

Annual Report 2022



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

It was a privilege to be re-elected in the County Council elections in May 2021 to represent our local communities for a further four years.

The elections saw the Conservative Group lose its majority on Cambridgeshire County Council. The number of councillors elected for each political group was as follows.

Conservatives	28
Liberal Democrats	20
Labour	9
Independents	4

1 The Council

- 1.1** A new Joint Administration of Liberal Democrat, Labour and Independent councillors is now running the Council, and the three groups have signed an Agreement including a policy framework, protocols for working arrangements, and a new committee structure.
- 1.2** I remain Deputy Leader of my political group, and as such am a member of the Council's new five-strong Leadership Team. I chair the Council's new Environment & Green Investment Committee, and am focused on Flood & Water issues as the new chair of the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Flood & Water Partnership and a member of the Regional Flood & Coastal Committee. I am a member of the Strategy & Resources Committee, the Highways & Transport Committee, and the Constitution & Ethics Committee. I chair working groups on Heavy Goods Vehicles and on the County Council's Farms estate, and am also active on the Green Investment Advisory Group and the Tree Strategy Working Group.

- 1.3** I have also remained Chair of the Combined Authority's Overview & Scrutiny Committee this year, appointed to that committee by the District Council but elected as chair by a coin toss after a dead-heat vote.
- 1.4** The County Council's move from Shire Hall in Cambridge to Alconbury finally took place in the autumn - but not for Full Council meetings, for which the 'Multi Function Room' at Alconbury is certainly too small for meetings with COVID social distancing, and possibly even permanently. The Annual Meeting of the Council in May 2021 was held amid the war planes of the Imperial War Museum at Duxford.
- 1.5** The new Joint Administration has been taking stock of the Council it has inherited. We invited in a 'peer challenge' panel of expert councillors and council officers from the Local Government Association to look at the operation of the Council and advise on priorities. They did so, and came back in spring this year to update on how we were doing. We also convened an Independent Remuneration Panel, as we are required to do, to review councillor allowances. Unlike the previous administration we agreed their recommendations unaltered.
- 1.6** The Council's Chief Executive retired during the year, and we appointed a new Chief Executive Stephen Moir who started in post in February 2022. Unlike his predecessor, Stephen will serve Cambridgeshire County Council only, not Peterborough too. This is part of a process of disentangling many of the joint staffing structures set up by the previous administration, so that we and they can focus on Cambridgeshire priorities.

2 Strategy & Resources

- 2.1** The new Council inherited a budget gap of £22.2M for this year. We managed to balance the budget this time, but very significant financial challenges lie ahead. The budget gap we inherited was set to rise to £86M by 2027, and our 'peer challenge' team identified this as an issue 'of significant magnitude'.
- 2.2** The Council increased its portion of Council Tax in February, by 1.99 per cent for general services, and three per cent for adult social care. This was a difficult decision to take during the current cost of living crisis, but many people struggling most with increased bills and prices are those who are most likely to need council services, and likely to pay a lower council tax increase. The Conservative opposition proposed an increase of three percent instead, with no increase for general services.
- 2.3** The Council's budget for this year included a £14M 'Just Transition Fund' to tackle inequality, improve lives, and care for the environment.
- 2.4** The new Joint Administration commissioned an independent review of the Council's development company This Land. This found 'unusual' accounting practices and '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.' The review made a number of recommendations, most to be carried out within three months. The new administration also reviewed the financial model for the lease of the old Shire Hall building.

- 2.5** The County Council's Farms estate extends to 33,000 acres - the biggest public sector rural estate in England and Wales. The new Joint Administration is keen to reposition this asset not just as a source of rental income (important though that is) but also as a major part of our environmental and climate ambitions.

