

Bridget Smith, Leader of South Cambridgeshire

23 May 2018

Today is a truly auspicious day for two reasons.

Firstly, half the members in this room are new to local politics and new to this council and, secondly, for the first time ever we have 4 years before we are again thrown into the maelstrom of elections. Both these things present us with a unique opportunity to work differently and to work better. We can, if we choose to, all work collaboratively for the benefit of all of our residents, our villages, South Cambridgeshire as a whole and this council.

We have already made some small steps towards this through the offering the chair of Scrutiny to Cllr Chamberlain and the Chairmanship of this council to Cllr de Lacey. Both the best people for the job. We have also been pleased to learn that Cllr Ellington will continue to apply her experience of the health sector for our mutual benefit, and we are really pleased about that. The other group leaders have indicated their support to my group ceding 2 committee places to Cllr de Lacey which can only happen with unanimous support. I thank them for that in anticipation.

I would also like to announce that we shall be moving to pre-scrutiny rather than post-scrutiny. Pre-scrutiny gives members far more influence over shaping decisions and policy and strategy and we hope will be embraced by all members with enthusiasm.

Our cabinet members will be focusing on priority delivery rather than service areas and we will be taking a whole cabinet approach to much decision making. Our cabinet meetings are public and we will welcome participation by members and the public.

Our day 1 priority themes

We have three day-one priority themes.

Affordable Homes

You won't be surprised to learn that top of this list is affordable housing.

This region is suffering a tremendous crisis of housing. The ratio between house prices and incomes is among the highest in the country. People who work in South Cambs are having to live further and further away, including many of our own officers. It is a scandal that only the wealthiest can afford to buy a house outright.

We can help alleviate this in many ways.

We can work to deliver good quality market housing, of the right mix, quickly and in the right places and which meets the needs of all ages. In one of my villages, the average age is 63; people want to move out of their big family homes, but they have got nowhere to move to within the village where they want to stay.

All development must be associated with the proper infrastructure that the residents need, transport links, health care, education, community facilities, even sewerage.

Most of the current planned housing is in new communities, which have an enormous impact on the immediately surrounding area. We will therefore work closely with the residents in neighbouring villages, both when the developments are complete and while they are being built. We will re-

introduce monitoring of the construction traffic around Northstowe and the other large new settlements.

Above all, our focus must be on getting the amount of truly affordable housing increased. Affordable housing, in its many guises, allows local families to stay in their home areas, allows people to live near to their places of work, allows older people to stay near to their friends and families.

We will review our overall housing strategy. We will get the promotion of rural exception sites back on the agenda and optimise the use of our own assets. We will scrutinise developers' attempts to reduce the percentage of affordable housing. We will work positively with the Combined Authority and the Greater Cambridge Partnership to deliver affordable and key worker housing to help meet the needs of South Cambridgeshire.

Putting the environment first in everything we do

We will be putting the environment first in everything we do.

Much has been achieved in the past by this council, but there is still much that still can be done. We will integrate a concern for the environment and sustainability into everything we do independently and through our partnerships.

We can drive how the whole district deals with climate change through our policies and our actions. We can incorporate climate change concerns on many levels into the next Local Plan, which will be joint with the City, and into the new housing and employment developments.

We have a particular opportunity with the promotion of the Cambridge to Oxford corridor. We can play a key role in ensuring that investment in natural capital is central to the changes that this brings.

Every brick, every swathe of concrete is laid should be leaving an associated positive environmental legacy, be it improvements to flora and fauna, increased public access to the countryside, improved physical and mental health benefits, including reduced air pollution.

This work will be overseen by a new Climate and Environment Committee, to be chaired by Cllr Pippa Heylings.

Actively Support business growth

We will actively support business growth.

We have a booming economy in South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge City. But this isn't a growth that we can take for granted. As the recent Economic Commission interim report showed, this growth needs to be nurtured and we need to help solve the problems that that growth brings, or else the companies and the individuals that are driving the high-tech and bio-science innovation will just go elsewhere - not to other parts of Cambridgeshire or Great Britain, but to other part of the world.

It is also true that the economic growth that we need to support just isn't reaching everyone in our district. In particular, we must not ignore the hundreds of small businesses that keep our villages alive and vibrant and that provide opportunities in particular for our young people. We have to identify ways in which we can be a positive factor in ensuring their enduring success.

We will, therefore, do all we can to give pro-active support for businesses. We will ensure that all our services that businesses use, from environmental services to the planning system, are focussed on their needs. We are already looking at how we can make it much easier for small businesses to access advice from us on planning ideas before applications are made.

There is, in the immediate, the looming prospect of Brexit, and we have found a demand in South Cambridgeshire from small, medium and large businesses for us to take the lead. I read in this morning's press that the individual cost of Brexit per household is £900 per annum and the economy is reduced by £40 billion. There are practical things that we can do, such as supporting businesses with the staffing challenges that we know many of them are already seeing. We can collaborate with business groups and others, to understand in depth how leaving the European Union will affect our area. So we are setting up a Brexit Working Group to coordinate these efforts which we hope will include members from other adjacent councils and from all of our political groups here.

Transforming the Council

In order to do all this, we need to transform the way that the council works, to make all of our work transparent, responsive, open and honest.

We will be completely revising the system for deciding on the grants that we give to bodies in our district. The priorities will now be to ensure that the process is fairer and that the grants we give have the greatest impact on those in greatest need. We will be working with a newly-formed Grants Committee on the priority driven criteria for all applications from now onwards.

As you know, several of our core functions are now run in partnership with neighbouring councils, through shared services. Whilst this brings many benefits, it does mean that the running of the services becomes more distant and unaccountable. It is crucial that we find new and effective ways of managing these services. I have already started discussions with Cambridge City Council on how we can set up a system of joint scrutiny of these shared services and I am confident that we will be able to put this into effect very soon.

Conclusion

So, in conclusions, together - and I mean together - we will make this into the most considerate, responsive council,

- that is green to its core, in everything that it does,
- that welcomes change to the benefit of our residents and our businesses,
- that works tirelessly for those residents who are least well off, who can't afford a home or who are struggling to access essential services.

Together, we will seize the opportunity that the people of South Cambridgeshire have given us and show them that they made the right choice.

Together, we will put the heart into South Cambs.