

February/March 2024 Update from Cllr Heather Williams

District Councillor for The Mordens

South Cambridgeshire District Council's 2024 Budget

On Tuesday 27 February, I scrutinised the administration's Budget proposals in a Full Council meeting.

I voted against the proposal to increase council tax by the legal maximum amount, and I voted against the proposal to increase affordable housing rents by 7.7%. I was disappointed but not surprised that the administration unanimously voted for these proposals, whilst voting to give councillors a 5% pay rise – another proposal that I voted against.

My own group's Budget proposals (see below) considered in the meeting included freezing council tax and housing rents, in addition to removing further special allowances for councillors. I believe that, especially with the current cost of living, the council should be playing its part to help residents – not feathering its own nest. Unfortunately, however, the administration unanimously rejected our proposals.

I also raised my concerns that the administration's budget gap is now almost £4.5 million. I warned the administration last year that the budget gap would increase if they didn't change their mentality – and it has increased. My group all rejected the significant increases in debt and borrowing, horrified that the administration is still trying to live beyond the council's means.

I was pleased to see a number of positive motions passed unanimously by all councillors, showing that unity is possible on important issues. Councillors voted to continue pursuing White Ribbon accreditation, to request an expansion to its cost of living support scheme to tackle period poverty, and to do all we can to help ensure those who have grown up in the care system have equal opportunities.

Conservative Group Budget Proposal for 2024/2025

Ongoing Expenditure proposals

1. Freeze the council tax

It has been a difficult couple of years for residents dealing with the cost of living crisis resulting in part from the Russia-Ukraine war, and also with the pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic. Ever-increasing household bills, particularly in relation to heating and fuel costs, have hit people hard. It is proposed to freeze the council tax at 2023/24 levels to assist residents struggling to meet their living costs. The income forgone in 2024/25 as a result will be around £343,000.

2. Additional planning enforcement (compliance) officer

There is a need to bolster resources in the planning enforcement team and it is proposed to add an additional officer at a cost of £62,000 to provide for the growing demands and complexities of investigating breaches of planning conditions and consent.

3. Additional Envirocrime enforcement officer

There is an increasing problem with fly tipping nationally and South Cambs is not immune to this. It has been recognised that resources deployed to tackle this issue are woefully short and although additional resources are being deployed they don't go far enough. A further officer and dedicated vehicle are proposed to bolster the resources to tackle this anti-social behaviour. The cost of an officer would be £49,000 and the cost of the vehicle would be £50,000, which would be included in the Capital programme. The running costs of this additional vehicle are estimated at £21,000.

4. Additional contact centre officers

The contact centre is a vital resource to the Council in its interaction with residents of the district and it is important that it is properly resourced. Particularly given the extra strain that will be put on it with the administration's decision to hire out parts of the building, two

further officers will enable the contact centre to deliver the level of service that the public rightly expect. The cost of this would be £74,000.

5. Tackling Isolation Officer

Mobility and social interaction are vital lifelines for residents living in more remote, rural South Cambs villages. The proposal is to employ a part-time Tackling Isolation Officer costing £16,000 who will work to support isolated residents and families, enabling them to socially interact within their local area.

6. Self-financing Transformation incentive scheme

Transformation works best when the process runs throughout the organisation, fuelled by bottom-up ideas. It is proposed to introduce a self-financing Transformation incentive scheme where staff are encouraged to suggest Transformation initiatives, to then be rewarded with a bonus if their idea is selected and if it saves the council money. Any reward would be paid using that saving. Devising new ideas would not be part of their normal day-to-day responsibilities.

Ongoing Expenditure Proposals

1. Scrap the four-day week

The additional costs relating to the four-day week waste trial of £103,500 be used to part fund the ongoing proposals above.

2. Remove second Special Responsibility Allowance for councillors

It is proposed that the current policy that allows councillors to receive more than one Special Responsibility Allowance be discontinued, this will save around £14,000. This would ensure the council can continue to maximise the money it directs to delivering for residents.

3. Removal of the Transformation department

The Transformation department continues to be a significant area of expenditure for the council, amounting to £3.894 million in 2022/23. Further, we have seen this department expand by 63 staff since 2018/19.

It is proposed that the transformation process be done by existing staff in existing departments. Two members of staff would coordinate the programme and a member(s) of existing staff from each department would be seconded the role of delivering transformation in their department. This would ensure transformation is a bottom-up part of the process completed within departments, rather than top-down, and would save the council money in doing so.

4. Data

It is proposed that the £111,000 bid for the two staff for the new internal data team is not taken forward at this time. The alternative proposal would be to allocate this responsibility to a member(s) of each department, who can then submit departmental data to senior leaders for collation. Completing this work with existing staff would save money and ensure data collection is done by experts in their respective departments.

5. Magazine

The council produces four issues of the South Cambs Magazine per year. It is proposed to reduce the number of issues from four to two, which will save around £30,000. Six-monthly magazines should provide readers with sufficient updates and information.

One off proposals

7. Remove bid for Systems Analyst post

Remove the bid for an extension to the systems analyst post, saving around £42,000.

8. Additional funding for fraud prevention and investigation

Local Authorities have in recent years seen increasing amounts of attempted fraud against them and, if anything, the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis has seen this sort of activity increase further. It is important to tackle this growing trend and preventative work is seen as a key element to achieving this. It is therefore proposed to invest £10,000 in further fraud prevention work and raising fraud awareness in the community and other related projects. The additional cost of the successful Key Amnesty project carried out this time last year was minimal.

