

Annual Report 2021



CLLR LORNA DUPRE

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**District councillors for the Sutton ward
(including Sutton, Mepal, Witcham, and Wentworth)**

Introduction

Once again this has been a year dominated by the COVID-19 virus, alongside flooding at Christmas and the New Year which affected a number of residents, in some cases very significantly.

1 COVID-19

- 1.1 The District Council took an active part in the cross-county public health effort. Colleagues in South Cambridgeshire kept the two of us regularly briefed for which we were extremely grateful. The District Council was responsible for the distribution of a number of different COVID-related grants for local businesses and for individual support.
- 1.2 Following the initial lockdown in March, Ely Market opened to essential goods on 11 June, and to other stalls a month later. District Council operated play areas opened on 4 July, and the Council offered advice to parishes wanting to know how to reopen their play areas in a COVID-safe way.
- 1.3 Early in 2021 the District Council also took part in a new county-wide programme for ensuring taxis and private hire vehicles are COVID-safe. This provides video training, and a subsidy for fitting a quality standard screen in the vehicle. A sticker in the vehicle will show which drivers have been trained. It is hoped that this scheme will be expanded to voluntary car schemes.
- 1.4 Following a proposal from our council group, the Council set up a COVID Recovery Working Group to help steer the district's recovery from the pandemic. This began to do some

useful work, but was closed down prematurely by the Council which was disappointing as there was so much more it could have done.

2 Mepal Outdoor Centre

- 2.1 In a surprise move in July 2020, the District Council's ruling group called a behind-closed-doors meeting of the Full Council to discuss 'an asset management matter in the parish of Mepal'. The local press quickly revealed that this meeting was to discuss a project that had already been taking shape in secret for eighteen months, to replace Mepal Outdoor Centre with a crematorium. To date approaching a quarter of a million pounds has been spent to progress this scheme, which has not yet reached the stage of a formal planning application.
- 2.2 The location of the proposed facility is just twelve minutes from the existing crematorium at March, which is hardly operating at capacity. A new crematorium at Huntingdon is also due to open imminently. A crematorium in Mepal will therefore only be viable by poaching custom from its neighbours in what is becoming quite a crowded market.
- 2.3 In April the Council's Finance & Assets Committee agreed by a majority to submit a planning application to demolish the remains of the structures at Mepal Outdoor Centre.

3 Planning

- 3.1 In summer 2020 the Government launched a consultation on radical changes to the planning regime in England. Councils' Local Plans would be shorter, quicker to produce, and restricted to 'zoning' of sites into

three categories (Growth, Renewal, or Protected) and policies on design.

- 3.2** The District Council agreed three new Supplementary Planning Documents during the year, on the Natural Environment, Custom and Self-Build Housing, and Climate Change. The Council recently launched a consultation on a limited review of its current (2015) Local Plan, concentrating only on policy GROWTH1 in the Plan. This is proposed to show a housing requirement of around 8,922 dwellings between 2011 and 2031. The Council's view is that it already has a housing supply of 10,175 in this period, so that it will not be necessary to identify any additional housing allocations to 2031.
- 3.3** A planning application by Havebury for 55 affordable homes at Brick Lane Mepal was refused by the Planning Committee in March, on the grounds that development outside the village envelope was not permitted under the Sutton Neighbourhood Plan, and that it did not comply with the Council's design code. We made representations to uphold the Sutton Neighbourhood Plan and its policies, and Lorna spoke at the Planning Committee meeting.
- 3.4** Abbey Homes has now had two detailed applications for 'reserved matters' on its site at Garden Close Sutton refused by planning officers, on multiple grounds. Following a request from a local resident, the District Council's trees officer drew up a Tree Preservation Order for 57 trees on the site. Abbey Homes objected to the order which was therefore referred to the Planning Committee for determination. We wrote to

nearby residents to explain how they could make their views known, and Lorna spoke at the Planning Committee meeting. The Committee agreed to the making of the Tree Preservation Order.

- 3.5** In Wentworth, landowners AgReserves sought to convert their planning permission for six self-build homes into full market price housing. We made representations against this request, as it would open up a loophole for applicants to gain initial consent for self-build housing as the thin end of the wedge towards easing their path towards achieving full market price housing on sites where it would otherwise be refused. Lorna spoke at the Planning Committee meeting, and the Committee refused the request on the grounds that the self-build opportunities had not been sufficiently advertised and the application therefore failed to comply with the Council's new Supplementary Planning Document.
- 3.6** The Sutton Co-op opened in February 2021, rather later than originally intended due to COVID and a hold-up with highways paperwork, which Lorna assisted in resolving.
- 3.7** A planning application has been submitted for change of use of the former Deli@65 to a hot food takeaway with one first floor flat (the latter already permitted). The application has yet to be determined.
- 3.8** Outside the Sutton ward, but of some general interest, a planning application has been submitted for the second phase of housing at the former MOD site at the Princess of Wales Hospital in Ely. An application for redevelopment at the hospital has also been submitted, and the two

have become entangled with a proposed land swap between them.

