

Whaddon District and County Councillor Reports September 2024

Bumper issue - there is a backlog to report on general council issues and public consultations that were paused due to the General Election.

This report includes:

- *Local Issues*
- *Public Consultations*
- *County Council Issues*
- *District Council Issues*
- *Cost of Living Support*
- *War Memorial Grants*
- *Fire Service issues*
- *Police Service Issues*

STOP PRESS: Parish Liaison Tuesday Sept 10 (invitations issued by SCDC to all parish councils)

Peter Freeman of Homes England will be on hand to answer questions about what next for 'Cambridge 2050.' We are encouraging all parish councils to attend if they can.

Local issues

Foul Water – County Council liaison with Anglian Water

Following reports of foul water infrastructure problems from a number of parishes around the county, we asked if the County Council could arrange a wider forum for liaison with Anglian Water. This is happening this week, and Susan will report back.

New Local Highways Officer starting

It's great to report that Catriona Morton has been LHI for the patch to which Whaddon belongs – together with 34 other villages. Catriona is currently getting settled and undergoing induction.

A-Road litter picking

South Cambs District Council is responsible for litter picking on local A-roads and has been very responsive to representations on the need for additional sessions. The team has recently been expanded and at our request parts of the A1198 that are particularly affected by littering will now get more frequent cyclical attention.

Melbourn-Meldreth path upgrade

We are including this for the record, as Whaddon residents will encounter the works on their travels to Meldreth and Melbourn, and for its relevance to Meldreth Station:

This is part of the 'Melbourn Greenway' delivered by the Greater Cambridge Partnership, whose remit is to deliver infrastructure improvements through ring-fenced national funding. Eventually the Melbourn Greenway is designed make some safety improvements for active travel in Melbourn High Street, and to create a new off-road path and bridge to Royston.

The current works are well underway with much attention having been put into the diversionary footway along Station Rd – a fundamentally difficult route and indeed one of the reasons for improving the field path. The diversion has had vegetation cut way back (and we have pointed out that this needs to be a year-round standard) and has been tested by a local resident rail user and her

guide dog. Some signage has been moved or gone missing; please get in touch if you spot anything that needs tweaking.

The new path will be lit and will accommodate all forms of active travel. Some cycle parking will be installed at the base of the London platform. Together with the 'Wonderpass' (A10 underpass on the pedestrian route) and its public art (which will be receiving some remedial paint work and tidy up during the construction period), the new route will have a well-supported feel.

Greater accessibility needed at Meldreth Station

Questions have arisen during the Greenway works which we thought would benefit from some background information:

Meldreth Station is owned by Network Rail and leased to the Train Operating Company, GTR.

Meldreth Station inaccessibility (over the tracks, and to the London platform) has actively taken up by the Meldreth Shepreth and Foxton Community Rail Partnership and Rail User Group over the past 15 years. The Community Rail Partnership works with the rail industry toward local access and service improvements.

Meldreth station is relatively small in terms of footfall so lags behind the Letchworths and Roystons, and therefore we have not been near the top of the queue for lifts. A ramp from Meldreth Station car park to the Cambridge platform was achieved some ten years ago. Partial funding from a TTP (Melbourn Science Park) Section 106 agreement has been allocated for a ramp from the path to the London platform but the rest needs to come from the rail industry. An Access for All application to the Dept for Transport for that ramp funding due for determination last year was delayed then announced as unsuccessful just before the General Election. GTR have told us they will try again, and we are continually challenging GTR. Meanwhile the Community Rail Partnership helps with signposting to GTR's Mobility Assistance scheme at Meldreth Station.

Public consultations

National Planning Policy Framework – proposed reforms

There has been much speculation on changes to planning policy, directed by central government, following the General Election. A government consultation has now been launched which is open for response until 24 September.

Please look here for full context and information, and for how to respond:

[Proposed reforms to the National Planning Policy Framework and other changes to the planning system - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/proposed-reforms-to-the-national-planning-policy-framework-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system)

Combined Authority Bus Franchising Consultation

Bus services in our area are poor and have been declining over many years. The Transport Act 1985 removed the public sector's role in fare-setting, routes, and bus frequencies. Bus services are run by commercial provider; where a commercial provider does not come forward the local transport authority may step in with a publicly subsidized 'contracted service' – and this is the case for all of our local bus services.

