

## **District Councillor report to Parish Council March 2025**

### **Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government**

On 25th February, the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) announced an additional £30 million in funding for homelessness services. This funding will be allocated to 295 areas most at risk of homelessness due to high housing costs and rent arrears. It will specifically help councils intervene early to prevent evictions or provide accommodation for individuals experiencing rough sleeping. With this new allocation, the total Winter Pressures Funding for homelessness and rough sleeping this year reaches £60 million. In addition, the government introduced a £10 million emergency package for rough sleepers last year, followed by a further £20 million in January. (South Cambs will get £190 332)

[A full breakdown of funding allocations for each council is available here.](#)

### **Message from the Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Nik Johnson on Bus Franchising**

I wanted to write to you to share that today I have taken the decision to introduce bus franchising in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. This follows extensive consultation, detailed analysis, and my own careful consideration in what will be the most significant and exciting reform of our region's bus network in forty years. I believe that putting communities and passengers, current and future, first is the right call. The consultation told us of the importance of more reliable, affordable and convenient services. Franchising allows us to do this. The Combined Authority will set fares, routes, timetables, and service standards, working in partnership with contracted operators to deliver a network that serves people, rather than being dictated by commercial interests alone. This reform will allow us to reinvest profits into improving services, create a more integrated transport network, and ensure communities are not cut off. The choice to move forward with franchising follows a clear recommendation from the Combined Authority Board, our Transport and Infrastructure Committee, and strong public support. Our consultation, held from August to November last year, found that 63% of respondents backed this approach.

I fully recognise that this is a major undertaking, and it will not happen overnight. The transition to franchising will be carefully managed, with the first franchised services expected to begin operation in late 2027. The business case set out how franchising can work, and now our job is to begin the work of implementation. We will continue to engage closely with local communities, businesses, transport stakeholders, and bus operators to ensure a smooth and effective rollout. Your input will be fundamental to making this a success. In the meantime, the Combined Authority will continue to invest in improvements, including the Tiger on Demand rural services, extending the Tiger bus pass for under-25s, and maintaining affordable fares through the £2 cap scheme.

I want to assure you that this was a decision made with the long-term prosperity and sustainability of our region in mind. A well-connected, efficient, and accountable public transport system offered by franchising will be essential for economic growth, social mobility, and environmental sustainability. I look forward to working with you as we embark on this journey to create a bus network that truly works for everyone in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

### **Government unveils plans for new towns**

The Prime Minister has revealed the government's plans for the next generation of new towns. The New Towns Taskforce has outlined key principles for these new developments, which will focus on providing affordable housing, essential infrastructure, and access to green spaces and nature. More than 100 sites across England were put forward for consideration, reflecting the ambition of local communities and housebuilders to contribute to the creation of these new towns.

The announcement includes plans to streamline the planning process through agreements between agencies and expert bodies that are legally required to be consulted. This initiative will be supported by government funding, which includes:

- £1 million for government agencies, including National Highways, Natural England, and the Environment Agency, to accelerate the planning approval process for new homes and enhance feedback to councils and industry where needed.

- £2 million to aid the Building Safety Regulator in improving the processing of new-build applications.
- Over £3 million in grants to councils to boost planning capacity, along with direct support to address complex issues delaying new developments.

[The Prime Minister has unveiled the government's plans for the next generation of new towns.](#)

### **Local Plan: Site submission update**

This week, Cambridge City Council and SCDC will be requesting updates from landowners, developers, and site promoters regarding site submissions as part of the Greater Cambridge Local Plan preparation. Since 2019, we have received approximately 700 sites through the 'Call for Sites' process, where interested parties have submitted sites for potential inclusion in the new Local Plan. Our officers have assessed these sites, along with others, but have not been registering new sites or additional information on existing submissions since May 2022 to allow for proper assessments and manage the flow of information.

