

Annual Report 2024



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

The composition of the County Council has changed significantly since my last report.

Three councillors have left the Conservative Group and now sit as 'unaligned' members. Another has left and joined the Independent group that is part of the Joint Administration running the Council. And a recent County Council by-election in Yaxley saw the seat change from Conservative to Liberal Democrat.

The table below shows the current composition of the Council compared to the latest election results in May 2021. The Conservatives are not the largest group on the Council—for the first time ever.

	2021	2024
Conservatives	28	22
Liberal Democrats	20	23
Labour	9	9
Independents	4	4
Unaligned	0	3

1 The Council

1.1 The Joint Administration of Liberal Democrat, Labour and Independent councillors continues to run the Council. I remain in the same roles as last year, concentrating on Environment & Green Investment, Strategy Resources & Performance, Highways & Transport and Constitution & Ethics.

I still chair the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Flood & Water Partnership, and remain a member of the County Farms working group, Green Investment & Utilities Advisory Group, and Tree Strategy Working Group, and now co-chair a working group on the many very large infrastructure developments that organisations like Anglian Water,

Network Rail and large energy companies are planning countywide.

1.2 I ceased to chair the Combined Authority's Overview & Scrutiny Committee this year, because I was asked by the Leader of the Council to represent the Council on the Combined Authority Environment & Sustainable Communities Committee.

2 Strategy Resources & Performance

2.1 The Council set a balanced budget in February 2024, though this is becoming increasingly difficult for councils of all political colours across the country. An increasing number of local authorities are issuing 'Section 114' notices—the nearest council equivalent to bankruptcy. A 2023 poll of English councillors for the *New Statesman* found that a quarter of them believed that their council would soon go bankrupt, with 6 per cent saying this was 'very likely'.

The Council increased its portion of council tax by 4.99 per cent in total—2.99 per cent for general services, and two per cent for adult social care. The increase in need for social care, and children's social care in particular, is causing pressure on council budgets.

2.2 Following a request from three of its committees, Full Council agreed an increase in funding for Emergency Planning, in view of the frequency and severity of extreme weather leading to flooding. The budget also includes record levels of highways funding to strengthen and improve the standard of roads and pavements, including tackling potholes, weeds and gullies, in response to residents' concerns.

But without the long-promised, but not delivered, fair funding settlement from Government, future budgets will continue to be a struggle.

3 Adults & Health

3.1 In recent years the availability of NHS dental care has shrivelled to almost zero. Dentists say that under the current contract, it is no longer financially viable to offer NHS procedures because of a lack of Government investment. One in five people have resorted to 'DIY dentistry' and 4.4 million children in England have not seen an NHS dentist in at least a year, leading to a seventeen per cent increase in tooth decay-related extractions in children.

East Cambridgeshire remains one of the worst 'dental deserts' in the country. A national 'Dental Recovery Plan' has been published, including mobile 'dental vans' in rural and coastal areas, with at least one of these combine to Cambridgeshire. Cambridgeshire NHS has put in place a local Dental Improvement Plan, and identified the areas of the county most in need as being Fenland, Littleport, Ely, and Peterborough.

3.2 At Priors Field GP practice in Sutton, Malling Health has agreed a twelve-month extension to their contract, to spring 2025. The NHS is in negotiations to buy the premises and improvement works are taking place to the building. Updates on primary care in Sutton are available at www.cpics.org.uk/sutton

After Sutton's experience of the surrender of the Priors Field contract last year, I asked the Adults & Health Committee to review how

communication is managed in the event of a decision by the NHS to close a practice, and press the NHS on how it can identify and monitor 'at risk' practices more effectively. The Committee discussed these issues in June. NHS Cambridgeshire also carried out a post-action review.

The vulnerability of the entire NHS system was very evident, mostly due to workforce constraints including shortages and emigration. The *Washington Post* had recently led with the headline *How the UK became a terrible place to be a doctor*. Of the 88 GP practices in Cambridgeshire, thirteen were rated red in terms of vulnerability, and only fifteen or sixteen rated green. It was observed that this left a large number of practices in the amber category.

