

## **Annual Report 2021 Melbourn, Bassingbourn, Meldreth & Whaddon: County Cllr Susan van de Ven**

This report includes a summary of my work on behalf of the communities I represent, and then basic background on the composition and responsibilities of the County Council. I stand for re-election this May and, whatever the result, would like to thank parish councillors and clerks for their work for the local community and to say how much I have enjoyed working with them.

**Coronavirus response:** All four villages have seen remarkable community action to ensure that residents receive the support they need. There has been much sharing of resource and good practice, with provision of food and social support, assistance in getting prescriptions and groceries, and refurbished computers to our village colleges for home learning, all thanks to volunteers. County and District Councils have worked together to provide first-rate support to community groups and have helped disperse Covid support funding.

**Practical Solutions Groups, Melbourn and Bassingbourn:** These groups were set up to unite school leaders, councillors and officers and police community support officers, to promote positive community projects and in particular supporting our young people and our elderly and vulnerable residents. Meetings had to be halted during the height of the pandemic but the structures that were already in place helped facilitate Covid community support.

**Access and sustainable transport:** In order to progress opportunities for improved cycling, walking and public transport, I coordinate several community groups including the Cam Vale Bus User Group, the Meldreth Shepreth and Foxton Community Rail Partnership, and the A10 Corridor Cycling Campaign. Despite Covid interruptions, all three areas have seen progress:

- Train services have had to reduce but retain core services to provide key worker transport, and in May we'll see the restoration of the half-hourly timetable. The Passenger Benefit Fund is being applied to all three stations for infrastructure improvements.
- The former 127 bus service has, remarkably, moved to a commercial footing as the number 17, serving Melbourn, Meldreth, Whaddon, Kneesworth, Bassingbourn, Litlington, the Mordens and Royston. Bassingbourn's North End stop has been reinstated following close working across parish and county councils and the bus operator.
- The approval of the Melbourn Greenway scheme will bring improvements to the basic A10 network including a Melbourn-Royston link.

**Water & Highways issues:** The dire state of County Council finance has been spotlighted by water-related issues in Bassingbourn (unrepaired leak on the A1198) and badly blocked drainage networks in Melbourn and Meldreth, both river valley villages. Effective intervention of County Highways has been a long time coming. It has been good to see resurfacing of a small number of roads/pavements in Melbourn, Meldreth & Bassingbourn though much more is needed.

**East West Rail, Bedford to Cambridge:** The East West Railway Company has announced detailed route options for the new railway line from Bedford to Cambridge. While originally a Bassingbourn station and route had been proposed, the proposal now is for a station at Cambourne and then a dip southward to join up at a new Cambridge South Station, which will meet the ongoing growth of the Cambridge Biomedical Campus. It's vital that this new line contributes fully to the move to zero carbon from day one, meaning that the line should be designed to be electrified or hydrogen powered. Many thousands of residents are potentially affected by the routes being consulted which includes a **7km long and 10m high embankment** from the Eversdens to Shelford, cutting across Barrington hill and the A10 between Foxton and Harston. Consultation closes June 9th:

<https://eastwestrail.co.uk/consultation>

**‘South West Cambridgeshire’ new town:** A West Sussex speculative development company, Thakeham, is proposing to create a new town sprawl of 25,000 homes between and encompassing the villages of Shepreth, Melbourn, Meldreth, Whaddon, Bassingbourn, Wimpole, Orwell, Barrington and Foxton. This has its origins in a Bassingbourn EWR route. The new town, dubbed ‘South West Cambridgeshire,’ would be half the size of Cambridge and would profoundly change the hinterland of a multitude of villages. The developer has missed the deadline for the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan’s ‘Call for Sites’ in spite of having spent the past two years preparing its scheme, during which time it will have been fully aware of the South Cambridgeshire Planning process. It now proposes a late submission in the Call for Sites – promised by Easter but still awaited. I am part of the South West Cambridgeshire Action Group which is scrutinizing the various national channels that could meet Thakeham’s aspirations: <http://www.swcag.org.uk/>

### **Background: County Council responsibilities and future direction.**

Full details of the County Council structure, committees and meetings with reports can be seen on-line at [www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk](http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk). Full Council meetings are live-streamed.

Political Balance: 35 Conservatives, 16 Liberal Democrats, 7 Labour, 2 ‘St. Neots Independents’, 1 Independent.

**Decision-making committees:** With a Conservative majority on each committee and every Committee chaired and vice-chaired by a Conservative:

- Adults
- Children and Young People
- Commercial and Investment
- Economy and Environment
- Health (Public Health & Health Scrutiny)
- 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 smaller committees - Planning, Audit and Accounts, Constitution and Ethics, Pensions, Staffing Appeals - all chaired by Conservatives except Audit and Accounts, chaired until recently by a LibDem.

