

Annual Report 2022



CLLR LORNA DUPRE

CLLR MARK INSKIP

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

1 COVID-19

- 1.1 This has been the third year of COVID-19, and following the Government's removal of all precautions early in 2022, the virus continues to run rampant. A limited programme of booster vaccinations began earlier this year.
- 1.2 The District Council administered various rounds of COVID grants to local businesses during the year. The Council got off to a slow start, and we have expressed concerns during the year at the way in which some of its spending decisions have been made.
- 1.3 Mark proposed a motion to the Full Council contrasting the behaviour of local residents during lockdown with the law-breaking of the Prime Minister. The ruling group amended the motion with one change - deleting all expression of disappointment at the illegal events in Downing Street.

2 Mepal Outdoor Centre

- 2.1 The council's planning application to replace the popular Outdoor Centre with an unwanted crematorium was finally published in August 2021. The council's own survey showed only thirteen per cent of respondents wanted a crematorium at Mepal.
- 2.2 **21/01216/F3M** is an application for 'construction of a crematorium and associated service and administration building, function building, memorial garden, natural burial areas, pet cemetery, car parking, new vehicular access from the A142 north of the site and landscaping'. The original planning statement prepared by the applicant's agent, Nexus Planning, stated that the applicant was East Cambs Trading Co Ltd, the council's

trading arm. Mark questioned this and it was hastily changed to East Cambridgeshire District Council. Once again, the council leadership is blurring the boundaries between the Council and its commercial trading arm. We submitted objections to the proposal, on the grounds that the need for an additional crematorium has not been evidenced, and that the transport assessment significantly understates the likely traffic. The application has yet to be determined, with a new deadline of 6 May 2022.

- 2.3 Meanwhile **21/01054/DEM** was an application to demolish all buildings at the Outdoor Centre. This took place just in time for Christmas 2021.

3 Planning

- 3.1 Last year we reported that the Government was poised to publish proposals for radical changes to the planning process. A year later, we are still waiting. Meanwhile, East Cambridgeshire's Local Plan is now seven years old, after an update in 2019 was discarded by the ruling group after three years of work and an Examination in Public. It is becoming increasingly outdated, with insufficient policies to address climate change or air quality as well as issues which need to be reconsidered such as parking space provision.
- 3.2 The Council's limited review of its current (2015) Local Plan is still ongoing. It concentrates only on policy GROWTH1 and housing numbers, as we reported last year.
- 3.3 Vistry obtained outline planning permission for its Phase 2 on Mepal Road in Sutton, with 173 dwellings—the maximum allowed by Sutton's

Neighbourhood Plan—plus sports pitches, a burial ground, and open space. The developer is also asked to make financial contributions to education and highways. Mark attended the Planning Committee meeting to confirm our broad support but also to raise specific concerns including flooding, biodiversity, and traffic noise.

- 3.4** Abbey Homes lodged an appeal in June against refusal of its 'reserved matters' application for the land behind Garden Close in Sutton. We submitted a representation urging the Planning Inspector to dismiss the appeal, which he did. Abbey responded immediately by submitting yet another application, for two fewer houses overall, but more premium chalets masquerading as single-storey dwellings. Once again we objected to this application, which is still awaiting determination.
- 3.5** The planning application submitted for change of use of the former Deli@65 to a hot food takeaway was withdrawn, but replaced in September by an application for 'alterations, new ducting system, odour control measures to existing café, and alterations and additions to form first floor flat, access, parking and site works'. This looked much like an attempt to kit out the premises for use as an Indian takeaway, but without an actual application for change of use. The application was approved by the Planning Committee, shockingly, after we called it in, but is still actively disputed. Meanwhile the owner has put the premises on the market.
- 3.6** A planning application has been received from the Anchor at Sutton

Gault for change of use from pub to flexible café, guest house and pub. It is still awaiting determination. Meanwhile the extension works at The Three Pickerels at Mepal have taken far longer than expected, with a further closure of the nearby footpath which will have been shut for eighteen months by the time the building work is finished.

- 3.7** Lorna persuaded the Planning Committee to grant planning permission at The Brook in Sutton, Hiams Farm in Mepal, and Amberlea Country Kennels and Cattery on the A142. She was less successful with an application for an annexe in Link Lane, and remains concerned that the Council's policy on annexes and extensions remains inconsistent and factually inaccurate.
- 3.8** Although the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority decided to close down the previous Mayor's '£100K homes' scheme, East Cambridgeshire District Council has expressed its enthusiasm to proceed with it. Four '£100K homes' have been advertised in the development at the bottom of Forehill in Ely, and several on the site of the former Paradise Pool. Those promoting this scheme have never satisfactorily explained how those taking it up will avoid being trapped in properties they cannot afford to move out of if they find they no longer meet their needs. And these properties will make only a minute contribution to filling the huge gap in affordable housing in East Cambridgeshire.
- 3.9** Neighbourhood Plans are under way at Mepal and Witcham, and Mark has been working with the latter. We are

both actively involved in the revision of Sutton's Neighbourhood Plan.

3.10 The Council has approved changes to its list of projects eligible to receive funding from the Community Infrastructure Levy paid by developers. This now includes the £1M the Council agreed to pay in 25 annual instalments towards the A14 redevelopment, but also health provision, community facilities, and water management and flood prevention across the district.

