

# Cllr Lorna Dupré

## MONTHLY REPORT MARCH 2021

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### Deputy leader resigns as 'Farmgate' report issued

Deputy Leader of Cambridgeshire County Council Roger Hickford has resigned his post and quit his council seat following the issuing of the final report into the 'Farmgate' scandal.

As I have previously reported, the matter involves the award to Mr Hickford of the tenancy of a county council-owned farm.

The county council's Audit & Accounts Committee meets on Friday 5 March to review the report into the granting of the tenancy and subsequent actions, when one of the key questions will be how much of the report will be allowed into the public eye. The timetable is here:

<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/news/manor-farm-audit-to-be-considered-by-audit-and-accounts-committee>

At the time of writing, the report has been shared with very few people, not including the complainant (or me).

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### COVID-19

COVID-19 rates in Cambridgeshire continue to reduce, with some areas showing infection levels well below 100 cases per 100,000, though they remain very high in Fenland where the reduction is slower. However, numbers are still much higher than last summer so it is essential to continue to take precautions. The number of patients with COVID-19 in hospitals is reducing but still significant, and we are still seeing deaths from Covid although these continue to reduce.

On Monday 22 February the Government published its Roadmap for the coming months.

#### Step 1

##### From 8 March

- All children and students will return to face to face education in schools and college.
- Wraparound childcare and other supervised children's activities can resume where they enable parents to work, seek work, attend education, seek medical care or attend a support group.
- Care home residents allowed one regular visitor provided they are tested and wear PPE.
- The Stay at Home requirement will remain, but people can leave home for recreation outdoors such as a coffee or picnic with their household or support bubble, or with one person outside their household.
- Some university students on practical courses able to return to face to face learning.

### **Also Step 1**

#### **From 29 March**

- Outdoor gatherings of either 6 people or 2 households allowed, including in private gardens.
- Outdoor sports facilities such as tennis and basketball courts to reopen, and people can take part in formally organised outdoor sports.
- Stay At Home order ends, though many lockdown restrictions remain (eg you should continue to work from home where possible, and overseas travel remains banned, aside for a small number of reasons).

### **Step 2**

#### **No earlier than 12 April**

- Non-essential retail, personal care premises, such as hairdressers and nail salons, and public buildings, such as libraries and community centres, will reopen.
- Most outdoor attractions and settings, including zoos, and theme parks, will also reopen although wider social contact rules will apply in these settings to prevent indoor mixing between different households. Drive-in cinemas and drive-in performances will also be permitted.
- Indoor leisure facilities, such as gyms and swimming pools, will also reopen - but only for use by people on their own or with their household.
- Hospitality venues can serve people outdoors only. There will be no need for customers to order a substantial meal with alcohol, and no curfew - although customers must order, eat and drink while seated.
- Self-contained accommodation, such as holiday lets, where indoor facilities are not shared with other households, can also reopen.
- Funerals can continue with up to 30 people, and the numbers able to attend weddings, receptions and commemorative events such as wakes will rise to 15 (from 6).

### **Step 3**

#### **No earlier than 17 May**

- Outdoors, most social contact rules will be lifted, although gatherings of over 30 people will remain illegal.
- Outdoor performances such as outdoor cinemas, outdoor theatres and outdoor cinemas can reopen. Indoors, the rule of 6 or 2 households will apply - although we will keep under review whether it is safe to increase this.
- Indoor hospitality, entertainment venues such as cinemas and soft play areas, the rest of the accommodation sector, indoor adult group sports and exercise classes also reopen.
- Larger performances and sporting events in indoor venues with a capacity of 1,000 people or half-full (whichever is lower) will also be allowed, as will those in outdoor venues with a capacity of 4000 people or half-full (whichever is lower).
- In the largest outdoor seated venues where crowds can spread out, up to 10,000 people will be able to attend (or a quarter-full, whichever is lower).
- Up to 30 people will be able to attend weddings, receptions and wakes, as well as funerals. Other life events that will be permitted include bar mitzvahs and christenings.

### **Step 4**

#### **No earlier than 21 June**

- It is hoped all legal limits on social contact can be removed.
- The Government hopes to reopen nightclubs, and lift restrictions on large events and performances that apply in Step 3.
- This will also guide decisions on whether all limits can be removed on weddings and other life events.

## Vaccinations

The roll-out of the vaccination programme continues, with nearly 230,000 people across the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough NHS STP area receiving at least one dose of vaccine (as at 21 February 2021).