4 Assets & Procurement

4.1 Shire Hall in Cambridge is to be re-marketed after original preferred bidder Brookgate pulled out.

4.2 The committee has approved a new Land & Property Strategy to guide the management of its diverse portfolio.

5 Children & Young People

5.1 A new initiative aimed at nurturing and developing social care skills in Cambridgeshire has been launched by the County Council.

Cambridgeshire Academy for Reaching Excellence (CARE) is a new Social Care Academy which aims to improve outcomes for children and young people through support and training being offered for social work students and apprentices, international practitioners, experienced social workers and those

in leadership positions. It comes at a time when across the country local authorities are facing a shortage of social workers. More information at www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/care

5.2 The Holiday Activities & Food programme has continued over each of the school holidays.
www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/council/communities/support-with-the-cost-of-living/holiday-activities-and-food-programme

5.3 The county council is developing a scheme to expand Rackham primary school in Witchford to 420 places, and to increase the number of early years places. The council is in the process of appointing consultants for the scheme, with the aim of completing the project for September 2026.

6 COSMIC

6.1 COSMIC (Communities, Social Mobility & Inclusion Committee) has continued to oversee the Household Support Fund, which supports people experiencing immediate financial hardship to pay for essential items. An increasing number of families are struggling financially at the moment. The Government announced after councils had set their budgets that it would continue to fund the Household Support Fund for six more months, so the council will continue to issue supermarket vouchers to eligible families at the current rate for the next six months.

6.2 The Council ran a quality of life survey in August 2023, with a sample of 5,500 people asked about their views on a range of issues. While most Cambridgeshire residents felt happy and safe, over half of 18-24s felt

lonely with 61 per cent of them struggling with their mental health.

6.3 The committee has been overseeing a Cambridgeshire Priorities Capital Fund. This consists of £1M left over from the previous administration's £5M Communities Capital Fund. The fund was opened to a single round of one-off applications, and was heavily over-subscribed.

6.4 The mobile library service to a number of villages including Sutton and Witchford has been reorganised for a trial two month period, to be monthly rather than fortnightly. This trial took place in February and March so I am awaiting the outcome.

6.5 The committee is running a number of pilot decentralisation projects. I pressed for a community energy pilot in East Cambridgeshire, and am delighted that this is kicking off with a stakeholder conference in Ely.

7 Environment

7.1 An exceptionally wet winter left the ground saturated from mid-December onwards. Storms Babet through Henk compounded the problem, leaving many areas with flooding issues.

7.2 The Council continues to decarbonise its own buildings, winning grant funding for installation at a further nine council premises. Cambridgeshire was ranked fifth out of all county councils by Climate Action UK for our climate change work, including a gold star for decarbonising buildings and heating.

7.3 The council is in the process of installing solar car ports at Babraham

and St Ives Park & Rides. Energy from these will power EV chargers, including some specially designed for people with disabilities, as well as providing energy to commercial customers by private wire.

- 7.4** The application for an incinerator at Wisbech was granted by the Government minister, despite local opposition, but is now held up by another minister's review of licensing of incinerators nationally. Fenland District Council is seeking a judicial review of the decision.

The council's planning committee refused an application by Envar at Woodhurst for new incineration facilities. Envar have appealed, and an inquiry has concluded with a decision expected before summer.

- 7.5** Local Nature Recovery Strategies are now being prepared across the country. The Combined Authority is responsible for the one for Cambridgeshire, and has contracted this to the County Council together with Natural Cambridgeshire.

- 7.6** Cambridgeshire will join most other councils in introducing weekly food waste collections by 2026.

- 7.7** Swaffham Prior community heat project won the prestigious national Edie Net Zero Award for Renewable Energy Project of the Year and is currently in the running for an international award. By November, 65 homes in Swaffham Prior, including 23 Sanctuary properties, were fully connected to the new energy centre. I joined residents, council officers, contractors and others at an event to celebrate the anniversary of the first connections. Work is now under way

on the connection to the council's solar farm at North Angle in Soham.

