

Annual Report 2023



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

2022 will be notable as the year of the death of HM Queen Elizabeth II on Thursday 8 September. The accession of HM King Charles III was proclaimed in Cambridge and Ely, and elsewhere in the county, two days later, and I was privileged to attend both proclamations.

The composition of the County Council has changed since my last annual report following the death of Independent Chair of the Council Derek Giles who retired from that role as a result of his ill health, and another councillor switching parties. Cllr Doug Dew (Hemingfords & Fenstanton)

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| Conservatives | 27 |
| Liberal Democrats | 22 |
| Labour | 9 |
| Independents | 3 |

left the Conservative Group in January 2023 and joined the Liberal Democrat Group. Cllr Geoff Seeff (Lib Dem) won the St Neots The Eatons seat in the by-election in February following Cllr Giles's death.

A County Council by-election will be held on Thursday 4 May, the same day as the District Council elections, following the resignation of Cllr Dan Schumann (Soham South & Haddenham).

1 The Council

- 1.1** The three-group Joint Administration of Liberal Democrat, Labour and Independent councillors continues to run the Council. The Agreement signed by the three groups in May 2021 is scheduled for a two-year review, which will take place after this May's elections.
- 1.2** I remain in the same roles as last year, concentrating on Environment & Green Investment, Flood & Water,

Strategy & Resources Committee, Highways & Transport and Constitution & Ethics Committee. working group on Heavy Goods Vehicles which I chaired last year has concluded its work, resulting in a new policy. The County Council Farms estate work continues, as does the Green Investment Advisory Group and the Tree Strategy Working Group.

- 1.3** Once again I chaired the Combined Authority's Overview & Scrutiny Committee this year.
- 1.4** The council's Chief Executive Stephen Moir carried out a reorganisation of the senior staffing structure, and the Council has been making senior appointments. The process of disentangling joint staffing structures with Peterborough Council set up by the previous administration has been very positive.
- 1.5** The council's new HQ at Alconbury Weald was formally opened on Friday 8 July. (I remain of the view that the location is entirely wrong given the non-existent public transport links.)

2 Strategy & Resources

- 2.1** The high rates of inflation in the last year, and the turmoil of the Liz Truss / Kwasi Kwarteng mini budget, increased the costs of providing council services and therefore widened the budget gap.
- 2.2** The Council increased its portion of Council Tax in February, by 4.99 per cent in total—2.99 per cent for general services, and two per cent for adult social care. The Conservative opposition proposed an increase of four per cent instead, plugging the council tax gap by using up one-off

funding meant for environmental projects, care, and strengthening council services.

2.3 I chaired the first meeting of county farm tenants since the start of the pandemic, at Quy Mill. We received an inspiring presentation on regenerative farming from Hertfordshire farmer Paul Cherry, host of the annual Groundswell festival. There was lively interest in these techniques and in carbon sequestration and carbon credits.

3 Adults & Health

8.1 National changes in health and care decision-making took place during the year, with the creation of local Integrated Care Systems spanning health and social care.

Cambridgeshire & Peterborough created a joint Health & Wellbeing Board to replace the previous separate Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Boards.

3.2 This year has exposed the vulnerability of NHS services nationally and also locally. A BBC investigation last summer of dental provision in the UK revealed that no dental practice in Cambridgeshire was accepting new adult patients. Large numbers of patients are having to travel far afield, pay money they cannot afford for private treatment, or resort to DIY dentistry—and a resident of Ely was recently reported as having had to travel to war-torn Ukraine for dental treatment which was quicker and cheaper than that available in the UK.

3.3 Meanwhile the 6,000 patients at Priors Field GP practice in Sutton heard in February that the practice

would be closing at the end of March, with patients to be sent to alternative practices in some cases a thirty-mile round trip away. My Sutton ward district council colleague Mark Inskip and I set up a petition which attracted over 2,300 signatures, calling on NHS England and the Secretary of State for Health to intervene. A fortnight of intense hard work followed, including two public meetings organised by NHS Cambridgeshire, one online public meeting, and a special meeting of Sutton Parish Council.

