

DISTRICT COUNCILLOR'S REPORT – JANUARY 2026

Dear Residents and Councillors,

As the new year begins, our district moves forward with renewed focus and a continued commitment to transparency, collaboration, and practical progress. Thank you for your ongoing engagement and for shaping the work we do together.

District Council Elections

I am preparing to attend the Special Council meeting on **14 January 2026** to represent our interests. I am seeking the opinions of the Parish Council today to ensure that local views are reflected in the broader discussion.

The Government is currently moving to replace the two-tier system in this area with single-tier unitary councils. While the final structure is still subject to consultation, the current timeline anticipates elections for a new "Shadow Authority" in **May 2027**, with the new unitary council becoming fully operational on **1 April 2028**.

The Case for Postponing Elections

The Secretary of State has invited views on postponement specifically to "release essential capacity" and allow reorganisation to "progress more effectively". Arguments for this path focus on **stability and strategic continuity**:

- **Maintaining Status Quo:** Existing HDC councillors would remain in office until the council is abolished in April 2028, ensuring those who initiated the LGR process see it through to completion.
- **Avoiding Leadership Changes:** A change in decision-makers mid-process could disrupt the momentum of the LGR transition. Proponents argue that changing leadership at such a crucial time may have a poor impact on residents.
- **Preventing "Lame Duck" Mandates:** If elections proceed, members would be elected for a "short term" of only two years (2026–2028).
- **Shadow Authority Overlap:** With Shadow elections in May 2027, proceeding in 2026 could lead to "twin hat" or "triple hat" responsibilities, potentially diluting councillor focus across multiple authorities.
- **Financial Savings:** Postponing would save HDC an estimated **£350,000** in election costs.

The Case for Proceeding with Elections

Those in favour of maintaining the May 2026 schedule emphasize **democratic principles** and **operational capacity**:

- **Mandated Democratic Process:** Elections are the "bedrock of the democratic process," and statutory officers advise that capacity constraints are generally not a legitimate legal reason to delay them.

- **Operational Readiness:** An internal assessment concluded that HDC has the capacity to run the election and the LGR transition concurrently, as there is little overlap between the dedicated staff teams for each task.
- **Parish Financial Impact:** If the District election is postponed, Parish Councils may have to bear the **full cost** of their own standalone elections (estimated at **£475,000** across all 71 parishes), as they would lose the "economies of scale" from sharing costs with the District.
- **Limited Impact on LGR:** Officers advise that postponing elections offers only "limited opportunity" to accelerate LGR, as the primary work currently involves data capture and planning rather than final implementation.

The council must weigh the "reputational risks" of postponing a democratic vote against the "strategic risks" of a change in leadership during the LGR transition. Members who supported **Option E** (Huntingdonshire as an independent unitary) must consider if a 2026 election risks the active pursuit of that option, or if the democratic right of residents to vote outweighs these transition concerns.

Silver Street Development (Morris Homes)

It is vital that we maintain transparency as this project evolves, ensuring that the interests of our residents and the integrity of our local planning documents remain at the forefront.

I am very pleased that the Parish Council is committed to honouring our Neighbourhood Plan (NP) and Housing Needs Assessment (HNA). These are statutory documents, adopted by referendum, and they represent the democratic will of our village.

It is my firm view that we must hold the line on these documents. If the developer's proposal does not align with our NP or HNA, particularly regarding the mix of housing, it is not for the developer to suggest they be set aside for "pragmatic" reasons. By standing by our statutory framework, we ensure that residents remain the priority in this process.

The current Morris Homes proposal represents a fundamental change from the original concept. The shift from raising the site levels to installing a **pumping station** for drainage is a major concern.

- **Flood Risk:** By discharging water into the Silver Street culvert, we risk undermining the foundations of downstream properties.
- **Infrastructure Strain:** Our sewage system is already at a breaking point, with approximately **230 storm discharges in 2024**. Adding more pressure to this system is, in my view, unsustainable.

The developer is currently proposing a "hybrid" road layout consisting of some traditional pavements and some "shared surfaces". While the District Council often leans towards shared surfaces for aesthetic reasons, our **Neighbourhood Plan** rightly prioritises the safety and certainty of traditional pavements.

For those with visual impairments or mobility challenges, a kerb is a vital safety feature. Furthermore, "hybrid" designs can often be the worst of both worlds, creating ambiguity that may concern a **Road Safety Auditor (RSA)**. I will be pushing to see the independent RSA

findings to ensure that "design aesthetics" are not being prioritised over the safety of our most vulnerable pedestrians.

With the combined costs of the A1 roundabout redesign, drainage requirements, and Section 106 obligations, the viability of this site is a complex issue. We should not second-guess the authorities; instead, we should push for a formal viability test sooner rather than later. This ensures the developer proves the site can be delivered safely and in accordance with our local laws before significant capital is invested.

Because these changes effectively create a new type of development, I believe a **public meeting** is essential. I am calling for a forum where Morris Homes, Anglian Water, and the Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) can answer directly to the community. Transparency is the only way to maintain trust and ensure that the long-term safety of Silver Street is guaranteed.

Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) and Regional Flood Updates

At the recent Flood Group Chairs meeting, I facilitated a workshop for the LLFA to identify the most pressing flooding issues across Cambridgeshire. I intend to use this list to engage with other flood groups across the catchment to see if these challenges resonate elsewhere. The top three issues identified in **December 2025** are:

1. Maintenance of Watercourses and Flood Assets

- **Description:** Poor upkeep of rivers, streams, and flood structures (e.g., staunches at St Ives and Brownhill) is both a real and perceived problem. Neglect increases systemic flood risk and undermines public confidence.
- **Impact:** Multiple communities affected; risks to residents, transport, facilities, and the environment.
- **County-wide relevance:** Applies across the Great Ouse catchment and beyond.

2. Planning Ignoring Infrastructure and Capacity Objections (Anglian Water and Others)

- **Description:** Developments are approved despite Anglian Water and statutory consultees warning of insufficient sewerage/drainage capacity. This compounds flood risk and sewage discharge problems.
- **Impact:** Sewer overflows, property flooding, environmental pollution, and erosion of trust in planning processes.
- **County-wide relevance:** Systemic issue across Cambridgeshire; growth pressures outpace infrastructure investment.

3. Condition of Highway Drains

- **Description:** Blocked roadside gullies and drains cause nuisance flooding, leading to perceptions of neglect ("council doesn't care"). This undermines engagement and makes larger floods escalate more quickly.
- **Impact:** Residents, transport, and community morale affected; drains often blocked by silt and debris.

- **County-wide relevance:** Widespread issue across Cambridgeshire, critical for building trust and resilience.

Wishing you well,

Martin

Martin Hassall

District Councillor for Buckden, Diddington and Southoe

Phone: 07480 798 342 - Email: martin.hassall@huntingdonshire.gov.uk