

Annual Report 2021



CLLR LORNA DUPRE

County councillor for the Sutton division

(including Sutton, Mepal, Witcham, Wentworth,
Coveney, Wardy Hill, Way Head, Little Downham,
Pymoor, and Witchford)

Introduction

The year has continued to be overshadowed by COVID-19, with infection rates rising and falling, and restrictions tightening and easing. The arrival of effective vaccines has been transformational, and their rollout an impressive piece of work by the NHS, but we must continue to be vigilant.

Meanwhile the period between Christmas and New Year saw flooding seriously affect a number of local communities.

1 The council

1.1 I have remained Deputy Leader of my political group for the whole of the last year, as well as being my group's lead member on the County Council's Environment & Sustainability Committee, and a member of the General Purposes Committee and the Health Committee. I have also remained Chair of the Combined Authority's Overview & Scrutiny Committee.

1.2 The composition of the Council has changed only slightly in the last year following the move of one Labour councillor to Independent. The Council currently consists of 35 Conservative councillors, 16 Liberal Democrats, six Labour, two St Neots Independents, and two Independents. However the County Council faces elections for all 61 seats on Thursday 6 May so this may change.

1.3 Plans for the County Council's move from Shire Hall in Cambridge to Alconbury have been held up, leaving the Council homeless until the autumn. The Government decided not to extend the power for councils to meet online, and at the time of

writing this is being challenged in the courts—so whether the Council has a physical council chamber matters! The new Alconbury building, which we were repeatedly told would not be a replacement Shire Hall, has now been named—New Shire Hall. Public transport to the new HQ will be negligible, with just one bus a day at 8:00AM from Cambridge North Station and Tesco Bar Hill to the new HQ, and one bus back at 5:15PM.

1.4 The Government kicked its plans to impose unitary (single-tier) councils in most places into the long grass, so Cambridgeshire is likely to have both District and County Councils as well as the Combined Authority for the foreseeable future.

1.5 The Council increased its portion of Council Tax in February, by 1.99 per cent for general services, and one per cent for adult social care. The Government has announced that Councils can increase adult social care precepts by three per cent over two years, so it is likely that a one per cent increase this year means a two per cent increase next year.

1.6 The long-running story of 'Farmgate' (the controversial award by the Council of a farm tenancy to the Deputy Leader of the Council, and the decision to borrow a large amount of money to do up the farm house) culminated in the resignation from the Council of the Deputy Leader at the point at which an audit report on the matter was finalised for the Council's Audit & Accounts Committee to consider. The full contents of this report have still not been made public, despite long-running demands for transparency and accountability.

2 COVID-19 and health

- 2.1** The County Council continues to play a key role in joint arrangements with the local NHS and other bodies for local management of the pandemic. A Local Outbreak Control Plan was drawn up, and a joint Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Local Outbreak Engagement Board meets regularly. The Council has continued to work with District Councils and local community support groups to assist residents in need with food, medicines and fuel.
- 2.2** We are sadly losing our longstanding Director of Public Health Dr Liz Robin who retires at the end of April. Interviews have taken place for her successor.
- 2.3** In other health news, the County Council's Health Committee has been kept informed of major developments planned for the Addenbrooke's campus, including a new Children's Hospital and a Cancer Research Hospital.
- 2.4** Meanwhile, plans have now been published for an overhaul of the facilities at the Princess of Wales Hospital in Ely, including new buildings; more day surgery, outpatient, diagnostic, and urgent care services; more joined-up care across health and social services; and a new multi-level car park.
- 2.5** The East of England Ambulance Trust was placed into special measures in October 2020. Inspectors from the Care Quality Commission found a 'negative culture', poor leadership, and a service in which bullying was 'normalised'. Thirteen cases of sexual misconduct and predatory behaviour,

including claims of staff abusing patients, had been reported to police in a single year. Former staff had spoken of a 'toxic work environment'.

