

Cllrs Lorna Dupré and Mark Inskip

MONTHLY REPORT MARCH 2022

Full Council meeting and budget

Budget

The Council budget for 2022/23 was passed on 22 February, including a Council Tax freeze to recognise the cost of living challenges facing many residents. We supported the Council Tax freeze—after all, the District Council currently has unallocated reserves amounting to ten per cent of its annual spending. This contrasts with the County Council whose reserves are only three per cent, and which the County Council has agreed to increase to four per cent in line with the advice of the local government experts who visited last summer.

We proposed an amendment to devolve the Rural Services Delivery Grant of £169,000 to Parish Councils, and to allocate £10,000 to investigate options for Civil Parking Enforcement, to address the problems caused by illegal parking around the district. This would have been funded by joining the Combined Authority's Community Led Housing Support service, saving the costs of providing it in-house and drawing on the extensive experience of ACRE in community engagement. We also proposed to cutting the £25,000 (33 per cent) proposed increase to the Council's PR budget. This amendment was defeated.

Growth fund

The budget included setting up a £2M Growth & Infrastructure Fund, to be funded from money handed back to member councils by Cambridgeshire Horizons, a 'not-for-profit organisation responsible for driving forward the delivery of sustainable new communities'. We proposed that £0.5M of this fund should be used as a contribution to a safe pedestrian and cycle crossing solution at the A10 BP roundabout at Ely—a problem largely of the District Council leadership's making. This proposal was defeated by the council's leadership.

Covid precautions motion

Mark proposed a motion at Full Council, which was passed unanimously, thanking residents in East Cambridgeshire for their exemplary behaviour during the lockdown periods. Very few Fixed Penalty Notices were given to our residents for breaching Covid lockdown rules, and large numbers of volunteers helped those in need. We also thanked health professionals and all those in public office and leadership positions who worked hard to lead by example.

The council's leadership deleted the section of the motion which shared the severe disappointment of many local residents that this leadership and responsibility had not been demonstrated by Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

Public and councillor questions

Questions from the public at this Full Council meeting were about actions to address the Climate Emergency. One asked about the provision of electric vehicle charging points, highlighting how few points there were in East Cambridgeshire and that many of those had not been working for several months. Another asked for the Council to bring pressure on the Local Authority Pension scheme to disinvest from fossil fuels.

Constitution changes

Various changes to the Council Constitution were passed at the Full Council meeting. Most of these were proposed by the officers after extensive consultation with councillors, and with all-party support.

The council's leadership however also changed the rules on questions at Full Council meetings from the public and from councillors. Rather than these being an opportunity to hold decision-makers to account, any member can now be questioned. As public questions and answers are limited to fifteen minutes, this will reduce the opportunity for the public to scrutinise those who make the decisions. It is also likely that questions by (and of) any and all councillors will be misused for partisan point-scoring and pile-ons, rather than for their proper purpose of ensuring accountability and transparency when decisions are made. These changes were not consulted on and did not have cross-party support.

Bin round changes

Waste collection dates will change permanently with effect from the week beginning Monday 28 March. The new day for all villages in the Sutton division, including Mepal, Witcham, and Wentworth, will be Thursday.

The reason given by the Council for these changes is to make the routes more efficient and save twelve tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions every year. We suggested unsuccessfully that the Council could have waited until Easter to implement these changes, or even done so when black sacks and posters were issued earlier in the year, rather than do so now and then upend everything temporarily for the bank holiday.

The Council and its company East Cambs Street Scene appear to be struggling with staffing for the waste collection service. Operations and development manager posts have been advertised, as well as driver and team leader posts.

Garden Close Sutton appeal

We submitted a letter of objection to the detailed planning application by Abbey for the site at Garden Close Sutton. We objected on the following grounds.

