

Report by Councillors Claire Daunton and John Williams for Quy Parish Council, May 2020

Much of what we would normally report on is now on hold : major site developments, major area initiatives, infrastructure projects etc. However, much work has been going on to ensure that we continue to deal with local issues and are fully connected with the implications of national decisions. See below for updates on North East Cambridge and sites at the airport. We will also refer below, where appropriate, to the possible impact of recent government announcements on South Cambs.

Covid -19 : SCDC Actions

Over the past seven weeks the work of South Cambs District Council has been adapted to deal with the current virus epidemic and resulting lockdown. Officers and councillors have been working hard together to deal with the many consequent needs and challenges. These have affected all areas of the Council's work from Housing to Revenue and Benefits, to Planning, Waste Management, Environmental Health, Sustainable Communities, Democratic Services, Legal Services, IT and Building Control. We must first pay tribute to the dedication and hard work of all Council staff, alongside our work. This is largely hidden effort but it is clear that, since much connected with Covid 19 has fallen on local government, the impact on the lives of all those involved – staff and councillors - has been significant.

As district councillors we have found our lives turned upside down and we can identify with parish councillors and residents on how much time, as well as mental and physical adjustment, the pandemic and its consequences has taken.

Here are some examples of work which has a direct effect on parish councils, and on local communities more generally.

Volunteer Co-ordination

SCDC officers and councillors have worked constantly alongside volunteer groups across the District. We have also been giving additional support to those in the particularly vulnerable group who are on the 'shielding' register, and supporting our Housing colleagues to maintain contact with residents in Council-owned houses. All villages and wards now have volunteer groups working well. These form a network of communication and assistance which is proving crucial to local communities in dealing with the consequences of the epidemic. As councillors we are in constant contact with our local groups as with the responsible officers (patch managers) for each Ward. This has been an outstanding effort on the part of everyone. Some of the work is highly confidential, but where we have been able to share information with volunteer coordinators, such as in Little Wilbraham this has been a very valuable, supportive partnership, and continues to be so.

In Quy we have been pleased to work alongside the parish clerk and parish councillors to help the very strong, local volunteer support. We have been able to share information concerning the assistance available from South Cambs and the County and have been much assisted in our own work with specific individuals by the excellent work of the local group.

There has been very good communication between officers, parish council, volunteers and councillors. We recognise fully the level of hard work and creative commitment in Quy, and we thank you for this.

Waste Management Services

1. The green bin collection was suspended in the middle of March. This was because there was sickness and self-isolation amongst staff, as well as their taking on childcare responsibilities whilst schools were closed. There was then a need to introduce social distancing when working, meaning that collection rounds were taking longer. Our bin men are key workers.

2. Management worked hard to put in place systems that meant the green bin collection was re-introduced from 4th May, only a monthly basis to start with. The usual collection timetable was followed where possible, with some modifications. The PC was contacted and there were press notices and social media notices. On the first week of resumed collections the Waste Service collected 268 tons of green waste and the workforce surpassed their previous impressive collection target : it now stands at 99.8% of bins collected on time and on the day indicated. We hope that very soon the usual fortnightly collections will return.
3. There had been an increase in fly-tipping, possibly because the County's recycling centres were closed. The Waste Service was quick to follow up notifications of fly tipping. If any is reported to the PC, please encourage people to use the on-line reporting system.

