

Cllr Lorna Dupré

MONTHLY REPORT FEBRUARY 2023

FULL COUNCIL

Group changes

Cllr Doug Dew (Hemingfords & Fenstanton) has left the Conservative Group on the County Council and joined the Liberal Democrat Group. The new composition of the Council is now

- Conservative 27
- Liberal Democrat 21
- Labour 9
- Independent 3
- Vacancy 1 (by-election 16 February)

Budget meeting 7 February

Tuesday 7 February is the date of the annual budget meeting. As reported last month, the Government announced its 'financial settlement' for councils just before Christmas, and proposed that Cambridgeshire County Council's 'core spending power' (the overall revenue funding available for council services) should increase by 9.5 per cent, less than the current rate of inflation.

Half of that 9.5 per cent is from the council's power to raise council tax—in other words, the Government expects local council tax payers to shoulder a lot of the extra costs.

The County Council proposes to set a balanced budget for 2023-24, in the face of a national funding settlement which takes no account of Cambridgeshire's population growth. The Government's decision to move its fair funding review back for a further two years leaves Cambridgeshire with a formula which takes no account of recent population growth, and in some cases bases funding on population figures which are more than twenty years old.

The proposed budget seeks to bridge a potential funding gap for the coming year of £21.4M, even after finding more than £10M of additional savings or income, in the face of levels of inflation not seen for forty years along with rising costs for energy and essential services.

The proposed budget also outlines how the Council plans to spend more than £15m in one-off funds from reserves next year including

- £1M to continue free school meal vouchers for eligible children
- £1M into highways schemes including rural roads drainage
- £1M investment into flood mitigation

- more than £1.3M into libraries
- £380,000 investment in community services.

The council's new 'triple bottom line' approach to the social and economic impacts of budget proposals has seen increased investment in biodiversity improvements, and in ensuring all new schools are built to net zero standards.

The budget proposal would see band D properties paying an additional £73 per year in council tax, although more than half (64 per cent) of the county lives in homes rated band C or below and would see rises of between £49 and £65 per year. In total this would raise £17.8M towards setting a legally balanced budget for 2023/4 and help to mitigate the additional costs of adult social care.

The Full Council will also be asked to approve the Council's five-year business plan, based on its Strategic Framework, which sets out a vision for a 'greener, fairer and more caring Cambridgeshire', and is based around its seven key ambitions. Over the next five years, the business plan looks to deliver

- £122M for new primary school places
- £164M for new secondary school places
- £13.3M investment into converting streetlights to LED, delivering both environmental and financial benefits
- £2.5M into a new highways materials recycling operation
- A £7.2M upgrade to the March and Milton household recycling centres

At the time of writing, the following council tax changes are being proposed.

Cambridgeshire County Council	+ 4.99 per cent (£1.72 per week Band D)
East Cambridgeshire District Council	No change
Fire Authority	+ £4.95 per annum at Band D
Police & Crime Commissioner	+ 5.8 per cent (£0.29 per week Band D)

The Combined Authority has agreed to introduce a Mayoral Precept of £12 per year at Band D to support local bus services.

STRATEGY & RESOURCES

Electricity contract

Concerns over the carbon credentials of its current provider of electricity have led Cambridgeshire County Council to defer a decision to sign up for a further four years while it looks into further options.

Since 2016 the Council has had a single contract in place for the supply of electricity with Total Energies, a French multinational oil and gas company from which it purchases a 'Pure Green' electricity tariff at a small extra cost. The

contract was negotiated via the Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation (ESPO), of which the County Council is a shareholder.

In recent discussions with ESPO, the opportunity has arisen to allow the council to offset the energy it purchases with energy it generates, such as from the North Angle solar farm which is due to become operational later this year. It is not yet known if this opportunity would be available via other purchasing organisations, and councillors agreed to defer making a final decision on the contract until March to explore this further.

ADULTS & HEALTH

Cold weather actions and tips

Each year the number of deaths expected from cold weather increases. Cold weather and freezing temperatures are threats to health, as they can lead to falls, respiratory infections, strokes, heart attacks and other health risks.

This winter a particularly high number of people are ill with a respiratory illness, and so Cambridgeshire County Council have put together some actions and tips for residents to help them prepare.

www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/news/locals-urged-to-be-aware-of-the-dangers-to-health-in-cold-weather

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Great Gidding school

A difficult meeting of the committee last month included a decision to start formal consultation on the potential closure of Great Gidding school in Huntingdonshire. Pupil numbers from within the catchment have declined significantly and there are concerns about the ongoing educational and financial viability of the school.

Outdoor centres

The council is also moving to close Stibbington outdoor centre, and use the money saved to improve the council's other centres at Grafham Water and Burwell House.

