

Cllr Lorna Dupré

MONTHLY REPORT FEBRUARY 2022

COVID-19

Overview

Whatever the Government may say, rates of the virus in Cambridgeshire are currently the highest they have ever been and continue to rise. In Cambridge they are particularly high—the city has the sixth highest rate in the country. In the East of England, one in 20 people currently has COVID-19.

Omicron symptoms are milder than those for other variants of the disease with the protection of the vaccine, but high case rates lead to high numbers of people self-isolating which impacts public services—the running of schools, care for vulnerable children or older people, or refuse collections for example. A high number of people in hospital with COVID-19 is creating additional pressures. Other routine appointments with the NHS such as planned operations might need to be cancelled.

The local Director of Public Health is continuing to ask people to

- Vaccinate: get COVID jabs and booster jabs when offered.
- Test: take a rapid test before meeting others, and isolate if positive. If you have symptoms, always isolate and get a PCR test.
- Protect: wear a face covering in crowded indoor spaces, keep your distance, wash hands, and meet in well ventilated spaces.

Case rates in Cambridgeshire

The following shows the number of Covid cases per 100,000 population in the local Director of Public Health's most recent report, with the highest first.

Area	Cases per 100,000
Cambridge	1,412
Fenland	1,240
South Cambridgeshire	1,195
Cambridgeshire	1,180
East Cambridgeshire	1,123
Huntingdonshire	999
National average	985

COVID in schools

A majority of COVID cases are in the pre-school and primary school-age population where the virus continues to spread rapidly and where there is currently no protection.

For the week ending 20 January, Cambridgeshire recorded 2,956 cases of COVID-19 across 392 educational settings. This is a significant increase on the previous week when there were 1,421 cases across 342 settings.

Attendance in state schools has also declined and stands at 88.3 per cent in Cambridgeshire, compared to 88.1 per cent in England overall. In addition, 8.6 per cent of teaching staff in Cambridgeshire were unavailable for work due to Covid.

Vaccinations

In Little Downham & Sutton 92 per cent of eligible residents have now received their first dose of the vaccine, 87.2 per cent have received their second dose, and 74.4 per cent have received their third dose or booster.

In Haddenham, Stretham & Witchford the figures are also increasing, with 93.4 per cent of first doses, 88.7 per cent of second doses, and 77.4 per cent of third doses or boosters.

<https://www.thevaccinators.co.uk/>

Testing

Changes in testing policy (removing the requirement for confirmatory PCR tests) are affecting the reliability of data, both nationally and locally. Cambridgeshire's high case rates may also be reflective of the county's very proactive management of COVID-19 in schools, which is leading to more cases being identified, as many young children do not show symptoms.

<https://www.gov.uk/order-coronavirus-rapid-lateral-flow-tests>

General Covid information

- <https://twitter.com/CambsCC>
- <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/coronavirus/coronavirus-covid-19-overview>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-vaccination/coronavirus-vaccine>

FINANCES

County Council budget and spending plans

Cambridgeshire County Council's Joint Administration proposes to set up and spend a £14 million 'Just Transition Fund' over the next five years to tackle inequality, improve lives, and care for the environment. The Council's Strategy and Resources Committee on 27 January recommended proposals for the fund, as part of the new administration's plans which also include a set of new priorities for the council.

In its first year, if agreed by the Full Council budget meeting on Tuesday 8 February, the Just Transition fund will fund schemes that

- Increase flood prevention, continuing a recent rapid increase in gully clearing
- Help tackle climate change
- Widen opportunities for children with special educational needs and disabilities
- Increase independent living services
- Expand direct payments and individual service funds, where adults assessed as needing support can choose and manage their own care services
- Expand the 'Care Together' programme, providing care services close to where people live

When the Joint Administration took control of the council in May last year, it inherited a potential budget gap of £86M by 2027. The new leadership invited in an independent and cross-party team of local government experts in July 2021 to review the council, who highlighted this as an issue 'of significant magnitude' for the new council administration.