3 Adults & Health

- 3.1** One of the major changes the new administration made to the Council's committee system was to combine the former Adults Committee and Health Committee into a single committee, making the most of the close relationship between health provision and adult social care. The Committee has been working hard towards the introduction of the Government's Integrated Care System across health and care providers in Cambridgeshire. We also welcomed a new Director of Public Health, Jyoti Atri, into post.
- 3.2** The COVID pandemic has had a devastating effect in terms of loss of life, long-term health challenges, and the emotional impact on families. Workforce challenges in health and care are acute, as people are reassessing their careers and life choices. International recruitment has been adversely affected first by Brexit and then Covid. The Council has worked extensively with partner agencies to support the COVID effort, though with all precautions now removed in England case numbers have surged in recent months.
- 3.3** The Joint Administration has adopted a 'health in all policies' approach. We are investing in the development of 'Care Together', with Community

Catalysts supporting local social care micro-enterprises as an alternative to large agency staff models, and rolling out the Real Living Wage to social care workers. We have established increased support for unpaid carers, and expanded the Direct Payment option to more people. And we have invested further in the Enhanced Response Service as an alternative to reliance on an over-stretched A&E.

3.4 The Council has invested afresh in public health programmes, including more NHS health checks, and local grants for community wellbeing activities. It has also started to assess the impact of government reforms on our social care responsibilities, in which it's clear there will be very significant new responsibilities and costs without new funding.

3.5 Work is progressing on the opportunity to build 80 flats on land at the Princess of Wales Hospital in Ely. 16 of these will be let out to Cambridgeshire Community Services NHS Trust as a hospital rehabilitation ward enabling health and social care to be further integrated.

4 Children & Young People

4.1 A major focus of this committee during the year was to ensure funding of vouchers over school holidays for families eligible for free school meals. This happened throughout 2021/22 and is guaranteed throughout 2022/23. The Council has also worked with local providers on to establish the Holiday Activity & Food programme for the children of families on benefits-related free school meals. The numbers of children in Cambridgeshire eligible for free

school meals has continued to increase significantly across the county - by one-third in East Cambridgeshire since March 2020.

4.2 The Council has carried out a high-profile drive to recruit more local foster carers and ensure more children and young people in care can remain within the county.

4.3 The national shortage of HGV drivers means the County Council has faced challenges in both home to school transport and school catering during the year, adding still more pressure for staff on top of Covid.

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

4.5 A full and comprehensive review of admission arrangements for all own admission authority schools has been agreed, to include the published definitions of existing school catchment areas, and admission policies for schools with a sixth form. The Council is also proposing to commission new and additional places to meet rising demand for specialist placements for children with special educational needs.

5 COSMIC!

5.1 The former Communities & Partnership Committee was renamed Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion Committee. In an attempt to remember the order of the words in this very long title, I used the initials to create the name CoSMIC, and it appears to have stuck!

5.2 The committee has been responsible for supporting communities through COVID, making provision for refugees from Afghanistan and now Ukraine, assisting EU citizens in obtaining settled status and voting rights, as well as a range of public services from libraries to mortuaries. It runs what was the Innovate & Cultivate Fund, now Cultivate Cambs, funding community support activities. It also drew up a Domestic Abuse Safe Accommodation Strategy.

5.3 COSMIC makes decisions about the Household Support Fund, which supports people experiencing immediate financial hardship to pay for food, household energy or other essential items. An increasing number of families is struggling financially at the moment.

5.4 The committee is also responsible for developing one of the Joint Administration's major commitments - decentralisation of Council services and decision-making, to bring the Council closer to communities and make it more locally accountable.

6 Environment

5.1 The new Environment & Green Investment Committee, which I chair, has been exceptionally busy this year, with a large number of practical projects as well as new strategies. The committee is responsible for climate change and renewable energy, strategic planning, flood and water, biodiversity, waste, antiquities, and surprisingly digital infrastructure and broadband.

6.2 Waste has been contentious, with unpopular commercial applications for incinerators at Wisbech and

Woodhurst, very expensive odour control measures required to the Amey facility at Waterbeach, and uncertainty about the Government's intentions following several consultations on extended producer responsibility, deposit return schemes, and recycling. The Council's recycling centres at Milton and March are also in the early stages of plans for upgrades.