9. Additional vehicle to tackle Envirocrime

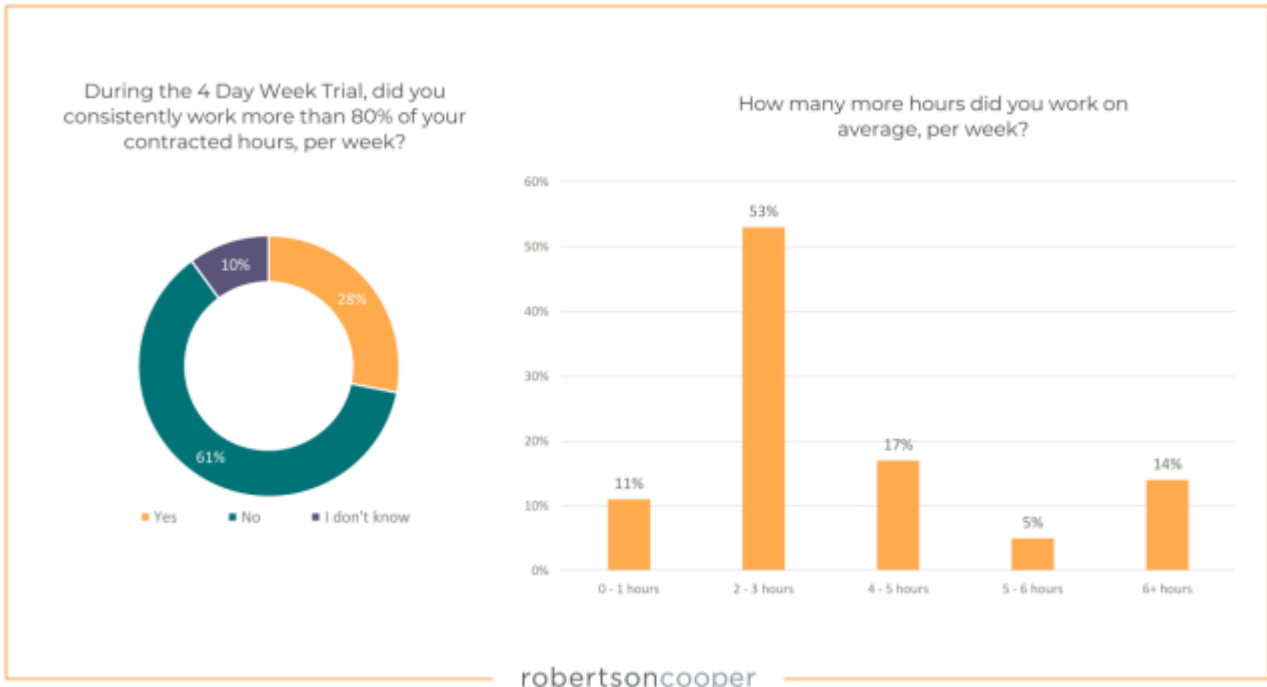
An additional allocation be made in the capital programme for an additional vehicle for Envirocrime in the sum of £50,000.

10. Earmarked reserves

The remaining difference to one off items of £18,000 be funded from earmarked reserves.

Four-day week update

I am continuing to scrutinise the four-day working week trial at the council. A wellbeing survey completed by 328 staff showed that almost 100 staff are working more than four days a week – with 53% working 2-3 more hours a week, and 14% working a 6+ hours a week. This means performance is being propped up by some workers working more than four days a week – which is not right. Performance in seven out of 16 working areas has stagnated or declined during the trial, showing staff are struggling to fit all their work in to four days.



The administration repeatedly assured us that any drop in performance would stop the four-day week trial. And yet on Tuesday 12 March, the Cabinet voted to continue the trial – with desk-based staff working 32 hours a week instead of 30, matching the hours worked by waste crews.

I will continue working hard to ensure residents get what they are paying for – that is, five days' work for five days' pay. I am analysing the data sent to the government each week and will continue to hold the administration to account over their reckless social experiment.

Easter bin collection changes

Only bin collections due to take place on Good Friday (29 March) will be affected by the upcoming Easter bank holidays.

Any residents with a bin collection due on Good Friday should put their bin out on Monday 25 March – four days earlier than usual. All other bin collections will remain the same.

Increased fines for fly tipping

In July 2023, the government announced that maximum fines for fly tipping, littering, household duty of care offences, and graffiti would be increased to help reduce the issues of environmental crimes and target the worst offenders.

The new fines for South Cambridgeshire which come into force on 1 April 2024 are:

- Fly-tipping Fixed Penalty Notices will increase from £400 to £700. The government maximum is £1000.
- Littering or graffiti fines increase from £150 to £400. The government maximum is £500.
- Breaching a household waste duty of care increase from £400 to £600.

Fly tipping is a blight on our beautiful countryside. I am encouraging people to dispose of their waste responsibly to prevent environmental destruction and landscape damage – whilst also avoiding a hefty fine.

Grants for community groups and parish councils

If you are from a local community group or parish council, please do make the most of the council's available grant schemes. The [GrantGrabber service](#) helps you search for available grants – all in one place.

For further information on receiving a grant for a community project from the council, please visit the [grants webpage](#).

Thank you for reading my report. If I can be of any assistance, please do get in touch.

Cllr Heather Williams

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