

# Annual Report 2024



**CLLR LORNA DUPRE**

**CLLR MARK INSKIP**

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

## 1 The council

- 1.1 Elections to the District Council took place in May 2023. Mark and Lorna were both re-elected—thank you very much indeed to the residents of Sutton ward.
- 1.2 The elections made no change to the composition of the district council, which remains 15 Conservatives and 13 Liberal Democrats. This time however the Liberal Democrats secured more votes across the district than the Conservatives, who retained their majority on the council by just twenty-five votes in one ward.
- 1.3 On 18 April 2024 a district council by-election was held in Ely West ward. Again there was no change in the composition of the council, with the Liberal Democrats holding the seat.

## 2 Full council

- 2.1 The council leadership pushed through its Corporate Plan—its intentions for the next four years—at its July meeting.

We supported some of the aims in the plan, and were pleased to see the inclusion of funding for a new Local Plan—something we proposed in February 2023 and which was then opposed by the ruling group.

There were other elements we could not support—the continuing lack of an independent advice service following the council's forced closure of Citizens Advice in Ely; the reliance on Community Land Trusts to deliver affordable housing when there is no effective regulation of them; the emphasis on so-called '£100K homes'; the determination to press ahead with a crematorium at Mepal; and the

refusal to consider moving to council enforcement of on-street parking which almost every other council in England has done.

We also queried how the council's two Trading Companies were 'commercial' if one was losing money and the other had to come to the council mid-year for an enormous bail-out.

- 2.2 The budget in February 2024 once again saw a council tax freeze. We proposed to reduce to zero the level of council tax paid by the very worst-off households in the district, but this was rejected despite the escalating effects of the ongoing cost of living crisis.
- 2.3 The administration's proposed crematorium at Mepal was rubber-stamped by the Full Council. £9 million of developer contributions which were meant to improve local amenities will instead be used to build a council-run facility which the council's ruling political group believe will generate a profit to subsidise council tax.

The plans will only stack up financially if the council starts and wins a full-on price war with its nearest rival, the commercial crematorium run by Dignity at March. We are not convinced this is a war the council can win.

Moreover, the council has indicated it would try to collaborate with the other nearby crematorium in Huntingdon, to avoid unnecessary competition. We have pointed out that this is the definition of a cartel, which is punishable by up to five years in prison for its directors.

**2.4** Both Mark and Lorna asked questions at Full Council meetings during the year. Mark asked about the numbers of people denied their right to vote through the introduction of photo ID for voting in May 2023. 41 voters across the district arrived at the polling station without ID, of whom 27 returned with an acceptable form of ID. He also asked what discussions the Leader of the Council had had with Government ministers about their plans for a quarter of a million additional houses around Cambridge.

**2.5** The district council underspent by £1,746,865 in 2022/23 on its revenue budget, and by £1,984,154 on its capital budget.

**2.6** The council rejected a request from one of our colleagues to ask Sanctuary Housing to attend a meeting of the council's Operational Services Committee to answer questions from councillors about its empty properties. Instead the council leadership organised a behind-closed-doors seminar for councillors only. This is disappointing given the large number of empty homes, and of occupied homes in poor condition, and the high level of public interest in the shortage of social housing in the district.

### **3 Planning**

**3.1** The Planning Committee voted at the end of April 2023 to refuse the application by Abbey Homes for the detail of its plans for development at Garden Close Sutton. Three reasons were given for refusal, including non-compliance with the Sutton Neighbourhood Plan's policies on housing mix.

Abbey then appealed against the refusal, but at the same time submitted a slightly revised application. The Planning Committee approved this revision. At the time of writing the outcome of the appeal is still unknown, but if Abbey are successful they will have two versions of their plans to choose between.

**3.2** Sutton Parish Council is refreshing its Neighbourhood Plan, Mepal is well on the way with its Plan, and Witcham is also working on one. We expect the public referendums on the Mepal and Sutton Plans this summer.

**3.3** The council went ahead with a 'single-issue review' of its Local Plan, concentrating purely on the housing numbers. The Local Plan is now nine years old—if it were a human being it would be in junior school. It has failed to protect residents across the district from inappropriate development, and is now hopelessly out of date in the face of the threat of climate change.

To achieve the total 9,000 new dwellings required in East Cambridgeshire between 2011 and 2031, the rate of house building will need to increase very significantly, from an average 419 a year over the past twenty years to 600 a year for the next nine years.

The council also agreed to start work on a new 'environment chapter' for its next Local Plan, and to consult on a special Supplementary Planning Document for hedgehogs.

**3.4** The council's planning department has written to the applicants for the controversial Camp's Field development in Wilburton advising that as they have not submitted the

required documentation in the requested time, it proposes to dispose of the application, which was submitted four years ago.

