District Councillor's Report for The Mordens Ward SCDC

September 2024

eVisas and Ukrainian Guests

The Home Office and UKVI are launching a new online platform for managing refugee visas. Under this new system, all physical visas will be transitioned to an eVisa format. This update will play a key role in the forthcoming Ukraine Permission Extension scheme (UPE). The Homes for Ukraine team is reaching out to all guests and hosts to inform them of this change, ensuring a smooth transition to the UPE. If parish councillors encounter residents facing any issues with this process, please reach out to me, and I will request assistance from the SCDC team.

Small Business Support

Please could residents and Parish Councillors share this information, it would be lovely to see a small business within the Fen Ditton and Fulbourn ward receive this grant.

Small businesses in South Cambridgeshire are encouraged to apply for funding of up to £5,000 in a new grant programme which has been launched. This financial assistance is available for businesses that are already operational and seek to expand, offering grants, guidance, and support to existing enterprises with up to nine employees. These new support grants are part of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) acting as the lead authority for the Fund's implementation, while the District Council oversees the delivery and distribution of the grant scheme.

For those aiming to start a business and take their first steps, free advice is available, including guidance on developing a viable business plan. This startup assistance will be provided by the Business and Intellectual Property Centre in collaboration with 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 on the SCDC website or you can email: **businessgrants@scambs.gov.uk**

Cambridge and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) bus franchising consultation

This is a friendly reminder that the ongoing consultation is still open, and both parish councillors and residents are welcome to participate in the survey. The consultation on bus franchising will last for 14 weeks and will include a combination of online and in-person events. This isn't the first time the public has been asked about bus franchising, and we hope that this time, we can achieve progress beyond just the consultation phase. Please follow the link below to join the consultation.

https://cambridgeshirepeterborough-ca.gov.uk/news/bus-franchising-consultation-in-cambridgeshire-and-peterborough-goes-live/

Cambridge Cancer Research Hospital

I will be supporting efforts underway in Cambridgeshire to support the plans for a new Cambridge Cancer Research Hospital, which is designed to be a leading facility in cancer research and treatment. Concerns have arisen regarding potential funding changes from the current government.

The Cancer Hospital is one of two proposed new facilities in Cambridge, alongside the Cambridge Children's Hospital. This new hospital aims to enhance groundbreaking research and emphasise early intervention, laying the groundwork for improved cancer care, as cancer impacts a significant portion of the population. There is uncertainty surrounding the future of the hospital's construction, as recent discussions indicate that funding may be reconsidered in the coming months.

I firmly believe that the Cancer Research Hospital is absolutely vital for the East of England. Addenbrooke's stands out as a remarkable site, merging the efforts of the private sector, charitable organisations, and the NHS to provide groundbreaking treatments that will save lives and enhance the quality of life for cancer patients facing challenging conditions. I have witnessed firsthand the incredible dedication and hard work that has already gone into this project. It has secured planning permission, and considerable time and resources have been invested to bring it to this point. To see this ambitious project put on hold would be nothing short of devastating. For those seeking more information about the Cancer Research Hospital, please visit the following website: https://www.cambridgecancer.org.uk

Four-day week update

A four-day week means staff work 80% of their usual hours while receiving full pay. South Cambridgeshire District Council conducted a trial of a four-day working week for its employees from January 2023 to March 2024. After the trial, the Council has continued the four-day work schedule.

The Council has released results from the trial and here are some key questions I have:

Has it saved money?

One of the expected advantages of the four-day week was cost savings for the Council. In November 2023, the council projected potential savings of £776,000 from this initiative, but actual savings amounted to £371,500—less than half of the forecasted amount. Additionally, this figure does not account for necessary expenses such as £430,000 for purchasing additional bin lorries if the four-day week becomes permanent, nor does it include an estimated £40,000 for a public consultation.

After considering these expenses, the council is facing a deficit of approximately £100,000, indicating that the four-day work week has resulted in higher costs rather than savings, alongside sporadic service delivery. These calculations do not also cost lost working hours which would be huge.

Has performance improved?

Determining whether performance has improved due to the four-day week is challenging, as various factors can influence results. The planning phase for the four-day week started in October 2022. During the trial, the council also aimed to enhance operational efficiency through service reviews and moving more services online. However, the improvements in efficiency are not directly linked to the four-day week policy. According to an analysis from the University of Salford, 33% of performance indicators showed a decline during the trial, raising concerns about essential services.

How has recruitment been affected?

The council hired 134 new staff members during the trial, but this number does not consider the employees who left. Only 9 of the new hires were in senior planning roles categorised as hard-to-fill positions, comprising just 6% of the new recruits.

Is the data reliable?

In September 2023, a report from the University of Cambridge was revised at the council's request prior to release. The current report from the University of Salford has raised questions about the reliability of the data and whether it has been influenced in a similar manner.

What do staff experiences reveal?

While many employees report having more positive workdays, underlying issues affect overall staff wellbeing. In 2024, 37% of council staff indicated they needed to work more than four days each week to manage their workload, an increase from 28% in 2023. Additionally, 30% of staff reported heightened stress levels in 2024, with many indicating that stress negatively impacted them. This situation raises questions about the sustainability of the four-day work week, as a significant number of employees are exceeding the intended schedule. New employees have reported challenges in acclimating to the council's practices, suggesting the trial may complicate the onboarding process for newcomers.

What do residents think?

Residents, who financially support the council's operations, showed limited support for the four-day week. In an online survey, 75% of respondents opposed the initiative. Moreover, more than 80% of council members have not had an opportunity to vote on this arrangement, indicating a lack of representative input from the community.

I will continue to raise my concerns regarding the effectiveness of the four-day work week trial, including questions about cost, staff performance, and recruitment. The experiences reported by staff indicate challenges that may undermine the intended benefits of the shorter working week.

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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