In order to help balance the county council's finances, the Joint Administration proposes to raise the County Council's share of council tax by 4.99 per cent—an extra charge of £1.04 per week for a Band B, and £1.19 for a Band C household. More than half of all homes in Cambridgeshire are in these two bands. The local government experts who visited in summer highlighted that historic decisions not to raise council tax in previous years had led to significant ongoing lost income to support local services.

This is a difficult time for many people who are struggling with factors including the financial effects of the pandemic, enormous increases in energy bills, national insurance rises of over 10 per cent, and loss of universal credit. The council's business plans therefore include direct support for those most in need.

If Cambridgeshire received the same level of funding as the average county council, it would have received an extra £23M for services in 2022/23. Instead, the Government has announced that a review of local government funding expected in 2020 has been postponed for at least another year and is now not expected until 2023/4.

Current funding baselines for local authorities in England come from an assessment of relative needs and resources which has not been reviewed since 2013/14. It takes no account of Cambridgeshire's 27 per cent increase in people aged 65+ in the past ten years, compared to the national average of 19 per cent.

This Land

One of the commitments of the Joint Administration on taking office was a thorough review of the council's development company This Land. The independent report, by Avison Young (AY), a multi-national real estate services consultancy with no prior involvement with This Land, was discussed by the council's Strategy & Resources Committee at the end of January.

The report referred to 'unusual' accounting practices, and to 'shortcomings [which] require immediate attention'. It said, 'Overall we do not consider that there is a full understanding within This Land of the level of risk exposure the business is under,' and that 'it did not seem that there was a sufficient level of familiarity and understanding of the sites during the meeting [between consultancy AY and This Land].'

AY made a number of recommendations to the council, most to be carried out within three months. The committee will receive a further report in March.

ADULTS & HEALTH

Integrated Care System

Along with every other part of the country, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough is preparing for the 'Integrated Care System' which will become statutory from April. This will involve health and social care systems coming together to meet health and care needs across an area, to coordinate services, and plan in a way that improves population health and reduces inequalities.

ICs are based on Primary Care Networks, groups of GP practices serving 30,00-50,000 people. This is a whole new way of working for the NHS and for council social care systems, with a lot of adjustments to make.

Staffing pressures

COVID-19 continues to bring significant pressures to care services in the local community. Some of these challenges include

- Increased staffing costs
- Impact on staff wellbeing and mental health, with some leaving the sector
- Increased insurance
- Increased cleaning and PPE costs
- A competitive job market and challenges recruiting and retaining staff

The Adults & Health Committee has therefore agreed to invest £4.2M to ensure continued support for care providers to meet the needs of their clients.

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Young persons' mental health hubs

A motion from Fenland councillor Samantha Hoy calling for a network of mental health hubs to meet the needs of young people received unanimous support by the County Council last month. Work is beginning on putting this into practice.

School admissions review

The Children & Young People Committee has agreed to undertake a full and comprehensive review of admission arrangements for all own admission authority schools. This should include the published definitions of existing school catchment areas, and admission policies for schools with a sixth form.

Free school meals

The numbers of children in Cambridgeshire eligible for free school meals has continued to increase significantly across the county. The numbers were included in a report to the Children & Young People Committee.

	Jan-18	Jan-19	Mar-20	Apr-20	Jan-21	Oct-21	Increase since Mar-20	% of children eligible
East	1,029	1,349	1,697	1,838	2,138	2,254	33%	17%
Fenland	1,978	2,438	2,926	3,160	3,631	3,863	32%	28%
Hunts	2,121	2,715	3,546	3,811	4,430	4,599	30%	19%
South	1,115	1,497	1,821	1,981	2,397	2,639	45%	11%

COMMUNITIES, SOCIAL MOBILITY, & INCLUSION

Household Support Fund

A reminder that the County Council's Household Support Fund is still open (to 31 March). It offers:

- Support with food, household energy and other essentials for individuals and families: residents are eligible to access this support if they earn less than £17,940 per year, or are in receipt of certain state benefits
- Direct food vouchers: as in previous school holidays, supermarket vouchers will be issued to eligible families.

www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/coronavirus/household-support-fund

The County Council is offering a one-off payment of £20 from this fund to all 39,000 people in the county who are on Universal Credit. More information at orlo.uk/97w7o

Cambridgeshire Skills Learner Voice Forum

Cambridgeshire Skills are looking for past and present learners from a wide range of backgrounds willing to give their time to participate in a new Learner Voice Forum. The Forum will advise staff on a variety of issues, and will have the opportunity to work in partnership to shape the future of Cambridgeshire Skills.

