

Farmgate report, finally

The county council's Constitution & Ethics Committee met on Friday 25 February, to receive the report of solicitors Wilkin Chapman LLP into the conduct of former Conservative councillor and County Council Deputy Leader Roger Hickford.

The case, known as 'Farmgate', concerns Mr Hickford's actions in obtaining the tenancy of a county council farm. Mr Hickford had been chair of the council's Assets & Investment Committee in 2016/17, and 'member champion' for the county farms estate. He was awarded the tenancy at Manor Farm Girton in April 2017, and took it up in December 2017.

In December 2018, a request was referred to the council's General Purposes Committee for a substantial council investment in the farm. It was only at that point that many councillors realised that Mr Hickford was the tenant, and Cllr Lucy Nethsingha, now Leader of the Council, requested an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the award of the tenancy. Council auditors began to investigate the matter, but this was then taken on by external auditors Mazars, whose report has still not been published.

The Constitution & Ethics Committee last year requested an investigation on lines similar to an investigation under the council's Code of Conduct, though this Code does not apply to those who are not councillors. This investigation was carried out by Jonathan Goolden of Wilkin Chapman LLP, who has investigated and led a large number of reviews of complex and politically high profile cases of alleged misconduct in the public sector.

The committee decided to publish the 177-page report in full, on grounds of public interest. The report found appalling levels of bullying and intimidation by Mr Hickford in pursuit of personal advantage, and has sent shock waves through the local authority. The summary is as follows.

24.1 We have concluded that Roger Hickford's conduct in respect of his conduct towards Officers and others in relation to his tenancy of Manor Farm Girton did amount to breaches of the Council's Code of Conduct as follows:-

- a) Official Capacity (paragraph 1.1) – he acted in his official capacity when dealing with Officers in respect of the tenancy of Manor Farm, Girton;*
- b) Respect (paragraph 2.1) – he failed to treat Officers and others acting on behalf of the Council with respect;*

- c) Bullying (paragraph 2.2(b)) – he used a bullying manner in order for the Council to pay for works that would otherwise be the responsibility of the tenant. He also used a bullying manner in order to set the terms of the Lease for Manor Farm;*
- d) Impartiality (paragraph 2.2(d)) – he compromised Officers and others’ impartiality in his dealings with regard to Manor Farm;*
- e) Disrepute (paragraph 2.2(e)) – his conduct towards Officers and others and his conflict of interest would have reduced the public’s confidence in him being able to fulfil his role or the Council being able to discharge its functions;*
- f) Improper use of position (paragraph 4.1) – he used his position as Deputy Leader to receive concessions that the Council would not otherwise have agreed to;*
- g) Interests (paragraphs 8 and 10) – he failed to register a disclosable pecuniary interest (the tenancy of Manor Farm) within 28 days and he failed to declare a non-statutory disclosable interest in meetings with regard to County Farms matters.*

24.2 However, he did not breach paragraph 5.1(a) of the code, Misuse of Council resources.

Finding

24.3 Our findings are that there have been breaches of the code of conduct of the authority concerned.

- The report can be found at www.tinyurl.com/farmgate-report
- The debate is online at <https://youtu.be/YqSxVYCxoxQ>

I proposed, and the meeting agreed unanimously, that

- The issues raised in the report should be treated as a cross-Council priority;
- The Committee should refer it to the Strategy & Resources Committee, with a request that they establish a programme of action to resolve these issues and prevent a recurrence;
- The Committee should invite the Strategy & Resources Committee to refer the matter on to the Full Council if appropriate; and
- The Council should take up the matter with council colleagues across Cambridgeshire to improve standards of behaviour in public life more widely.

The publication of the report is welcome, but the matter is far from over.

COVID-19

Overview

Covid precautions in England were removed on Thursday 24 February. People with Covid are no longer legally required to self-isolate, and the £500 payment for some people on lower incomes has also ended. Statutory sick pay and employment support allowance will start to be paid after four and seven days of absence, rather than immediately. Routine testing for pupils and staff in schools has ended, with the exception of special schools. Free lateral flow and PCR tests will end from 1 April, with very few exceptions.

