at least 500,000 residents.

Finance and Budget

The council held its budget meeting on 25 February, where we scrutinised the administration's budget proposals for 2025/26 and proposed an alternative budget. It included proposals to bolster planning enforcement, environmental crime and tackling fraud, amongst other things.

In our alternative budget, we called for a referendum on the 4-day week. In over two years of this 5 days' pay for 4 days' work scheme, residents have paid for over 104 extra days' holiday for council staff. The 4-day week consultation was open until Sunday 23rd March. However, the consultation failed to ask if residents are happy with paying their council not to work. This is why we called for a referendum – to finally give residents a say. We were disappointed but not surprised that the administration rejected our calls for a referendum.

In scrutinising the administration's budget plans, we opposed proposals to increase Council Tax by the legal maximum amount of £5.09 for a Band D household because we do not feel it is right to raise taxes whilst residents must continue to pay for council staff not to work. We opposed the 2.7% increase in affordable rent and the 4% increase in shared ownership rents for the same reason. How is it right that residents are being asked to dip into their pockets more and more, when council staff are only working 32 hours but being paid for 37 hours?

We expressed our concern at the £46 million increase in borrowing when interest rates – the cost of borrowing – remain incredibly high. Additionally, by our calculations, the administration's Transformation programme has cost over £10 million, yet only saved £1.7 million. This is yet another example of the administration wasting your money.

The things in the budget meeting that we did support were the Localised Council Tax Support Scheme to ensure there is support for those who are struggling. We supported the Housing capital budget which looks to increase the number of houses owned by the council. We were pleased to see indications that, while our alternative budget was voted down, it looks as if our proposals around fraud and envirocrime may be taken forward.

Following a question I asked at the Scrutiny and Overview Committee, the following figures have been provided for the upcoming year's budget for management and 'transformation' related activities:

Corporate Management	£737,000	CEO salary, subscriptions, Annual Accounts + audit, peer review
Data Team	£188,000	Support, co-ordination and implementation of data strategy initiatives
Policy and Performance	£241,000	Plan production and monitoring, KPIs, surveys and consultations
Central Support Services	£122,000	Central expenses including printing and postage
Digital Transformation	£804,000	*
Transformation	£1,119,000	**
Total	£3,211,000	

* "This service specifically deals with the move to enable residents to interact with the Council using the online portal on a 24/7 basis. Digital transformation aims to create and improve services for its local individuals and communities, by utilising technology and improving processes."

** "The costs of staffing and related items deal with service reviews and efficiencies. The transformation team offers tools, resources, and support to services at every stage of the transformation activity to fundamentally change systems and processes to achieve measurable improvements in efficiency, effectiveness, and resident satisfaction in a modern society."

Housing

The District Council owns and maintains around 5,700 council houses. There are a further 6,100 council houses or houses managed by registered social housing providers in Cambridge City. Last year, the two councils adopted a Greater Cambridgeshire Housing Strategy for 2024 to 2029. This focuses on addressing demographic changes, tackling homelessness, and supporting first-time buyers through initiatives like First Homes.

South Cambridgeshire District Council has recently carried out a stock condition survey which will enable the council to undertake a costed 5,10 & 15 year plan in terms of prioritising works. To date, the council has fitted a number of solar panels to its homes as well as ongoing insulation works and is committed to bringing all council houses up to a minimum Energy Performance Certificate rating of Band C by 2030. The councils will be implementing requirements arising from the new Social Housing (Regulation) Act and the new regulatory consumer standards that came into force in April 2024.

People wishing to rent council homes can apply through the Home-Link website www.home-link.org.uk, the choice-based lettings scheme for all council and housing association homes in Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk. Other types of properties such as extra care and equity share properties may also be advertised there. Decisions are made impartially by officers using objective criteria, and councillors can provide advice but can't influence a decision in favour of any applicant.

Last year's annual report to tenants and leaseholders was published recently and has 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.

Planning

SCDC oversees planning policies and development projects through the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2018, guiding growth until 2031. This plan ensures housing, commercial development, and infrastructure projects align with sustainability goals and community needs. The council collaborates with Cambridge City Council through the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service, managing planning applications and large-scale strategic developments. Key planning priorities include ensuring new developments incorporate public transport provisions, green spaces, and sustainable building practices.