3.11 The Council's preferred 'Community Land Trusts' remain controversial, and any attempt to question any aspect of them is a red rag to a bull. Lorna seconded a motion on CLTs in October, asking the council to review issues arising from CLT proposals in Stretham, Little Thetford, and Wilburton. The meeting was handled appallingly, with the partner of a councillor permitted to make offensive and slanderous comments in the guise of a public question, in total contravention of council rules of procedure. No attempt was made by the Chair or senior officers to stop it.

3.12 In February the Council lost a significant planning appeal in Soham. It failed to defend three of its reasons for refusal of a major development by Persimmon. 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 further stated that even if the council could currently demonstrate the housing land supply it said it had (more than 6.5

years), there had 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.'

4 Finance and assets

4.1 The Council's budget was thrown into confusion in January, when an increase in Council Tax was recommended in the report presented to the Finance & Assets Committee. The Leader of the Council amended the budget at the meeting, to remove every recommendation, and refer the decision to the Full Council with no recommendations until the very last minute.

4.2 However, the Council once again froze its share of the Council Tax in its February budget. The plans in the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy for an increase of £5 per annum at Band D, the maximum allowed, were put off for a year.

4.3 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 cut the £25,000

(33 per cent) proposed increase to the Council's PR budget. This amendment was defeated.

- 4.4** 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 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.
- 4.5** Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority has expressed concerns that the repayment profile of its loan of over £20M to East Cambs Trading Company for the MOD homes at Ely is slipping, and it may not be repaid by the due date of 31 March 2023. However, this has not stopped the District Council proposing to lend the Company a further £7.5M, partly so that it can repay its current loan from the Council, and partly so that it can start new projects at MOD Phase 2 and 3, and at the Paradise Pool site which the Council is now proposing to sell to the Company.
- 4.6** The Council's Bus, Cycle, Walk working group continues to meet. In July it drafted a response to the County Council's Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan, and a letter to parish councils listing walking and cycling routes identified last year as being in disrepair, obstructed by street clutter, or insufficiently lit, and asking for an update on their

condition. The working group requested spending on feasibility studies from Sustrans for five priority cycling routes in the district:

- Fordham-Burwell
- Haddenham-A142
- Little Downham-Ely
- Littleport-Chettisham-Ely
- Swaffham Prior-Reach-Burwell

The Council also agreed a Cycling & Walking Strategy to be used in influencing County Council and Combined Authority plans for active travel.

- 4.7** Lorna has proposed to the Full Council that East Cambridgeshire should address the lack of 'Changing Places' toilets in the district for people with severe disabilities; and review disabled access to all public toilets and signage on them for invisible disabilities. East Cambridgeshire was the only district in the county not to be awarded any money at all by the Government in its recent funding round to improve Changing Places toilet provision.
- 4.8** Mark has been pursuing evidence of longstanding use of the old railway track bed between Sutton and Haddenham between 1982 and 2022, with the intention of trying to protect it as a right of way.

5 Operational services

- 5.1** Having been pressed into declaring a Climate Emergency in October 2019, the Council approved its second Climate Change Action Plan in June. Mark has been pressing the Council to go further and faster in tackling climate change. At the meeting of the Combined Authority Board at the end of June, the Leader of the Council

proposed an amendment to water down the Combined Authority's response to the Commission's recommendations, and abstained on the response itself when this amendment was defeated.

5.2 The Council remains one of the few left in the country which is refusing to take responsibility from the police and adopt Civil Parking Enforcement. The ruling group's preferred course of offering up its staff as police volunteers hit the buffers, as did its proposals to pay for PCSO staff or give police powers to its own staff. Instead it is now simply 'supporting' a police pilot scheme to target a few 'hot spots' using community volunteers. It rejected a call from us to investigate Civil Parking Enforcement, the system used by nearly every other council in England to tackle illegal on-street parking.

5.3 The Council's record in collecting residents' black bag waste and recyclables has plummeted. Difficulties recruiting and retaining drivers began in September, and by November the local press was reporting allegations of low morale, bullying, stress and other staff concerns. These were denied by management. Green waste collections were cancelled from mid-December to the end of January, then it was announced that waste collection rounds were being permanently reconfigured from the end of March. (Our new collection day is Thursday.) The first few weeks of this change have not gone smoothly, with large numbers of uncollected bins, in some cases left for days or even weeks.

5.4 The Council's intention to purchase several new waste vehicles has been

put on hold because of the lack of clarity about the Government's waste strategy intentions. Lead times between order and receipt are around twelve months, so this spending will need to be carried forward. This is not the first time this procurement has been delayed, and it risks existing vehicles being run beyond their planned working life and becoming more difficult to maintain.

5.5 We have continued to meet with local police and others over night-time joyriding at the Elean Business Park, and also elsewhere including Hive Road Witcham and on the Ouse Washes at Sutton Gault. This was particularly problematic over Christmas and New Year. We asked questions of the Police & Crime Commissioner about the priority being given to anti-social driving and also about the off-putting waiting times for 101 calls. The police issued formal letters to a large number of culprits, and the issue appears to have temporarily quieted.

6 Administrative issues

6.1 The Council experienced several email outages during the year, in some cases lasting several days. Mark asked searching questions and did not receive particularly full answers.

7 Finally

7.1 We continue to offer online Zoom surgeries, advertised on Facebook. Our monthly councillor reports are at www.tinyurl.com/lornasreports It is a privilege to serve the residents of our parishes, and we thank them, the parish councils and their clerks, for the experience of the last year.