- 7.8** The Government's decision on the application by Sunnica for a large solar farm between Burwell and Red Lodge has been delayed several times—most recently until early April. As Chair of the County Council's Environment & Green Investment Committee, I wrote to Michael Gove to draw to his attention the poor level engagement by the applicant with local communities.

- 7.9** The Council once again hosted a Solar Together programme in Cambridgeshire. Organised and run by independent company iChoosr, this has previously worked well. However, in this round there were problems with one of the suppliers operating in Huntingdonshire. Cambridgeshire and other councils have been working with iChoosr to seek to address the causes of this before deciding whether to run further rounds of the programme.

- 7.10** Cambridgeshire has been awarded £11.5M over two years to improve energy in homes which are not on mains gas, including offers being made to some residents in Little Downham. More information at actiononenergycambs.org/funding

- 7.11** The annual carbon footprint report showed the County Council's own carbon emissions at 46 per cent lower in 2022/23 compared to four years earlier. Sixty per cent of these emissions is from waste. Total greenhouse gas emissions for Cambridgeshire as a whole in 2021 were 6.8 million tonnes CO₂e, with transport being the highest emitting

sector. There has been a twenty-five per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in Cambridgeshire between 2005 and 2021. East Cambridgeshire produced the highest volume of greenhouse gas emissions per person in the county, mostly from land use and agriculture, unsurprising in an important food-growing area.

7.12 Fens 2100+ is a new programme launched in 2023 to enable the Fens to adapt to the challenges of climate change now and into the future. It is a partnership project between the Environment Agency, Association of Drainage Authorities, Internal Drainage Boards, National Farmers Union, and Anglian Northern and Great Ouse Regional Flood & Coastal Committees.

Its aim is to develop a Fens-wide flood resilience investment strategy, and develop a strategic case for continued investment in flood risk management across the Fens. The project will set out the investment choices needed so that Flood Risk Management Authorities can plan for the next twenty-five years and the Fens can flourish and adapt to climate change.

Over the next 100 years, an additional £4.5 billion will be needed to manage flood risk in the Fens—based on today's costs and not accounting for climate change. Under current flood risk management funding rules half of that investment would be funded, the rest is not. The Fens 2100+ programme has been developed to address that gap.

7.13 The Council's second Community Flood Group conference took place in September in St Ives, and was well

attended. The keynote speaker was flooding expert Mary Long-Dhonau.

The council has also updated its policy and protocol for enforcement under the Land Drainage Act 1991.

7.14 An estimated 10,000 public EV charge points will be needed across Cambridgeshire by 2030. With fewer than 500 currently installed, this is a huge challenge. A small-scale pilot project to trial on-street connections is due to begin shortly.

7.15 Gigabit-capable broadband coverage in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough has hit 85 per cent a year early, meaning we are above the national average and ahead of Government targets. Connecting Cambridgeshire attended the Timebank coffee morning in Sutton at the end of February to talk about the upcoming national Digital Switchover.

8 Highways & Transport

8.1 The condition of our roads and pavements is still a huge challenge, in Cambridgeshire as it is nationwide—a mixture of inadequate Government funding, decades of neglect, extreme weather, and in some cases poor standards of repair. The Council has received additional funding for pothole repairs which it has been using on new technology, and more crews on the ground.

8.2 156 roads in Cambridgeshire have been identified as failing because of their soil base, and the effects of more and heavier vehicles, historic neglect, and extreme weather. Many of these are in the Sutton division, and Little Downham and Pymoor in particular. A plan for short and

medium term actions has been agreed, but longer term the focus needs to be on lobbying for the substantial investment needed.