### **Council officers and Council offices**

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 to reduce council staff, has continued. The CCC HQ building, Shire Hall, has been closed and emptied prior to being re-developed for other purposes, and the County Council will move to new buildings in Alconbury Weald, probably from September 2021. The new buildings will be more economical to run but has no public transport links. There will be increased travel costs and time for staff, and more traffic pollution.

### **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

*Responsibility for transport strategy is gradually being taken over by the Combined Authority.*

### **Key issues faced: reduced funding, increasing costs, increasing demand, Covid**

The reduction in general grants from central government has continued except that some extra money has been made available for Covid measures. The Local Government Association, a cross-party organisation, has been ringing alarm bells about the greater financial burden placed on local councils and several have become insolvent. County Councils have the flexibility to increase tax levels to government approved levels (see below) without having to call a referendum. The demand for services is increasing as the proportion of the population needing adult social care support increases. Although the total number of under-fives is not increasing at the moment, the severity of need of an increasing proportion is placing greater demands on a hard-pressed service. The general pattern is for the cost of providing services to rise above general levels of inflation.

### **Council Tax**

The government has again capped the levels by which local councils can increase tax for 2021-22:

- 3% over two years towards Adult Social Care and 1.99% towards other services.

Cambridgeshire CC has decided to limit the social care increase to 1%, followed by 2% next year and 1.99% for other services. So, for the coming year 2021-22, the total 2.99% increase will cost a Band D household an extra £54.22 per year. Over 60% of households in Cambridgeshire are in the lower bands A-C. In round figures, every 1% brings in about £3 million to the Council.

Since capping was introduced in 2014, the Council has not made use of the full flexibility allowed by central government. As a result of the compounding effect of those decisions, the Council's income is much less than it would have been.

### **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.

### **Corporate Parent: Looked After Children**

The County Council is the corporate parent for children in care, of which in January there were 670.

### **Highways**

- a. Road maintenance and footpath repair are the most frequent source of complaints.
- b. The impact of the decision by the County Council to reduce the drain clearance process was cruelly exposed by the recent flooding incidents across the County.
- c. The work on the new A14 is nearing completion, and this produces knock-on effects on the rest of the road system. Highways England is responsible for the maintenance of motorways and trunk roads but most A and B roads are maintained at the expense of the local authority which is designated as the 'Highways Authority'. The Highways Authority receives a grant from central government towards those costs but this does not begin to address the level of need.

## **Education**

All Cambridgeshire secondary schools are now 'academies' which means that the Council has no jurisdiction over them. The disruption of the last few months has caused the suspension of Ofsted inspections and of conventional examinations so it is not possible to make a comment on the success of Cambridgeshire schools against national benchmarks. Only a small minority of primaries have become academies.

The County Council retains responsibility for the 'wellbeing' of children in academies though it has no formal role in intervening if things go wrong. Central government grant to Cambridgeshire improved in 2015-16 and has been maintained. A 'National Funding Formula' published in September 2017 was a small move in the right direction. Costs in schools have increased at a higher rate. Independent researchers confirm that, **in real terms**, funds available to schools have been cut by 9% since 2010.

The major topic this year, as last, is that funding for children with special needs has not kept up with the demand. The 'High Needs Block' in Cambridgeshire now has a deficit of £28 million, and a similar pattern is seen in other counties, so this is a national problem.

## **Environment and Climate Change**

The County Council, in common with many others, is beginning to acknowledge the climate crisis and develop a strategy to reduce energy consumption. Following a council debate on the draft Climate Change and Environment Strategy, the Leader was persuaded to support the declaration of a Climate Emergency. The particular problem for Cambridgeshire is the massive expansion of housing and population and lack of public transport in its vast rural area. Decision-making with partner stakeholders is often disjointed. At an officer level there is good joint working with the South Cambs Climate Action and Environment team.

## **Combined Authority**

Since May 2017 there has been a 'Combined Authority' for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough under a Mayor, comprising:

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

The Mayor has a Cabinet comprising the Council Leaders from all the constituent councils (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 Mayor has also been offered greater scope by central government in order to 'level up' to the Metro Mayors in the North of England. This means adding adult education and the development of a university in Peterborough among other projects as well as oversight of strategic housing development.

## **The future for local government services and the implication for communities**

It is 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. Central government has been decreasing its grants to local councils with the expectation is that services will be 'transformed' and local groups - parish councils and voluntary groups – will have a bigger role in supporting those people in the early stage of needing help. 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.