

Cllrs Lorna Dupré and Mark Inskip

MONTHLY REPORT FEBRUARY 2024

Crematorium at Mepal

By 6 votes to 5, the Conservative majority on the council's Finance & Assets Committee pushed through a recommendation to the Full Council to build their crematorium at Mepal. This is the scheme that the Conservative administration removed from the council's corporate plan for two years so that they could work and spend public money on it in secret. We and our Liberal Democrat group colleagues on the committee voted against this for several reasons.

1. The council proposes to use over £9M of Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to build the crematorium. This is money handed over by developers across East Cambridgeshire to improve local amenities—money that could have been spent to enhance our towns and villages. The scheme will take these contributions and convert them into ready cash which can then be used to subsidise the council tax. This is not what CIL is meant for.
 2. Most of the paperwork for the decision was confidential, but even in the public papers it is clear that the crematorium will only make money for the council if East Cambs launches a full-on price war against the existing crematorium in March, just twelve minutes away. It is not clear that the owners of the March crematorium will take this lying down, nor that the council will necessarily win such a battle, nor again that this is a purpose for which developer contributions should be used.
 3. The public papers also suggest that East Cambs will seek to reach an arrangement with Huntingdon Town Council, which owns the other nearby crematorium, to minimise risks arising from competition with each other. Mark has queried whether this is consistent with the Enterprise Act 2002 which aims to root out and punish anti-competitive behaviour and even impose jail sentences for directors to deter the formation of cartels. (A cartel is a group of independent market participants who collude with each other in order to improve their profits and dominate the market.)
 4. One of the stated aims of the plan for a crematorium is to have a facility in the district, and to make it more convenient for residents in East Cambridgeshire. However, Mepal is at the very edge of the district, the nearest possible location to the council's major competitor at March, and for a large number of residents will be less convenient than their current nearest provider. We are also not convinced that most people base their choice of provider on local authority boundaries.
 5. The proposed crematorium is opposed by the vast majority (85 per cent) of residents who responded to the consultation about it. It is not needed, not wanted, and a waste of public money.
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Growth and Infrastructure Fund grants

The council's Finance & Assets Committee also allocated 'Growth and Infrastructure' funding to three applicants, in Stretham, Witchford and a small residual amount to Wilburton. The money for these does not come from the council but is a windfall arising from the dissolution of an organisation called Cambridgeshire Horizons Ltd, and a sharing out of its assets.

The controversial application was in Stretham, where the applicant (Stretham & Wilburton Community Land Trust) claimed that their application for money for a community hub had the support of Stretham Parish Council, which the parish council turned out in person to the meeting to refute. The report to the committee claimed that the match funding for the scheme was also coming from the parish council, which again the parish council denied and which was then stated to be an error. We felt it was entirely wrong in these circumstances to support this application, so we did not. (We did however vote for the Witchford and Wilburton bids.) But the applicants still got their £700,000.

The Stretham hub was also awarded £510,000 from the district council's Community Infrastructure Levy income at the same meeting.

Barclays Bank closure

The announcement that Barclays Bank intends to close its Ely branch on 11 April is bad news for local residents. A physical presence by banks on our high street is very important for many reasons, providing in-person services for some of our more vulnerable residents, a place for services requiring attendance in person, and of course helping to keep our high streets alive and thriving. We will be writing to Barclays to make the case for a physical presence to remain in the centre of Ely. Anyone wishing to comment on the Barclays closure can do so by phone on 03457 345345 (charges may apply), or by email to lianne.coupland@barclays.com

Questions over controversial Wilburton development

The application by Stretham & Wilburton Community Land Trust (see above) and Laragh Homes for a large and controversial development at Camp's Field Wilburton was submitted in 2020 but has yet to be resolved. The district council's planning department wrote to the applicants several times in the second half of last year but failed to elicit a response.

A planning contractor working for the council then wrote again on 11 January to say, "I therefore intend to treat the application as 'finally disposed of' under Article 40 of the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 ('the Order') to remove it from the Statutory Register of outstanding applications for planning permission" and inviting

comments within fourteen days. The applicants have responded asking for a revised timeline for continuing with their application, and the planning contractor has responded as follows.

“Whilst based on your previous response to the Article 40 notice the LPA [Local Planning Authority] is not convinced that there has been or will be sufficient progress to warrant extending the application period further, we are willing to allow a further 14 days to provide a comprehensive and robust plan to set out how you intend to progress the application, based on attempting to address the shortcomings set out in the correspondence to you on 11th September last year. If we are provided with convincing and clear evidence that sufficient, positive progress will be achievable and within a reasonable timeframe, we may decide to extend the target date for the application. This option will still be at the discretion of the LPA.”

The last accounts for Stretham & Wilburton Community Land Trust published by the Financial Conduct Authority appear to be over three years old October 2020 (<https://mutuals.fca.org.uk/Search/Society/18729>) and not fully audited.

Meanwhile, various changes seem to be happening at Laragh, according to its records at Companies House. And there has been a flurry of complaints on social media from residents of one of its recent developments about the build quality of their homes and suggestions of issues on Manor Farm in Stretham.

Sutton GP services

The NHS in Cambridgeshire has now announced its intention to negotiate to buy the Priors Field building. It says:

In April 2023, Malling Health became the interim contract holder to provide primary care services to the patients of Priors Field Surgery in Sutton. Since then, we have continued to look into the future of ensuring Sutton and the surrounding areas continue to have primary care services that meet the local community's needs.

Alongside this work, we have formally agreed to enact the second year of our interim contract with Malling Health to provide primary care services to the patients of Priors Field Surgery until 31 March 2025. These services will continue to be delivered from Priors Field Surgery's current location, and this lease agreement is also in place until 31 March 2025.

On Friday 12 January 2024, the ICB Board ratified the recommendation from our Commissioning and Investment Committee to enter negotiations to purchase the current Priors Field Surgery building. This decision was taken after a range of site options were reviewed and

considered. We remain committed to working with the local community to ensure Sutton and the surrounding areas continue to have primary care services that meet their needs both now and, in the future, and we will keep you updated with further news on negotiations as they progress.

News and updates can be found at <https://www.cpics.org.uk/sutton/>

Fire station

The Fire Authority is now entering a period of public engagement about its plans to close Sutton fire station, along with those at Manea and Kimbolton. Sutton Parish Council have a public meeting about it at 7:30PM on Tuesday 5 March.

Post Office

The Post Office is now advertising a vacancy for a post office to replace the facilities that will be lost in the One Stop in Sutton. It says:

Post Office Ltd is looking for a successful retailer to incorporate a Post Office Local into their existing or proposed business.

The offer available in this Post Office would be:

Post Office Local – integrating Post Office services into a vibrant and sustainable retail business, so they can be offered over the same opening hours. The exact layout and design will be agreed with you to suit your business.

The closing date for expressions of interest is Thursday 14 March 2024, or earlier if sufficient applications are received. Unfortunately, with the inquiry into the Post Office miscarriage of justice still ongoing, now may not be the ideal time to be advertising opportunities for sub-postmasters.

Meet your councillors

Our next surgeries will take place on

- Monday 12 February, 6:30-7:30PM (not 5 February previously advertised)
- Monday 4 March, 6:30-7:30PM

in the Community Room at Sutton School. Between surgeries, residents can continue to contact us by email, Facebook, or phone.

CLlr Lorna Dupré

CLlr Mark Inskip

District Councillors for the Sutton ward