The Forum will meet termly but may also be invited to get involved in projects and activities as they arise. These could include sitting on the interview panel for staff recruitment or representing Cambridgeshire Skills at networking events. More details from 01353 613013 or cambsals@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

ENVIRONMENT & GREEN INVESTMENT

Drainage at Skylarks Witchford

I have been following up concerns about current drainage issues on Sutton Road Witchford arising from the Skylarks development, and about the potential for even more flooding if the further planning application there is approved.

Local Flood Risk Management Strategy

The consultation period on the revised flood risk management strategy has now closed, and the responses are being reviewed before the strategy is finalised. As Chair of the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Flood & Water Partnership, I have had initial conversations about whether that body—which brings together a range of agencies with flood and water responsibilities—can take on the oversight and monitoring of the progress of actions in the strategy's Action Plan.

Cambridgeshire Local Councils Conference

Along with a large number of parish councillors, I joined the Cambridgeshire Local Councils Conference on 14 January, and in particular the two afternoon sessions on climate change and community flood groups.

Carbon footprints

Cambridgeshire

The county council's Environment & Green Investment Committee, which I chair, received its latest carbon footprint report, on the carbon emissions of the county council, and of Cambridgeshire as a whole.

2020/21 was an unusual year, with COVID lockdowns and reduced economic activity. So it is not surprising that the council's carbon emissions from its own sites and assets, and from its purchased electricity, were down twenty per cent on the previous year. Adding in indirect emissions, from the activities of the

Council's contractors and suppliers, the Council's carbon emissions were down a staggering forty per cent. Much of that drop is likely to be temporary.

The most recent figures for Cambridgeshire as a whole are from 2019, and show a steady decline, mostly due to the decarbonisation of electricity generation.