Vaccinations

The roll out of vaccinations for 5 to 11 year olds will begin from 31 March. Advice at this point is that children will be vaccinated in pharmacies and mass vaccination centres rather than in primary schools. Mobile vaccination centres are still in operation—see the schedule at <https://www.thevaccinators.co.uk/>

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 & COUNCIL ASSETS

County Council budget and spending plans

The County Council's budget was set on Tuesday 8 February as outlined in my previous report. Significant budget gaps were left to the incoming Joint Administration for the years ahead, and still remain to be addressed.

County Farms estate

Cambridgeshire County Council has been advertising for new tenants for seven council-owned farms, part of the council's 33,000 acre rural estate.

The council's estate – the largest public sector estate in the country – is divided into 226 holdings, with 160 different tenants. The seven farms up for application, 1,800 acres in total, are in South Cambridgeshire, Fenland and Littleport. Interest is high, with 67 viewings booked by mid-February.

The estate brings in £5M in rent to the council council each year, to support local services. It contributes to the local economy, enables the council to put its environmental commitments into practice, and ensure public access to the countryside with permissive paths and bridleways.

The council is looking for innovative, entrepreneurial applicants with new ideas for developing their own businesses on the land. These could well be arable or livestock farming, but there are also opportunities for ancillary enterprises such as livery, farm shops or engineering.

Applicants will need to demonstrate that they have the necessary skills and a viable three-year business plan and budget. They will also need to show that they understand the council's expectations for the farms estate, and in particular are keen to farm in step with nature and do their bit to help tackle climate change and increase biodiversity.

Interviews will take place this month, and tenancies will be ready to take up from October onwards. The council has published a brochure about this opportunity, <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/business/business-with-the-council/rural-business-opportunities>.

On Sunday 13 February I was on BBC Radio Cambridgeshire telling Richard 'Spanners' Ready about this terrific opportunity. The interview is on my YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjloOsjbM94>

Queen's Green Canopy

On Saturday 19 February I joined Waterbeach County Councillor Anna Bradnam, deputy Lord Lieutenant Tim Breitmeyer, and members of the County Council's farms team to start the planting of five thousand trees at Oldfield Farm in Landbeach. The trees are part of the Queen's Green Canopy project to mark the Queen's Platinum Jubilee. The farm is part of the County Council's rural estate, and is let to a local tenant farmer.

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Holiday vouchers and household support

The council's Children & Young People Committee is being asked at its meeting on 1 March to continue the supermarket voucher scheme for 2022/23 for eligible families, on the same basis as in the current financial year. This will cost around £3.6M, and will operate alongside the Holiday Activity and Food Scheme which will also continue to run in the coming year.

Meanwhile the Household Support Fund will run until the end of March. Demand is very high so is now restricted to one application per person.

Special needs provision

During Covid-19 Cambridgeshire has seen an unprecedented increase in the numbers of children with special educational needs and disabilities who require

a specialist placement. As of 8 February, 211 children in Cambridgeshire had an Education Health and Care Plan requiring placement in a special school or specialist provision attached to a mainstream school in the near future. This includes pupils who have moved into Cambridgeshire. These pupils are either currently on roll in a mainstream school or receiving tuition packages of alternative provision.

The council is proposing to commission new and additional places to meet this need through appropriate specialist educational provision across Cambridgeshire. On a wider, strategic scale, officers are also mapping future demand in order to develop sustainable specialist provision for the future.

Proposals include expansion of existing Area Special schools, creation of dedicated provision attached to mainstream schools, and more efficient use of independent providers through negotiation of block contracts.

CONSTITUTION & ETHICS

Motions about planning applications

I reported last month on a motion to the county council's Full Council meeting in January opposing the proposal by Envar for an incinerator near Somersham. It was passed because I and my colleagues in the Joint Administration did not vote. We felt it was inappropriate to discuss at Full Council a planning application which was waiting to be determined by the County Council itself.

Such motions increase the risk of the council appearing to pre-judge applications, and of the council forming an opinion on applications where all the facts are not necessarily available. This could lead to appeals by unsuccessful applicants, or even judicial review. Planning applications should be discussed by the Planning Committee on the basis of the evidence in front of them.

At the meeting of the Constitution & Ethics Committee on 25 February—the same meeting that discussed 'Farmgate'—the committee agreed unanimously to recommend to the Full Council that motions for debate relating to planning applications yet to be determined, whether by the Council or the Planning Inspectorate, should not be permitted.