3 Children and schools

- 3.1** Local schools, parents, and pupils have coped impressively with everything that has been thrown at them by the pandemic this year. There has been much confusion at Government level about opening of schools, not least in January when schools were told to be fully open for just one day before the Government reversed its decision. National exams and their eventual replacement with other measures were a major issue over the summer.
- 3.2** A national campaign spearheaded by footballer Marcus Rashford forced the Government to ensure children from low income households were fed over the school holidays. The County Council has issued vouchers to large numbers of families over the holiday periods, and there is also a Winter Fund to support vulnerable households with other costs such as fuel.
- 3.3** A proposal for recommissioning mental health counselling services for children and young people in Cambridgeshire was rejected because it would have removed access to these services from young people aged 18-25, leaving them to find unspecified alternative services elsewhere. The proposal was brought back the following month in a much improved form, with an additional contribution of £70,000 per annum into the programme to enable 18-25 year olds to continue to access services.

3.4 All Cambridgeshire secondary schools and a small minority of primaries are now 'academies' which means that the Council has no jurisdiction over them. The County Council retains responsibility for the well-being of children in academies though it has no formal role in intervening if things go wrong. Costs in schools have continued to increase, and independent research confirms that in real terms funds available to schools have been cut by nine per cent in the last ten years. In particular, funding for children with special needs has not kept up with demand. The 'High Needs Block' of funding to support children with higher levels of need in Cambridgeshire now has a deficit of £28M. This problem is not unique to our county.

3.5 In December I successfully proposed a motion to the Full Council calling on the Council to endorse the call of the Local Government Association for the release of National Citizen Service funding and the Government's promised (but not delivered) Youth Investment Fund to local councils like Cambridgeshire to spend on improving youth services.

3.6 I have recently given my approval for council officers to use their delegated powers to approve the extension of the permission for the seven-bay mobile classroom at Sutton primary school for a further three years, to 31 August 2024.

4 Adult Social Care

4.1 Cambridgeshire and Peterborough is one of the last thirteen areas in the country to establish an Integrated Care System, a new partnership

between health and care providers across the area to coordinate services.

4.2 A pilot project has been established, and a contract awarded to social enterprise Community Catalysts, to increase the number of micro-enterprises providing social care and support in local communities.

5 Highways and transport

5.1 Travel and transport patterns over the last twelve months have been heavily affected by COVID. Initially car use declined in the first lockdown, but has rapidly increased since then. Many people have been understandably distrustful of travelling on public transport. The Government has provided some grant funding to invest in infrastructure for sustainable travel, but this has been slow to materialise in practice.

5.2 The Ely Area Capacity Enhancement programme is ongoing, with the aim of upgrading the railway to allow more trains to run through Ely. The aim is to improve connectivity and reliability for passenger services and meet the demand for more rail freight between the Port of Felixstowe, the West Midlands, and the north to support sustainable, long-term economic growth. The first round of public consultation took place between September and November 2020, and the next round of consultation is expected this year.

5.3 In February I uncovered a £7.5M reduction in Government funding for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough road maintenance for this year, from £35M down to £27.5M.

5.4 The County Council has been reviewing the first two and a half years of its 'open book' highways contract with Skanska. £456,000 in overpayments has so far been identified, representing some 0.4-0.5 per cent of the contract value for the period. This sum is being refunded by Skanska and allocated in part to works on the dangerous Wheatsheaf crossroads on the B1040 between St Ives and Somersham, and to additional gully cleansing.

5.5 A proposal was pushed through the County Council in December to downgrade the whole length of the A1123 from an A road to a B road. This was presented directly to a Full Council with no evidence to support its claims that this would discourage lorries, reduce injuries, and improve safety. The proposal would lose the Council some quarter of a million pounds each year in Government funding to maintain the road. Officers have sought the views of parish councils and other bodies along the route and will bring a report to the County Council's Highways Committee in due course.