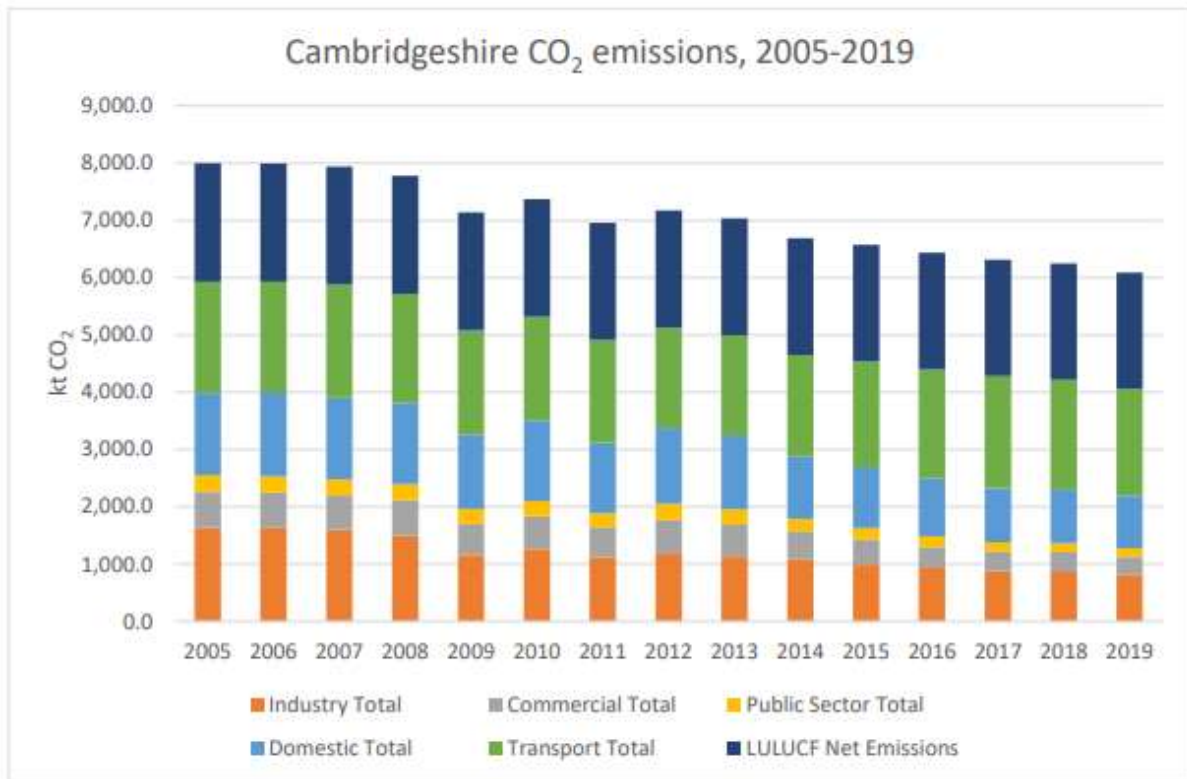
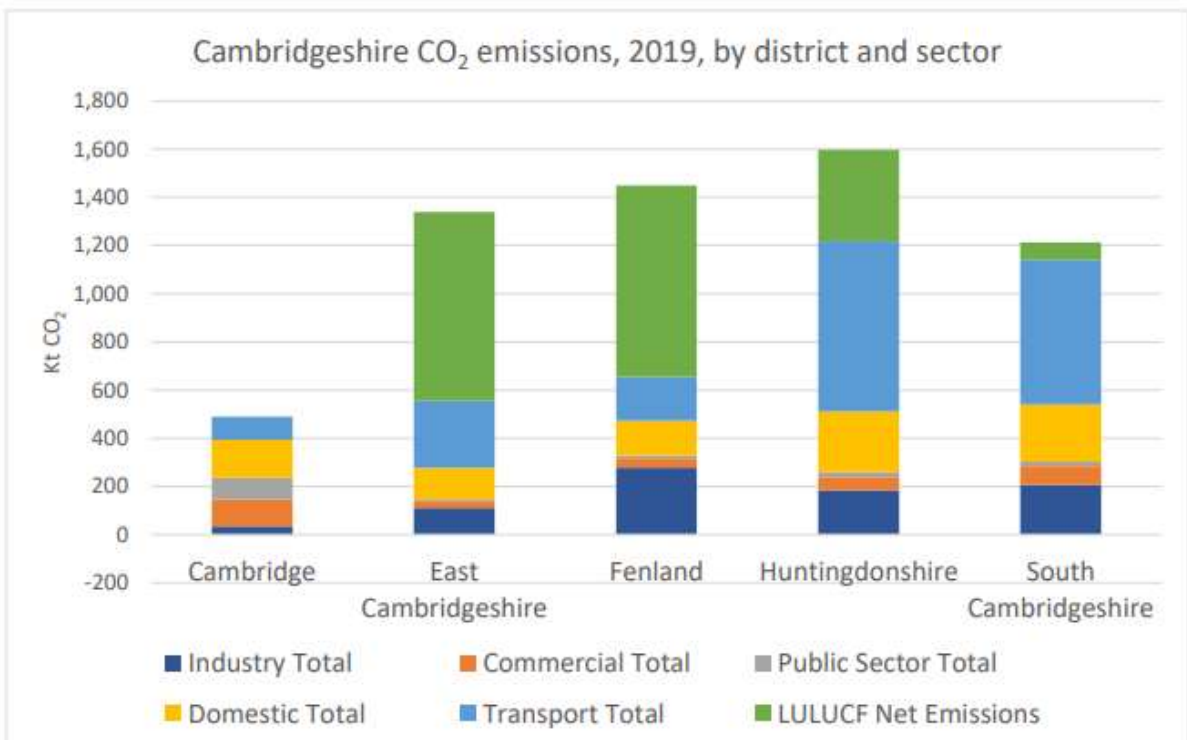


Figure 8 Cambridgeshire CO₂ emissions, 2005-2019 (data from BEIS)

The report compares carbon emissions between the Cambridgeshire districts.



