

Annual Report to Buckden Parish Assembly 2020

A report on Cambridgeshire County Council from Cllr Peter Downes

Foreword

I wrote the Annual Report (see below) in March. Since then, our world has changed so this foreword provides a short up-date from the County Council perspective. The main report follows below.

1. The County Council has been heavily involved in mitigating the worst effects of the virus, especially in relation to looking after older people and children in need. I think the staff have been showing great resilience and determination in the face of unprecedented circumstances. There was initially some overlap and confusion between what each layer of local government has been doing, especially in relation to the identification of the most vulnerable but I think that has now settled down.
2. **The Director of Children's Services provided this report on April 24th:**
 - a. *Our programme of prioritised face to face visiting to most vulnerable children and young people continues;*
 - b. *Other visiting taking place virtually using social media;*
 - c. *Some visiting is taking place less frequently than previously where this is proportionate;*
 - d. *Links between early help services and community hubs established;*
 - e. *Schools continuing to offer excellent support to children who are vulnerable and those of key workers;*

Low rates of referrals of children continue, as is the case nationally and regionally;

Low numbers of vulnerable children accessing school places despite best efforts, as is the case nationally and regionally. Mitigation for both includes asking safeguarding board and community hubs to ensure they are referring on as needed.

Likely to be a significant increase in referrals once services begin to return to normal and children are being seen by universal services;

For the longer term, the risks are that there is a shortage of Independent Fostering Agency placements as demand returns to usual levels, which may result in greater use of residential placements;

There is also a risk that any spike in demand resulting from more children being referred after the lockdown period ends may require additional temporary staff.

Schools have been staying open for the children of key workers but the up-take has been less than expected and it is not yet clear when schools will re-open fully. The voucher scheme for giving financial food support has been inconsistent.

3. It is too early to say what the long-term financial implications for the County Council will be. The government has made extra money available to local councils and although these sums sound large at national level (e.g. £1.6 billion), by the time they get down to front-line services they may not be adequate. The sum allocated from the government to CCC worked out at just over £14 million. More has been added in the last couple of days.
4. Meetings of councillors and officers continue to take place via Zoom so, as far as possible, the routine work carries on but inevitably more slowly.
5. It has been heartening to see the way in which local communities have rallied round to help those in greatest need. Sometimes that has been organised via a parish council; in other cases self-help groups have sprung up independently.
6. When this crisis is over, not too long we hope, there will need to be a serious discussion at all levels of government, from Westminster through to parish councils about what we will need to do differently in future. Our society will face profound challenges and opportunities. Those who make a commitment to serving the community as elected councillors will have a major role to play

Peter Downes, May 4th 2020

The main report follows the pattern of the reports I have provided in previous years.

Paragraphs 1 – 3 provide the factual details about the County Council

Paragraphs 4 – 5 summarise the Council's financial position and policy

Paragraphs 6 – 9 report on the main areas of County Council activity which affect the lives of residents

Paragraph 10 reports on the Combined Authority of which Cambridgeshire is a part.

Paragraph 11 reports on my more specific contacts with Grafham

Paragraph 12 comments on the national scene insofar as it affects local government.

Paragraph 13 summarises the national pressures and uncertainties we face.

Keeping you informed

It is all too easy for councillors to become engrossed in their work on committees and lose touch with the people they represent. That is why I almost always attend the monthly Parish Council meetings, write articles for 'Roundabout' and provide all residents with up-dates through the Focus leaflets.

I quite understand that not everybody will share my interpretation of national developments and I am very happy to engage constructively with any residents who would like to challenge the contents of this report.

Full details of the Council structure, committees and meetings with reports can be seen on-line at www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk. Full Council meetings are web-cast.

1. The political balance of the Council

The political composition of the Council now stands as:

35 Conservatives, 16 Liberal Democrats, 7 Labour, 2 'St. Neots Independents', 1 Independent.

The Council has seven decision-making committees. with a majority of Conservatives on each committee and every Committee chaired and vice-chaired by a Conservative. The committees are:

Adults	Children and Young People
Commercial and Investment	Economy and Environment
Health	Communities and Partnerships
Highways and Community Infrastructure	

The overall political and financial direction of the Council is in the hands of the General Purposes Committee comprising 15 members. This is chaired by the Leader of the Council who is also the Leader of the Conservative Group.