The NHS are now publishing the numbers of people receiving at least one vaccination in each lower tier (district or city) local authority area, which is available on [Statistics » COVID-19 Vaccinations \(england.nhs.uk\)](https://www.statistics.gov.uk/COVID-19/Vaccinations) The numbers for East Cambridgeshire residents between 8 December 2020 and 21 February 2021, broken down by age, are as follows:

Age	Under 70	70-74	75-79	80+
No of injections	11,688	4,810	3,500	4,829

The National Booking Service allows people to manage their appointments via the main booking page if people want to reschedule or cancel their appointment. For those who have booked via 119, they can call 119 to reschedule or cancel as well. Rescheduling will be subject to availability at the local site. People are also asked to reschedule or cancel as early as possible to enable the slot to be offered to someone else in good time.

## Rapid COVID testing centres

Community Rapid Testing using 'lateral flow' tests is available including at Soham Town Rangers Football Club. More information and online booking at <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/coronavirus/coronavirus-covid-19-rapid-community-testing>

The Council hopes to be able to offer pop-up testing at different sites across the county—more information about this in the coming weeks.

## Schools

The County Council's education team is working flat out with schools to make sure they are ready for all children to return to the classroom announced as part of the national Roadmap. In secondary schools, all children will be required to wear face coverings whilst at school and have a rapid test twice a week.

The Council has launched a GoFundMe page to try to raise much needed funding for laptops and tablets for children who need them for schoolwork <https://www.gofundme.com/f/cambridgeshire-laptops-for-children>

## Coveney COVID help

Congratulations to Coveney Village Hall COVID support group for earning a Chairman's Commendation from the Chairman of Cambridgeshire County Council for their work in supporting local residents during the pandemic.

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## Budget

The County Council set its budget and Medium Term Financial Strategy on Tuesday 9 February as expected, as proposed by the Conservative group.

The County Council's share of the Council Tax will rise by the maximum 1.99 per cent for general services, plus 1.00 per cent of the 3.00 per cent over two years allowed for Adult Social Care (this means they will be able to implement the remaining 2.00 per cent increase next year).

As noted in my report last month, the budget includes an extra £4M each year for the next five years on footpaths, half of which will come from borrowing. £6.97M over two years will be spent to rebuild a stretch of the B1050 on a new alignment, from Earith Bridge to the layby on the left before the entrance to Willingham. And £2.7M is to be spent over five years on flood attenuation and biodiversity.

## Road maintenance cut

Unfortunately however the Government has decided to reduce its highways maintenance grant to Cambridgeshire and Peterborough by £7.5M this coming year, from around £35M to around £27.5M. The money will initially go to Mayor Palmer's Combined Authority, and will then be split *pro rata* between Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, with Cambridgeshire getting the lion's share because of its greater size.

This reduction will more than wipe out the £4 million extra for footpath maintenance this coming year. And the proposal currently on the table to reclassify the A1123 from an A road to a B road could lose Cambridgeshire another quarter of a million pounds a year for road maintenance, as this is based on length of roads of various classifications.

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## HGV working group

The County Council's working group on HGVs has now held its second meeting, including a discussion with Derek Crosby from the police about enforcement. We have drawn up a list of organisations we want to hear from before drawing up proposals on what the County Council should be doing.

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## Local Highways improvement bids

The County Council's LHI panel for East Cambridgeshire has been presented with twenty bids for funding from parishes across the district, including Coveney, Little Downham, Sutton, and Witchford. In total the bids are asking for £183,846.13 of council funding, while this year's budget for East Cambridgeshire is likely to remain similar to last year's which was £99,481 after engineers' costs.

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## A1123 response

I have been asked by the Council for my comments on the proposal to reclassify the A1123 (and A1421) from an A road to a B road. My response was as follows.

The A1123 is one of a number of roads in the County that is heavily used by traffic, including heavy commercial vehicles, on its way through narrow residential village streets not designed or intended for this volume of traffic.

There is a County Council working group which is currently reviewing the Council's policy in this matter; and there is also an existing County Council policy on reclassification of roads. These, not a standalone and unaided motion to the Council, are the appropriate means to use to raise and resolve these issues.

I am in principle supportive of proposals that are effective in addressing excessive heavy vehicle traffic on village roads. I would like to make the following detailed points.

1. Reclassification of the A1123 should not result in a net reduction in the funding available to the Council to maintain the road. We have been advised by officers that the proposal to reclassify the A1123 will lose the Council £250,000 a year in road maintenance funding from the Government. It has finally been admitted by those promoting this scheme that this is indeed the case. Furthermore Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are set to lose £7.5 million in Government funding for road maintenance this coming year, which will add to the financial pressure on highways maintenance everywhere across the county and reduce even further the council's room for financial manoeuvre.