It is interesting to note the very obvious differences between the different districts. These include the huge contribution of LULUCF (Land Use, Land Use Change, and Forestry) in East Cambridgeshire and Fenland. And of course the similarly very significant contribution of transport in Huntingdonshire and South Cambridgeshire. Without these two major pressures, Cambridge's footprint is very much smaller – just one-third that of Huntingdonshire, which is the largest.

Local parishes

At the Cambridgeshire Local Council Conference, we were introduced to <https://impact-tool.org.uk/> —a parish-level carbon emission estimator. The estimator is not perfect but is a reasonably reliable indicator. I have published on my blog carbon estimates for all the parishes in the Sutton division. Search for 'carbon' at <https://lornadupre.mycouncillor.org.uk/>

Envar planning application

A motion was recently brought to full council for debate, about the application by Envar at Woodhurst for a new facility for incineration of medical waste.

The motion said that the council 'supported the objections' against the application. Whatever one's views of the application itself, this was singularly inappropriate, as it is the council's own planning committee that will decide the application, and it must do so on the basis of the facts in front of it.

The motion was passed, however, as members of the council's Joint Administration chose not to vote—refusing to be pushed into voting to disregard the clear wishes of residents, but also not prepared to agree a council policy on an application before the planning committee does the job it is supposed by law to do without prejudice.

I was on BBC Radio Cambridgeshire the following morning to explain what had happened, and the interview can be heard at <https://youtu.be/pvQ9x3le78Y>

Council climate change plan scores well

A group called Climate Emergency UK has scored the Climate Change plans of all local councils in the UK, against 28 questions in nine sections.

Cambridgeshire County Council was the second highest scoring county council. This is based on the council's current plan, not the updated and more ambitious one which will be presented to the full council on 8 February for approval.

<https://councilclimatescorecards.uk/>

Sampling of materials from Hundred Foot

I have been advised by the Environment Agency that they are expecting the report on the samples they took from the arisings out of the Hundred Foot to be available to them shortly. They will be liaising with the Littleport & Downham IDB, which took its own samples, before expected publication of the findings in the second half of February.

CUSPE research

Postgraduate students from the Cambridge University Science & Policy Exchange have been working on a number of projects for the council, including two environmental ones. They reported back to the Environment & Green Investment Committee recently. One project was on setting up a Decarbonisation Fund for Cambridgeshire, and the other was on the potential for local heat networks to power homes sustainably in our market towns, using Huntingdon, March, and Ely as examples.

Heritage website

A new heritage website for Cambridgeshire is currently under construction, with the aim of improving the availability of local heritage lists.

<https://local-heritage-list.org.uk/cambridgeshire>

Digital connectivity strategy and the copper switch-off

Connecting Cambridgeshire has produced a new digital connectivity strategy for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough. Councillors were particularly concerned at the lack of national government publicity about the imminent copper switch-off in 2025. Old copper networks will be phased out and start to be replaced with digital systems delivered over broadband connections.

“This will affect all public services, businesses and domestic premises, making people even more reliant on digital connectivity and will require signposting and awareness raising, particularly among those who do not use mobile phones, or cannot access the internet,” says the report.

Many homes still rely on this network. But so do a great many specialised applications such as alarm lines, payment terminals and health-monitoring equipment. Many older telephone systems, fax machines, payment terminals and alarms that do not have SIM card capability will no longer work after the 2025 deadline. There is concern that a great many people who rely on these systems have not yet been fully informed about the changes that lie ahead.

HIGHWAYS & TRANSPORT

Road closures

A142 Mepal

Mepal Viaduct on the A142 is set to be closed over three weekends. The closures will run from 8:30PM on Friday to 5:00AM on Monday on

- Friday 25 February to Monday 28 February
- Friday 4 March to Monday 7 March
- Friday 11 March to Monday 14 March

Faults have been found in the bridge joints installed in 2016, which will need to be repaired. Contractors will need to access the whole stretch of the carriageway, and will work rotating shifts at weekends to minimise disruption.

Hillrow Causeway Haddenham

The Hillrow Causeway closure due to start in the middle of January has been put off to the end of March. This was because the cost was found to exceed the £500,000 threshold which means it had to be approved by committee.

