

**May 2019**

**Opposition leader's report to South Cambridgeshire District Council**

**Cllr Peter Topping**

Chair, I said last year when the administration of Cllr Smith took power that we would not oppose for the sake of opposition.

So when Cllr Heylings brought forward her motion on zero carbon we supported it – and even seconded it.

And in that spirit I will be attending the Zero Carbon Future symposium that is being organised next week by this council and others. I will be going because Councillor Graham Cone the Conservative lead on environment and sustainability can't attend due to his day job as a radiotherapist at Addenbrookes. I understand that Cllr Heylings will be speaking on behalf of the Liberal Democrats at that event, because Cllr Smith is attending a Palace Garden Party.

But to be fair, I hope the sun shines on Cllr Smith's big day, - I would just offer three reminders if she is presented to the Queen.

- Selfies with the sovereign are generally discouraged
- A bow rather than a formal curtesy is sufficient as a sign of respect
- Don't bring up in conversation the time in this council in 2016 when you voted against a proposal to celebrate Her Majesty's 90th birthday and described it as a ridiculous vanity project.

Now the new order has an aspiration to be green – green to the core

And it certainly is green – green to the gills in the administration of a district council. Why else would they brought in their management consultants to tell them what to do.

Although if I look at the minutes of the cabinet meeting when that decision was made, I see it was on the recommendation of the previous chief executive, probably last summer. Before there was any thought of council tax money being spent by this Liberal Democrat administration to the tune of over two hundred thousand pounds to give her early access to the Local government Pension Scheme and thereby early retirement.

The new administration commissioned two pieces of work from these management consultants. I'm told the second report was needed to explain the first.

Either way, their near £100 thousand pounds of work made interesting reading, especially the line describing "increased levels of frustration between members and officers".

If the administration is struggling so much with so many officers they perhaps ought to reflect on their own behaviour and requests. It's an old saying that people, when rightly and fully trusted, will return that trust.

And the consultants proposed a body of work – some of which is coming up later in this meeting, to spend a further million on implementing their grand design.

It is the residents that will have to pay for this – for the near £100k on consultant's fees, over £200k for the CEO's early retirement, the proposed million pounds of implementation. I thought – and I believe our residents do – that this council is in the business of emptying bins and recycling, good

design in planning, keeping people out of the trap of homelessness. These are the things that the officers do, and keep on doing, whatever the political weather. The officers just keep going – or, as is the case in recent months, they just keep going – out the door. Perhaps Cllr John Williams has been prescribing the stick again but forgetting the carrot.

There was one piece of data that the report included which caught my eye. The consultants noted, breathlessly, that the numbers of meetings had gone up – by 37 per cent.

And I wondered, is that a good thing? Really? And then I wondered, which meetings were they? Secret meetings – because by the way, of the 19 council and cabinet meetings held this last year, nearly half excluded the press and public.

But what were these meetings that had increased in number? Certainly not the portfolio meetings, because they have all gone.

Certainly not the two meetings of the Audit Committee in late 2019, both cancelled, depriving the audit committee and the fearless Cllr Heather Williams to ask the other Cllr Williams what he was doing about getting the accounts closed.

Certainly not the mental health working group that councillor Ellington did so much to get going under her portfolio, and I understand is now on hold. But what can we expect from an administration whose first decision was to axe the Health and Wellbeing Portfolio.

But I don't want to be unduly pessimistic. After all, the council voted for the Conservative Local Plan, and indeed this week the planning committee, voted through the New Town of Waterbeach.

The affordable houses for this part of Waterbeach will be 30 per cent. This is a failure to stare down the developers and extract the full 40 per cent of affordable homes that the Liberal Democrats set much store by when in opposition. This is a failure of political leadership that I lay at the door of the new Cabinet.

I said at the beginning that our approach was not to oppose for the sake of opposition – but we find much to question, and much to oppose, and this administration has much to learn.

**Cllr Peter Topping**

**Conservative Opposition leader**

**South Cambridgeshire District council**