ENVIRONMENT & GREEN INVESTMENT

Household Recycling Centre changes

COVID-19 measures at the Household Recycling Centres are being changed with effect from Tuesday 1 March. Booking requirements for all vehicles at all sites are being removed, and the number of vehicles allowed on all sites is being increased to pre-COVID levels.

There will still be 'meet and greet' staff to limit the number of vehicles on site to the sites' maximum parking bay capacity, site signage related to COVID, hand sanitiser for public use, and social distancing between site staff and visitors.

Anyone who is self-isolating is asked not to attend any site. Where staff assistance is needed, materials must be removed from the vehicle by the site visitor for removal by site staff after the visitor's departure. Staff will maintain social distancing, wear gloves and sanitise after handling waste. Where practical, only one person should be on a gantry at any time except where two are required to lift bulky items.

Visits using vehicles or trailers which require e-permits will be registered by site staff on arrival at a recycling centre, as they were prior to the introduction of the booking system, with no requirement to book visits in advance.

Solar Together

On 9 February I was on BBC Radio Cambridgeshire to promote the second round of Cambridgeshire's group buying scheme for solar energy. The interview is on my YouTube channel at https://youtu.be/8N_bb67mfps

Registration is currently open to join a large group of people across Cambridgeshire buying solar panels or battery storage from pre-approved installers. Homeowners can register online to express interest free of charge and without obligation. More information about the scheme is available at <https://solartogether.co.uk/cambridgeshire/landing>

Pre-approved suppliers will take part in an auction on 15 March, bidding to supply and install the panels and batteries for the whole group. They can offer competitive prices because of the number of installations close to each other.

After the auction, applicants will receive a personal recommendation. If they accept this, the details will be confirmed with a technical survey and an installation date set. Telephone and email helpdesks are on hand throughout, along with pre-installation information sessions.

The effects of climate change are becoming ever more obvious, and energy bills are rising astronomically. This is a great way to reduce carbon emissions, and energy costs over the longer term.

Climate Change Strategy

The Joint Administration's ambitious Climate Change & Environment Strategy was approved by the Full Council on Tuesday 8 February. I was invited by UK100 to write a guest blog post for them on our new strategy, and it has been

published at <https://www.uk100.org/blog/2022/02/ambitious-cambridgeshire-our-new-climate-change-environment-strategy>

UK100 is a network of highly ambitious local government leaders, which seeks to devise and implement plans for the transition to clean energy that are ambitious, cost effective and take the public and business with them.

Cambridgeshire COP

80 representatives of organisations fighting the climate emergency met on Monday 28 February to kick off a year-long 'Cambridgeshire COP'. After COP26, the climate summit held in Glasgow last November, Cambridgeshire County Council leader Cllr Lucy Nethsingha was inspired to bring together countywide organisations to share information on Cambridgeshire's current position in the race to net zero.

Monday's webinar heard from Cllr Nethsingha, Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Mayor Dr Nik Johnson, and Cllr Pippa Heylings who sits on both the Local Government Association Climate Board and South Cambridgeshire District Council. Cambridgeshire's Lord Lieutenant Julie Spence was also in attendance and read a message of encouragement from Prince William Duke of Cambridge.

The event included four group discussions on increasing biodiversity, developing sustainable transport, changing heating and housing options, and dealing with waste.

A range of local events and activities will take place throughout the year. These will include a biodiversity in May, to mirror the international national biodiversity conference in China; activities led by youth groups in June to coincide with the pre-COP27 discussions in Bonn; and a two week series of activities across Cambridgeshire 7-18 November to coincide with COP27 in Egypt.

Local Flood Risk Management Strategy

The revised local flood risk management strategy is expected to be approved by the council's Environment & Green Investment Committee on Thursday 3 March, having completed its public consultation and been amended in the light of residents' and councillors' comments.

Floodmobile comes to Sutton

It was great to see the Floodmobile in Sutton on 17 February, with lots of samples of fittings to make homes more flood resilient. Experts were on hand to talk residents through everything that is available. It was good to hear from one

of them that loss adjusters and insurers are beginning to step up, and to go beyond the like-for-like approach which left homes at no less risk after flooding.

The Floodmobile will be back on the road in early summer. I have been asked whether it is possible for it to visit Mepal, and have made that request, although there are a limited number of available slots across Cambridgeshire.

