

County Council report to Buckden Parish Council, February 9th, 2021

The two main themes of the last four weeks have been Covid and flooding so these are highlighted, together with an early heads-up on the County Council budget planning.

1. Flooding

I do not need to labour the point that flooding has been the main topic over recent weeks. The Ouse flows through all the villages in my county division and the flooding has affected local villages differently according to their terrain and proximity to the river. It has become clear to me, through all the on-line meetings I have attended about flooding, that we have all learned a great deal and need to have better procedures in place with the serious possibility that these incidents may become more frequent. The last serious flooding in this part of Cambridgeshire was in 1998 and the lessons learnt then had mainly been forgotten.

Many partners have a part to play:

- a. the Environment Agency has to control the flow of the river as far as it can and give warnings in good time;
- b. Anglian Water has to be able to guarantee the separation of sewage drains from surface drainage
- c. the County Council has to improve its performance in clearing drains (it had reduced this programme as a cost-cutting measure);
- d. the District Council has got to think more carefully about flooding risk when giving planning permission and developers need to be required to include flooding mitigation.
- e. Parish Councils need to know precisely where the areas of greatest risk are and have emergency measures in place e.g. community venues where displaced persons can take refuge;
- f. Landowners are the 'riparian owners' of the ditches and brooks on their land and are responsible for their maintenance;
- g. Houseowners have to be aware of the risk, acknowledge their primary responsibility to protect their own premises and have emergency sandbags, vent covers available if serious flooding threatens.

Extracts from recent report to all councillors from the County Council responsible officer

As you know, 23 December saw extreme levels of rainfall in our area, which caused significant surface water flooding at the time and subsequently caused a large rise in river levels a few days later. Parts of the county recorded three times the monthly average rainfall falling in 24 hours, with many areas recording at least one month's worth. To date we have received approaching 500 reports of flooding incidents and as Lead Local Flood Authority we are required to investigate flooding events, subject to relevant criteria being satisfied. This is to identify the cause and where necessary, making the relevant risk management authorities (RMA's) aware of their responsibilities with respect to the issues identified.

We assessed the reports we had received and identified 'hot spots' of high levels of surface water property flooding. We then approached the local members to ask for their assistance in setting up a local discussion to help gather information to inform our investigations. Buckden, Broughton, March and Swavesey were identified by officers as having had a high number of incidents that fall within our remit. Huntingdonshire District Council have already arranged similar sessions for communities in their area which has helped us greatly. We will keep the emergence of 'hot spots' under review and should further ones be identified by further reporting we may be in touch with local members to ask for your help in engaging with communities.

Depending on the source, there are several agencies involved in the assessment of flooding incidents, of which we are one. Others include Anglian Water, District Councils, Environment Agency and Internal Drainage Boards, so we are endeavouring to include representatives from these at our meetings.

The LLFA team is grateful for your efforts in supporting communities and in encouraging reports. We continue to review reports as they come in, so please can I ask that you encourage residents and businesses to continue to report? Details of how to do so are here:

<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/business/planning-and-development/flood-and-water/report-a-flood>

2. Covid

The last few weeks have been dominated by the impact of the new lockdown on family life, commercial activity and community events. There is a sense that we are in a state of 'limbo' and it is very difficult to focus on future developments. Nevertheless, all those engaged in community life – parish, district and county councillors – have to try to keep up the hope of better days to come.

The County Council is required to keep schools closed except to vulnerable children and the children of 'key workers'. There has been an increase in the number of 'key workers' since the last lockdown. As well as looking after the few children in schools, teachers are expected to provide home learning for the majority. It has been very difficult for them and for parents.

A decision on the re-opening of schools is said to be imminent and may have been announced between my writing this report and the time of the meeting.

3. County Council budget for 2021-22

The routine work of the Council continues and the main topic is inevitably the budget for 2021-22 and beyond. As you will see from the report below, a decision will be made at the February Council meeting next week and I should be able to give you the outcome at your parish council meeting on the same evening. Given the political composition of the Council, it is certain that the Conservative version will be adopted.

The County Council component of our total tax bill amounts to just over 70%, (the rest going to District Council, Fire and Police Authorities, and small % to the parish council). It is therefore a matter which elected councillors take very seriously and try to reconcile the tension between the provision of public services and the cost to the taxpayer.