Before reclassification of the A1123 is formally progressed, a proper cost benefit analysis should therefore be conducted and reported to the Highways & Transport Committee, both of the impact on the A1123, and of the impact on other roads in the county whose maintenance may deteriorate as a result of this proposal.

Such an analysis could of course, and indeed should, consider the effects of reclassification more widely. If it could be shown to have benefits to public health, for example, or to reduce injury accidents, those would be entirely relevant considerations.

2. Reclassification of the A1123 should not simply tip its traffic problems onto the roads of neighbouring villages. An analysis should therefore be carried out of the changes in traffic flow that would result from reclassification of the A1123, with this information reported to the Highways & Transport Committee and shared with those villages and with the police for their comments.

3. It is self-evident that reclassifying a road will not in itself change its use by drivers, including drivers of heavy commercial vehicles who will continue to use the quickest and most convenient route for their journeys. The village in which I live, Sutton, is on the B1381, which is still widely used by heavy vehicles despite its classification as a B road.

Reclassification will only deter traffic, or slow its speed, if it is accompanied by practical interventions to achieve these aims—weight limits, speed limits, and other speed restriction measures. Commitment to these initiatives should be absolutely integral to any move to reclassify the A1123.

Finally, I would note that the use of the A1123 is not uniform along its entire length. Indeed part of the A1123 in the St Ives and Houghton area is also part of the County Council's Advisory Strategic Freight Route. This further demonstrates that a decision to reclassify the A1123 can only be taken in the wider context of the Council's ongoing review of its policy on heavy commercial vehicles in villages.

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### **Lancaster Way roundabout**

This scheme has continued to cause issues for residents of Witchford and further afield, with safety of cyclists and equestrians a particular concern. The decision to open the Bedwell Hey Lane gate as an access to the Business Park for two hours at the beginning and two hours at the end of each working day was taken without consultation with the Parish Council or other road users. This temporary access, serving up to 250 vehicles twice a day even before lockdown rules are revised, overlays a bridleway.

Discussion with the project manager is ongoing, and has also involved the local Rights of Way officer, but has been and remains difficult and frustrating.

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### **Flooding**

The County Council's Flood Risk team has received 760 reports related to the flooding in December and January. This includes both internal flooding and external flooding such as of gardens or highways. Reports of highway related flooding have been forwarded directly to the highways department.

Formal flood investigations are in their early stages and the Council is currently recruiting additional resource for this task. Twelve community flood meetings, mostly in Huntingdonshire which was worst affected, have been held to discuss the recent flooding and identify actions.

An extraordinary meeting of the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Flood & Water Partnership took place on 3 February and the next meeting is scheduled for 2

March. These are not public meetings. I have asked for minutes of the February meeting and have been told they will be made available once they have been agreed by the 2 March meeting.

The Council is now in discussions with the Environment Agency about setting up flood groups and writing flood plans with communities who are at various stages in this process. The Council is also in discussions with Anglian Water.

Information provided by residents has helped the Council develop a database of locations where additional watercourse maintenance is needed. The Council plans to write to all relevant landowners to remind them of their riparian responsibilities and will assess the appropriateness and extent of any enforcement action.

### Littleport & Downham Internal Drainage Board

I attended the February meeting of the IDB as an appointee from the District Council. There was a useful discussion about a number of water management issues and a number of actions were agreed.

### Sutton

I attended a site visit recently at the top of The Orchards and St Andrew's Close with residents and Hilary Ellis of the Local Lead Flood Authority. Concerns have been expressed about the effect of the Linden Homes (Vistry) development. Hilary has discussed an option with Vistry to intercept and slow overland water flow, and Vistry is also considering obtaining CCTV of the pipe that starts in the field north of The Orchards and flows south.

### Pymoor and Little Downham

I attended an online meeting of the parish council's flood group in February and was assigned a number of actions which I am working on. One of these was to track down the minutes of the February Flood & Water Partnership meeting, and I have reported the outcome of this above. I am also in contact with the County Council's Joint Interim Assistant Director for Environment & Commercial Services about the issues in Pymoor and Little Downham.

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### This Land

This Land CEO David Gelling has left the County Council's housing company and has been replaced on an interim basis by strategic land director David Lewis. This Land accounts show accumulating losses including £11.8M for the year end to December 2019, and £3.9M for the previous year. A recent update report to the Council's Commercial & Investment Committee did not mention how many houses the company had built—a curious omission for a house-building company. Meanwhile flats built in Cambridge at the

Milton Road library site remain unoccupied twenty months after completion.

