

News from Cambridgeshire County Council

Council reverses two decisions under pressure

After coming under strong pressure from residents across Cambridgeshire and from the minority political groups on the County Council, the Conservatives agreed to change their minds on two decisions made for the budget in this current year, 2016-2017.

Street Lighting reductions

Our recent conversations with residents revealed that one of the biggest grumbles has been the dark streets. Street lights have been removed, most are dimmed and then switched off overnight.

We had been told the new lights would be more efficient brighter lights. That was the justification for removing an average 10% of lamp posts across the county, mainly on residential streets, fewer on main roads.

But last year, as part of the budget cuts, the Conservative and UKIP councillors on the County Council voted to dim the lights by 60% and switch most off overnight between 2am and 6am, leading to dark and dingy areas.

Lib Dems opposed this cut, saying this was potentially unsafe and people would be fearful of going out at night. We have had reports of elderly people stumbling and having to go to hospital, which of course creates more costs for the NHS. So we welcome the change of heart by the council.

We recognise the need for measures to reduce costs and minimise climate change and will continue to campaign to control lighting more intelligently and deploy innovative energy-saving solutions.

Winter road-gritting cuts

After sustained pressure from the Liberal Democrats and many others, and a petition organised by South Cambs Lib Dems, the Conservative-led County Council has now backed down and reversed their previous decision to stop gritting on some key roads.

They had announced plans to stop gritting some key roads in icy conditions. The Liberal Democrat Council Members warned that reducing gritting was a risky policy.

It would not have been necessary if the Conservatives and UKIP had agreed our proposal for the extra 2 per cent increase on council tax to minimise the possible negative outcomes of service reductions.

Under the plans, a number of essential roads were to have been withdrawn from the gritting routes including main roads into villages and school routes.

The UKIP group leader called for the reinstatement of gritting by finding the extra money needed from reserves - possibly OK in the short term but unsustainable for the longer-term.

Every road accident avoided saves the public purse thousands of pounds and misery for the injured and their families.

During the budget planning meetings earlier in the year, the Liberal Democrats argued that both these measures were likely to turn out to be a 'false economy'. We recommended that the government's option of being able to raise council tax by an extra 2% should be accepted, so as to protect essential services. This proposal was rejected by the Conservatives and UKIP, together with the votes of some Independent councillors.

If you would like to follow up any topics raised in this edition of FOCUS, please contact your nearest Lib Dem County Councillor, Peter Downes in Brampton:

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www.huntingdonlibdems.org.uk

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Local topics

'The fly-over to the Offords is urgent'

County Council agrees to put pressure on British Rail to bring forward their plan for a better rail crossing

Buckden's County councillor, Julie Wisson, put forward a motion to the Cambridgeshire County Council at its most recent meeting, calling for a robust approach to British Rail on the delay to the rail crossing plans. This was seconded by Brampton's councillor Peter Downes and carried unanimously.

Both main speakers emphasised that Buckden residents are 'trapped' between the railway line and a very busy trunk road, the A1.

Plans for up-grading the A1 and eliminating all the roundabouts have been in preparation for what seems like years and publication of a scheme is expected shortly.

Bogus callers

We have been alerted recently to the presence in the area of some workmen claiming to be from the council and who happen to have some 'spare tarmac' they would like to use up on your drive (at a charge to you!). I can assure you that County Council highways staff would never do this so please don't be fooled! Delivered with this Focus is a useful bookmark from the County Council advising on how to avoid being tricked in other ways.

Peter Downes

'Devolution deal' accepted - with elected Mayor

After consultations, debates and votes in all the councils in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough i.e. Huntingdonshire, Fenland, East Cambs, South Cambs, Cambridge City Council, Peterborough City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council, it has been agreed that a new tier of local government will be created from May 2017. The government insisted that we must have a directly-elected mayor so you will be asked to vote for a mayor in May 2017.

The mayor will chair a committee comprising the Leaders from each council. They will decide on developments which affect the whole area e.g. housing, roads, transport and also other matters including Further Education.

The Combined Authority will receive an extra grant from central government of £20 million per year for the next 30 years, (not index-linked!). There will also be a welcome extra £170 million (but over five years, not index-linked) for more affordable houses, particularly in Cambridge.

The Lib Dems believe that this deal is *not* a good idea

* The creation of yet another tier of local government in a time of national austerity is a waste of money. The Mayor will be paid £70,000 a year and the cost of the mayoral office and staff will be £881,000 per year. The election will cost £765,000 every four years.

* The extra money being offered sounds generous, but when you allow for inflation over the next 30 years, deduct the running costs and spread it over seven councils, it amounts to less than an extra 1% spending power.

It's time for a more radical reorganisation . . .

After taking part in the discussion about the 'Deal', the Cambs County Lib Dem group members are more convinced than ever that it is now time to move towards a more radical re-structuring of local government.

The councils should be spending less on avoidable bureaucracy and more on providing the services people need and expect.

We believe there should be a serious examination of the possibility of abolishing all the seven councils, to be replaced by two unitary authorities (Peterborough and N-W Cambs, Cambridge and S-E Cambs). More on this soon.

Thursday, May 4th is the election date this year

Will you be here to vote? If you may be away on business, or on holiday, or if getting to the polling station is physically difficult, you can register to vote by post. Forms can be obtained from the Electoral Services Officer at Pathfinder House, St. Mary's Street, Huntingdon, PE29 3TN. You can make contact by phone on 388388 or via the web-site: [www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/More/Councils and Democracy/Elections/How to vote/postal vote](http://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk/More/Councils%20and%20Democracy/Elections/How%20to%20vote/postal%20vote).