

Cambridgeshire County Councillor's Report

Dry Drayton Village - 11 November 2020

Finance

It's that time of year when the county council is again looking to set its budget for the next financial year. Following the challenges of the first half of this financial year, it is clear that there is a significant funding gap. Consequently the council has now written to the government offering options of financial flexibility to meet future budget demands, as well as directly requesting further funding. Over the last four years the council has worked closely with local MPs to campaign for a fairer funding deal for the county. This resulted in a good level of one-off support in advance of a government promise of a full spending review. However, as councillors approach this year's budget setting round, they may be facing a stark choice between either taking potentially drastic measures to bridge this Covid-19 related gap, or an unacceptable rise in local taxation. In his letter the leader of the council asks the government to take decisive action to support local services.

in February, Cambridgeshire County Council agreed a business plan and budget for 2020-2021 that reflected a positive and healthy short and medium term financial position. Thus it was not only able to set a balanced budget for 2020-2021 but also had a clear and achievable position for the year 2021/2022 with savings of just £4.2m needing to be made to balance a total budget of £650m. However, less than six weeks later the whole of the UK was in lockdown. As the implications of the pandemic hit, the council immediately took a central role in coordinating the response of public services across the county as they all tried to manage the complex public health and economic consequences. The council is now asking government to recognise the hard work that went into that effort and its financial impact, and to do what it needs to, so that the council can continue to deliver the services that its residents expect and need.

Health & Social Care

Despite the fact that numbers of Covid-19 cases [although rising] are still relatively low in South Cambridgeshire, as we all know, a nationwide second lockdown is now in progress. The prospect of isolation against a backdrop of short days and weather that does nothing to encourage outdoor activity, won't be welcomed by many residents who live alone. Providing community support is a challenge for some of the bigger villages in the division. Here in Dry Drayton I know that the parish council is already thinking about what replacements there might be for some of the usual community activities in the village that everyone enjoys and which provide a sense of belonging and being supported. There is also an excellent organisation called Care Network with whom I am regularly in touch and with whom I have recently been speaking about the challenges of loneliness and social isolation. I have already made the parish council aware of this organisation and, if any of you have a personal need, I can provide contact details for you to discuss the resources that are available through Care Network. Please let me know if that's the case.

Highways

The three outstanding issues that have been raised locally are all drainage related. I obtained the following update from our Local Highways Officer [LHO] yesterday afternoon [10.11.2020]

Oakington Road/Park Street - jetting of drains. This has been ordered. No date yet. The contractor has been kept very busy since the August storms that we experienced.

Park Lane - promised investigation into the cause of almost perpetual flooding at the junction with Madingley Road. This, too is awaiting jetting [it has been ordered] prior to further investigation.

Scotland Road - this is a more complicated issue and I am grateful to both a local resident and a parish councillor who have provided information. Our LHO visited the site last week [confirmed by a resident]. An order for grips to be cut has been made but the LHO is aware that the local view is that these alone will not resolve the matter. I have now also written to an officer in the council's Lead Local Flood Authority team asking that he work with our LHO to find a resolution.

Drainage is an issue not just in Bar Hill division it would seem, but across the county. The current policy is reactive and not always as promptly reactive as residents would like. I am pleased to see that a new proposal for highways drain maintenance is being developed for the next budget year. As a member of Highways & Transport committee which will be asked to approve any change in policy, I will be scrutinising the proposal closely. Responsibilities for drainage are complicated and communication and collaboration between the various organisations is not good. Most of these are public sector organisations, all of which complain that they have insufficient funding. I am working to improve this situation which I am convinced will offer taxpayers better value for money.

Education

The details of the current lockdown are continuously reviewed by the education service. The county council's Director of Education [DoE] continues to provide supportive daily communications for all headteachers. The current advice is that all those in the clinically extremely vulnerable group should work from home. This obviously impacts on staff numbers in school and thus the way that schools manage the education offer. Recently too for one SCamb primary school a small number of confirmed Covid-19 cases has resulted in large numbers of both pupils and staff having to self isolate, leading to a week long closure. I receive a weekly list of schools that have had cases confirmed. In the local area numbers are generally very low. It is a shame that Cambridge News chose as a recent on-line headline, an out of context quote from the county council's press release that seems not to reflect that.

In September the Department of Health and Social Care agreed to supply PPE to Education Services free of charge. Hopefully this will save schools some money and also the time that would otherwise be spent on sourcing PPE. The council is providing an appropriate distribution process.

I accepted an invitation this month to attend a Zoom budget briefing given by the DoE for headteachers and school business managers. It was extremely well attended. Despite an existing funding proposal there is concern about government funding for the forthcoming year particularly around the allocation for Special Educational Needs & Disabilities.

Libraries

The county's libraries will continue to offer a limited service during lockdown including the Select and Collect offer that you may already be used to. Full details of what is being offered can be accessed at: <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/libraries-leisure-culture/libraries>

Household Recycling Centres

All nine of Cambridgeshire's household recycling centres will remain open during lockdown. There is significantly reduced capacity due to the social distancing measures that are in place and residents are being asked to make only essential visits. The booking and e-permit schemes still apply. Further details can be found at: <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/waste-and-recycling/household-recycling-centres> where you can also make a booking to visit. For those unable to go on line, the phone number to make a booking is: 0345 045 5207.

Please do continue to contact me with your comments and questions.
Take care. Stay safe.

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