The full Strategic Review of the Council and its plans for the next five years runs to 374 pages so I think you might prefer the following summary of the key factors:

Cambridgeshire County Council to discuss and set its 2021/22 budget next week

Cambridgeshire County Council meets next Tuesday (Tuesday 9th Feb) to set its budget for the year ahead, aiming to close a projected £9.6m budget gap, and agreeing a new five-year business plan – all under the shadow of the current global pandemic.

A report to Members from **Chris Malyon, Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Finance Officer**, published [here](#) as part of the Full Council agenda, confirms that in February of last year the Council set a balanced budget for the current year, using none of its reserves, and in addition being able to make further investments in measures to transform its services. At that point the Council was in a very robust financial position with only an expected £4.2m 'budget gap' for 2021-22. This was much less than in previous years.

Since *(the global pandemic began in)* March 2020, we have continually developed our understanding of emerging trends, actual demand increases and emerging impacts on society and the economy. This has enabled us to narrow the range of the predicted budget gap and present options for a robust budget for 2021-22", Mr Malyon confirms.

His paper goes on to set out the current financial situation of the council, and the options open to Members to set a balanced budget which every council must do before March 1. At the meeting each of the political groups has the opportunity to present their own amendments to the budget considered by the Council's General Purposes Committee in January. These amendments will be debated and then voted on.

For 2021-22, Cambridgeshire is set to receive £645m of funding*, excluding grants retained by its schools. But its total expected spending 2021-22 - despite finding savings and additional income of £4m, will be £655m - leaving a **£9.612m gap**.

Further gaps are also identified in the next four years of the plan – based on information on the latest projections of expected demand pressures.

The costs of running the Council have risen by £42m (6.9%) compared to the last financial year. In particular, the impact of COVID-19 has led to increased challenges across all services areas but especially in Adult's and Children's Social care which have seen increases in both the amount and complexity of need.

A significant amount of activity has been undertaken to identify savings, efficiencies and income to reduce the current gap. However, the opportunities to generate additional savings proposals without significantly impacting the delivery of services, the paper confirms, have reduced in both number and scale.

Mr Malyon sets out a range of other options which remain available to close the gap for Members to consider which include:

- Increasing the rate at which base Council Tax is set – the government has confirmed councils have freedom to raise council tax by up to 1.99% each year without triggering a local referendum. Each additional 1% added to the council tax bill would bring in just over £3m per year.
- Increasing the rate at which the Adult Social Care Precept is set. The council's current Business Plan is currently based on the council being able to set an Adult Social Care precept of 2% in each of the five years that the plan covers to 2025 – 26.

Each additional 2% added to the council tax bill costs the average Band D Council an additional £27.18 a year.

- Use of the flexibility available around Minimum Revenue Provision (MRP) – extending the amount of time the council has to pay back money it is borrowing and thereby reducing annual cost of that borrowing. A restructuring of the MRP in 2015 led to the creation of the transformation fund.
- Use of the Transformation Fund – money previously set aside each year to transform services across the council to work more efficiently and effectively for local residents. There is currently £23m in the fund.
- Reduce service levels

A further option of using the council's general reserve is also highlighted in the report – although at 3% of the overall budget, the reserve is currently held at the minimum level which is currently considered prudent and therefore should only be used as a last resort to balance the budget.

Cambridgeshire County Council's Full Council meets from 10.30 on Tuesday, Feb 9th and you can follow the debates and discussion live from this [link](#).

*The key sources of Cambridgeshire County Council's funding are council tax (£323m), business rates (£64m), central Government grants (£136m) and fees and charges income (£122m).

Buckden

I attended a meeting about the impact of the Silver Street development proposals and that will be a separate item on your agenda, I'm sure.

I would place on record my admiration for the dedication to civic service and responsibility shown by the Buckden Parish Council. You all work extremely hard in the interests of the well-being of your community and I thank you for all you do.

The current requirements in terms of social distancing etc make it very difficult for me to carry out my normal expectation in terms of local casework but I am always pleased to be copied in to correspondence and, if appropriate, I can give my support or guidance, albeit remotely!

Contact me on 01480 509471, peter.downes@cambridgeshire.gov.uk
Peter Downes, February 4th, 2021