In addition there are several more smaller committees covering, for example, Planning, Audit and Accounts, Constitution and Ethics, Pensions, Staffing Appeals. All the committees are chaired by Conservatives except Audit and Accounts which is chaired by Cllr Shellens (Lib. Dem.).

2. Council officers

The Chief Executive, Gillian Beasley, is shared with Peterborough as part of the policy of reducing back office costs and several other senior posts are also shared with Peterborough. The trend of recent years i.e. to reduce council staff, has continued.

3. What the Council provides

Social services to children and young people, older people, people with mental health problems, physical and learning disabilities;
Planning of school places and some support for schools (although the funding for day-to-day running comes from central government); Coordinated Early Years provision, nurseries etc.;
Libraries;
Road maintenance; road safety measures;
Growth and wider development issues;
Trading standards; waste disposal and recycling centres.

The former responsibility for Overall transport strategy is gradually being taken over by the Combined Authority.

4. The key issues faced by Cambridgeshire County Council: **reduced funding increasing costs increasing demand**

This report has to be written before the full effect of the budget by the new Chancellor of the Exchequer is known. Central government 'Revenue Support Grant' has been discontinued. In 2013-14 it was £86 million for Cambridgeshire. Councils have had some flexibility to increase tax levels (see below, para. 5) without having to call a referendum. The demand for services is increasing as the proportion of the population needing adult social care support increases and the same applies to the under-fives. The cost of providing services rises above general levels of inflation.

5. Council Tax

The government has again capped the levels by which local councils can increase tax for 2020-21:

2% towards Adult Social Care and 1.99% towards other services.

Cambridgeshire CC has decided to adopt the 2% social care increase but only a 1.59% for other services.. So, for the coming year 2020-21, the 3.59% increase will cost a Band D household an extra £53 per year. Over 60% of households in Cambridgeshire are in the lower bands A-C.

The difference between a 1.59% increase and 1.99% amounts to 11p a week for a Band D household. The loss to the Council is £1.7 million.

In the years 2014 – 2017 the Council did not make use of the full flexibility allowed by central government. As a result of the compounding effect of those decisions, the Council's income is about £22 million less than it would have been

6. Services for older people

More and more people are living longer and, in the main, healthier lives. When they do become dependent, the cost to the Council is very considerable. The Council's aim is to enable more people to live longer at home and be supported there rather than going into sheltered accommodation. The policy of 'Transformation' is based on a significant reduction in personnel together with higher expectations on the voluntary sector and an assumption of a willingness on the part of beneficiaries to accept new ways of being supported. While there is obviously merit in trying to find new ways of providing services, there can be no disguising the fact that provision will get worse for some and this is a matter of great concern, both locally and nationally.

7. Transport and Highways

- a. Road maintenance and footpath repair are the most frequent source of complaint from residents.
- b. One of Cambridgeshire's main road arteries, the A14, is undergoing a major re-build and the knock-on effects on the rest of the road system is considerable.

8. Education

All Cambridgeshire secondary schools are now 'academies' which means that the Council has no jurisdiction over them. The proportion of Cambridgeshire secondary school pupils attending schools rated as 'good' or 'outstanding' has increased since last year. National research findings confirm that becoming an academy does not *of itself* raise standards.

Only a small minority of primaries have become academies. The Ofsted assessment of our primary schools is much more positive and the improvement has been more marked in the maintained primaries than in the

academies. The financial advantage of being an academy, significant in the earlier days of the policy, has now disappeared. The County Council retains responsibility for the 'well-being' of children in academies though it has no formal role in intervening when things go wrong.

Central government grant to Cambridgeshire improved in 15-16, was maintained for 16-17, 17-18 and 18-19. A 'National Funding Formula' published in September 2017 was a small move in the right direction. But, alas, costs in schools have increased at a higher rate. Independent researchers confirm that, **in real terms**, funds available to schools have been cut by 8% since 2010. .