The Mayoral Combined Authority (which is our Local Transport Authority) has launched a major consultation proposing a new framework of public control permitted in the mayoral local

government framework. The consultation will run for 14 weeks and will compare a franchising solution with an Enhanced Partnership approach.

‘Under a franchised network, the Combined Authority would contract bus operators to run services on its behalf but have control over the routes, frequency, fares and overall standards of the region’s buses. An alternative Enhanced Partnership solution, while producing benefits over the current bus service, provides less control over the routes, frequency and overall delivery of the services.’

[Combined Authority announces launch date for bus franchising consultation - Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority \(cambridgeshirepeterborough-ca.gov.uk\)](https://www.cambridgeshirepeterborough-ca.gov.uk/news/combined-authority-announces-launch-date-for-bus-franchising-consultation)

This is part of a continuing search for means of improving local public transport. Last year’s Making Connections public consultation saw an unprecedented response; the Cambridge city road charge would have generated very significant income to fund a publicly controlled and augmented bus network. Lack of political support meant the discontinuation of that scheme.

Active travel hierarchy consultation

A consultation on the development of an ‘Active Travel Hierarchy’ was launched on 22 July. This seeks feedback on which routes and public rights of way are considered most important to users, as well as asking residents about their preferences for prioritised maintenance activities. Some of the feedback, including from me, was that the consultation was difficult to use and understand. In response, the council has revised the online material to make it easier and extended the consultation to **30 September**. <https://consultcambs.uk.engagementhq.com/active-travel-hierarchy>

County Council issues

State of roads, pavements and highway infrastructure:

As reported over months and years, the effect of so many years of severe national underfunding has left the workforce slim and the maintenance budget very low. Cambridgeshire local authority funding is well known to be particularly low per head of population hence lobbying nationally by all Cambridgeshire councils for ‘Fair Funding.’ Government gives out some extra pothole funding every year, but this is only a tiny fraction of what is needed. If maintenance grant funding were to vastly increase as it needs to, the workforce too would need to increase, to manage and carry out works (and that would require increased revenue funding).

Weed treatment

The County Council’s chemical weed treatment programme is underway, within built-up areas in villages and towns with a 40MPH limit or below. Treatment will take place twice a year as a minimum. Chemical weed treatment is applied directly to any weeds in the gullies of roads and at the back of footways abutting a building, wall, or fence line. A period of about three to five weeks is typically required for the weed treatment to take effect. After this, road sweepers are deployed to remove dead weeds. A second programme of treatment will take place in October. This will help to get the weeds under control before the next growing season. Seven areas of the county have confirmed that they do not wish to be part of the chemical weed treatment programme, so they have been excluded. The County Council is working with these areas—Cambridge, Caxton, Duxford, Lolworth, Morborne, Burwell, and Girton—to appropriately support their alternative treatment regimes.

Overgrown vegetation

It's hard to find a path that has not been beset by encroaching plant life! Thank you to all residents who have taken the time to cut back any overhanging hedges or trees from their property. County Highways should be contacted to cut back vegetation on public land – please do use the Cambridgeshire Report a Fault website and keep hold of the reference number to share with Susan if necessary.

Old Shire Hall

Cambridgeshire County Council's former HQ, Shire Hall is set to become a luxury hotel having originally been put up for sale in 2018 as CCC HQ relocated to the purpose-built New Shire Hall at Alconbury Weald in 2021. The original deal fell through and the site was remarketed earlier this year.

15 bids were received with a range of different uses proposed for the various buildings on the site including hotels and extended stay apartments, retirement living, student, co-living, research, residential apartments, offices and business space. The bid aims to create a luxury hotel with a restaurant and spa complex.

District Council issues

South Cambs Business Support: Youth Engagement Programme

An SCDC Youth Enterprise Support Programme will support young people who want to start their own business, to get started. The programme will work with young individuals aged 16-25 to develop essential skills, knowledge and will include opportunities to gain real market experience. Candidates will also be eligible to apply for £1,000 grants to transform their business ideas into local market ventures.

Young people who are interested in the Youth Enterprise Support Programme can register to start their journey from conception to commerce at <https://nxgconnect.co.uk/youth-enterprise-programme/> If you have any queries please contact Business Support Key Projects Team Leader: Katherine.Southwood@scams.gov.uk

Small Business Support

Small businesses in South Cambridgeshire are being invited to apply for funding of up to £5,000 each in a new grant programme launched this week. The funding is available to those already trading with ambitions to grow and will provide grants, advice and support for existing businesses with up to nine employees. The new [support grants](#) are available as part of the [UK Shared Prosperity Fund](#). Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) is the lead authority for delivery of the Fund, while the District Council is responsible for grant scheme delivery and allocation.

