

Cambridgeshire County Council Report January 2019

Mark Howell

New-look Child and Family Centres get seal of approval

More than 9 out of 10 of people surveyed this winter said they valued Cambridgeshire County Council's Child and Family Centres.

In our recent Child and Family Centre survey 93% of the 330 people who shared their views online and at activity sessions agreed that provision - which was reshaped in April - was helpful. The survey ran from September to November 2018 to give families the opportunity to feedback on the new service, and to tell us how the transition period felt.

One respondent said they valued, "Being able to socialise and make new friends." Another said Child and Family Centres provided, "Somewhere to learn parenting skills for both new parents and parents who were experiencing difficulties". Another respondent said it was, "Useful to get advice and support from Family Workers and other staff."

Our refreshed and redesigned Child and Family Centre services launched in April 2018 to better meet the needs of a growing and rural county. The new model delivers services for families with children aged 0-19, and allows buildings to be used more flexibly bringing services closer to the communities which need them via an improved outreach offer.

One of the changes put in place was to run events and activities from a wider range of venues in new locations. Of those surveyed more than a third (36.67%) said they have attended a session delivered by their Child and Family Centre in an outreach venue such as a sports centre or village hall. One respondent said, "Some different venues, but same staff who are all great."

Ready for the winter period and getting on top of the pothole problem

Cambridgeshire Highways are ready for the winter period and getting on top of the pothole problem from last winter caused by Beast from the East.

Teams have already been out gritting eight times and filled 2,590 potholes so far this month (December).

In August, Cambridgeshire welcomed another two new specialist machines, known as the 'dragon patcher'. They have joined the county's first dragon

which can repair up to 150 potholes a day, and is faster and quieter than traditional methods.

With five crews on the ground, plus three dedicated dragon patchers, the County Council is currently filling more than 1,000 potholes a week. Last month, the Department for Transport announced extra funding which will benefit roads in Cambridgeshire. It means an extra £6.653 million will go towards helping fight the campaign on potholes in our county. So far, we have used 821 tonnes of salt for gritting and have more than enough over this festive period.

Guided Busway

The Council understands there are local concerns about keeping pedestrians and cyclists as safe as possible when they use the pathways alongside the Guided Busway - particularly where numbers of people and cyclists are increasing as more businesses are expanding along the route.

In June this year, we reviewed the area with cycling experts, following which we have painted a white line with the warning, 'Beware of buses' on the southern section of the busway maintenance track.

Other representations – including a petition presented to the Highways and Community Infrastructure Committee by City Councillor Katie Thornburrow – have also led to the Council discussing further measures with Bus Operators on the Busway. As a result, they have agreed to reduce the speed of buses to 30mph on the city bound track from the Hills Road Bridge for a distance of around 875 metres, towards Long Road Bridge.

The new speed limit will begin this week and the signs have been put in place.

Fight against scams

More than 20 organisations are signing up to a new partnership to intensify the fight against scams and to make Cambridgeshire and Peterborough a scam-free county.

Led by Cambridgeshire County Council and Cambridgeshire Police, the Against Scams Partnership unites more than 20 organisations, including Peterborough City Council, Trading Standards, Age UK, Neighbourhood Watch and NatWest Bank, who will work together to raise awareness of scams and to support victims of scams.

According to Action Fraud, 53% of people aged 65 or over have been targeted by scams and criminals. Being a victim of this crime can have devastating impact. These crimes are often targeted at people in our communities that are vulnerable for a variety of reasons, including poverty, isolation, frailty, disability, cognitive impairment, and by the very nature of them being specifically targeted.

Anyone can be a scam victim, regardless of age, gender, education or economic background; partners are committed to act on the Against Scams Partnership four key aims:

1. Improve awareness of scams
2. Increase protection for everyone, and especially vulnerable people, against scams
3. Implement consistent recording of scams and improve referral processes
4. Improve support for potential victims of scams

Provisional funding settlement for local government

Cambridgeshire County Council's leader has given a mixed welcome to the government's provisional funding settlement for local government for 2019/20 announced today (December 13th).

