
Report: County Councillor (Hardwick div.) District Councillor (Harston & Comberton) Cllr Michael Atkins February 2023

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News from the County

County Council Budget set

The County Council recently agreed a budget for 23/24. Facing a gap between revenue and expenditure of over £20m due to rising inflation and increased demands for services, particularly adult social care, and after identifying over £10m in savings, the Council agreed to raise council tax by 5%, or an additional £73 per year for a band D property. Indeed the settlement from the UK government, which included a headline increase of council purchasing power of 9%, assumed that all councils would raise their tax by 5%, the maximum amount without triggering a referendum.

The budget also outlined how the Council intends to spend more than £15m in one-off reserves, with projects including supermarket vouchers (see below), £1m for highway schemes looking at drainage of rural roads, £1m for flood mitigation, and just over £1m for libraries.

Disappointingly, the UK Government's 'fair funding review', which has been promised for some years, has been delayed again. The Council, and by extension the services we can provide to residents, are severely disadvantaged by the current funding regime, which does not reflect the growth in Cambridgeshire's population over the last ten years. If we were funded to the same level as our neighbouring counties, we would have approximately £60m more in income to provide services. Leaders of all political parties have signed an open letter to Michael Gove, the Secretary of State responsible, to urge that this be remedied as soon as possible.

Supermarket vouchers for FSM families

As in previous holidays, families usually in receipt of free school meals will receive vouchers of £15 to help with food costs over the half-term. Information about free school meals is available at <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/schools-learning/help-with-school-learning-costs/free-school-meals>

Potholes

Potholes have worsened dramatically following the December freeze and continuing wet weather, unsurprisingly given the effects of freezing temperatures and water on long neglected infrastructure

resulting from decades of underfunding and a policy of 'managed decline.' Last summer's drought has had an additional impact on soil beneath road structures, causing further problems.

I would encourage everyone to please check on the 'Cambridgeshire Report a Fault' webpage (<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/travel-roads-and-parking/roads-and-pathways/roadworks-and-faults>) to find out whether potholes you are concerned about have already been logged. If not, please do log the pothole and note the reference number. If there is a problem with the reporting page do let us know. Please note that currently, when the subcontractors go out to fill potholes, they can only address what has been logged on the system, though the council is looking at whether this can be changed.

You may be interested to know that in one week in January 5586 potholes were reported – 2.5 times the normal. The dragon patchers (of which there are two) can do 100 every day, with manned teams able to do 20 a day. More than 45,000 were fixed last year.

In general terms, if a pothole is large and deep, we will fix it within five days. If it is smaller and less of a hazard, we will fix it within 21 days. We mark up the potholes in different ways, those repaired in five days are not marked as our repair is immediate, yellow means we will repair it in 21 days. We always aim to fix potholes within five and 21 days. We aim to fix emergency faults as soon as possible, always within five days.

We always aim to repair potholes with a permanent fix first time, however, in the winter this can be difficult due to the weather and numbers of potholes. At this time of year, we sometimes have to make temporary fixes to keep people safe, to keep up with the numbers and because road conditions are too wet for permanent repairs. Permanent fixes will then be programmed in and delivered when the weather allows.

The total amount of money we have specifically to fix potholes is £2.2m – this is part of a larger highway maintenance budget (which includes planned maintenance, patching, drain clearing etc) which is around £30million per year for maintenance of 4,500km of road. The average cost of fixing a pothole is £42.

Coronation events

You should have received details on how to request road closures for any community events connected to the coronation of King Charles III scheduled for the 6th May 2023. Street party applications require 8 weeks' notice, and highway applications 12 weeks' notice, so planning early in the new year is advised!

News from GCP & Combined Authority

Mayoral Precept

A precept from the Mayoral Combined Authority of £12 per year per Band D property has been agreed, to ensure continued subsidy for bus services restored following the Stagecoach cuts last year. The Combined Authority was able to step in before Christmas to provide a 6-month subsidy for a large number of threatened rural service but this was from financial reserves and it was always known that a longer term solution would be required, and the new precept will secure those services previously rescued. The effort now needs to go into improving bus ridership so that in the longer-term large subsidies will not be required.

News from the District

Key Amnesty

People who are misusing Council properties are being offered a one-off opportunity to #DoTheRightThing and return their keys without facing criminal proceedings during a month-long crackdown by South Cambridgeshire District Council. The campaign targets people who have provided false information on application forms for housing; those illegally subletting, where the tenant moves out then rents the property to someone else - usually at a higher rent. In addition Right To Buy fraud is included where people do not meet the criteria to buy their property but make false applications to benefit from a discount as well as tenants who fail to use the property as the only or principal home as well as those who abandon homes without following the proper process.

It is hoped the campaign will also provide an opportunity to raise awareness among people who moved out of Council properties to create a family bubble during the Covid pandemic, who wish to remain living with relatives. They may now realise they no longer require their Council home and wish to #DoTheRightThing by handing in their keys, enabling another family to come out of temporary accommodation or off the housing waiting list.

Additionally, the campaign is encouraging anyone who suspects housing fraud to #DoTheRightThing and report it to the District Council using the online form or emailing fraud@scambs.gov.uk.

#DoTheRightThing runs across South Cambridgeshire District from February 1 to 28. To surrender keys, people are asked to hand them in to South Cambridgeshire Hall, Cambourne CB23 6EA, in an envelope containing the property address. No more questions will be asked.

Ukraine – new hosts needed

There are currently 500 hosts for Ukrainian refugees in the greater Cambridge area, but with the continuation of the war, there are some hosts unable to renew the arrangement after the initial six months. Anyone who might be able to provide a spare room for a guest is asked to text ROOM to 88802 or go to <https://www.scambs.gov.uk/spareroom> - about 200 are needed over the next few months.

Contact Details

Councillors and residents are welcome to contact me on any issue which is concerning them:

<p>Cllr Michael I. Atkins matkinslibdem@gmail.com https://www.facebook.com/cllrmichaelatkins 07968 264637</p>
