

Annual Report 2026



CLLR LORNA DUPRE

CLLR MARK INSKIP

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

1 The council

1.1 The composition of the council has varied over the last twelve months, but is currently 14 Conservatives, 12 Liberal Democrats and two Independents. The Conservatives are in a group with one Independent, and the Liberal Democrats in a group with the other.

John Hill retired as Chief Executive in December 2025 after a quarter of a century in post, and was replaced by Emma Grima in an internal-only process. We argued for a better process, but this was rejected.

2 Full council

2.1 The budget in February 2026 once again saw a council tax freeze proposed by both groups on the council. We proposed an alternative budget which would have supported the arts, tourism and the environment, re-established an independent Citizens Advice presence in Ely, and implemented civil parking enforcement, but this was defeated.

2.2 The cost of the Conservatives' unpopular, unwanted crematorium at Mepal continues to balloon. Councillors were told this would be a £13M fixed price contract, but from an original estimate of £9M, the price is now £14M. With the construction only half complete, the council has used up all its contingency funding, and in February it came back for an additional £300,000. The decision to approve the extra contingency funding was made on the casting vote of the Chair of the Council.

The money for the scheme has come from developer Community Infrastructure Levy contributions

which were intended to improve community amenities, at a huge cost to towns and villages across East Cambridgeshire in lost opportunities.

The purpose of the scheme was to use profits to subsidise council tax. Not only does it seem highly unlikely to us that there will be any profits to speak of, but with the end of East Cambridgeshire as a council under Local Government Reorganisation it is unlikely that the Leader's council tax subsidy ambition will be relevant either.

The plan is for the crematorium to open in the summer.

2.3 Mark successfully proposed a motion to improve the council's response to empty homes. As a result the council has resolved to develop a new Empty Homes Strategy by July 2026, with ambitious and realistic targets to reduce long-term empty homes and return them to use; and a business case and options to implement it, including investigation into a revolving loans fund, expanded enforcement capacity, an Empty Homes Partnership and officer, and an online 'Report an Empty' portal to connect buyers and renovators.

A second motion from us proposed that the council should require its Trading Company to join the scheme which gives people moving into new build homes the right to take complaints to the New Homes Ombudsman. This was defeated.

We successfully proposed that the council should continue to press the Government to invest in upgrades to the rail network north of Ely.

3 Audit

3.1 The council's external audit report, received in January, was damning. The council's arrangements for supporting the audit were graded Ineffective for quality and completeness of the draft financial statements, delivery of working papers in accordance with agreed schedules, quality of working papers and supporting evidence, and volume and value of identified misstatements and disclosure amendments. No assurance could be given by the auditors for short-term debtors, short term creditors, grants received in advance, reserves, other income and expenditure, cash flow statement, collection fund, other disclosures, or leases.

The auditors made eight specific recommendations, including within Recommendation 1 that "the finance team must develop a strong understanding of Local Government accounting requirements". The auditors warned: "if we are not satisfied with the pace and substance of improvements in addressing our Recommendation 1 (Page 39) as part of the 2025/26 audit, we would be minded to issue Statutory Recommendations at that point, given the recurring inability to prepare robust financial statements and support the audit process".

Despite multiple significant issues in the council's draft statement of accounts for 2024/25, the Chair of the committee used his casting vote to ensure that sign-off of these accounts was delegated to himself, along with the council's director of finance, without further committee scrutiny.

Following this embarrassment, the council has appointed an interim Technical Accountant and a Principal Accountant.

4 Planning

4.1 The developers of the scheme behind Garden Close Sutton have now applied to vary their planning permission to remove all the affordable housing originally required for the site.

4.2 Witcham's Neighbourhood Plan received the support of ninety per cent of those who voted in a referendum in February. The district council agreed at its meeting on 24 February that the plan should be adopted, and we both spoke in support of this.

The Government no longer offers grants for making or reviewing a Neighbourhood Plan, but the council set aside a fund of £50,000 for parishes to bid for, on a first come first served basis until 31 March 2028 or until the fund is exhausted. A matching contribution is required.

4.3 We are continuing to engage with the developer, the county council's flood and water team, and affected residents over water management on and around the Phase 2 site of the Vistry development at the top of Mepal Road Sutton.

4.4 Data from the council's annual monitoring report states that 635 net house-building completions took place in the district in 2024/25, mostly in Ely, Soham and Littleport. The Sutton ward contributed six net completions to this total.