4 Finance and assets

4.1 The Council once again froze its share of the Council Tax in its February budget. However, the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy shows plans for an increase of £5 per annum at Band D, the maximum allowed by law, from 2022 onwards.

4.2 The Council's waste company ECSS requested and was awarded an increase of £91,000 in its management fee for the first six months of the year to cover agency staff costs due to COVID, though it is not clear on what contractual basis this was granted. Meanwhile the Council's other trading company ECTC was not in a position to repay either of the loans due to the Council in March 2021. The Council agreed various changes to its current loans.

- The original £5M loan due to be repaid 31 March 2021 at an interest rate of 5.22 per cent will be replaced with a new loan with a final repayment date of 31 July 2023 and a reduced interest rate of 3.5 per cent.
- The loan for the MOD properties in Ely due to be repaid 31 March 2021 at an interest rate of 5.22 per cent will be replaced with a new loan with a final repayment date of 31 March 2023 and a reduced interest rate of 3.5 per cent.

The Mayor's Combined Authority has also agreed a request from the Council for a re profiling of loans in respect of housing schemes in East Cambridgeshire.

- Haddenham: to extend the loan until March 2023 (current balance £2.8M) with an interest free period

of twenty-two months between April 2020 and March 2022.

- MOD Ely: to extend the loan until March 2023 (current balance £24M) with six month interest free period between July and December 2020.

4.3 The Finance & Assets Committee made the decision to appoint the Leader of the Council as a 'Custodian Member' of the 'East Cambs Community Land Trust', and that this Trust should be listed as an 'outside body' from which the Council should receive annual reports. It seems extraordinary that this body should claim to be a community-led independent 'Community Land Trust' when it has no genuine community connection, is top-heavy with councillors from the Council's ruling group, and shares office space at Fordham with the Council's own developers Palace Green Homes.

4.4 The Finance & Assets Committee oversees the Council's working group considering bus travel, cycling, and walking in the district. The results of the March-May 2020 survey were eventually collated, and councillors on the working group (including Lorna) have been considering these. A request was made to the Combined Authority for support for improved bus provision. Lorna suggested the responses on walking and cycling improvements be grouped on a location basis and shared with parish councils to draw on their local knowledge.

4.5 The Council has decided it wishes to remain one of the handful of local authorities left in England where on-street parking is still enforced by the

police and not by the council. Because parking enforcement is not a police priority, the Council has decided that its preferred way to introduce some enforcement of on-street parking in the district is to use Council staff acting as police volunteers, who would operate under police control. This seems a very strained set of arrangements to avoid doing what all except eleven councils in England outside London do.

- 4.6** A motion from our group to the Council recognising that 'black lives matter' was referred to the Finance & Assets Committee where it was subjected to an amendment to remove all reference to black lives mattering.

5 Operational services

- 5.1** Having been pressed into declaring a Climate Emergency in October 2019, the Council has been working on its Climate Change Action Plan. Mark successfully proposed a number of changes to make the plans for tackling climate change more ambitious. The Council has achieved a few 'quick wins', moving to a 100 per cent renewable energy 'green' tariff and aiming to replace all its street and car park lighting with LEDs by the end of the year. The council noted a 75 per cent drop in business mileage since March 2020 due to COVID-19 related restrictions—there is no guarantee that this will be sustained.
- 5.2** Mark successfully proposed that the Council join the growing number of local authorities signing up to support the Electricity Bill, a proposed piece of legislation which would allow electricity generators the right to become local suppliers and sell their energy directly to local people.

- 5.3** We have continued to liaise with the local police over night-time joyriding at the Elean Business Park. The police successfully requested additional resource to address this issue. In August, drivers were banned from the Elean Business Park for meet-ups as police imposed a three-day dispersal order. And twenty-two warnings have been issued for anti-social driving around Witchford, Ely and Sutton, including the Elean Business Park.

- 5.4** Mark submitted a motion to the February Full Council meeting calling on the Council to formally endorse the Fens Biosphere project. Disappointingly this proposal was significantly watered down, so that 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 in Littleport. However, it is good news that Mark managed to get this issue on to the agenda for public debate by the Council for the first time.

6 Administrative issues

- 6.1** The Council's ruling group has decided to introduce a new Audit Committee with effect from May 2021. Our preference would have been to reorganise the Council's committees by establishing a new 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.

- 6.2** Face to face appointments for Council services were reintroduced in April 2021, but only for a very limited range of services: EU settlement scheme interviews, homelessness issues which cannot be dealt with remotely, training for taxi drivers, essential appointments, and Environmental Health PACE interviews. All such appointments need to be pre-booked, either online or by phone.

7 Finally

- 7.1** We have replaced our regular monthly face to face surgeries in Sutton with online Zoom surgeries. These are advertised on Facebook, with an email address for residents to use to book a slot.

Our monthly councillor reports are at www.tinyurl.com/lornasreports