## 4 Finance and assets

- 4.1** The council's Finance & Assets Committee once again ran a number of grant programmes, including a Growth & Infrastructure Fund, a Community Fund, a 'Pride of Place' grant scheme, a Safer Community Fund, and business grants. The council also gave away 75 English oak trees to communities to mark the coronation of King Charles III and his seventy-fifth birthday.
- 4.2** Following changes to the council's constitution, the Finance & Assets Committee will now be responsible for strategic planning, climate change, and the environment, which previously sat with the Operational Services Committee. We opposed this change on the grounds that these are important enough matters to deserve their own committee.
- 4.3** The council's Trading Company, ECTC, is delivering no more than thirty per cent affordable housing, which is the expectation of any commercial developer, and is not delivering a surplus for the council.

## 5 Operational services

- 5.1** The service offered by the district council's community advice bus has been drastically scaled back to just Soham and Littleport, and events in Ely. The council says more staff will be available at the council offices in Ely to advise residents. First they closed the CAB, now they have withdrawn the Community Bus service from local villages, making it increasingly difficult

for East Cambridgeshire residents to access advice and support.

- 5.2** Services overseen by the committee overspent by £742,047 in 2022/23, mostly due to reduced income from the Leisure Centre management fee, increased costs in the planning service and of dealing with environmental crime, and an increase in the management fee payable to East Cambs Street Scene (ECSS) due to what the council described as the 'so called' cost of living crisis.

In 2022/23 East Cambs District Council paid ECSS an annual fee of £3 million. Two years later the council has signed off on a fee of £4.6 million to deliver exactly the same service—an increase of fifty-three per cent.

- 5.3** The council's performance in waste collection and street cleaning continued to lag. Much publicity was given to the idea of running waste vehicles on hydro-treated vegetable oil, but debate rumbled on during the year about whether or not this was affordable. In November it was noted that ECSS had underspent by £33,000 on fuel, but a proposal by Mark to use this to run the fleet on vegetable oil for the rest of the year was defeated.
- 5.4** Mark has been a member of a group of councillors carrying out a strategic review of the council's waste and recycling service.
- 5.5** A damning report on East Cambs Street Scene was published following a 'wide-ranging review undertaken by the Chief Executive'—himself a member of the ECSS Board. The report listed a range of failures, and considerable challenges and risks. We were not surprised by the findings,



but were shocked at the extent of the issues and at how long it had taken to force the truth from the council.

Following this report, changes were made to the composition of the company Board, and a formal requirement put in place that overspends or underspends of over £50,000 should be reported to the Operational Services Committee within an agreed timeframe.

- 5.6** Negotiations took place during the year about whether or not Cambridgeshire's district councils and the county council could come to an agreement on whether to move to weekly food waste collections starting in 2026 as expected by Government.

Not doing so would have meant being 'named in legislation' as continuing with fortnightly collections until the end of the county council's Private Finance Initiative contract with waste company Thalia at Waterbeach in 2036. Fortunately the negotiations concluded positively and we can expect weekly food waste collections (and black wheelie bins) in two years' time.

- 5.7** The district council adopted its fourth annual Environment Plan, as a result of which a draft Supplementary Planning Document for hedgehogs was produced, and will be consulted on this spring.

- 5.8** A template Nature Recovery Plan for use by parish councils or other groups was made available online, and can be used to prepare a local action plan to help boost the natural environment locally.

- 5.9** The council is still refusing to join the rest of the country in taking responsibility for on-street parking enforcement from the police. We are receiving more and more (justified) complaints from members of the public about unlawful and dangerous parking.

## **6 Local issues**

- 6.1** We were overjoyed that the proposal to close Priors Field GP surgery in Sutton and disperse the list did not happen, and were hugely proud of the determined community effort to retain this vital service in the village. NHS Cambridgeshire has been negotiating to buy the building and grounds, and is already investing in improvements to the exterior and interior.

Unfortunately, this was followed by announcements that One Stop no longer wished to host a post office, and that the Fire Authority was going to consult on closing Sutton's fire station. Attempts to encourage residents to step forward as on-call firefighters have not succeeded for a variety of reasons. A decision on the future of the fire station at Sutton, along with those at Manea and Kimbolton, is expected to be made this summer.

- 6.2** We attended the biannual Community Liaison meeting organised by the Elean power station on 6 May last year. The company operating the plant has been rebranded Melton, and is owned by Octopus Energy.

- 6.3** The anti-social driving gatherings at Elean Business Park have continued, with neither the police nor the district council nor the county council's

highways department nor the landowners able to find a permanent solution. The landowners have not implemented the planning permission they have been given for a data centre and small business unit on the site, which might have deterred anti-social drivers from gathering there in the night-time.

**6.4** Mark has been a regular attender of meetings organised by East Cambs Climate Action Network.

## **7 Finally**

**7.1** 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](http://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.