We are delighted that the community campaign has been so successful, and that the NHS has contracted with Malling Health to provide services in Sutton for twelve months with an option to extend, while a more permanent local solution is found. I have now met on several occasions with the Patient Participation Group and NHS Cambridgeshire, and am continuing to do so as we work through the practical issues and support residents.

8.4 In addition to Covid, avian flu precautions were implemented across the UK during the year, with a particular protection zone centred round Pymoor after a confirmed case.

4 Children & Young People

4.1 Funding of vouchers over the school holidays for families eligible for free school meals has continued, as has the Holiday Activity & Food programme for the children of eligible families. The cost of living crisis has seen many Cambridgeshire families reliant on such schemes.

4.2 The Council was praised by Ofsted for the work of senior leaders in

Children's Services in responding to the challenge of Covid, and for maintaining continuity during structural change, Most children in need and those with a child protection plan were supported well.

- 4.3 A number of schools in the Sutton division, including Sutton, Downham Feoffees and Witchford Village College received good Ofsted inspection results during the year.
- 4.4 The council is still seeking residents who would like to make a difference to the life of a child or young person by becoming a foster carer.
- 4.5 In a piece of good news for Cambridgeshire, the council and the Government reached agreement on the 'safety valve' process to resolve the escalating deficit in the cost of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities education. The deficit was expected to grow to over £90M by 2025/26 if left unchecked, and the council was not permitted to divert funding from other sources to fill the gap. Cambridgeshire has been awarded £49M which will be used to create 463 new special school places, with a further £11.3M in capital funding to support new SEND provision on mainstream school sites. Cambridgeshire has historically received less funding per child for education than other areas.

5 COSMIC

- 5.1 COSMIC (Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion Committee) has continued to oversee 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 are struggling financially at the moment. COSMIC agreed to use some of the money from the fund to give a 'payment holiday' to pensioners in arrears with their water bills.

- 5.2 A Warm Hubs programme over the winter was funded by the NHS and administered by Cambridgeshire ACRE with fantastic support from local parishes.
- 5.3 A review of the mobile library service resulted in a number of improvements, including more stops, more fuel-efficient routes, and local storage of vehicles. Cambridgeshire's Library@home volunteers were one of three voluntary organisations in the county to be given the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service—the highest award a local voluntary group can receive in the UK.
- 5.4 The Government is introducing a requirement for photographic ID for voters at elections. This starts with the elections in May, and will cost up to £180M over ten years, despite cases of voter identity fraud at polling stations being almost non-existent. Around two million voters in the UK do not have the right form of ID to enable them to vote—they can apply for free Voter Authority Certificates, but applications for these are extremely slow and many people are likely to find themselves deprived of their right to vote on 4 May. I have been working with County Council officers on ways in which the council can support the effort to ensure the many people without the required photo ID apply for a free Voter Authority Certificate so that they are not denied their right to vote. I proposed a motion on this to the

county council which was agreed. A similar motion to the District Council was defeated.

6 Environment

- 6.1** The Council awarded the first spending from its Just Transition fund, including £2.175M for a business case for the first phase of the Council's plan for Cambridgeshire to reach Net Zero carbon by 2045. £1.75M was also awarded for flood work and nature restoration.
- 6.2** On the hottest day on record in the UK, Joint Administration members of the County Council voted to sign Zero Hour's Nature & Climate Declaration, while the tarmac melted in the council car park outside the building.
- 6.3** The County Council is working with district councils on energy retrofits in homes with poor energy efficiency. A number of Cambridgeshire residents including in Little Downham received individual invitations to apply for this.
- 6.4** The public inquiry into the proposals for an incinerator at Wisbech took place in February. I attended and made a representation on behalf of the county council, urging that the application be refused.
- 6.5** The waste disposal contract with Thalia (formerly Amey) at Waterbeach has taken considerable amounts of council time. In addition to the odour emission works required by the Environment Agency, the new year saw new enforcement by the Environment Agency of rules on 'persistent organic pollutants in waste upholstered domestic seating'. This led to a week of the council being unable to accept unwanted sofas,

futons, gaming chairs, upholstered dining seats, and other similar items. These must now be incinerated not landfilled. In addition to this, discussions are also ongoing with Defra regarding proposals to introduce weekly food waste collections.