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## Census

Census Day is Sunday 21 March, and for the first time this important data gathering exercise will take place predominantly online. Postcards have started arriving to alert residents to the census. Information gathered by the census helps determine how Government funding is apportioned for local public services, so a complete picture of our residents is important in ensuring we get our fair share of resources.

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## Sutton school mobile classrooms

Cambridgeshire County Council has submitted a planning application to itself (reference CCC/21/011/VAR) to extend the use of the seven-bay mobile classroom block to 31 August 2024.

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## Scheduled monuments

I recently attended a presentation for councillors on Cambridgeshire's scheduled monuments. There are far more of these than I realised—263 are listed at <https://ancientmonuments.uk/england/cambridgeshire>—and we were all keen to see the Council promote these more effectively. Encouraging visits to these monuments once lockdown restrictions are lifted could also support the Council's aims to improve physical and mental health, as well as promoting the county's heritage.

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## Byway

Following a complaint by a resident, I reported to the Council's Local Highways Officer and Rights of Way Officer the obstruction of Byway 221/12, called Blockmoor Drove, that runs parallel to the A142 on the other side of the Mepal Outdoor Centre. A large wall has been constructed to block access along the byway, and at the time of writing officers are investigating.

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## Fen biosphere

I have submitted a motion to the next County Council meeting on 16 March expressing support for the Fen Biosphere project. The motion says:

This council is proud to be a partner in Natural Cambridgeshire, the Local Nature Partnership for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough which launched its Doubling Nature vision last year. Achieving the vision depends on collaborative partnerships and the sharing of the vision with a wide range

of stakeholders, including various agencies, organisations, communities, landowners, farmers and developers.

The proposed Fens Biosphere zone stretches from Wisbech in the north to Cambridge in the south, and from the county's western border to its eastern border. It includes the core zones of Holme Fen, Woodwalton Fen, the Nene Washes, the Ouse Washes, Wicken Fen, and Chippenham Fen. It encompasses large areas of farmland, a rich natural environment, historic scheduled monuments, and opportunities for tourism and outdoor recreation. Biosphere status offers to help address particular challenges including the management of water and peatland.

Biosphere status is awarded by UNESCO to unique and valuable landscapes such as the Fens. Biospheres connect people, economies, and nature to secure a future where all can thrive, meeting the needs of current and future residents and working towards providing secure and happy futures for all. Biospheres aim to improve the natural environment, using new ideas, science, and technology to explore new ways of living every day in ways that solve global challenges.

Following the sustained work of a multi-agency partnership coordinated by Cambridgeshire ACRE, the proposed Fens Biosphere was awarded Candidate Status by UK Man and the Biosphere (UK MAB) on behalf of UNESCO in November 2019, opening the real possibility that the Fens Biosphere could become the UK's eighth UNESCO Biosphere designation—one of 714 in 129 countries, the only lowland Biosphere in the UK, and the only Biosphere in the East of England.

In order to gain UNESCO Biosphere designation, the Biosphere initiative must demonstrate evidence of widest public support through extensive public consultation and there is an additional requirement that young people be involved. Since being awarded candidate status, the Biosphere Project has therefore embarked on a thorough programme of consultation with local communities and businesses, including a conference in January 2021 attended by 164 participants.

Designation also requires the support of local authorities. Although several local authorities within the candidate area have voiced support, it is a requirement that this support be demonstrated through formal endorsement.

This Council therefore

- recognises the value of the Fens Biosphere and formally supports its request for UNESCO Biosphere designation;
- authorises the Chief Executive to write formally to convey its support;

- authorises the championing of the Fens Biosphere initiative by asking the Chief Executive to write to all relevant local authorities to encourage them to do the same.

More about the Fens Biosphere initiative at <https://www.fensbiosphere.org.uk/>

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## **New Shire Hall**

The decision has been made by those responsible to call the Council's new Alconbury building New Shire Hall. This follows repeated admonishments by the Council's ruling group not to refer to it as the Council's new HQ, on the grounds that it is the hub of a new 'hub and spoke' model of council accommodation and does not fulfil the same role as the existing Shire Hall.

It has now been acknowledged that there will be a summer hiatus between the Council having to vacate Shire Hall in spring, and being able to occupy the new premises at Alconbury in the autumn. This means the Council will be left with nowhere of its own to meet over the summer, and a serious reduction in working space for any staff who will be working from the office as lockdown restrictions are lifted. Meanwhile unless the Government changes its mind, the power of local councils to meet online will cease on Friday 7 May.

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## **Coveney and Witcham roads**

Our Local Highways Officer has provided the following update on roads in the Little Downham to Witcham area.

