

Cambridgeshire County Councillor's Report to Parish Councils March 2018

Highways & Community Infrastructure [H&CI] Committee met in February just after I wrote my report for you last month so it didn't include a report on the proposals being made for the library service. This was actually raised in one meeting and I subsequently provided a summary for the Parish Council that had raised it and I am including it as an addendum to this report for anyone else who is interested.

Meeting agenda pack: <http://bit.ly/2ljqbNr>

The next meeting of H&CI takes place on 13 March. At this meeting members will approve both the schedule of highways maintenance and the list of successful applications to the Local Highways Improvements scheme. I will discuss the relevant interests in these at your individual meetings. Meanwhile you can view the reports to committee at: <http://bit.ly/2FHimiM>

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority [CPCA] met in February to agree its budget. The Mayor invited the Chairman of the Overview & Scrutiny [O&S] Committee to present that committee's recommendations before general debate on the budget by the Board. The Chairman expressed the concerns of the committee in relation to the consultation process which he said should in future be more ambitious and include opportunities for public participation adding that the response to the consultation carried out on this occasion had been poor being sent as it was to a limited number of authorities of which only 3 had responded. He also pointed out that the budget papers did not include any of the new financial arrangements with regard to the Local Enterprise Partnership [LEP] and that these should be included in the public interest as a significant amount of funding is involved. He also stated that presentation of the budget on a 1 year basis was misleading as it gave no indication of forward commitments. To give clarity he suggested the budget should be projected over a 3 year period so that forward commitments are clearly seen. The concerns were summarised into one recommendation to the Board: "The O&S committee express their concern at the lack of detail made available in the budget papers as they are presented. The committee expresses particular concern that the budget papers do not reflect the money committed to projects in future years, for example commitments made to Peterborough University. We welcome the commitment to produce a medium term financial plan and ask that this be produced as a matter of serious urgency." In response the Chief Executive explained that in some ways the Combined Authority operated on the same basic principles as local government particularly in relation to transparency and governance. However, the fluidity of its funding position made it significantly different to a local authority, e.g. CPCA had received additional sums of funding since November. He acknowledged that as CPCA matured its ability to provide confidence in forward funding projections would increase. Whilst welcoming in principle the recommendation for longer term planning he said that he thought that 3 years was not long enough and 5 to 7 years would be more appropriate.

Meeting agenda pack, decisions and minutes: <http://bit.ly/2DpGzZ1>

The agenda for a second meeting later in the month included an item, later considered separately by all constituent councils, on the extension of Combined Authorities' borrowing powers. Agenda pack and decisions: <http://bit.ly/2p4WpnN>

A separate meeting, as referred to above in respect of the borrowing powers of Combined Authorities, was convened for the County Council through a special meeting of **General Purposes** committee. Agenda and minutes: <http://bit.ly/2pb3brm>

Communities & Partnerships committee has now considered its first 4 applications each to the Innovate and Cultivate funds. These include one by SCambs District Council for its 'Through the Door Project' which aims to tackle loneliness and social isolation. The agenda also included a report seeking member support for the 'White Ribbon Campaign'. This campaign is aimed at eradicating male violence against women and girls, men and boys. The report to committee included an update on the Council's progress towards White Ribbon accreditation. Meeting agenda pack: <http://bit.ly/2tIYSJh>

At the meeting of **Economy & Environment** Committee I made a plea for reconsideration of the funding for Bikeability. Officers had been asked at a previous meeting to investigate sponsorship opportunities to cover a shortfall in funding. Members were advised that this had proved difficult for, whilst organisations might be willing to sponsor events, they were not so keen on providing funding for the training programme. I pointed out that, in a county where we are promoting cycling and continually improving cycling facilities, it seemed incongruous to restrict training for the young. This not only keeps them safe now but instils in them life long good behaviour as cyclists. My position was supported by other members and as a consequence Officers have now been requested to prepare a report for a future meeting advising the extent of the shortfall in funding and proposing other funding options. The agenda also gave an opportunity to evidence again the need for closer collaboration between the County and District Councils on S106 matters when the planning application for Wintringham Park was discussed. My efforts to progress closer working moved on a step this week when I met with the Director of Economy, Transport and Environment. He has agreed to the creation of a working party to further investigate the issues and how to overcome them. Meeting agenda pack: <http://bit.ly/2DmJ7Y7>

Energy from Waste treatment facility. There will be drop in sessions to provide more information on Amey's planning application. Details:

Monday 19 March 12pm - 4pm at the Village Hall, Green End, Landbeach CB25 9FD

Monday 19 March 5.30pm - 9pm at Cottenham Coffee Shop, High Street, CB24 8RZ

Tuesday 20 March 12pm - 9pm at the Church Room, St John's Church, Station Road, Waterbeach, CB25 9HR.