- 6.6** The first households in Swaffham Prior are now receiving renewable energy from the new energy centre. Interest in this project has been considerable. Other energy projects (solar panels on Park & Ride sites, North Angle solar farm, and replacement of gas and oil boilers in schools and in the Council's own premises around the county) are continuing to progress. In conjunction with iChoosr the council ran another round of Solar Together, the group buying scheme for homeowners wanting to invest in solar panels and battery storage.
- 6.6** The Examination into the planning application by Sunnica for the large solar farm between Burwell and Red Lodge began in autumn 2022. I attended the Examination and spoke about the size and scale of the application, the impact on rural communities, food security, soil quality, biodiversity, transport, and public rights of way.
- 6.7** Anglian Water and Cambridge Water announced in the autumn their preferred location for a new reservoir in the Fens, north of Chatteris, to come onstream in the late 2030s. A planning application will come in due course and progress through a number of stages. It will be a decision for the Secretary of State through the Planning Inspectorate, as with other major infrastructure schemes.

- 6.8 The council has published an interim Tree Strategy, which it will revise once it has baseline information about what trees the council has, where they are, and how the council can expand and improve its tree assets.
- 6.9 We received details of the County Council's carbon emissions for the year. There was a significant reduction in the early stages of the pandemic, due to construction work (in red) ceasing, but this is likely to increase again in future years.
- 6.10 We agreed a motion to the Full Council calling for managed divestment by the council's Pension Fund from fossil fuels.
- 6.11 The council ran a #LetsGetOutdoors campaign over the summer to encourage residents to make use of Cambridgeshire's fantastic parks.
- 6.12 Connect Fibre, Openreach, Trulli and others all expressed interest simultaneously during the year in cabling up Sutton and other villages with high-speed broadband infrastructure.

7 Highways & Transport

- 7.1 The condition of Cambridgeshire's roads and pavements remains a serious challenge. This situation has been building for many years in which the council's approach was one of 'managed decline'. However, recent extreme weather has speeded up that decline very significantly. The peaty soil under the road surface has shrunk in hot dry weather, and expanded in wet weather, causing the surface to crater and split. Adding more tarmac to level the surface

simply increases the weight and makes matters worse. The severity and extent of the problem is far beyond the maintenance budget of the council, so simply 'freeing up some money' is not an option. The council has been actively engaging with the Department for Transport to seek their support and funding.

- 7.2 The council used a data interpretation and modelling tool to identify a 'Safe and Dry' programme of 115 locations where work was needed to improve flood resilience, and work began on the first fifty of these locations including Main Street Wentworth and Main Street Witchford. The council is also undertaking a two-year programme to clean and plot all gullies and surface drainage features to improve highways drainage management into the future.
- 7.3 The freezing spell over winter caused many road and pavement surface defects, and failure of pothole repairs. We encourage residents to report faults online.
- 7.4 Various road works have taken place during the year, including repairs to Mepal Bridge which finally took place. The demountable flood barrier at Welney was installed over the summer. West Fen Road was closed in March 2023 due to a collapsing culvert which will take a number of weeks to repair.
- 7.5 The BP A10/A142 roundabout is still impassable for people walking or cycling. The Combined Authority has made available a sum of money to assess options for safe crossing but the timescale is drifting which is disappointing.