- The application does not comply with the requirement of Policy NP5 of the Sutton Neighbourhood Plan that the development shall be low-density.
 - The application does not comply with the requirement of Policy NP5 of the Sutton Neighbourhood Plan that the development shall be predominantly single-storey.
 - The application does not comply with the requirement of Policy NP7 of the Sutton Neighbourhood Plan which establishes a requirement for two-bedroomed dwellings and properties suitable for downsizing into, and for lifetime occupation.
 - The application does not comply with the requirement of Policy ENV1 of the East Cambridgeshire Local Plan that the development shall respect the character of the area and create positive, complementary relationships with existing development.
 - The application does not comply with the requirement of Policy ENV2 of the East Cambridgeshire Local Plan that the development shall ensure conflict between motor vehicles and pedestrians and cyclists is minimised, or that safe and convenient access is provided for people with disabilities.
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Neighbourhood Plans

Mepal

The Council has designated Mepal parish as a 'Neighbourhood Area' for the purposes of neighbourhood planning. A Neighbourhood Area is the geographical area to which a Neighbourhood Plan will apply. Since the request to designate the parish was made by Mepal Parish Council and applies to the whole parish, there is no requirement for consultation. Designation marks the first step of the neighbourhood planning process and will enable Mepal Parish Council to begin preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan.

Sutton

We continue to be actively involved in the revision of Sutton's Neighbourhood Plan, and will be attending the open event at the Glebe on Saturday 19 March.

Witcham

Mark is attending the Witcham Neighbourhood Plan meeting on 18 March to share experiences and advice on creating a neighbourhood plan following the work he has done in Sutton.

Soham planning appeal could have district-wide consequences

Major developer Persimmon has won its appeal to build 175 homes in Soham—along with a partial costs award against the Council which refused the application.

The Council failed to provide evidence on three of its reasons for refusal and opted not to defend these at appeal. The appeal therefore related to the council's insistence it had a five-year supply of developable land, and the suitability of the location for the proposed development.

The Inspector said there had been a significant shortfall in development against the East Cambridgeshire Local Plan housing requirement to date, and that the plan 'cannot be said to have been effective in delivering the anticipated housing need to date'.

He said the Local Plan had not been effective in meeting housing needs, and there was evidence that sufficient housing had not been delivered over the past three years. He further stated that even if the council could currently demonstrate the housing land supply it suggested (more than 6.5 years), there has been significant under-delivery against the plan to date, and there was a 'persistent failure' to meet housing requirements.

'There can be no certainty that the strategy contained in the [Local Plan] will deliver sufficient housing in the long-term of the plan period,' he concluded. 'In fact, the evidence before me suggests that it will not.'

We await a briefing from Council officers about what this means for the Council's Local Plan, with a potential risk of reopening the district to inappropriate development. The council leadership suddenly abandoned its 2019 revision of the Local Plan in its final stages in 2019, after it had been through its examination by an inspector. This means the current plan is now seven years old and severely outdated.

Repayments of loan for MOD homes in Ely behind schedule

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority currently has £35,527,594 out on loan for various housing projects. It loaned £24.4M to East Cambs Trading Company Ltd (ECTC) to refurbish 88 former MOD homes in Ely for use as private homes, including fifteen 'affordable' units.

As at 28 February the outstanding balance was £21,522,510. In August 2020 the Combined Authority Board authorised an extension to this loan, and at that time the forecast balance for February 2022 was £12,141,813. Approximately £5.78M is due from units under offer, and £2.5M is expected in May 2022 from the transfer of fifteen affordable units to a 'Community Land Trust'. Cash flow is £2M behind forecast, and the Combined Authority believes there is a high probability that the cash flow will not be achieved, and that the loan repayment by March 2023 is at risk.

Combined Authority officers have been informed that £410K has been removed from the construction project to reflect properties that are now to be 'sold as

seen' to accelerate cashflow. Additional options available to ECTC to avoid default include re-financing, portfolio transfer, accelerating the volume of sale with a block investment sale, or using company reserves to clear the balance of the loan when it determines. ECTC have been asked to confirm they are considering further contingency measures and what they might be. The Combined Authority will continue to monitor the situation, but ECTC has until 31 March 2023 to repay the loan and no direct intervention can be taken by the Combined Authority unless or until default occurs on 31 March 2023.

Meet your councillors

We 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

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District Councillors for the Sutton ward