For those looking to start a business and get their foot on the ladder, there is free advice on offer, including how to create a viable business plan. The startup advice will be delivered by the [Business and Intellectual Property Centre](#) and the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority [Growth Hub](#).

Applications are open until 31 October 2024. Businesses may only make one application. The District Council reserves the right to close the application window earlier should the level of demand exceed the maximum funding available. More information can be found [online](#) or please email businessgrants@scams.gov.uk quoting Small Business Grant.

SCDC Four-Day Week Trial

With the General Election over, consideration of this trial was paused but has now gone to the council's Staffing and Employment Committee. Here is a synopsis:

An independent report by two universities into South Cambridgeshire District Council's performance during its four-day week trial has been published. An independently run health and wellbeing survey has also been published. Of 24 key performance indicators monitored by the Council, analysis by the Universities of Cambridge and Salford found 22 improved or remained the same.

Under a four-day week, officers are expected to carry out 100 per cent of their work, in around 80% of their contracted hours, for 100 per cent of their pay. The Council's opening hours have been maintained so it has been open for business just as it was before the trial – with longer opening hours on Wednesdays.

Researchers evaluated the Council's key areas of performance over several years – including during the full length of the four-day week trial from the beginning of 2023 to the end of March 2024. Eleven measures were performing better during the trial, compared to beforehand. This covers areas such as call answering times, timeliness of planning decisions, how long it takes to process benefits claims and speed of emergency repairs to Council homes. The areas found to have improved are:

- Percentage of calls to the Council's Contact Centre that were answered.
- The average number of days to process Housing Benefit and Council Tax Support changes.
- The percentage of emergency repairs to Council homes completed within 24 hours.
- The average number of weeks taken to determine householder planning applications.
- Major planning application decisions made in time.
- The percentage of major planning application decisions that get overturned by the Planning Inspectorate.
- Smaller planning application decisions made in time.
- The percentage of smaller planning application decisions that get overturned by the Planning Inspectorate.
- Staff turnover, which has dropped by almost 40 per cent.
- The percentage of complaints responded to within timescales.
- Invoices paid by the Council within 30 days.

A further 11 key performance indicators showed no significant differences during the trial – meaning those services continued to be delivered to the quality they were previously. The frequency of bin collections has also remained the same.

The two areas that were exceptions in terms of performance during the trial period were housing rent collected and average days to re-let housing stock. Housing rent collected either hit or was just below the Council's target in the 15 months of the trial. However, overall collection rates were below the long-term average, indicating that rent collection has not recovered to pre-Covid levels. The assumption is that this is likely due to the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on tenants' household finances.

Meanwhile, the target for the average number of days taken to re-let Council homes is very ambitious at 17 days. The top 25 per cent performing Councils in the country average 37 days to relet Council houses. In 2022/23 the average turnaround time for South Cambridgeshire District Council was 28 days; in 2023/24 it was 30 days. Returned Council homes now also often require extensive works which take longer to complete.

Professor Brendan Burchell from the Department of Sociology at Cambridge University, said “These results are supportive of moves to reduce the length of the working week but are not a surprise. In the past two years other researchers have studied many private sector employers in the UK and elsewhere that also reported the company’s performance was maintained after a 20 per cent reduction in hours of work; employees and managers can find better ways of doing things to work more efficiently, given the right guidance and motivation.”

There is also a financial assessment of the trial, which outlines a known full year cost saving of £371,500. This is mainly due to permanently filling 10 posts that were previously identified as ‘hard to fill’. The financial saving has been made by not needing more expensive agency alternatives.

Meanwhile, recruitment data shows there has been a 53 per cent increase in the average number of applications for jobs advertised externally and more than 130 new staff have joined the Council. Of new starters, 76 per cent were influenced by the four-day week trial when deciding whether to join.

The findings of the latest independently run health and wellbeing survey by Robertson Cooper show higher employee commitment, with more staff reporting they intend to stay longer working for the Council, a key factor in reducing turnover and high vacancy rates. Mental and physical health and motivation have also risen.