The council reported that it has a 6.1 year land supply, above the five year minimum requirement.

- 4.5** The Government has recently consulted on the growing issue of unadopted amenities on privately managed estates, with the aim of reducing reliance on private estate management and increasing adoption of amenities by public authorities. As this affects a growing number of new build areas in East Cambridgeshire, we persuaded the council that it should make a response, and encouraged individual residents to do so too.

The Government has also been consulting on major changes to the planning system, including reducing levels of community engagement on larger schemes and get them through the planning system faster.

5 Finance and assets

- 5.1** The council has been transferring assets to parish councils in advance of Local Government Reorganisation. This includes a package of assets including public toilets and a car park being transferred to Littleport Town Council for £1 each. City of Ely Council has been offered Oliver Cromwell House, The Maltings and Maltings Cottage, also for £1 each.
- 5.2** The council is using Community Infrastructure Levy funding for two grant funding schemes—one for local infrastructure such as community centres, village halls and sports centres, and the other for inclusive play and open spaces. A minimum of ten per cent match funding will be required from applicants.

The council also opened a Community Fund to applications in the final months of 2025. Community groups were encouraged to apply for grants of up to £1,000 to spend on new or existing projects designed to improve the quality of life for residents. The next funding window will be open from 11 May to 22 June 2026.

- 5.3** The council's Finance and Assets Committee unanimously agreed to grant a licence to Mepal Pantry for use of the allotment land next to 10 River Close Mepal to grow produce to directly support the local community the Pantry currently serves. (We were amused at the council's admission in the committee report on this item that it had been collecting rent from the previous tenant while apparently not being aware that it was the owner of the land.)

6 Operational services

- 6.1** As part of national changes in legislation, the council is currently delivering black wheeled bins and food caddies to households across East Cambridgeshire. The black bins will replace our black sacks, and will be collected fortnightly. We will also have a smaller food caddy for use in our kitchens, and a larger caddy for food waste which will be collected weekly. The 'go live' date for the new arrangements is 1 June.

From that date, soft plastics including bubble wrap, food packaging and carrier bags can also be put in with household recycling. Free garden waste collections will continue, but food waste should go in the food caddy, not our green bins. Residents who live in properties that cannot accommodate the bins will be

provided with purple bags for anything that cannot be recycled.

Some areas will have a new bin day from 1 June. Mepal—whose collection day will be Tuesday—is the only part of the Sutton ward that this will affect.

6.2 We strongly supported a proposal for a Public Spaces Protection Order to clamp down on anti-social driving across East Cambridgeshire, such as has been happening at the Elean Business Park for years. A consultation with the public showed huge support for the new Order, which was approved by the Operational Services Committee and which it is hoped will take effect from the summer.

6.3 The council has awarded GLL a five-year extension to its contract to manage The Hive leisure centre on the A10 near Ely. The contract will now end in 2035. 228 solar panels have been installed at The Hive, using £69,510 from Sport England's Swimming Pool Support Fund.

6.4 The council is still refusing to join the rest of the country in taking responsibility for on-street parking enforcement. It is now five years since the Leader of the Council promised a unique system of police volunteers to enforce parking, but there is still nothing to show for it.

6.5 Mark took up issues relating to street sweeping in High Street Witcham. Under the Environmental Protection Act 1990, local authorities have a statutory duty to provide clean streets, footways and open spaces that are in public ownership. All towns and villages are divided up into

"zones" with the busiest being cleaned more regularly.

6.6 Mark attended the meeting of the EPR straw plant liaison group in October. The annual maintenance outage took place in July, and two apprentices had recently been taken on.

7 Local Government Reorganisation

7.1 The ruling group on the district council has proposed to the Government that East Cambridgeshire should be joined in a new authority with Huntingdonshire, Peterborough, and Fenland. We have strongly opposed this, on the grounds that our connections for work, study, health care, leisure, and retail are predominantly with Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire, and that it would be wrong to deny East Cambridgeshire residents any influence over decisions affecting the places and amenities that play such a key part in most residents' lives.

The Government will make its decision in the summer.

8 Finally

8.1 We continue to offer in-person councillor surgeries every month, at Joy Bistro at 65 High Street Sutton, from 6:30 to 7:30PM on the first Monday of every month except for bank holiday Mondays. 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.