5.6 This year has seen changes made to the BP and Lancaster Way roundabouts. Billed by the Combined Authority and the County Council as 'improvements' they are nothing but, for the many pedestrians and cyclists for whom the BP junction in particular is now even more hazardous. Equestrians are also badly affected. The official answer to these concerns is that once the A10 is dualled, a safe crossing will be installed. The problem is that even if dualling of the A10 were a good idea, there is currently no funding to implement it, and even if there were

it would take many years to complete. I and others persuaded the County Council to support the installation of a Pegasus crossing at Lancaster Way, but this was refused by the project board. The verge north of the Lancaster Way roundabout has now been severely reduced, there is no safe crossing for equestrians, and an opportunity has been sadly missed.

5.7 I was appointed this year to a working group of the County Council investigating the issue of heavy vehicles in villages. This group has started to interview interested parties such as the police and the Combined Authority, and will report later in the year. I am pressing for the County Council to retain its Advisory Freight Route map, updating it as necessary, and to find ways to implement appropriate restrictions. I have raised the issue of the County Council's 'covenant' for parishes to persuade local hauliers to sign. No central record is kept of which hauliers have signed this covenant with which parishes, rendering it effectively useless. I have pointed out that if this information were published centrally on the Council's website, residents would be enabled to monitor lorry movements through villages and know whether individual hauliers were breaching agreements or not.

5.8 The Council's budget for this year includes initiating a two-year project to remake the B1050 between Earith Bridge and Willingham. This will cost £7M over two years and include a new alignment for the road along part of its length.

5.9 When the County Council announced it was going to propose new arrangements for verge

management, I persuaded officers to include proposals on better and less restrictive working with parish council and on how community groups can be assisted and supported with wild-flowering. The new arrangements also change the pattern of verge cutting where possible in line with Plantlife principles.

- 5.10** The County Council set up a working group this year to review the operation of its Local Highway Improvement process. This review recommended less significant changes to the process than had originally been thought.
- 5.11** Three parishes in the Sutton division (Little Downham, Coveney, and Witchford) have had Local Highways Improvement schemes provisionally recommended for approval this year. Road resurfacing has recently taken place in Witcham and Mepal, and is planned for Cross Lane Little Downham, and Elizabeth Court, The Orchards and The Brook in Sutton this financial year. The Sutton Gault footbridge was repaired just in time for winter. Works at New Road Witchford to provide access to the new housing there are coming to a conclusion—this project has been problematic ever since its inception several years ago. Other works have taken place on Main Drove and Gravel Head Bridge in Little Downham, and elsewhere.
- 5.12** During the year I have dealt with a number of other highway issues including dumping of hazardous materials by contractors on the old Mepal Road alignment, and the blocking off of a right of way behind the Mepal Outdoor Centre.

6 Environment

- 6.1** The floods at Christmas and New Year were a major wake-up call for all agencies involved. Most of the impact was felt in Huntingdonshire, but a number of properties in this part of East Cambridgeshire were affected. The decision by the County Council some years ago to cease routine clearing of gullies gave surface water in many places nowhere to go, while the Environment Agency set up pumps and generators towards Welches Dam to pump water from the Counter Drain into the Washes. The waters reached record levels at Sutton Gault, where the barriers were closed at the causeway, and also at the Jolly Bankers. A strategic group met twice daily for several days to assess the severity of the incident, with a tactical group also meeting to cover the need for practical intervention. Following these events a multi-agency group has met monthly to identify issues to be followed up, publishing notes from its meetings on the County Council's website. At national level, a committee of MPs has published a series of recommendations on flood risk, for the Government to respond to.
- 6.2** The Environment Agency's barrier bank works did not complete by the end of last autumn as required, so following an inspection a revised deadline of autumn 2022 has been established, and a fresh work plan published. The road at Welney Wash will be closed in July and August 2022 to install a demountable flood barrier.
- 6.3** The County Council continues with its energy projects including replacement of school gas boilers;

solar carports at Park & Rides and at its new Alconbury HQ; and the community heat project at Swaffham Prior.

6.4 The County Council's new Waste & Minerals Plan has passed through its inspection stage and the Council has received the inspector's modifications. The Plan is expected to be approved by the County Council in the summer.