The Council introduced the four-day week trial in a bid to improve services by filling hard-to-fill posts permanently, rather than relying on more expensive agency staff, which can also be disruptive. For example, when bin lorry drivers leave, it can disrupt collections when new drivers are learning bin routes or agency drivers cover them as replacements are trained. 11 lorry drivers left the Council in 2022, but only five did in 2023 after bin crews joined the trial.

Council leader Bridget Smith has written to Jim McMahon MP, the responsible minister to ask him to clarify that the new government will not lever financial penalties against councils who adopt a 4 Day Working week model. Once clarification is received the Council will have all the information required to move forward to make a final decision on whether this is the right model of work for South Cambs. The previous Minister responsible for trying to stop local authorities from trying out new ways of working lost his seat in the General Election.

Cost of Living Support

Household Support Fund

It is very good to be able to report that the government has just announced an extension to the Household Support Fund for the next six months to support struggling households with bills and essential costs. The £421 million extension gives certainty to councils in England over the winter months – up until April 2025 – as they work to help those struggling with the cost of energy, food, and water. Many councils also use the funding beyond emergency support, including working with local charities and community groups to provide residents with key appliances, school uniforms, cookery classes, and items to improve energy efficiency in the home. Pensioners and others struggling to heat their homes or afford other essential items over the colder months should contact their council to see what support may be available to them. Details on the latest scheme will be communicated in the coming weeks.

Pension Credit

Pension Credit is worth, on average, £3,900 per year and unlocks additional support including the Winter Fuel Payment, help with Council Tax, NHS dental care and a free TV licence for those over 75.

Pension Credit backdating rules mean it is possible for individuals to apply for Pension Credit and have the claim backdated by up to three months if they were entitled to claim in that time. This means that the latest date to apply and still qualify for a Winter Fuel Payment is 21 December. The Department for Work and Pensions has produced [a toolkit to support councils to ensure older people understand how they can get Pension Credit](#).

War Memorials Grant Scheme

The War Memorials Trust is providing grants for the repair and conservation of free-standing war memorials in England intended to help those who are responsible for the upkeep of war memorials.

The grants support the care and preservation of war memorials to a high standard, and to prevent the decay of this important part of our built heritage. Grants will normally be for between 25% and a maximum of 75% of eligible costs. The maximum grant is £5,000 for non-freestanding war memorials while freestanding, non-beneficiary war memorials may be considered up to a maximum grant of £20,000. Application close on October 31st 2024. <http://www.warmemorials.org/grants/>

Fire Services:

Batteries might kill you

People are being urged to Take Charge and Be Safe with their electrical items following two fires involving batteries recently with Cambridgeshire Fire and Rescue Service highlighting the risks after firefighters were called to incidents involving electric vehicle batteries. With one, an e-bike battery started to smoke as it was plugged in to charge. In another, an e-scooter battery caught fire after being damaged the day before. Lithium-ion batteries can pose a considerable risk if damaged or disposed of incorrectly. Water does not work on the fire; and thermal runaway means the fire is extremely hot. More information is available on the Fire service website.

On-call firefighter - have you considered doing this?

On-call firefighters are not based at a fire station. They carry a pager and respond to emergency incidents as and when they happen. They receive an annual wage to reflect the time they commit to being available plus additional payments for attending incidents and drill nights (one evening a week for two hours).

As well as being an on-call firefighter, many also have other jobs and are able to provide evening, daytime or weekend cover. When they are on-call they may be at home, working for themselves or for a nearby company, or out in their local community (staying within a five-minute travel time of the fire station). The role forms a vital part of today's fire and rescue service, providing emergency cover to more than 90 per cent of the UK. In Cambridgeshire, they make up more than half of the workforce and are generally located in rural communities, small towns and villages.

How do I become an on-call firefighter? We are generally looking for people aged 18 and over, with a good level of general fitness, that can respond within five minutes to emergencies. Please follow this link for Cambridgeshire On-call fire-fighters:

[On-call firefighter \(cambfire.gov.uk\)](http://cambfire.gov.uk)

Police issues:

Pegasus - scheme to help people communicate with police

The Police have launched a new scheme to help people communicate with them; it is particularly intended for anyone with an illness or disability who may wish to have easier access system in place, but anyone can apply.

For more information on the scheme or to register, visit [Pegasus card scheme | Cambridgeshire Constabulary \(cambs.police.uk\)](https://www.cambs.police.uk/pegasus-card-scheme)