This next phase of the process began on Friday 14<sup>th</sup> March and close on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> March. In advance of the draft Local Plan consultation this autumn, we are launching a three-week update period where promoters can submit new sites or provide updated information. This will ensure that planning teams have the most current data as we continue to prepare the plan. We also anticipate that this will help accelerate the plan-making process. This is a standard part of the planning procedure. Any new sites or updated information received will be published in the summer, along with assessments in the Housing and Employment Land Availability Assessment, alongside the draft Local Plan.

### **Weekly food waste collections**

The council is following national policy change by the previous government. It will become mandatory for councils to collect separate food waste on a weekly basis. We are pleased to see weekly food waste collections being implemented to improve the cleanliness of streets for the residents who live there.

We are currently investigating the additional costs of doing this under a 4-day week bin collection scheme, as bin crews in Greater Cambridgeshire are also working 32 hours but being paid 37 hours. The government has given a grant to cover the costs of weekly food waste collections, but the grant does not

cover our costs at the council. As the opposition, we believe this in part to be because more bin lorries and more staff are required to collect the same number of bins in 4 days rather than a regular 5-day week. We believe that it is important to know any additional cost implications to continuing the current working arrangements at the council before a decision is made later in the year. We have been frustrated by an initial response from officers that we would have to wait until after the consultation to be given this information. We have therefore enacted our right to information as councillors to receive the information the council currently holds on this. We have to say that the difficulty in gaining information like this increases our concerns around the level of openness and transparency at the council.

### **Local Government reorganisation**

We are keeping a close eye on the government's local government reorganisation plans and an extraordinary meeting of the council has been called for 19<sup>th</sup> March at 6pm to discuss it. No decision will be made at this meeting, however we understand the council will be considering a draft letter to the government minister to set out the direction of travel.

All councils will receive an invite to submit proposals by spring and autumn 2025, ready for the first wave of new unitaries to be set up in line with the 2027 target. We are continuing to work with council officers to ensure everyone is up to speed on new updates.

### **Summary of the budget meeting**

The council held its budget meeting on 25th February, where we reviewed the administration's budget proposals for 2025/26 and put forward an alternative budget. A full breakdown of our proposal is available [here](#). Our suggestions included measures to strengthen planning enforcement, address environmental crime, and tackle fraud, among other priorities. In our alternative budget, we also proposed holding a referendum on the 4-day workweek. Over the past two years, residents have funded over 104 extra days of holiday for council staff under this scheme, which offers five days' pay for four days' work. The ongoing consultation on the 4-day week will run until the end of March, and we encourage all residents to share their views. However, we feel that the consultation doesn't address whether residents are comfortable with paying their council staff for fewer hours of work. For this reason, we called for a referendum to give residents a clear voice on the matter. While we were disappointed that the administration declined this proposal, we continue to believe a referendum is the best way forward.

In our review of the administration's budget, we also expressed our concerns about several aspects. We opposed the proposal to raise Council Tax by the maximum legal amount of £5.09 for a Band D household, as we feel it's not fair to increase taxes while residents are still funding a 4-day week for council staff. We also opposed the 2.7% increase in affordable rent and the 4% rise in shared ownership rents for similar reasons. We questioned how it's fair to ask residents to contribute more when council staff are working fewer hours but being paid for a full week.

We were also concerned about the £46 million increase in borrowing when interest rates remain high, as well as the administration's Transformation programme, which, has cost over £10 million but only saved £1.7 million. We believe this highlights inefficiencies that should be addressed.

However, there were aspects of the budget that we did support, including the Localised Council Tax Support Scheme, which aims to provide assistance to those who are struggling. We also supported the Housing capital budget, which aims to increase the number of homes owned by the council. We were pleased to see that, while our alternative budget was not approved in full, some of our suggestions, particularly around fraud and environmental crime, may be considered moving forward.

*Thank you for taking the time to read my report; if you have any questions or want to discuss any of the issues raised email me on [graham.cone@councillor.online](mailto:graham.cone@councillor.online) or ring 07595 361 285 (please leave a voicemail if I am unavailable) **Councillor Graham Cone***