

### Summary of council's budget meeting

The council held its budget meeting on 25 February, where I scrutinised the administration's budget proposals for 2025/26 and proposed amendments to their budget. A full breakdown of my proposal is [available here](#). It included proposals to bolster planning enforcement, environmental crime and tackling fraud, amongst other things.

In my group's alternative budget, I called for a referendum on the 4-day week. The [4-day week consultation is still live](#) until the end of March and I would encourage all residents to have their say. However, the consultation fails to ask if residents are happy with funding their council not to work. This is why I called for a referendum – to finally give residents a say in this, once and for all. I was disappointed but not surprised that the administration rejected my proposals.

In scrutinising the administration's budget plans, I opposed proposals to increase Council Tax by the legal maximum amount of £5.09 for a Band D household because I do not feel it is right to raise taxes whilst residents must continue to pay for council staff not to work. I opposed the 2.7% increase in affordable rent and the 4% increase in shared ownership rents for the same reason. How is it right that residents are being asked to dip into their pockets more and more, when council staff are only working 32 hours but being paid for 37 hours?

I expressed my concern at the £46 million increase in borrowing when interest rates – the cost of borrowing – remain incredibly high. It is forecast the council will spend approximately £3.657 million over the next year on interest alone. Additionally, by our calculations, the administration's Transformation programme has cost over £10 million, yet only saved £1.7 million. This is why I proposed a different approach to Transformation, as I fear the one being taken at the moment is very costly and will take many years to recoup any potential savings, and given local government organisation the reality is this money may never be recouped.

The things in the budget meeting that I did support was the Localised Council Tax Support Scheme to ensure there is support for those who are struggling. I supported the Housing capital budget which looks to increase the number of houses owned by the council. I was pleased to see indications that, while our alternative budget was voted down overall, it looks as if our proposals around fraud and envirocrime may be taken forward.

## Empty home concerns

Through the budget reports, we were able to see that over £1 million was lost in rents for empty properties last year. Some properties in The Mordens ward are included in these figures and, in some cases, have taken over a year to bring back into use. I don't think that this is acceptable and am pushing for swifter work to bring our houses back into use. I think this will work for everybody, including the council, and perhaps if that was addressed there would not be the increases to affordable rents and shared ownership rents. If rents continue to be increased, I fear we will reach a point where affordable housing is no longer affordable.

## Concerns about floating bus stops

I proposed a motion to council, requesting we write to Cambridgeshire County Council to warn against the continued use of floating bus stops, where pedestrians are sandwiched between two lanes of traffic: cars and cyclists. This is dangerous and frightening for people with disabilities and the visually impaired, particularly because floating bus stops are not yet included in guide dog training. The motion was deferred until a new report is published assessing the impact of floating bus stops by the Greater London Authority. I will continue to listen to the concerns raised by charities such as Guide Dogs UK and CamSight to ensure our streets are safe for everybody to use.

### What is a Copenhagen crossing?



A Copenhagen crossing provides a continuation of the footway and / or cycleway across a minor side road junction, providing a clear visual priority to pedestrians and cyclists. This is achieved by including ramps, markings, colouration of surfaces and by ensuring that the corners are relatively tight to slow down vehicles. Footways that are a minimum of 2m wide will be provided along Madingley Road, continuing across the lightly trafficked side roads with a 'Copenhagen Crossing'.



I also raised my concerns at the Greater Cambridge Partnership, along with concerns about potential confusion over Copenhagen crossings. I am not against change and new ideas, but I fear that this will cause problems for drivers, pedestrians and cyclists who are accustomed to regular zebra crossings but may be unsure of how to use a Copenhagen crossing.

## Weekly food waste collections

The council is following national policy change by the previous government. It will become mandatory for councils to collect separate food waste on a weekly basis. The council is working to implement this and a lot of the way this will work will be similar to the trial we had in The

Mordens previously. I am pleased to see weekly food waste collections being implemented to improve the cleanliness of streets for the residents who live there.

I am currently investigating the additional costs of doing this under a 4-day week bin collection scheme, as bin crews in Greater Cambridgeshire are also working 32 hours but being paid 37 hours. The government has given a grant to cover the costs of weekly food waste collections, but the grant does not cover our costs at the council. I believe this in part to be because more bin lorries and more staff are required to collect the same number of bins in 4 days rather than a regular 5-day week. I believe that it is important to know any additional cost implications to continuing the current working arrangements at the council before a decision is made later in the year. I have been frustrated by an initial response from officers that I would have to wait until after the consultation to be given this information. I have therefore enacted my right to information as a councillor to receive the information the council currently holds on this. I have to say that the difficulty in gaining information like this increases my concerns around the level of openness and transparency at the council.

### **Local Government reorganisation**

I am keeping a close eye on the government's local government reorganisation plans and an extraordinary meeting of the council has been called for 19 March at 6pm to discuss it. No decision will be made at this meeting, however it is my understanding that the council will be considering a draft letter to the government minister to set out the direction of travel.

All councils will receive an invite to submit proposals by spring and autumn 2025, ready for the first wave of new unitaries to be set up in line with the 2027 target. I am continuing to work with council officers to ensure everyone is up to speed on new updates.

### **Backing British farmers and pubs**

I am continuing to back British farmers and our pubs at the council. I requested our business support team to look into how we at the district council can help our farmers, pubs and those in the hospitality sector to navigate the challenging economic circumstances.

I am working hard to support those in our rural countryside and would encourage anyone needing assistance or advice to get in touch. I will do all I can to support you.

## **County Council Household Support Fund**

I am pleased to see the Household Support Fund – a grant funded by the government – in action at Cambridgeshire County Council. The fund is designed to support those most in need. It is not a charity and it does not need to be paid back, but it can help you with the rising cost of energy and food.

The fund includes a Holiday Voucher Scheme, offering households in receipt of Free School Meals supermarket vouchers to support them during the school holidays. Financial awards are also available to be redeemed at supermarkets, energy paypoints or by bank transfer. I would strongly encourage anyone who is struggling to make sure they are getting the support they are entitled to. You can [find out if you are eligible here](#).

### **Grants for community groups and parish councils**

If you are from a local community group or parish council, I am encouraging you to 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.

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