Holiday voucher scheme

The Christmas holiday voucher scheme closed at the end of January with around three per cent of vouchers unclaimed—significantly less than in previous rounds. The Council intends to run a voucher scheme for February half term and will be publishing information in early February. Each eligible child will be issued with a £15 voucher for the half term; criteria are published on the council's website.

- Information <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/schools-learning/help-with-school-learning-costs/free-school-meals>
- Queries winter.support@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

Foster caring

Cambridgeshire County Council is continuing to seek residents who would like to make a real difference to the lives of a child or young person by becoming a Foster Carer. Applicants must be over 21 years of age, have a spare bedroom, and be willing and able to provide a stable and loving environment in which a child or young person can thrive. Foster Carers can benefit from local training and development, generous pay and benefits, 24/7 support from a Supervising Social Worker, as well as local support groups and networking opportunities.

- Information www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/fostering-and-adoption
- Email fostering@cambridgeshire.gov.uk,
- Call 0800 052 0078
- Text FOSTERING to 60777

Strikes in schools

The National Education Union has announced four strike dates affecting Cambridgeshire.

- Wednesday 1 February (national)
- Wednesday 1 March (East of England)
- Wednesday 15 March (national)
- Thursday 16 March (national)

The County Council's education team has been providing advice and information to schools, and the Director of Education has met with the Trade Unions.

The most up to date and relevant information about strikes affecting particular schools will be on the schools' own websites. However a list will also be maintained at <https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/schools-learning/school-term-dates-closures/school-closures>

COMMUNITIES, SOCIAL MOBILITY & INCLUSION

Food bags for vulnerable families

Nearly 1,200 vulnerable families across Cambridgeshire were given special food bags as part of the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme this Christmas.

The 'Take and Make bags'—funded by the Department for Education—contained long-life food items worth up to £35 to allow families prepare nutritious meals

for the New Year. Bags were distributed to 1,178 families, and eligible children were also able to attend a holiday scheme which provided them with a nutritious meal and a variety of experiences such as sports, cooking and play opportunities. Requests for free school meals have increased by 24 per cent in the past sixteen months.

Free school meals information www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/children-and-families/schools-learning/help-with-school-learning-costs/free-school-meals

Cost of living www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/council/communities-localism/support-with-the-cost-of-living

National Lottery funding

Funding of up to £10,000 is available for events and activities through the National Lottery Awards for All programme. National Lottery Awards for All does not have a deadline, but can take up to twelve weeks from the point of submission to receiving funding, which means applications for the Coronation weekend should be made before the middle of February.

www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/under10k

ENVIRONMENT & GREEN INVESTMENT

Waste upholstered domestic seating

Last month I reported on changes by the Environment Agency to its enforcement of legislation on disposal of waste upholstered domestic seating. As a result of these last-minute changes, Cambridgeshire County Council had no option but to stop receiving unwanted sofas and other upholstered furniture from 1 January.

Fortunately this situation lasted only a week, and legally compliant storage arrangements have now been put in place while permanent disposal solutions are negotiated.

Moving towards Net Zero

The County Council's Environment & Green Investment Committee received a report last month on the council's progress towards Net Zero for its own operations, and for the whole of Cambridgeshire.

The focus of the council's activities in the next six months will be on:

- Decarbonisation measures in eight schools for heating, hot water, and energy efficiency.
- 30MW of solar electricity generating capacity coming online from the North Angle Solar Farm.

- 100 homes connected to the Swaffham Prior Community Heat Network receiving 99 per cent decarbonised heating and hot water.
- 1,500 Cambridgeshire homes installed with solar and battery solutions by the end of May 2023 to add to last year's figures.
- Starting to retrofit a further five Council buildings (to add to the 22 already complete or nearing completion) to decarbonise heating and hot water.
- 30 businesses receiving low carbon business support to start their Net Zero journey.
- Decarbonisation plans for the Council's high emitting carbon sectors.
- A roadmap for the roll-out of county-wide electric vehicle infrastructure in partnership with the Combined Authority and district partners.
- Starting an audit of trees and significant hedgerows this month on the Council's assets to inform the Corporate Tree and Woodland Strategy and wider Biodiversity Strategy.
- Launching a new People Strategy to help bring the right skills and resources to the organisation for climate change and biodiversity crises.
- Developing and sharing best practice and case studies as part of the implementation of the Council's Climate Communications Strategy.
- Agreeing Net Zero by Design principles for all projects and services.
- Net Zero procurement guidance for commissioners of Council services.
- A further thirty council officers receiving Carbon Literacy training.
- A new corporate outcome for the Council starting April 2023 focused on responding to the climate crisis and achieving carbon net zero.