Planning and Development

1. Planning officers are working as usual, even if remotely. There was a backlog of applications in the system due to some necessary downtime for the introduction of the new IDOX IT. This is now working well and gives PCs an opportunity to follow the progress of applications more easily. Officers are now working through the backlog with speed. We are also going paperless and ask PCs to help us do this as quickly and effectively as possible. **Planners are obliged to follow national rules and guidelines and to work to within the framework of the Local Plan, and continue to do so diligently, even if this might prove difficult.**
2. New Area teams have been introduced. PCs have been sent notifications of their team leader and areas covered by the different teams. Let us know if you have any difficulties in making contact ; some difficulties experience in the beginning of the lockdown period have now been solved. Once the lockdown is over we will help arrange in-person meetings with the team, giving you more direct contact with those dealing with your local applications.
3. Planning Meetings. The Council now has in place IT and protocols for holding virtual meetings, with public participation, using Microsoft Teams software. The Planning Committee is now holding virtual meetings ; and additional meetings have been scheduled to allow a return to a normal schedule as soon as possible.
4. Local and Neighbourhood Plans. The work on the next Local Plan is proceeding, as Planners collate and analyse the outcome of the various consultation exercises and assemble this into a report that can then be used to inform the next stage of the process. At the same time the work of sifting and analysing the information provided by landowners and developers in the 'call for sites' exercise has been going on. In the near future Ward councillors and Parish Councils it should be possible to contact concerning the outcome of this 'call for sites' exercise to indicate where sites in their specific areas have been put forward, and the criteria that is being applied to these sites. The Planning Service wishes to inform and consult at every step of the Local Plan. On Neighbourhood Plans, you will have seen the government's decision to pause the processes on these until 2021 given that, except in exceptional circumstances, referenda will not be able to take place.
5. Greater Cambridge Planning has just won much-coveted awards in relation to the Marmalade Lane development in Orchard Park. A co-housing project developed with the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service by developer TOWN has been recognised for Excellence in Planning by the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI). The project vision, set out by Cambridge-based Mole Architects and the future residents of the new homes on Marmalade Lane, was for an active low carbon community with beautiful buildings and spaces that integrated with the wider area. Marmalade Lane is now a sustainable co-housing neighbourhood, consisting of 42 state-of-the-art homes with community facilities and a shared garden, built on land previously owned by Cambridge City Council. At the virtual awards ceremony on 30 April, the project won the Excellence in Planning for Health and Wellbeing award; the Excellence in Planning for Small Schemes award; and the Silver Jubilee Cup Overall Winner. The judges were impressed by the project's innovative approach to developing the land and working collaboratively to overcome a range of planning and delivery challenges along the way.

6. North East Area Action Plan. Another meeting to discuss the early stages of this plan for the 160-hectare site at Cambridge North has been planned for the end of May. The move of the Water Treatment Plant is crucial part of the development of this site, but is a different exercise, conducted under different regulations. Anglia Water are to resume the consultation meetings, paused in March on account of the lockdown. We are in contact with Anglia Water and will be kept up to date on developments and on arrangements for parish council consultations.
7. Sites close to the Airport. Work has resumed on the Marleigh site and Hill and Marshall's are hoping to reach their target for the first 150 houses, with not too much delay. South Cambs is about to appoint a community officer to help early stages of community development there. Hill's have also presented plans for the installation of a roundabout, cycle and footpaths on Airport Way, close to Teversham, taking on board and including all the comments of earlier meetings. For the land north of Cherry Hinton, plans for this will be for major examination and discussion at the next meeting of the JDCC – postponed from 18th March – to be held on 27th May.

Finance

The SCDC Finance team is busy on a number of fronts : dealing with Council Tax queries and assisting those who are finding it difficult to pay ; dealing with business rate relief for businesses who cannot operate at present ; giving out grant monies from the government's several business assistance schemes.

The department is also dealing with the significant challenges facing local government finance from the drop in rates income and the increase in burden of work and of expectations. It is crucial that we do not lose income from Council tax ; and there is assistance in place to help those who are finding it difficult to pay. Officers are on hand to deal with this, and we pay tribute to their hard work. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) administers Universal Credit, but we know that there has been a significant increase in the number of claims. There has also been a significant increase in those seeking assistance with rent relief and with housing allowance. We will provide up to date figures at the meeting. This of course has had a significant impact on the work of the Revenues and Benefits department : claims are taking about two and a half weeks to process ; but for those in urgent need, immediate payments can be made