Sampling of materials from Hundred Foot

At the time of writing, we are still awaiting news from the Environment Agency of the analysis of the samples from the Hundred Foot de-silting, which were collected in early December.

HIGHWAYS & TRANSPORT

Road closures

A142 Mepal

The closure of Mepal Viaduct on Friday 25 to Monday 28 February was cancelled due to the flood closure of the alternative route at Sutton Gault. I have asked officers for an update on the remaining dates of 4-7 and 11-14 March.

Hillrow Causeway Haddenham

This work is now programmed in from 28 March to 13 May under a 24/7 closure. It remains disappointing how small an extent of road repair it is possible to buy for £600,000.

Three Pickerels Mepal

An application was made earlier this year for a second six-month extension to the closure of the footpath past the Three Pickerels. The footpath has now been closed for almost a year, while works are undertaken to the public house.

Because this is an application for a closure of a right of way for more than six months, it has had to be approved by the Secretary of State. This approval has been given, so an extension of the closure until 31 July is being granted.

Road repairs

Gravel Head Bridge Downham Common

Gravel Head Bridge was briefly closed on 23 February to redo earlier works. The road was then reopened without the works having been completed.

Unfortunately contractors had installed the bed level higher than was specified in the Drainage Board consent. They were instructed to carry out remedial repairs to the bed level as laid out in the consent.

However, since the consent was granted the Drainage Board have dredged their beds to a lower level than originally agreed in the consent and have insisted that the council and its contractors must follow their watercourse profile. A clause in the consent allows the Drainage Board to require council works to be removed if they impact on the Board's operations or maintenance.

Black Bank

Work was carried out as planned on the section of Black Bank between the California junction and the level crossing. However, this was carried out without the removal of the private trees which was intended to take place at the same time, as senior council officers wanted to review the impact of this on the road surface. I have been told to expect this review to take between six and eight weeks.

Local Highways Improvement bids

On 21 February I chaired the East Cambridgeshire Local Highways Improvement panel, which considered sixteen of the nineteen applications submitted. Three applications, including Witchford's, had been withdrawn. The remaining submissions included Sutton's for a crossing on The Brook near Mostyn Close, to help pedestrians travelling east-west between the various dwellings and amenities along the High Street.

The total amount of council funding available to these projects in East Cambridgeshire is under £100,000, and the total requested by applicants is over £127,000. It seems likely therefore that between half and three quarters of this year's bids will be approved. The Highways & Transport Committee will meet on Tuesday 26 April to make the final decision on the applications.

Bicycle stands

The county council is using Government 'active travel' grant to install bicycle stands in some villages. I recently joined council officers and Sutton district councillor Mark Inskip reviewing potential locations in Witcham and Sutton.

IN OTHER NEWS

County Council pay policy and pay gaps

The county council's Staffing & Appeals Committee met in February to receive annual reports on the council's pay policy and pay gaps, and the council's People Strategy. These reports contain some very interesting analysis of the gaps in pay between men and women, and between white and minority ethnic staff, as well as pay ratios between higher and lower earners.

The council's mean gender pay gap is 9.6 per cent, compared to 7.3 per cent last year. The council's median gender pay gap is 8.6 per cent, compared to 8.9 per cent last year.

The council's mean ethnicity pay gap is 2.5 per cent, no change from last year. The council's median ethnicity pay gap is also the same as last year at minus 2.9 per cent. However, the council does not hold ethnicity data for 1 in 4 of its employees, so this calculation is less reliable than the gender gap figure.

The median salary of the organisation in 2021 was £27,041, the same as last year. The ratio of the Chief Executive's salary to the organisation's median salary was 1:6, again the same as the previous year. The current mean salary for the organisation this year is £29,791, a slight increase of £328 compared to the previous year.

Meanwhile on the Combined Authority

February was a quiet month for the Combined Authority, with only one meeting—the Employment & Skills Board which contains no elected representation. The Overview & Scrutiny and Board meetings for February were cancelled.

Friday 25 March will see the first Mayor's Question Time to include questions from the public. This is expected to take place in the morning at Eddington, with some online capability too. I have been asked to host this in my role as Chair of the Combined Authority's Overview & Scrutiny Committee. Staff at the Combined Authority are currently working on promotional materials to advertise the event and invite questions from the public.

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 March 2022
- Tuesday 12 April 2022

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

Cllr Lorna Dupré

County Councillor for the Sutton division