The major topic this year is that funding for children with special needs has not kept up with the demand. The County Council tried to get permission to transfer some money from the mainstream schools budget to what is called the 'High Needs Block' but this was rejected.

A small but unpopular saving is the proposal to stop funding buses for special needs children attending after-school clubs and activities.

9. Climate Change

The County Council, in common with many others, is beginning to take this seriously and is beginning to develop a Strategy to reduce energy consumption. The particular problem for Cambridgeshire is the massive expansion of housing and population. Cambridgeshire is, mainly, an attractive place to live and though house prices are rising, they are good value compared with the London area. A rapidly increasing population puts pressures on many services which use energy but I am sure we will see new ideas coming forward. Whether the general public is ready to change its ingrained habits is another matter!

10. Combined Authority

Since May 2017 there has been a 'Combined Authority' for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough with James Palmer (Con.) as Mayor. The combined authority comprises:

Peterborough City Council (a unitary authority), the district councils of Huntingdonshire, Fenland, East Cambs, South Cambs and Cambridge City, and Cambridgeshire County Council.

The Mayor has a Cabinet comprising the Council Leaders from all the constituent councils, i.e. five Conservatives, one Labour and one Lib Dem, and there is also a scrutiny panel..

Some people claim that the introduction of a Combined Authority makes it unnecessary to have County and District Councils as well as parish councils and perhaps one of the layers of local government could be pruned to save costs. The work on this was remitted to the Mayor but he has done nothing about it.

Controversially the Mayor has recently overruled the Greater Cambridge Partnership in connection with road development proposals. He also has draft plans for a third river crossing from Hartford to Godmanchester which will be fiercely opposed by those fighting to defend the landscape of the Great Ouse Valley. He has decided not to have his HQ at Alconbury as originally planned but to have it in Ely.

The Mayor has also been offered greater scope by central government in order to 'level him up' to the Metro Mayors in the North of England. This means that he will take on adult education and the development of a university in Peterborough.

11. Buckden specifically

a. I attend monthly Parish Council meetings. I report on current issues and answer questions from parish councillors. I liaise with the Parish Clerk and/or Chairman and other councillors between meetings if and when required.

b. The well-known 'problems' for Buckden in terms of traffic flow are well known and not yet moving forward towards resolution.

c. In have worked with many different parish councils and communities over the 20 years I have been a County Councillor and, as I have said before, I rate Buckden very highly for its community spirit and its efficiency. It is clearly a good place to live, which is one of the reasons developers want to build more houses. The challenge for Buckden over the next few years is how to preserve what is positive about the community if and when there is considerable growth.

12. The future for local government services and the implication for communities

a. It is now becoming increasingly clear that the structure and funding of local government as we have known it for many years has changed and will continue to change. The growing expectation is that services will be 'transformed' and local groups - parish councils, voluntary groups – will have a bigger role in supporting those people in the early stage of needing help.

b. The County Council has continued to make savings in its procedures and in increasing income. For example, it has set itself up as a property company and is trying to sell off some of its land holdings for housing. Plans for moving HQ offices out of Shire Hall in Cambridge to a new building in Alconbury Weald are advanced and work has started. The existing impressive building in Cambridge has been leased for 40 years and will become a luxury hotel.

The new building in Alconbury Weald will be much smaller than the current Shire Hall and more staff will be located in some of the existing council properties around the county. Some of these measures are perfectly appropriate but there could be disruption to work patterns with consequences of which we are not yet aware.

13. National uncertainty

It is probably not an exaggeration to say that we face, as a country, greater uncertainty than most of us can remember in a lifetime.

Although the country appeared to make a clear decision in voting in a Conservative government with a clear working majority and a commitment to leaving the EU at the end of this year, it is already becoming apparent that the process of Brexit will be much more complicated than previously claimed by national politicians. We frankly do not know what the implications will be for the country economically nor for us, the general public, in our everyday lives.

Climate change, still disputed by some, appears to be confirmed as an international trend with local implications for changes in our daily pattern of behaviour.

Even as this report is being written, we have the new threat of widespread health concerns with not only their personal consequences but also an impact on many aspects of our social and communal lives.

Peter Downes, March 2020