- 8.3** The Committee reviewed its policy on weed removal, following residents' and councillors' concerns, and will resume cyclical spraying except where residents agree to manage weeds manually.
- 8.4** Sutton Parish Council's application last year for an HGV weight limit through the village was refused. A repeat application has been submitted for this year's round.
- 8.5** Highways officers agreed to put in place the waiting restrictions requested by Witchford Parish Council at the junction of Field End and Common Road, and at the junctions of Field End with Granary End, Quinton Road, and Victoria Green, on which I was consulted.
- 8.6** Options for a safe crossing at the BP A10/A142 roundabout have been narrowed down to three—two bridge options, and one 'at grade' (on the road surface) crossing option. These are now being further evaluated before a final option is chosen—and not before time.
- 8.7** The new 20MPH zone across most of Ely, requested unanimously by City of Ely Council and paid for by Government from the Transforming Cities Fund, went live at the end of March 2024. Applications closed in March for a further round of 20MPH projects across Cambridgeshire.
- 8.8** The pedestrian crossing on The Brook in Sutton near the school was installed during the year, as was the

pedestrian refuge on The Brook near the junction with the High Street.

- 8.9** Council officers consulted me on the proposal for a raised table and build-out on Manor Road in Witchford, which they approved after I had asked them to ensure it would not restrict access to deliver mobile homes to Cathedral View.
- 8.10** Anti-social driving at Elean Business Park in Sutton remains a problem, but the data centre at the Business Park which was granted permission last year and might have helped deter this shows no sign of being built.
- 8.11** Our excellent local highways officer Phil Harty has now moved on to become Clerk of Sutton Parish Council. The vacant local highways officer post is one of several which have been advertised, with an appointment to be made soon.
- 8.12** The Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP) proposals for a 'Sustainable Travel Zone' with a congestion charge were abandoned as they clearly had insufficient public or political support. My view, expressed in my Annual Report to parishes a year ago, was that the proposals were inequitable and should not be implemented. I was one of six signatories to a letter in September which said that the GCP should stop the proposals.
- 8.13** Meanwhile however the Government is progressing its plans for what it is calling Cambridge 2040, a huge intensification of development in and around Cambridge run by yet another layer of local government—an unelected organisation called the Cambridge Delivery Group.

There are existing challenges to the carefully-thought out development proposals already put in place by the local councils in Greater Cambridge. The Environment Agency is objecting to some key developments on grounds of lack of water. The Government is proposing to get around this by introducing a system of 'water credits' and water offsetting. I remain very sceptical about this.

The Government's proposals for 150,000+ more houses in and around Cambridge will certainly need sustainable transport solutions if the city is not to become congested beyond capacity. Whether we will see the funding needed for rail, trams and light rail remains to be seen.

9 Combined Authority

9.1 Last year I reported on the attempt of the 'Fenpowder Plotters' to unseat the Mayor. A year later, influence on the Combined Authority has moved in the opposite direction, with changes in the leadership of Peterborough City Council removing one of the more divisive figures on the Combined Authority Board.

9.2 The Combined Authority has been implementing an improvement programme following the issuing of a Best Value Notice in January 2023. The Notice has been revised and recognises the significant progress made since then, but also that some elements need further work.

9.3 The Mayor increased his precept on the Council Tax, from £1 a month at Band D to £3 a month, specifically for new or improved bus services. In the Sutton division the proposals include an additional Ely Zipper from Ely to

Sutton and possibly Mepal; a new service between Ely and Longstanton Park & Ride via Witchford, Sutton, Earith and Willingham (something I have been lobbying for for a long time); and potentially a demand responsive transport service for Little Downham and wider communities.

However, no sooner had these proposals been agreed than Stagecoach announced huge cuts to the No9 service which runs from Littleport through Ely and Stretham to Cambridge. The Combined Authority tender for a service to replace as much of this as possible, and awarded a contract to A2B to fill many of the gaps, although there is a three-hour gap in service at the morning and evening peaks. All this shows the failure of the market-led bus system that has been in place since the mid-1980s, and the importance of reinstating local democratic control of routes, timetables and fares.

10 Finally

10.1 I have continued to hold regular surgeries in Sutton, and attend the Book Café in Little Downham once a month, and coffee mornings in Coveney, Sutton and Witchford where possible. 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

10.3 My thanks to the clerks and parish councillors of the seven parishes in the Sutton division whose hard work keeps our communities together.