Cllr Steve Count paid tribute to the support of the County's MPs in helping him in his efforts to reverse a plan which would have seen £7m taken back from local tax payers to be spent in other areas of the country, and to win a fairer funding deal for the county. But he expressed his surprise that Cambridgeshire and Peterborough remain the only devolved area of the country not to benefit from a Business Rate Retention pilot.

"I am pleased that the Secretary of State has confirmed that he is abolishing the negative RSG, which would have seen council tax payers in Cambridgeshire in effect handing £7m back to government to spend in other better funded areas in 2019/20 – and also that there will be more news soon about a fairer funding deal across local government as a whole." said Cllr Count.

"But I am surprised that we are not among the 15 council areas to have been included in a business rate retention pilot – the only devolved area not to benefit from this scheme- it is clear that the voices of everyone supporting this bid simply haven't been heard.

"As a county which sees enormous business growth in some areas, we need to be able to spread prosperity to parts of our county which struggle economically. It is vital business rates raised in the county should be available to benefit the county.

“The launch today of a further and more detailed consultation on the government’s funding formula is welcome, as the tremendous underfunding of Cambridgeshire highlights the funding inequality between different areas of the country. This is something we have worked hard to highlight to Government, alongside our other Shire County colleagues.

“Hardly a month has gone by over the past year when I haven’t taken an opportunity to lobby central government directly or via our MPs – as highlighted at Tuesday’s Full Council meeting.”

Core Government funding was around 30% of the council’s service spending five years ago and this has now fallen to 13% reduced by more than £100m a year. But during this time the council has worked hard to keep its costs down by transformation, efficiency and commercialisation such as

- Delivering shared services – both LGSS and sharing of key personnel with Peterborough. Nearly the entire management team is now shared across the two organisations
- Establishing a housing development company to deliver income of £4m a year to support front line services
- Developing a commercial portfolio to deliver £5m a year to support frontline services

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The Council has also invested significant sums in transformation projects to reduce its overall operating costs.

Despite this demand for services continues to rise, with increasing numbers of children requiring social care and support, demand for Special Educational Needs schools places rising along with the complexity of need, and a 20% increase in the past four years of the number of residents aged 85+

Claims that Cambridgeshire County Council’s budget setting process led to a fraudulent budget have been refuted by the council’s most senior finance officer.

Cllr Mike Shellens, chair of the council’s audit and accounts committee, said at yesterday’s Full Council meeting “For a budget to be put out based on figures that we know from past experience will not be forthcoming, is in my view putting in information which is incorrect, and incorrect information in a budget, makes it in my view, fraudulent.”

But in an email following the meeting, Chris Malyon, Council’s Chief Financial Officer and Deputy Chief Executive, who has statutory responsibility for the financial affairs of the Council, told Members: “As Councillors you all have a statutory responsibility to set a balanced budget. In times of reduced government funding and increased demand for services this is not a straight

forward process. However I robustly refute the phrase used that the budget was fraudulent”

Cllr Steve Count, Leader of Cambridgeshire County Council said: “As Chair of the Council’s Audit and Accounts Committee Cllr Shellens has direct access to Gillian Beasley, the Chief Executive of the Council, to Chris Malyon, our Chief Financial Officer, to both internal and external auditors and to me as the Leader of the Council. He is also ultimately responsible for our whistleblowing policy.

“He has used none of these avenues to make any accusation of fraudulent behaviour, and to my knowledge before yesterday’s meeting, had never raised this issue in any council meeting.

“For such a serious accusation to be made, by Cllr Shellens, without any evidence to substantiate that claim is incredible. I would urge him to put forward evidence to back up his claim, which I do not believe exists. However, if anything is submitted, I can assure everyone, it would be examined in full.”

In addition Cllr Steve Count, has confirmed he has reported Cllr Mike Shellens for a breach of the Councillors Code of Conduct.