There is no need to register you can just turn up.

I look forward to seeing you all at your respective meetings when your questions and comments will be most welcome. Or, if you prefer, you can email me.

Lynda

lyndaharford@icloud.com;
01954 251775/07889 131022;
Follow me on Twitter: @2whit2whoo

Addendum

The following was sent to Bar Hill Parish Council who raised a concern about the decision taken at the County Council's Highways & Community Infrastructure meeting in February to charge for computer access at libraries.

I am not a member of that service committee and was not able to comment fully at your meeting but I have now read very carefully the details of the report that members received including the recommendations that they were asked to approve. The decision notice and draft minutes have also now been published and, if anyone wants to read all the documents in full they can do so at:

<https://cmis.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/ccclive/Meetings/tabid/70/ctl/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/397/Meeting/906/Committee/7/Default.aspx>

For those who prefer, I offer the following summary:

The recommendations that the Committee was asked to consider were as follows:

- a] To agree the role and function of the library service and endorse the approach that was outlined in the report
- b] To agree the proposals around income generation and commissioning
- c] To note the ongoing programme of work to transform the library service which will be informed by feedback from stakeholders.
- d] To agree that Libraries Transformation Members' Steering Group had served its purpose and can now be dissolved.

To give you some background: Cambridgeshire Library Service is currently delivered through 32 libraries and 4 mobile library vehicles. 24/7 online access to e-resources [allowing people to reserve books and other materials, renew loans, etc] is also available. In total the libraries are open for more than 1,000 hours per week and more than 2.5million people visit the libraries annually. Cambridge Central Library is actually the 4th busiest library in the country. The libraries are staffed by the equivalent of 118.4 full time staff and benefit from the assistance of 911 volunteers. Altogether the service has over half a million books available for loan as well as over 84,000 reference books and 55,000 other items including spoken word and e-books.

Over the past 8 years the library service has become ever more resourceful and has made savings of more than £4million whilst at the same time keeping all libraries open. For the year 2018/19 the service is seeking to reinstate £230,000 of funding to the book fund.

The report acknowledges the role of libraries as gateways to knowledge and confirms the feedback from residents who attended a series of engagement sessions that the service is greatly valued. It also admits that libraries are one of the few [often the only] places in local communities where people can go to get free, impartial information, help and support.

In seeking to secure the future viability of the service Officers considered various ways of generating income. These included:

- Room and facility letting
- Increasing chargeable events at libraries

Increasing fees and charges [all fees and charges to be increased by 2.2% to cover inflation and lettings fees to be increased by 25% except for those charged to community organisations or partners where the increase would be just 2.2%

Co-location of public services

Charging groups like the Cambridge language schools who use the facilities extensively

Then there was a proposal for something called the 'Library Extra Scheme' which would be for library users who wish to make a financial contribution to the library service. It was said that the scheme would be designed to ensure that members do not receive preferential treatment over other library users but would "provide access to a range of value-added special membership benefits, for example 'premium member receptions'" - sorry I can find no further information at the moment about what this actually means!

And finally the proposal to introduce charges for computer access. The proposal is to introduce a £1 per hour charge for computer use by adults [anyone over 18] following an initial free half hour. It is intended to ensure that essential online transactions [for example on gov.uk sites which would include Universal Credit applications and on Cambridgeshire County Council online transaction] can be carried out free of charge. Libraries will promote the free courses available from the Skills & Learning service to help development of digital skills and support Job Centre Plus claimants.

Reading the minutes it is clear that members of the committee shared the concerns that I believe prompted the question at your meeting and which I certainly share.

The proposal conflicts with one of the main objectives of libraries, that of them being a place which gives access to information to all and thus helps to level inequalities. Many users are on low incomes or live in rural communities where internet access remains poor. Although the proposal is to provide free of charge access to gov.uk websites, there are many other types of websites, for example banks to which access is essential and should therefore be free.

The level of income generated by charging for internet access will not be particularly high [Officers apparently confirmed that it was estimated at £110,000]. It will surely also be labour intensive to enforce.

Reading the decision statement it seems that members amended d] above to:

d] To agree that the Libraries Transformation Members' Steering Group has served its purpose and can now be dissolved **but that Officer bring back a progress report to September committee in particular on how charging for internet usage was working in practice.**

I am sure that, like me, you will be interested to hear just how it is working in practice. I shall of course report back when the progress report is available.