Three Pickerels Mepal

The contractor working on the Three Pickerels at Mepal has asked for the closure of the footpath past the pub to be extended for another six months. While fully understanding the impact of COVID and Brexit on projects like this, a number of residents have pointed out that this would be eighteen months of closure. I have raised residents' concerns about this with the highways team, and asked them to consider whether there are ways in which the work can be completed without another six months' closure of this popular right of way.

Road repairs

Downham Hythe

Further works were ordered to the road surface at Wayhead and Downham Hythe after the recently resurfaced carriageway developed more potholes.

A10 Ely to Littleport

In November works were carried out to fill the worst cracks in the road near the Saxon Business Park. Following residents' complaints of severe potholes, I have been told contractors will inspect and repair any hazardous defects. The council is looking at including this section of road in next year's resurfacing programme.

Black Bank

Work is expected soon on the section of Black Bank between the California junction and the level crossing.

Anti-social driving

Together with Sutton district councillor Mark Inskip, I met with the police, district council, landowner's agent, and security company recently to discuss the ongoing problem of anti-social driving at the Elean Business Park in Sutton. A number of legal and financial options are under consideration, and I have approached the county council's highways engineers to ask them to suggest practical options. I have also made contact with the new manager at the straw plant to ensure he is aware of the history of this site.

Meanwhile anti-social driving has also been reported along Hive Road Witcham to Witcham Bridge Drove; and on the Ouse Washes at Sutton Gault. I have made the police aware, and also the Environment Agency in the latter case.

20MPH fund

The council's new Joint Administration undertook to make the option of 20MPH zones more widely available, and easier to obtain. The Highways & Transport Committee has agreed to set up a 20MPH fund (expected to be around £400,000), and a working group to consider application criteria and priorities.

IN OTHER NEWS

Cable thefts in Witchford

Following recent Openreach cable thefts in Witchford, Openreach advises residents experiencing loss of service to report this to their own broadband providers, from whom they should then be able to receive updates.

Drains at Sutton school entrance

Thanks to local highways officer Pam Joyce for ensuring five blocked drains would be cleared out at the entrance to the school and Brooklands Centre following a report from a resident; and to Pam and Sutton parish clerk Rosie Hughes for liaising over future maintenance.

Petition to reinstate online council meetings

The Association of Democratic Services Officers (ADSO) and Lawyers in Local Government (LLG) has launched a petition (link below) calling on the government to create Parliamentary time to agree a change in the law to allow councils in England to meet remotely if they wish. I have signed this as I believe online meetings enabled greater participation, transparency, and accountability, were better for the environment and safer for participants during a pandemic.

<https://www.change.org/p/uk-government-and-parliament-for-councils-in-england-to-have-the-choice-to-meet-remotely>

Meanwhile on the Combined Authority

The Combined Authority's Local Transport Plan update, and its extension to include Connectivity, has been held up for several months. The proposed update was expected to be relatively minor, with a six-week consultation. However, it now appears that the changes will be more significant, and legal advice is that they will require a twelve-week consultation. This cannot be carried out during the local election period in Cambridge, Huntingdonshire and South Cambridgeshire. The consultation will therefore be launched on or after Tuesday 10 May.

The Combined Authority has approved a new Employment & Skills Strategy. This contained some interesting information about skills provision and opportunities district by district.

Only 25.4 per cent of pupils at schools in East Cambridgeshire progress to higher education, and rates of higher skills are falling in the district. However there is higher than average progression into apprenticeships in East Cambridgeshire, at 11.4 per cent compared to 10.6 per cent in Cambridge.

East Cambridgeshire is recognised by the Strategy as a 'cold spot' for further education provision, and supply chains and labour shortages from COVID and Brexit are affecting the range of industries. The strategy sets out priority actions for the Combined Authority to address these and other issues in our district and across the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough area.

The Combined Authority has granted Laragh Homes a three-month extension to its loan for the completion of its project at the former Alexander House at the bottom of the Forehill in Ely, at six per cent above base rate.

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 8 February 2022
- Tuesday 8 March 2022

Please contact Mark at mark@markinskip.org.uk to book your timeslot.

Cllr Lorna Dupré

County Councillor for the Sutton division