6.3 The Council's high-profile scheme to get the community of Swaffham Prior off oil and onto a new renewable energy community heating system continues to progress well, with a £3.2M Government grant awarded. Other energy schemes include the installation of solar panels on Park & Ride sites, small-scale solar farms with private wire connections to commercial customers, and replacement of gas and oil boilers in schools and in the Council's own premises around the county. We have also run another round of Solar Together, the group buying scheme for homeowners wanting to invest in solar panels and battery storage.

6.4 Meanwhile commercial operation Sunnica has submitted a planning application to the Secretary of State for what is believed to be the largest solar farm in the country, stretching from Red Lodge in West Suffolk to Burwell in East Cambridgeshire. There is significant and highly-organised local opposition to this proposal. The County Council is a consultee in this process.

6.5 The committee developed two important strategies this year - a revised Local Flood Risk Management Strategy, and an updated Climate Change & Environment Strategy. The

Flood Risk strategy was accompanied by local initiatives to promote and fund community flood groups, visits by the Floodmobile to demonstrate options for fitting flood prevention measures in domestic properties, and clarification of the responsibilities of riparian owners for maintaining their watercourses. The year saw local flood and water matters require attention in the Sutton division, in Sutton, Witchford, and a long-running issue of the nature of material dredged by the Environment Agency from the Hundred Foot at Welney. The Environment Agency's barrier bank works on the Ouse Washes are now in the sixth year of a four year programme.

6.6 The Climate Change & Environment Strategy sets a new and more ambitious target for a net-zero carbon Cambridgeshire by 2045, aiming to work with businesses and communities to bring this about. We are also working on a Cambridgeshire Decarbonisation Fund and Local Area Energy Planning. Council Leader Lucy Nethsingha is leading plans for a 'Cambridgeshire COP' following the high-profile international COP26 climate negotiations in Glasgow.

6.7 As every year, the Council published its carbon footprint report. COVID meant 2020/21 was an unusual year, with not only less travel but also less construction, two of the biggest greenhouse gas contributors. The shrinkage in our carbon footprint is likely not to be sustained next year.

6.8 We invested an additional £109K over last winter to undertake urgent repairs to various biodiversity sites, as well as to begin a biodiversity audit of the Council's land to set a baseline

for our commitment to increase biodiversity in Cambridgeshire. We have also promoted, and taken part in, the Queen's Green Canopy initiative to mark the Platinum Jubilee.

6.9 I am involved in an interesting project by the Food Farming & Countryside Commission to design a Land Use Framework for Cambridgeshire, with the aim of developing a common vision for land and the potential for multiple land uses.

6.10 The County Council has responded to various strategic planning consultations including for North East Cambridge, the move of the Cambridge Waste Water Treatment Plant, and various phases of the development of Northstowe. It also adopted the revised Minerals & Waste Local Plan.

6.11 A new heritage website for Cambridgeshire is currently under construction. Meanwhile, a recent discovery in Fenstanton has turned out to be of international significance—a human skeleton with a nail through the foot, which experts believe to be the remains of a Roman crucifixion, probably of a slave.

6.12 Connecting Cambridgeshire has produced a new digital connectivity strategy for Cambridgeshire & Peterborough. We were concerned that the implications of the 2025 copper switch-off for many systems have not been fully recognised.

7 Constitution & Ethics

7.1 An issue dominating Cambridgeshire politics since the whistle was blown in 2018 is 'Farmgate'—the award to then County Council deputy leader

Roger Hickford of the tenancy of a County Council-owned farm in Girton. The new Joint Administration took office committed to publishing the facts, and this has now happened. Mr Hickford was found by independent investigators to have broken the councillors' Code of Conduct in seven different ways, including bullying and improper use of position for personal advantage. Mr Hickford resigned from the Council before the election.

7.2 In less contentious news, the committee proposed a new Parental Leave Policy for councillors which was adopted by the Council.