Work of the Revenues and Benefits Team

- There has been unprecedented demand for Universal credit
- Nationally more than 1 Million claims since 16 March which 6x the normal
- First payments for UC claims for March 30/31 have been made this week.
- Over 200 residents on Housing Benefit in South Cambridgeshire have received extra Housing Benefit which has averaged at nearly £30 weekly. The increase is replicated in Universal Credit and reflects the high rental costs in South Cambridgeshire.
- Notifications of UC applications to benefits: 1280 since 16 March all applicants who have not submitted a claim for council tax support have been notified of how and where to claim council tax support- (normally would have expected 200). There are around 1500 claims which are incomplete and waiting for residents to complete; these residents will receive reminders to complete the application (the majority of these will be council tax support claims)
- Numbers of claims in payment have increased from 6048 to 6181 there has been an increase in UC claims of 180 during this period. There has been an increase in council tax support awards of £200,000 compared with last year.
- Significant increase in work for Revenues and Benefits staff as more than double the number of new claims have been received and an additional 1000 changes of circumstances have been received.
- **Claims processing** days for SCDC benefits are higher than normal around 2.5 weeks but this is reasonable when comparing with 5-week processing for UC.
- **Hardship fund payment Council Tax Support**. Payments up to £150 in first phase. Second phase will enable SCDC to support those on UC/Working Tax Credit to ensure that extra payments from DWP increase Council Tax payments.

Financial Support from central government to local government for the additional burden that has fallen on local government has been provided in two tranches, *on a per capita basis*, £46k in the first tranche and £1.57m in the second tranche. The Local Government Network and the Local Government Association has ensured that the work and pressures of local government have begun to be heard in Westminster. It is too early yet to know precisely where the impact of Covid 19-related spending has fallen hardest. SCDC does not yet have all the information that will enable us to calculate fully how and where this will help.

Business Support : Grants and Relief

The Business Support Unit, recently enhanced in terms of coverage and staff, has been at the forefront of setting up networks of communication with businesses of all sizes, but especially SMEs, across the District and the City – working closely with city colleagues and with organisations representing businesses. The Unit has ensured that grants and other types of relief have been administered and that businesses are aware of the routes to financial assistance, as well as the various means of access to advice. Again, officers and councillors have been working closely together, both centrally and across all Wards. Eighty four per cent of the almost 2,000 businesses eligible for support have now been contacted. If registered for business rates village halls are eligible for rates’ relief and they have been contacted and encouraged to apply. This is an impressive result : officers and councillors have worked together to ensure that the message is heard and businesses claim what they are entitled to.

Here in the Wilbrahams we have worked closely with those eligible for grants, both self-employed and the small businesses we know about.

If, through personal contacts, you hear of any small businesses with whom we have not yet made contact, please do let us know and we will follow that up with speed.

A further tranche of funding to help local businesses has been awarded to local government but without criteria. South Cambs and the City are working closely on how best to draw up criteria for the spending this latest amount of money, £1.6m.

The Business Support Unit will be maintaining contact with businesses through and beyond this crisis. A Business beyond Covid strategy is well under development.

Virtual Meetings

Whilst councillors and officers have been meeting regularly for briefing sessions, and discussion meetings, the first official virtual meeting of a South Cambs committee took place on Friday 24th April, allowing public participation. This was the regular monthly meeting of the Grants Advisory Committee. It was held using new regulations for virtual public meetings, with specific protocols concerning speaking, recording, and the management of information on screen. No problems were encountered. This process has been extended successfully to other committee meetings, with public participation ; and, with relevant adaptations, it will be used for a Full Council meeting later in May.

Cycling and Walking

As yet we have few details on how and where the additional funding for walking and cycling, announced recently by the government, will be spent. The funds (£2m for the whole of Cambridgeshire, Cambridge City and Peterborough) will be given to the Combined Authority (CA). We have to be realistic about what this will mean for South Cambs. The CA is also carrying out further work on the CAM metro feasibility. CamCycle has initiated a new campaign ‘Spaces to Breathe’ and we are commenting on that.

Case Work

We continue to carry out individual casework as residents require. Most of this is dealt with confidentially, and now remotely, on – for example - Planning and Housing matters. Recently we have also provided individual, tailored assistance to local businesses and the self-employed.