

Annual Report 2023



CLLR LORNA DUPRE

CLLR MARK INSKIP

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

1 Priors Field GP surgery

- 1.1** Without a doubt the biggest challenge facing residents of Sutton ward for some years was the shock announcement in February of the proposed closure of Sutton's GP practice at the end of March, and the 'managed list dispersal' of its patients to other practices in ten locations around the wider area—some as far afield as Ramsey. The practice serves 5,959 patients in and around Sutton, and the loss of such an important anchor for the village would have been significant.
- 1.2** The immediate and effective mobilisation by the community was a wonderful example of what we can achieve together. Our petition to save the surgery rapidly reached over 2,300 signatures. NHS Cambridgeshire attended three public meetings in a week. Sutton Parish Council convened its own special meeting and agreed to apply for the Priors Field building to be listed as an Asset of Community Value. The Patient Participation Group held a number of meetings with senior NHS Cambridgeshire officials. And as a result, together we saved GP health care in Sutton.
- 1.3** Malling Health, a national primary care business with experience of crisis support, took on the contract from 1 April, and the feedback from patients to date has been very positive. Malling are contracted for twelve months with an option to extend, and are currently operating from Priors Field. Work is ongoing to identify an alternative site for a permanent health facility in the village. Lorna has also asked the County Council's Adults & Health

Committee to scrutinise how the NHS communicates practice closures, and how NHS Cambridgeshire monitors practices at risk of failure or closure.

2 Full council meetings

- 2.1** A special meeting of the Full Council was called to discuss the district council's response to the proposals for a Sustainable Travel Zone in Cambridge. Mark spoke in support of an amendment from our group which drew attention to the high level of carbon emissions from transport in Cambridgeshire; the need to provide car drivers with attractive public transport alternatives; that many residents cannot drive and need public transport to access employment, services and leisure activities; the significant congestion within Cambridge and on the routes into Cambridge, including the A10 and B1102 / A1303; and the urgent need for significant improvements to buses, given their continual decline since 1986 and the recent sudden acceleration of the decline.

The amendment called for support for well-resourced demand responsive transport; extended hours and increased frequency for public transport provision; extra routes from Park & Ride sites; the need for rail improvements and fare reductions and integration of various modes of public transport; provision of 'PlusBus' tickets; travel hubs along rural bus routes and key bus corridors; and provision for 'school student tickets' ensuring that rural school students pay no more than Cambridge school students for travel to school or sixth form college.

The amendment also drew attention to the funding challenges, with Government refusing to fund bus improvements, and local political opposition in some quarters to investing in bus services.

The amendment was defeated by the ruling group.

- 2.2** In February we proposed a motion expressing our concern at the rushed introduction of photographic Voter ID requirements which will leave many people refused their legitimate right to vote. The number of applications for Voter Authority Certificates is tiny in proportion to the number of voters without approved ID documents. The proposals cannot be justified by the risk of voter identity fraud, which the independent Electoral Commission reports every year is almost non-existent. Again, as usual, this motion was defeated.

3 Planning

- 3.1** East Cambridgeshire's Local Plan is now eight years old, after an update in 2019 was discarded by the ruling group after three years of work and an Examination in Public. It remains badly outdated, which brings with it the risk of losing planning appeals and control over development in the district.
- 3.2** A report prepared in October 2021 for local planning authorities in Cambridgeshire and West Suffolk said that from 2020 to 2040, 215 more East Cambridgeshire households each year will need affordable housing to rent, and that of these 75 per cent should be social rent. Meanwhile median house prices in East Cambridgeshire jumped over the

last ten years by 55.4 per cent, compared to 27.6 per cent nationally and 42.5 regionally.

- 3.3** A report to the council's Operational Services Committee revealed that 16 per cent of properties in East Cambridgeshire have Category 1 Housing Health and Safety Rating System hazards. In privately rented properties this rises to 17 per cent. The cost of mitigating this was estimated at £20M.
- 3.4** The council's planning application to replace the popular Outdoor Centre with an unwanted crematorium was approved in October. The business case for the crematorium has still not been presented to the council for consideration.
- 3.5** The planning application for the second phase of the Linden / Vistry development at Mepal Road was approved in December.
- 3.6** The Abbey Homes application for the detail of its development at Garden Close remains unresolved. We are continuing to challenge the application on several grounds, including the proportion of two-storey dwellings, the non-compliance of its small plot sizes, and the housing mix which doesn't meet the 2021 AECOM housing needs assessment for Sutton. We also have concerns about drainage and flood risk.
- 3.7** The former Deli@65 remains vacant, which is disappointing considering its central location in Sutton's High Street and the contribution it could make to the community.
- 3.8** Lasercharm was granted planning permission for the detail of its data

centre at the Elean Business Park, along with a unit offering office space for small businesses. If this is built, we hope it will deter the anti-social driving there which continues to plague Sutton and nearby villages.