6.5 The independent Climate Change Commission for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough, chaired by Baroness Brown, published its first interim report this spring. It contains many challenging statistics and over thirty recommendations. Greenhouse gas emissions in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are approximately 25 per cent higher per person than the UK average, and our 'allowed' share of emissions to 2050 could be exhausted within just six years if no action is taken. The Commission has recommended that a committee be set up specifically to examine the issue of peatland.

6.6 In February the County Council published its annual carbon footprint for 2019/20. The carbon contribution of purchased electricity reduced by one per cent on the previous year as more energy from the National Grid was from renewable sources. However the Council's direct 'Scope 1' emissions were higher than last year, due in part to more complete data and in part to a colder winter. The Council has decided to start introducing shadow carbon pricing, noting the carbon impact of relevant business cases to enable councillors and officers to take this into account when choosing between options.

University of Cambridge researchers have suggested the establishment of a Decarbonisation Fund to help reduce Cambridgeshire's carbon emissions. The Council also ran a Solar Together scheme with provide iChoosr for the bulk purchase of solar panels and battery storage. The scheme generated significant numbers of enquiries and final figures will be confirmed in late summer.

6.7 I proposed a motion to the Full Council in March on the Fens biosphere application by Cambridgeshire ACRE. The motion was somewhat watered down by the ruling group, but at least got the Council debating for the first time this UNESCO level application in the Council's own area.

6.8 Councillors received a number of briefings during the year, including one on the county's scheduled monuments, of which there are 263 listed on the ancientmonuments.uk website. We were all keen to see the County Council promote these more effectively.

7 Commercial

7.1 The County Council's house building enterprise This Land has repeatedly found itself in the columns of *Private Eye* as questions continue to be asked about its viability and strategy. Croydon and Merton councils have both closed down their equivalent companies.

8 Libraries

8.1 Cambridgeshire's libraries closed during lockdown, but are currently open for limited browsing. Returns are quarantined for several days

before being reshelved, and though visitors can browse the stacks there is currently no option to sit and study.

9 Police

9.1 A new Police & Crime Commissioner will be elected on Thursday 6 May 2021. A proposal for the Police & Crime Commissioner to take over the running of the Fire Authority has been delayed, as the Home Office has said it will not be able to consider a revised business case until after the Police & Crime Commissioner is elected. Meanwhile plans to build a new police hub next to the Park & Ride at Milton have been given the go-ahead subject to confirmation from the Secretary of State.

10 Combined Authority

10.1 In March the Local Government Minister wrote to the Mayor saying that the Government would not be paying the Combined Authority the outstanding £45M of the £100M originally promised for affordable housing. The Minister said "I have concluded that the programme has made insufficient delivery progress and that the value for money being achieved is below our expectations. I will not be extending the timeframe or continuing to fund the programme on its current basis." The Government has offered to make an unspecified sum available to the Combined Authority for some affordable housing up to March 2022 but with very much more stringent conditions.

10.2 The Combined Authority has started granting funds to the area's market towns to implement the 'Market Town Masterplans' drawn up by consultants.

10.3 The Combined Authority has now taken on full and direct responsibility for the public transport services previously managed by the County Council, including staff being transferred. In previous years the Combined Authority passed the money back to the County Council to manage these services on its behalf.

10.4 The Combined Authority has agreed to undertake a 'refresh' of its Local Transport Plan in the second half of this calendar year.

10.5 The Cambridge Autonomous Metro or CAM itself remains unfunded, though it now has a company structure (One Cam Ltd) with a Chairman and Chief Executive, and a considerable revenue budget.

10.6 The Combined Authority's bus strategy has been delayed. The Combined Authority's Overview & Scrutiny Committee which was tracking its progress has stood down its 'task and finish' group scrutinising this piece of work, and will renew its attentions as and when the strategy moves forward.

11 Finally

11.1 My usual face to face monthly surgeries have now been replaced by Zoom surgeries. These are held on the second Tuesday of each month, from 6:30PM to 7:30PM.

11.2 My monthly county councillor reports are at www.tinyurl.com/lornasreports