

# Cllrs Lorna Dupré and Mark Inskip

## MONTHLY REPORT MARCH 2021

### Council budget

As expected, the Council set its budget for 2021/22 on Tuesday 23 February. This included a freeze in the Council's share of council tax for the coming year, but after that three years of the maximum permitted increase of £5 a year (around 3.5 per cent) for a Band D household. This will still leave a budget shortfall of over £4M (on a total annual net expenditure of under £12.6M) in two years' time. No efficiency savings were agreed to help reduce this shortfall.

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### Committee reorganisation

The Council has for some time limped along with just two policy committees—Finance & Assets, and Operational Services. The Finance & Assets Committee has had far too much business, and its remit has been very broad including issues like planning policy. We have always argued that it is wrong for the same committee to be responsible both for the Council's finances and for its planning policies, not least because this could lead to distrust of the Council's motives in taking decisions about land use and strategic planning.

The Full Council meeting agreed by a majority to resolve the Finance & Assets Committee workload by setting up a new Audit Committee of five councillors, to start in May. We proposed instead a Strategic Planning & Economic Development Committee to deal with the pressing issues facing the future of our district, and to avoid the conflict of interest in having the same committee dealing with finances and planning, but this was defeated.

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### Planning applications update

#### Brick Lane Mepal

The planning application for the site at Brick Lane Mepal was refused by the Planning Committee on Wednesday 3 March, on the grounds of conflict with the Sutton Neighbourhood Plan regarding building outside development envelopes, and design quality—nearly two-thirds of the plots were smaller than the minimum in the Council's Design Guide. Mark and Lorna spoke at the Planning Committee meeting supporting the recommendation to refuse the application.

Several residents have made the point that they do not object to appropriate development on this site, and it would be useful for us as district councillors to know what would constitute a locally acceptable proposal for use of this site. The site is currently within the boundary of the Sutton Neighbourhood Plan though it is no longer within the Sutton parish. Sutton is beginning a review of its Neighbourhood Plan, and Mepal Parish Council has resolved that the area that

was formerly in Sutton Parish but was moved within the Mepal Parish boundary should be removed from any update to the Sutton Neighbourhood Plan.

### College Farm Wentworth

The Planning Committee on Wednesday 3 March refused an application by AgReserves to vary the planning consent for six self-build houses to allow them to be sold as market price houses. Lorna had called in this application as she believed this would set a dangerous precedent for developers across the district to apply for consent for self-build housing, establish the precedent of development on various sites, then apply to turn them into market-price housing if they did not sell. The Planning Committee refused the application, which had been supported by officers, on the grounds that it did not believe that the applicants had sufficiently marketed the site for self-build.

### West Lodge Lane Sutton

Lorna has called in an application for a first floor extension at West Lodge Lane on the junction with The Row. Officers plan to recommend it for refusal on grounds of visual impact, and suggest the applicant reduces its size—something that cannot be done without dismantling and rebuilding the existing permitted ground floor extension.

### 65 High Street Sutton

Mark and Lorna have already received representations from residents concerned about the application for a hot food takeaway at 65 High Street. The issues remain the same as when a previous hot food takeaway application was submitted. We have asked to be kept informed of officers' emerging views on this, so that we can decide whether to call it in to the Planning Committee.

### Council loses appeal at Littleport

Concrete company F P McCann has won its planning appeal against East Cambridgeshire District Council over an application to expand its Littleport factory which was first lodged in August 2016. The appeal was against a failure by the council to determine the application in a timely fashion.

F P McCann was also awarded costs after a planning inspector found East Cambridgeshire District Council guilty of 'unreasonable behaviour'. The planning inspector said McCann's had been forced into 'unnecessary or wasted expense; a full award of costs is justified'.

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## Masterplans

Mark and Lorna attended a District Council seminar last month on the District Council's forthcoming Market Town Masterplan applications for Ely, Soham, and Littleport.

Each market town in Cambridgeshire has been awarded £1M by the Combined Authority for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, for projects to help the authority achieve the goals set out in its Local Industrial Strategy. The money is also linked to the Masterplans for each of the market towns drawn up by consultants, and to COVID recovery.

Ely has £344,000 remaining of its £1M, Soham has £800,000 left, and Littleport wants to spend its entire £1M on roundabout works on the A10.

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## **Fens Biosphere**

Mark submitted a motion to last month's Full Council meeting calling on the District Council to formally endorse the Fens Biosphere project.

Disappointingly this proposal was significantly watered down by an amendment from the Conservative group, which Mark was forced to accept. Instead of supporting the Biosphere application, the Council is now committed only to request further information about the implications and benefits of designation of the Biosphere, and to write to Cambridgeshire ACRE to seek further information. This is all the more strange as Cambridgeshire ACRE is based in East Cambridgeshire, in Council managed premises at eSpace North in Littleport.

However, it is good news that Mark has managed to get this important subject on to the agenda for public debate by the Council for the first time.

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## **Co-op opening**

The Co-op on Ely Road Sutton opened on schedule on Friday 19 February.

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## **COVID grants**

The Council is still administering a number of COVID grants from money awarded by Government. The latest of these grants is the third round of the Additional Restrictions Grant—a discretionary scheme for councils to support businesses impacted by the COVID-19 restrictions in place from 26 December 2020 to 15 February 2021 that have not been eligible for the Local Restrictions Support Grant.

Money will be paid as a one-off grant and is for businesses which experienced a loss of income of over 30 per cent that was directly related to, or as a result of, the Tier 4 and national lockdown restrictions in place between those dates. Eligible businesses can apply online, or request a form by email to [covid19businessgrants@eastcambs.gov.uk](mailto:covid19businessgrants@eastcambs.gov.uk) or phone on 01353 665555. The closing date for applications for the scheme is 5pm on Friday 19 March 2021.

A full list of COVID019 grants is available on the District Council's website at <https://www.eastcambs.gov.uk/covid/coronavirus-information-businesses>

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### **Contract procedures**

An audit of the District Council's contract procedures has concluded that there was 'little or no supporting documentation to evidence compliance with the [Council's] Contract Procedure Rules and where contracts have been extended they have not been included in the central contracts register'. The Finance Manager has requested that procurement training is undertaken to ensure that all Services Managers understand the requirements of the Contract Procedures rules and understand the financial and legal risks relating to non-compliance. Further audit work on this is ongoing.

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### **Bus, walking and cycling**

The District Council's bus review working group has been repurposed to cover cycling and walking—Lorna is still a member. Its meeting on 10 March, the first with its new remit, will receive feedback on the cycling and walking surveys which were circulated to residents a year ago almost to the day. There must be some question about how current residents' views expressed in those surveys are, especially given the intervening of lockdown which has transformed the transport agenda nationally as well as locally.

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### **Meet your councillors**

We are continuing to offer online Meet Your Councillors events to replace our face to face ones in the Community Room at Sutton School. The next ones will take place on Tuesday 9 March and Tuesday 13 April from 6:30 to 7:30PM. Email [mark@markinskip.org.uk](mailto:mark@markinskip.org.uk) to book a slot.

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**Cllr Lorna Dupré**

**Cllr Mark Inskip**

District Councillors for the Sutton ward