

Annual Report for Duxford Parish Council – May 2019

In May, it will have been a year since we were elected as members to South Cambridgeshire District Council and the control of the council shifted from Conservative to Liberal Democrat. So, what has the Liberal Democrat-led South Cambs Council been up to in the last year?

Governance

The Liberal Democrats won control of the Council in May 2018 and is now a 30-strong group (previously 14). There are 11 Conservatives, 2 Independents, 2 Labour. In a spirit of co-operation, we appointed an Independent Councillor as Council Chairman, and for good governance, appointed a Conservative as Chairman of the important Scrutiny and Overview Committee. A 7-strong cabinet is made up of 4 women and 3 men.

New Business Plan

Following a public consultation, a new Business Plan covering the period 2019 to 2024 has been published, which changes the direction of the Council. We are committed to providing homes that are truly affordable for everyone to live in; to help local businesses to grow; to be green to our core and to put customers at the centre of everything we do as a modern and caring council. Check out the new Business Plan.

<https://www.scams.gov.uk/media/13114/business-plan-2019-24-for-web.pdf>

Re-organising the Council

It became clear in putting together the new Business Plan that the departmental structure of the council would struggle to deliver on our priorities. Furthermore, studies of other district councils showed that South Cambridgeshire had fallen behind in the use of new technology and working practices essential to run a modern council. Management consultants were commissioned to carry out a review of the council and to recommend what would need to change to improve business delivery and it was made clear to the consultants that business improvement was their brief, not cost-cutting.

Medium Term Financial Strategy

For most of the first year in control of the council, we had to work with the budget set by the previous Conservative-led administration. The council has recently approved the budget for 2019-20, which sets the priorities for the Lib Dem administration. The council no longer receives central government grants and the amount by which the amount of Council Tax the council can raise is also capped by the government.

Our five-year financial plan has been altered to deliver more income from investments and commercialisation with the aim of having 25% of £20 million income coming from these sources by 2024. The previous administration's plans were to reduce general reserves to less than £3 million by 2023 while we are aiming for reserves of £4.5 million by then. An inherited budget shortfall of £0.5 million has already been turned into a £1 million surplus which has gone into the General Reserve to help prepare for future uncertainties.

Housing

One of this administrations' priorities is the provision of more council houses and a resolve to meet agreed targets for affordable housing in new developments. We are aiming to build 70 new council houses per year, and even more where possible. So far in 2019, we've completed 28 new homes, adding those plus 6 purchased council houses to our stock. We also completed 13 shared ownership houses for sale in the last year and have another 61 plus 24 shared ownership currently being built on site.

A new strategy for Housing in South Cambridgeshire has been adopted to deliver homes that are affordable, not just to buy but to live in. In addition to delivering new homes, in the right place and at the right price, we will strive to keep utility bills low by ensuring that they are as energy efficient and water efficient as they can be. We also strive to build close to places of employment to encourage walking and cycling to work as well as using public transport.

New Investment Strategy

Our new investment strategy is ensuring council taxpayers are getting the best return for the council's financial reserves. The previous administration did not have an investment strategy against which to judge commercial opportunities to ensure they are sound but one is now in place. One investment; Cambridge Ice Rink is now close to being completed. Located off Newmarket Road on the edge of Cambridge but in South Cambs district, last autumn the council approved an additional loan to ensure the delivery of this high-quality community sporting venue that will benefit the health and wellbeing of residents. The ice pad will meet the requirements of the International Ice Hockey Federation, allowing visiting teams from around the world to play ice hockey there. South Cambs Council Tax payers will benefit from returns on the investment.

We moved quickly to put PV solar panels on the roof of the Waterbeach refuse depot to obtain the Government's feed-in tariff and purchased the lease of an office block strategically placed in the Cambridge Science Park which is delivering nearly a 6% nett yield on a £13 million investment. We have refocused Ermine Street's (the council's trading company to let homes on the open market) attention on South Cambridgeshire and the employment catchment of the Greater Cambridge sub-region to deliver properties that are not being supplied by current market conditions, such as rented homes for single people.

Better Pay to Attract and Retain Staff

There are a relatively high number of unfilled posts within the council (which affects customer service) and recruitment has not been helped by a squeeze on staff pay put in place by the previous administration, putting us at a disadvantage against neighbouring councils as well as the Greater Cambridge labour market. We have increased pay by 3% over the past three months, while ensuring that no South Cambridgeshire employee earns less than the real living wage. We are also considering improved non-pay employment packages. Some of the initiatives are listed below:

- Apprenticeship schemes.
- Negotiating discounts for staff, for example on public transport.
- The council has become a Disability Confident employer and an officially recognised disabled friendly employer.
- We have agreed to better maternity leave rates for staff who have premature babies.
- We are starting regular staff surveys to gauge employee satisfaction and encourage ideas to improve the working environment.

Customer Service

Our administration has set a target of improving complaint-handling by 10% and it is hoped that this will be exceeded. The 'mysouthcamb' customer portal is being rolled out, offering our customers the means to access Council services 24 hours a day and 365 days of the year.

Although digitising council services such as 'mysouthcamb' will lead to a lower footfall at the Council offices, we have not forgotten customers who do not have access to, or cannot use, the internet and who prefer to speak to our officers. The visitor experience at the Cambourne offices is therefore to be improved and, at the same time, measures also taken to address issues that staff have raised about their personal security.

Shared Services

Around 40% of the Council's revenue and 52% of its services are delivered by Shared Services (in cooperation with other councils) and it is apparent that when they were set up under the previous administration that insufficient attention was paid to details of governance and accountability. We are working with partners now to rectify this.

'Green to our core'

Our administration has pledged to become a zero-carbon district by 2050. A working group of members and officers is preparing a high-level business case for a set of energy conservation measures (such as EV charging points, solar panels over our car park and on our waste depot). We intend that our Cambourne offices will be a showcase for a Zero Carbon Council and an exemplar to our residents.

A council with a heart

Our administration is determined to find homes in our district for 5 refugee families fleeing warfare in the middle east. The Home Office previously asked the council to help with the rehoming of refugees and two years ago, the then minority Lib Dem Group, put a motion to

Councillor Peter McDonald Duxford Ward:
Parishes of Duxford, Hinxton, Ickleton, Babraham, Pampisford

Council proposing this but it was voted down by the majority Conservative Group. The current Home Office scheme runs until December 2019, and we hope to be able to provide homes for these 5 families by then.

Council grants

The committee that administers council grants has been refocused to make it more responsive to a range of needs and interests across the district. We have put more money into the mobile warden scheme this year and another increase is promised next year. We have initiated a piece of work to look at extending the scheme across the whole district and commissioned a similar piece of work on community transport.

Member Development

After the 2018 election, two-thirds of councillors were new to the role. Working with Democratic Services, a comprehensive programme of training has been delivered. The council holds regular Member briefings and Officer-member workshops. A series of Staff Workshops have been held, asking officers for their views and for ideas about improving the council which were very well received. Many of our members attended these events which send a powerful message that we are seeking to work together as one team to deliver the aims of the whole council.

Our first year in headlines

- Given more money for mobile warden schemes
- Increased Council Tax for empty homes
- Supported local businesses to get council work
- Tailored the Localised Council Tax Scheme for Universal Credit
- Offered homes for five Syrian refugee families
- Provided Brexit help to local businesses
- Sold land for self-build
- Identified sites for more new council houses
- Produced a new homelessness strategy
- Made available a 3-year £400,000 fund for community groups
- Published a new tool kit for loneliness
- Commenced the preparation of a new joint Local Plan with Cambridge City
- Saved X3 bus service from the chop

Peter McDonald

May 2019