- 7.6** The development by the council of an East Cambridgeshire Transport Strategy is pencilled in for 2023.
- 7.7** The Highways & Transport Committee agreed a new Local Cycling & Walking Infrastructure Plan. The proposals in it are currently unfunded, but include options for cycling routes between Ely and Little Downham; from Sutton westwards along the A142 towards Mepal; and north of Witchford between the new developments and the A142.
- 7.8** The county council plans to fit street lighting with energy-efficient LEDs. The council spends £3.3M a year on energy for street lights, and this sum will pay back in under six years.
- 7.9** The working group I chaired on Heavy Goods Vehicles produced a new policy and criteria against which to judge applications for weight limits in villages. A number of applications have already come forward. The new funding pot for 20MPH schemes has attracted a large amount of interest.
- 7.10** The county council and partners offered East Cambs District Council £150,000 to help with the set up costs of joining the rest of the country in adopting civil parking enforcement. This was declined by the current administration of the district council.
- 7.11** Cycle stands were installed at Sutton, Mepal and Witcham. Following an approach from residents I worked with our Local Highways Officer to put in place a better barrier arrangement between Windmill Lane and Windmill Walk in Sutton.
- 7.12** Local Highways Improvement bids in 2021 were successful for Little Downham (solar studs on B1411), Witchford (pedestrian crossing near the school), and Coveney (gates and signing on Jerusalem Drove). These have all now been installed—the solar studs in the last few days of March 2023. In 2022 the Panel approved Sutton’s bid for a pedestrian crossing on The Brook near Cromwell Road. There will also be a crossing further along The Brook near the school, paid for by ‘transforming cities’ funding. The process for applications and assessments of Local Highways Improvement bids has changed, with bids categorised as complex or non-complex, and quicker routes to assess non-complex applications.
- 7.13** Anti-social driving at the Elean Business Park in Sutton has recently spilled over onto the roundabout at the bottom of Mepal Road Sutton. I hope that the recently approved detailed planning application for a data centre at the Business Park will soon be built out and deter this.
- 7.14** We lost longstanding local highways officer Pam Joyce to retirement during the year, but she has been replaced by the excellent Phil Harty.
- 7.15** In autumn the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) consulted on its proposals for improved bus provision and active travel in the Cambridge area, which it proposed to fund through a charge for driving in a ‘Sustainable Travel Zone’ between 7:00AM and 7:00PM on weekdays. The results of the consultation will be published in the late spring, and the GCP needs to listen to the concerns of residents. The current proposals are not fair or equitable for East Cambs residents, and should not be implemented. It is wrong to penalise

people who drive when there is no viable public transport alternative. What is needed is action to address the decades of decline in public transport inflicted by successive Governments and local councils.

9 Combined Authority

- 9.1** The Combined Authority has had a somewhat turbulent year, including an attempt to depose the elected Mayor of Cambridgeshire & Peterborough (dubbed the Fenpowder Plot) which was unsuccessful. Most significantly, the auditors (EY) wrote to the Authority in June expressing concerns about the functioning of the Combined Authority, and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities has become involved, setting some clear requirements for improvement. The Combined Authority has agreed an Improvement programme with a package of external support, and an Independent Improvement Board has been established.
- 9.2** In September 2022 Stagecoach gave six weeks' notice of its intention to withdraw from a large number of bus routes. The Combined Authority pulled together a tender process at very short notice, and was able to find new providers for most of those routes, though there have been changes in frequency and extent of several of them. Additional funding was diverted to support these routes, and the Mayor has decided to levy a precept which will be added to the council tax to ensure the stability of these services for a further year. The Combined Authority really needs to move ahead with a system of franchising of local bus services, which would give democratic control

of routes, timetables, and fares, but to do this it needs to find sources of large amounts of income, and in any case franchising would take around five years to implement. Meanwhile the Combined Authority is finalising a Bus Strategy for submission to Government.

- 9.3** The Combined Authority remains starved of resources by the Government compared to other Combined Authorities. It received no money for its Bus Service Improvement Plan, and very little active travel funding. The Government also decided there would be no more money for affordable housing for any Combined Authorities.
- 9.4** The Combined Authority's Local Transport & Connectivity Plan, on which many other local transport plans depend, is being finalised.
- 9.5** Now that it has no money for, and therefore no real role in, housing, the Combined Authority has reorganised its committees into new 'thematic committees' including (for the first time) the environment.

10 Finally

- 10.1** I have continued to hold regular surgeries in Sutton and Witchford, and attend the Book Café in Little Downham once a month. Meanwhile, residents can continue to contact me by email, on Facebook or Twitter, or by phone.
- 10.2** My monthly county councillor reports are at www.tinyurl.com/lornasreports