County Councillor Annual Report 2022/2023

In February last year, I was elected Chair of the County Council after having attended only three proper meetings. It was a huge honour and a risk for the council because I was easily the most inexperienced Chair the Council has ever had - most people do a two-year apprenticeship as Vice Chair. I also managed to crash my car on the way to the meeting.

So in May, we accidentally won the District Council, with Independents as the largest group, and with me on the Cabinet. Which together we being Chair of the County was a tremendous time commitment.

Fortunately, my time as Chair is expiring, and I will hand over the chain at the next meeting on May 16th.

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It’s a year since I stood for election to District Councillor, and unexpectedly found myself at the heart of the first non-Conservative administration that Huntingdonshire has ever seen, as part of a group of 15 Independent Councillors in the 31 Councillor Joint Administration. I find myself in the Cabinet, taking the less-than-glamorous Customer and Transactional Services Portfolio. St Neots and the surrounding villages now occupy 4 out of 9- Cabinet seats- representing unprecedented influence for a District Council that had an unfair reputation for being Huntingdon focused.

It wasn’t the Portfolio that I would have chosen. But it’s one I’m very proud of, as 80% of the Council's effort goes into “Business As Usual” the humdrum unglamorous day-to-day work of the Council. And most of that is my responsibility.

As an Independent, I am happy to remove party politics from Local Government. I am pleased to report that we inherited a healthy and well-run District Council from our Conservative predecessors. And - although tempers sometimes get frayed - have provided a firm but fair opposition. I hope that continues.

External factors largely influenced our three biggest challenges in forming the administration.

The first was setting a balanced budget. We inherited a £2.5m budget deficit which quickly grew due to double-digit inflation. Before Christmas, it looked as if the only way we could set a balanced budget would be through cutting essential services - many of which had already been paired to the bone after 13 years of austerity. However, we were fortunate with a higher-than-expected Government settlement and some financial prudence. We are confident that we can set a balanced budget for the next five years with the aid of green bin charging, which we will introduce sometime in the future.

The second challenge was with the Future High Street Investment into St Neots, which had yet to progress under the previous administration and was also facing inflationary pressure. Thankfully, at long last, we will see spades in the ground in the Market Square revamp this summer in an attempt to turn from a car park into the social and economic heart of the town. I cannot talk about the Old Falcon, but there is progress.

The third big challenge is delivering our net-zero ambitions, for which the previous administration had set high targets but had no real plan to get there. Our Green Councillor, Lara Davenport Ray, has thankfully resolved that.

The Joint Administration has just released its corporate plan with three key priorities:

1. **Improving the quality of life for local people** 
   1. Improving the happiness and well-being of residents
   2. Keeping people out of crisis
   3. Helping people in crisis
2. **Creating a better Huntingdonshire for future generations** 
   1. Improving housing
   2. Forward-thinking economic growth
   3. Lowering carbon emissions
3. **Delivering good quality, high value-for-money services with good control and compliance with statutory obligations**

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At County Council, we are still working our way through the Pothole Pandemic - there is a backlog of about 5000 potholes, and we are fixing about 1000 a week, so we’re about a month away from filling them all - although we keep on discovering new ones. The issue is that most road surfaces are at the end of their useful life. The British asphalt association thinks the country needs to spend £11bn across the country to bring the roads up to a maintainable state.

We also had to vote on some contentious items at the last meeting - the first was a GCP proposal to build a new busway between Comberton and Cambridge with a new 2000 car park and ride car park. Controversial because it will require the removal of 520 trees from the Coton orchard. I voted in favour of this because, having spoken with Cambourne Parish Council, there are approximately 12,000 residents who are desperate for better public transport.

We also rejected a proposal for a referendum (that would have cost £1.5 million) on the GCP congestion charging recommendations for Cambridge. We expect that the consultation results will be published in May. In the Summer the County Council will vote on a revised proposal. I suspect that the proposal will reduce the operating hours of the congestion charging to “peak hours only” at the cost of improvements to the Huntingdonshire bus service. In which case, I am minded not to support it (which probably means it will fail).

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EWR are due to announce their final route choice in May.

A428 upgrade is subject to further legal delays, and the TAN Judicial Review seems set to go to a High Court Appeal.

I got on the front page of the Hunts Post last week as, because of Councillor West’s motion, the District Council strongly opposed the new Luton Arrivals route, and I wrote to the Chief Exec of the CAA to let him know.

Finally, this week I unsuccessfully tried to force the County Council to reverse a ludicrous decision to deny free school transportation to Abbotsley, Waresley and the Gransdens, with the help of 150 parents who signed a petition.

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I would like to record my sincere thanks to the Parish Councillors and Clerk for their hard work and dedication, and I look forward to serving you in the coming year and working together for the benefit of residents of the Parish.