7.3 The committee proposed, and the Council agreed, changes to the Council's standing orders which mean that councillors will no longer be able to propose to Full Council motions that relate to current planning applications that the Council is to decide or be consulted on. This does not prevent councillors speaking out, campaigning and supporting their residents in all sorts of ways on contentious local planning applications, of course. But its purpose is to stop councillors misusing Full Council meetings to set Council policy on applications which must be decided impartially by the Council's Planning Committee, or be responded to by council officers using their professional judgement.

8 Highways & Transport

8.1 The new Council is facing up to the many challenges left by its outgoing administration. Not least of these was the atrocious state of the county's 100,000 gullies, whose lack of maintenance contributed to the flooding of winter 2020/21. These are

now being mapped and cleared, including one which was in such a bad state a metal detector was required to actually find it.

8.2 We have established a new funding pot for local communities to bid into for 20MPH zones, to make these more widespread and easier to obtain. I am chairing a working group which will publish a proposed new policy on heavy goods vehicles in villages, which will align with the Combined Authority's forthcoming Local Transport & Connectivity Plan.

8.3 The Council has been focusing on Active Travel, with the aim of improving infrastructure for pedestrians, cyclists, and equestrians. A new Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan is in progress, and locally I am continuing the battle to gain commitment to funding to make the A10/BP roundabout safe for walkers and cyclists. The Council has expressed interest in taking up the prospect of being able to enforce moving traffic offences such as breaching weight limits. This would be possible everywhere in the county except for East Cambridgeshire.

8.4 Various road works have taken place during the year, with varying levels of success, at Gravel Head Bridge, the A10 near Littleport, the A142 Ely to Chatteris, Wayhead Drove, West Fen Road, Black Bank. Repairs to Mepal Bridge have been postponed to May but at least are on the way, and resurfacing of parts of Hundred Foot Bank are now pencilled in for three to five years hence. Surface treatments of various roads and pavements are being planned for the next two years. The Council decided not to pursue downgrading the A1123 to a B road,

because it would mean less money for repairs while not actually achieving the stated aim. Instead I have been working with councillors and officers on schemes to deter and slow heavy traffic on this road.

8.5 Local Highways Improvement bids last summer were successful for Little Downham (solar studs on B1411), Witchford (pedestrian crossing near the school), and Coveney (gates and signing on Jerusalem Drove). This year the Panel is recommending Sutton's bid for a pedestrian crossing on The Brook near Cromwell Road.

8.6 I have also been involved in local issues relating to anti-social driving at the Elean Business Park, the prolonged closure of the footpath past the Three Pickerels, queuing traffic at Ely Leisure Village, and the closure of the footpath from Gravel End to Downham Hythe.

8.7 Network Rail consulted last year on its Ely Area Capacity Enhancement programme to allow more trains to run through Ely. Since then, it has all gone very quiet.

8.8 Traffic in Cambridge is set to grow by 30 per cent in the next ten years, and there is a serious lack of funding for public transport. Without this, many people who cannot drive, or cannot afford to buy, insure or fill up a car, are left with limited or no options for travel. The Greater Cambridge Partnership has been consulting for some time on ways to relieve traffic congestion in Cambridge and improve public transport into the city. These consultations are still ongoing. One of the options on the table is some form of congestion charging to pay for better public transport.

Motions proposed to the County and District Council have sought to permanently rule this out. The motion to the County Council was defeated, though the one to the District Council is likely to pass given the current political composition of the Council. Both are premature, as the consultation is still ongoing.

9 Combined Authority

9.1 A new Mayor was elected in May 2021. This resulted in the scrapping of the CAM Metro and the '£100K homes' project, the latter taken up by East Cambs District Council. A new Chief Executive was also appointed, and the Combined Authority has decided to make its permanent home in offices in Huntingdon.

9.2 During the year, the Combined Authority's Climate Commission published its ambitious report; the Government announced there would be no more money for affordable housing, and snubbed the Combined Authority's bus improvement plan.

9.3 In better news, the Combined Authority has recognised the need to develop further education provision in Ely. Ely and Soham have also received funding for a variety of 'Market Town Masterplan' schemes.

10 Finally

10.1 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.

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