HIGHWAYS & TRANSPORT

Street lighting and road repair recycling

The County Council plans to fit street lighting with energy-efficient LEDs. The council spends £3.3M a year on energy for street lights, and investment in a programme of LED replacement would pay back in under six years.

The Council is also proposing to recycle materials from road works, from asphalt and tar to gully water, with an estimated saving of around £250,000 a year.

Local Highway Improvement schemes

I have continued to pursue delivery of Little Downham Parish Council's 2021/22 application for solar studs along the B1411, and share the parish council's frustration at the delay.

I have been asked to support an application from Witchford Parish Council for two LHI applications for the coming year: improvement to the lighting at the Sutton Road junction with the A142, and footway improvements at Bedwell Hey Lane and the approach from Main Street to public footpath 3. I have also been asked to support an application from Sutton Parish Council for a weight limit on the main road through the village. I have supported all of these applications.

Traffic island at West Lodge Sutton

The bollards on this traffic island were damaged recently, and during the period in which repairs were being arranged, a lorry driver swerved round the island on the wrong side of the road and collided with a car and a telecommunications pole. This is not the first time something like this has happened, and I have been liaising with the parish council and the Local Highways Officer about options.

Witchford Main Street crossing

The new crossing will be installed near Rackham School over half term, starting on Monday 13 February. This will require the closure of Main Street between Common Road and Church View. Given the nature of the works, and the narrow carriageway, buses will not be allowed through whilst works are in progress. If buses follow the proposed diversion route, two bus stops will be affected.

Jolly Bankers footpath Sutton

Following the reopening of the footpaths after the Middle Level Barrier Bank works, the Environment Agency will install a pedestrian gate next to the vehicle gate where the old stiles were. Fencing and access will remain as it is for now and the new gate and repairs will take place with the first grass cuts in March.

Potholes

Cllrs Alex Beckett and Neil Shailer, chair and vice-chair of Highways and Transport at the County Council, have published a statement about potholes.

“In the winter a lot more road defects and potholes form, this is being seen across the country. This is due to wet and freezing weather causing those worn areas of road and pavement surfaces to break up.

“We know how important our roads are which is why we carry out regular inspections of our roads, bridges, cycleways and footpaths. Defects identified and reported to us are repaired as quickly as possible. We have increased the number of gangs dealing with both temporary and permanent fixes and we are using our two dragon patchers.

“Our dedicated highway inspectors are working hard to keep the roads safe, but we can't be everywhere at all times, which is why we encourage the public to report any potholes or highway faults using our online tool. It's easy to use and flags any faults which have not yet been marked. We would rather have multiple reports of the same fault, than none at all.

“After the cold spell at the end of last year, it can take time for damage in the road to go on and form into potholes. We'd urge drivers to be vigilant over the next few weeks and report any faults to us.”

<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/highwayfaults>

Meanwhile on the Combined Authority

The Combined Authority Board set its budget in January, including for the first time a Mayoral Precept of £12 a year at Band D (less for lower bands, and more for higher bands) to support bus services in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough. This will help stabilise vulnerable services and help pave the way for a more sustainable 'franchised' bus model.

This was opposed by Conservative council leaders, including the Leader of East Cambridgeshire, who proposed instead withdrawing ten Cambridgeshire bus services without consideration of the effect on social isolation, deprivation, access to facilities, or connections to the rest of the transport network—or even any information about the number of bus pass holders using the services. They also proposed to use reserves to keep other buses running for just one year. Fortunately both proposals were defeated.

The Combined Authority's Overview & Scrutiny Committee, which I chair, asked some searching questions about the Combined Authority's draft Bus Strategy. We were concerned to hear that any possibility of franchising, which enables the Authority to specify the services to be provided and set the routes, timetables and fares, would take two years just to reach Business Case stage, and probably five years or more to implement.

The Combined Authority has agreed new governance and committee arrangements. As the Government is not offering any more money for affordable housing, the Housing Committee has been wound down and replaced with an Environment & Sustainable Communities Committee.

MEET YOUR COUNCILLOR

- **Sutton:** Cllr Mark Inskip and I hold our surgery in the school Community Room on Monday 6 February and Monday 6 March, 6:30 to 7:30PM.
- **Witchford:** my next surgery will be on Monday 27 February, 6:30 to 7:30PM, in St Andrew's Hall in Main Street.
- **Little Downham:** I hope to be at the Book Café in the Village Hall on Friday 24 February from 10:00 to 11:00AM.

Meanwhile, I can be contacted

- By email at lorna@lornadupre.org.uk
- By Facebook Messenger
- By phone on 07930 337596

Cllr Lorna Dupré

County Councillor for the Sutton division