3.9 Lorna persuaded the Planning Committee to grant planning permission at Low Bank Farm in Mepal and at 127 High Street, after officers had recommended refusal.

3.10 We both continue to be actively involved in the revision of Sutton's Neighbourhood Plan.

3.11 Cambridgeshire's Local Heritage List, funded by the Government as one of twenty-two pilot projects nationally, was launched late last year. The current list for East Cambridgeshire consists of 85 assets, including a number in Sutton ward.

4 Finance and assets

4.1 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 include an increase of £5 per annum at Band D, the maximum allowed, with effect from next year. Its proposed net operating budget for 2023/24 is £12,282,471.

4.2 We proposed an amendment to fund a new Local Plan, the implementation of civil parking enforcement, a doubling of the council's Environment Fund, and grant funding to parish councils and community groups to mark the Coronation, all of which was refused.

4.3 The council's East Cambs Trading Company continues to struggle. One

of our colleagues from Ely asked the Trading Company at a council committee meeting why its Annual Accounts said that 'No liability to UK corporation tax arose for the year ended 31 March 2022 nor the year ended 31 March 2021'. The reason given for this by the company was that 'we have had losses—and cumulative losses'.

In April 2022 the council approved a further loan facility of £7.5M to the company, including £1.7M to be provided in 2023/24, This is for developments at the former Paradise Pool site, and for phases 2 and 3 at the former MOD site in North Ely.

4.4 The Council's Finance & Assets Committee agreed unanimously a new *Interim Nature Recovery Network for East Cambridgeshire* report and *Biodiversity Net Gain* document. The former document identifies a number of priority areas for biodiversity, namely Wicken Fen, the Ouse Washes and surrounds, Newmarket chalk grasslands, Chippenham Fen and River Snail, Breckland Edge, Soham grasslands, Boulder Clay woodlands, Chettisham Meadows to Ely North Country Park, and the river corridors of the Great Ouse, Cam, Lark, Little Ouse, and Soham Lode.

4.5 Last year we drew attention to the lack of 'Changing Places' toilets in East Cambridgeshire for people with severe disabilities; and to the fact that East Cambridgeshire was the only district in the county not to even bother applying for Government funding to address the situation. This year the Government 'named and shamed' East Cambridgeshire among other authorities that had done nothing about this, and the council

finally did apply and receive funding for Changing Places toilets in Ely, Soham and Littleport.

- 4.6** The council's 'levelling up' bid for refurbishment of eSpace North in Littleport and a cycle route from Littleport Station to the A10 BP roundabout at Wisbech Road was turned down by the Government.
- 4.7** A parish poll in Stretham resulted in a two-to-one majority for a pause on the parish council's plans for a multi-million pound community hub. The parish council and district council both ignored this poll, and the district council awarded the scheme almost £1.5M in public funding.

5 Operational services

- 5.1** The Council remains adamant that it will be one of the last councils in the country, along with Wealden and the Isles of Scilly, not to take on civil parking enforcement powers. It continues to press the police to run a bespoke system using community volunteers which no other council has done, but eighteen months since they started to push this it has still got absolutely nowhere. This refusal means that other powers being handed down from Government, such as enforcement of some moving traffic offences such as breach of weight limits, will also not be available in East Cambridgeshire.
- 5.2** The performance of the council's waste and street cleaning company ECSS in collecting the rubbish and cleaning the streets continued to languish throughout the year, and has not really recovered from the reconfiguration of the rounds a year ago. Six months after those changes

the service continued to show—in the words of the council's Chief Executive—'failure to meet the usual standards [residents] should expect'.

Mark's proposals for addressing the problems were eventually adopted by the council which made some improvement, but even by Q2 (July to September) waste collection performance had only recovered to 58 per cent against a target of 90 per cent, and street cleaning to 21 per cent against a target of 90 per cent. External consultants were brought in to advise. The company has overspent by around £500,000 in-year this year, which will be met by local council tax payers.

- 5.3** Recycling lorries in East Cambs will soon be running on vegetable oil. The council agreed unanimously to set aside £2M for ten new vehicles which will be run on hydro-treated vegetable oil. The current waste collection vehicles are the biggest contributor to the council's carbon emissions. The new fleet could be on the road in early 2024.

6 Finally

- 6.1** We continue to offer in-person councillor surgeries in the Community Room at Sutton School, 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.