The council has faced challenges in balancing housing expansion with the provision of amenities. Cambourne's situation has highlighted concerns regarding developers not delivering agreed-upon community infrastructure. In Northstowe, the situation is even more difficult with the GP's surgery still many years away and not a single shop in operation within the development.

Environment and Waste

SCDC is committed to environmental protection and sustainability. The council's Zero Carbon Action Plan aims to reduce carbon emissions, promote renewable energy, and enhance biodiversity across the district. Initiatives include tree planting schemes, sustainable drainage projects, and incentives for homeowners to improve energy efficiency. The council also enforces environmental regulations to reduce pollution and protect natural habitats.

SCDC has awarded over £360,000 to nine local organizations as part of its Net Zero Villages scheme. These funds support climate-friendly initiatives such as community solar panels, electric vehicle charging points, and energy efficiency improvements in public buildings. The council continues to monitor air quality and promote green infrastructure projects to enhance sustainability within new developments.

Collection SCDC operates a joint waste collection service with Cambridge City Council, ensuring efficient and sustainable waste management. Residents receive kerbside collection services for general waste, recycling, and garden waste. The council promotes recycling initiatives and provides guidance on waste reduction.

Transport

The East West Rail organisation held another consultation on their plans for the proposed railway from Bedford to Cambridge in January. 5,206 people attended one of the consultation sessions and more than 5,500 responses were received. In the coming months, they will publish a report summarising the feedback from this consultation and it will be posted on their website eastwestrail.co.uk.

They will then host a statutory consultation to present more detailed information about the proposed infrastructure, its likely environmental impacts and the measures and strategies they are developing to mitigate those impacts. Feedback from the statutory consultation will be taken into account before they finalise our proposals and submit the application for a Development Consent Order to the Planning Inspectorate, which processes applications on behalf of the Secretary of State. Following the examination into the DCO application, the Planning Inspectorate will make a recommendation to the Secretary of State who will decide whether development consent should be granted.

The route that they are consulting on is essentially unchanged from the previous consultations, but more technical work has been done and the route maps are more detailed. The proposed route is parallel to the new A421 dual carriageway from the Black Cat roundabout at the A1, via a new station interchange with the East Coast Main Line at Tempsford, passing north of Croxton and Eltisley and south of Papworth Everard. There is to be a station north of Cambourne, after which the route passes close to the villages of Caldecote, Hardwick, Toft, Comberton, the Eversdens, Harlton, Haslingfield and Harston before joining the main line from King's Cross and entering Cambridge from the south. The EWR project team has decided not to include the suggestion of a northern route into Cambridge with a station at Oakington.

The Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) is planning to build three Guided Busways: Cambourne to Cambridge (C2C), the Cambridge South-East Transport (CSET) and a Waterbeach to Cambridge busway. The latter was voted for by the County Council in February. The other two, the C2C and CSET projects have both been an ongoing source of argument for several years. The GCP has applied for Transport and Works Act Orders (TWAOs) to the Department for Transport (DfT) for both projects.

C2C is planned to cross the Coton Orchard, just west of the M11, requiring trees in the orchard to be cut down. The District Council placed a Tree Protection Order (TPO) in January to cover twelve of the oldest threatened Bramley apple trees in the orchard that are by plans for the new busway. The twelve trees were planted in 1922. However, a TPO on its own would not protect the trees from the development of the busway as a TPO can be overruled by a planning decision.

I am opposed to the CSET project because its guided busway would use part of the route of the old railway line between Cambridge and Haverhill that was closed in 1967. I am instead supporting a plan put forward by RailFuture to rebuild the railway to Haverhill. If CSET goes ahead, rebuilding the railway will not be possible.

Local government reorganisation

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.

Cambridgeshire has not been listed amongst the first group of counties who submitted proposals for the reorganisation by the January deadline. However, Jim McMahon OBE MP Minister of State for Local Government and English Devolution has written to Cambridgeshire County Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council and the other district level councils setting out the process. SCDC held an extraordinary Council Meeting on 19th March and the SCDC cabinet agreed to send a response indicating that is it willing to consider entering discussions.

All councils will receive a further invitation to submit proposals by 28th November 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.

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