### **Coveney to Little Downham**

Since the problems that occurred during the roundabout works at the end of November I had crews repairing potholes and also laying and compacting planings to the overrun verges, farm entrances and passing places and grip cutting as an interim measure to improve things along the whole route from Coveney to Downham Hythe, however some of this work has been wrecked purely by the farm machinery and large vehicles ... not helped by the wet winter weather.

### **Coveney to A142 – Long Causeway**

This route also suffers verge overrun. In August 2020 the dragon patcher did an excellent job of repairing the edges all round the bends that were damaged... you would never know today as they are all wrecked again and this is a 2-way road! I have raised pothole repair orders for this route November 2020, January 2021 and have a pothole repair order to be completed within 21 days. The extra traffic using this route has not helped and when the new budget arrives I will be undertaking localised patching

and more repair work but at the moment we are just attempting to keep it a safe network.

### Coveney to Witcham

The first section along Short Causeway is in the plan to be Recycled as this section is very uneven, but not so many potholes. I have had SLOW and Uneven Road signs placed there to warn drivers.

From Main St to Jerusalem Drove, there is some verge damage and potholes but they get addressed as soon as we are made aware, the last repairs were done in January 2021. I will inspect the route to see if more have evolved.

The Green did suffer some overrun damage but this was resolved and to help stop the water ponding on the bend where it joins Jerusalem Drove last September works were done to improve the drainage there and this has made a big difference, but again the local farmers deposit mud during harvests and although they attempt to clear it a lot blocks our drainage system there. The Green also has the odd pothole occur.

Jerusalem Drove is a bit uneven but not too bad regarding potholes forming this joins Gravel Drove then Hive Drove and I've an order in place to repair a pothole near that bend. Heading up towards the village there are some dips and cracking and I've had the dragon patcher fix the worst of these last year but there are always areas like this but not all are reaching our repair intervention level and when they do I get them repaired.

I appreciate none of these back routes are in brilliant condition, we will never be able to stop vehicles with satnavs and local knowledge from short cutting these back roads to avoid hold ups on the major routes ... much to their peril and further destruction to these historic farm and village routes.

These routes are mostly single track with a concrete base and considering they were never constructed for today's large, heavy vehicles along with the underlying environment forever shifting, they have done remarkably well. Even with passing places we will never stop verge overrun damage by large vehicles or impatient drivers. The Recycle process does improve the surface running but we will still see this verge damage occur on single track roads. We spend money rebuilding the verges and repairing the road edges only for them to be destroyed by the next large vehicle. The safety of the public is our priority and we will always endeavour to repair defects that meet with our intervention levels within the specified response times.

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### Local roadworks

- Road recycling and surface works on Downham Common between Main Drove and Black Bank, already put off once, will start on 15 March and

take place for approximately twelve days. Working hours will be between 7:00AM and 7:00PM, with access to properties only, in liaison with site staff, and possible escort through the roadworks.

- Work is continuing at New Road Witchford to build the access to the new properties behind 1-7 Sutton Road. Some *ad hoc* redesign of the new road has been taking place as the works progress, and an 'as built' drawing will be supplied to the Council on completion.
- Resurfacing works will be carried out on Sunday 7 to Tuesday 9 March (weather permitting) in Witcham, in The Orchards, Westway Place, and Silver Street. The roads may be closed from 7:30AM to 6:00PM, and vehicle access will be restricted. Vehicles should not be parked on the road or footway.
- Laurel Close Mepal is to be closed for two days (currently Monday 8 and Tuesday 9 March, weather permitting) for resurfacing. As above, the roads may be closed from 7:30AM to 6:00PM, and vehicle access will be restricted. Vehicles should not be parked on the road or footway.
- 'Thin Surfacing' will take place at Churchill Close Sutton on Tuesday 23 March. The carriageway will be closed and residents may be required to wait for a short period before they can access their property. Vehicles should not be parked on the road or footway.
- Works at Gravel Head bridge at Downham Common between March and September were listed in my February report.

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### Meanwhile on the Combined Authority

There is at the time of writing still no news of the £45M for affordable housing which the Government is holding back, nor clarity about the closing date for the £100M scheme (March 2021 or March 2022).

The Climate Change Commission established by the Combined Authority will be launching its first interim report with an event on Monday 15 March.

### Meet Your Councillor

Sutton ward district councillor Mark Inskip and I will be holding our virtual surgery via Zoom from 6:30 to 7:30PM on

- Tuesday 9 March 2021
- Tuesday 13 April 2021

Please contact Mark at [mark@markinskip.org.uk](mailto:mark@markinskip.org.uk) to book your timeslot.

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### Cllr Lorna Dupré

County Councillor for the Sutton division