

## District Council Annual Report

### Upwood and the Raveleys Ward

#### June 2017

Shortly after my appointment as Leader of HDC in May last year, the Devolution deal for Peterborough and Cambridgeshire began to develop and in June I became a member of the Combined Authority Shadow Cabinet with responsibility for finance and fiscal policy. This created unexpected demands on my time with the result that my engagement with my five parish councils has reduced and my attendance at meetings has been sporadic. This is a regrettable situation as I am elected to serve the residents of the parishes and yet my time has been allocated to the District Council and increasingly, to the Combined Authority.

I was elected to the HDC leadership by the Conservative Group on a manifesto of reform and I appointed a Cabinet whom I felt could deliver the changes which are needed. These include

- the transformation of Council processes to improve service levels and productivity;
- delivering the 2016-2036 Local Plan with a strategy to build 21000 homes across the District, with a high percentage (approaching 40%) of affordable housing,
- an overhaul of the relationship between the District Council and our town and parishes
- an increase in the Councils commercial activities to raise non-tax revenues and help bridge the widening gap between revenues and costs to protect front line services
- the development of a strategic plan for the District which defines improved community resilience, economic growth, prosperity and housing plans and sets the framework for creating a more effective council for its residents.

We have published a rolling two-year corporate plan with input from the commercial sector, developers, landowners, the MOD, educational establishments and other stakeholders to ensure that development plans are coordinated. Our first objective is to ensure frontline services are not only protected, but continuously improved. To that end we have implemented programmes to improve the delivery of services for waste management, street cleaning and grounds maintenance, and are constantly fighting the challenges of littering and graffiti removal. Our officers efficiently administer housing benefits and related services to residents, both existing and new, while providing accommodation for those who for one reason or another have become homeless. Our planning department, in addition to their daily duties, are working on plans for the new A14 trunk road which, once completed in 2021, will unlock huge development potential for the district.

The Government has allowed Local Planning Authorities (LPA) to increase planning fees by 20% as from 1 July. The proviso is that all the income generated from the increase must be invested in improving the performance of the LPA. HDC has taken advantage of this increase and is in process of recruiting three new planning officers. We will also use some of the income to upgrade IT systems, including the website, to improve our service to customers.

Angie Dickinson, the Cabinet member responsible for Community Resilience chaired a parish and town council seminar in the Burgess Hall at the end of April. The aim was to establish better communication channels with all parishes and improve relationships. Good progress was made and it was agreed this event will be made a regular calendar feature with increasing interaction between local parishes and the District Council.

In the last nine months I and other members of the Cabinet have been busy developing the Devolution deal proposed for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The formation of a new local government system in our area has involved the creation of a new Cabinet under the control of the elected Mayor, James Palmer. Many people simply see another layer of government presided over by a costly figurehead. Well nothing could be further from the truth! I see the Mayor and his Cabinet as a new, powerful decision-making body which, unlike the current system which relies upon anonymous Whitehall officials, will live and work in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and make decisions on key strategic issues which will improve the prosperity and lifestyles of all our residents, current and future. Cambridgeshire has one of the highest economic growth rates in the Country with an annual Gross Value Added total approaching £22bn but the Mayor has set the objective of doubling this over the next 20 years.

To make this happen we must deliver a targeted programme which links together the creation of jobs, the skilling and education of the labour force, transportation, the building of 29,000 new homes by 2021 and 72,000 more by 2036. Affordable homes must be the highest priority in the home building programme to allow young people to come into the area to work and bring up families.

In Huntingdonshire we have identified a number of sites where c750 additional affordable homes can be added within one or two years to existing sites, because planning permission already exists and infrastructure barriers are low around the site. The cost to buy a new home remains a challenge to young people wanting to live and work in Huntingdonshire and so the CA is evaluating various types of factory built houses which can be delivered complete to site and erected within two or three days. Ultimately a manufacturing site for modular homes based on Alconbury Weald to serve local demand, would be a possibility.

At a local level we are working upon programmes which ensure that Huntingdonshire's four market towns Ramsey, St. Ives, St Neots and Huntingdon become part of the region-wide strategic plan and that residents and democratically elected members feel they are fully involved. The revitalisation of these towns will demand changes in transportation and communications, economic investment and the alignment of skills and training to local employment needs. All of the programmes which drive these reforms will be developed by and financed by the Combined Authority using the devolved funding from Government.

Having said all of this, I receive every week many requests from Councillors and residents from across my five parishes for assistance with issues for which they require help. These include planning complaints and enquiries, housing benefits or homelessness challenges, noise and anti-social behaviour complaints, parking and speeding issues; in fact the myriad of things a Ward Councillor is expected to deal with.

I enjoy this role more than many others I carry out and will always make time for our residents.

Robin Howe

Ward Councillor  
Upwood and the Raveleys

•

•