

Cllr Lorna Dupré

MONTHLY REPORT MARCH 2024

FULL COUNCIL

Budget

The council agreed its budget on Tuesday 13 February, prioritising funding to improve the condition of roads and footpaths, social care, and support for vulnerable communities.

This was a difficult budget process as many residents continue to feel the squeeze from cost of living pressures, but the council also faces significant cost increases. Those on the lowest incomes are also those who are often most reliant on services provided by the council.

The county council had to close a gap of £37.4M, with 75 per cent of the Council's net spending now being funded from Council Tax. Councillors have prioritised a number of key areas, based on residents' feedback from last summer's Quality of Life survey. The budget

- Sustains critical adults' & children's social care services.
- Includes record levels of highways funding to strengthen and improve the standard of roads and pavements, including tackling potholes, weeds and gulleys—in direct response to residents' concerns.
- Prioritises support for vulnerable communities, including continuing to providing holiday supermarket vouchers for those children most in need.

The council agreed a Council Tax rise of 4.99 per cent—2 per cent for Adult Social Services, and 2.99 per cent for general services—raising £17.5M of local income to help maintain and protect critical services for the most vulnerable communities. For the majority of residents in Band A-D properties that will mean an extra 99p to £1.48 a week.

A balanced council budget for the coming year is no mean feat after more than ten years of national underfunding, when so many county and unitary authorities are struggling. Some additional money from Government came in frustratingly late, well after most councils had set their budget. But this one-year funding does not address the longer term need for a Fair Funding Settlement in Cambridgeshire.

The council also expects the government's Household Support Fund to cease from the end of March. This is why the council's budget includes £3M to continue providing holiday supermarket vouchers for those most in need. Without this financial commitment from the council, this scheme would have had to stop when Government funding ended.

Councillor allowances

The council agreed to implement the council allowances scheme recommended by the independent panel set up for this purpose.

(More) changes to composition of the council

A by-election for the vacancy in Yaxley & Farcet will take place on Thursday 21 March. Meanwhile another change of party has taken place: Cllr Keith Prentice from St Neots has moved from the Conservatives to join the Independent group that is part of the council's Joint Administration.

STRATEGY RESOURCES & PERFORMANCE

Shire Hall back on the market

Bids are invited for the lease or purchase of part of the Shire Hall site in Cambridge, after the previous preferred bidder was unable to continue their interest.

Shire Hall had been the County Council's headquarters since the 1930s, but the site itself was the seat of government in Cambridge for over a thousand years. Previously the site of two medieval castles, the building was the county council's administrative centre from its completion in 1933 until 2022, when the council relocated to Alconbury as part of its planned savings programme.

The property comprises the original Shire Hall, the Octagon, the Old Police Station, Castle Lodge and public car parking. Offers will be considered by the council's Assets & Procurement Committee in June, when councillors will review not only the financial bid made but whether the offer delivers environmental and social benefits.

The council expects strong interest from commercial bidders, with the building's prime position in Cambridge making it highly suitable for different uses. Due to the historic importance of the site all proposals will require full planning and listed building consents to ensure protection of the assets on site.

The council has applied to give part of the lawn between the front of Shire Hall and the Mound the legal protection of 'Town Green' status, and has also invested in new interpretation boards and increased litter bins and maintenance to improve the visitor experience. These areas are not included in the disposal.

More information from Max Marston at BNP Paribas Real Estate (Max.marston@realestate.bnpparibas).

<https://propertylink.estatesgazette.com/property-details/6943307-shire-hall-site-castle-street-cb3>

ADULTS & HEALTH

Measles update

With cases of measles rising in some areas of the country, the council is asking everyone to check their MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccination status and get vaccinated if not up to date.

Measles is a highly infectious illness which can be very unpleasant and sometimes lead to serious complications. Two doses of the MMR vaccination give long-lasting protection against measles.

In the UK, the MMR vaccination is given as part of the routine childhood vaccination schedule. The vaccine is free, available from GPs, and anyone can catch up at any age on missed doses. An alternative MMR vaccination is available which does not contain pork products.

Walk-in vaccination clinics are taking place across Cambridgeshire. These are for anyone over the age of one year who is not up to date with their MMR vaccinations. More information at <https://www.cpics.org.uk/measles>

Individuals should check their vaccination status if possible before attending one of these clinics. Vaccination records are in a child's personal health record (red book). Adults can check if they have been vaccinated with their GP or vaccination records from childhood.

NHS dentistry under the spotlight

The county council's Adults & Health Committee will be scrutinising the provision of NHS dentistry in Cambridgeshire at its meeting on Thursday 7 March.

In recent years the availability of NHS dental care has shrivelled to almost zero, with many practices closing their doors to new NHS patients or ceasing to provide NHS dental care altogether. 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 17 per cent increase in tooth decay-related extractions in children.

East Cambridgeshire is one of the worst 'dental deserts' in the country.

In February NHS England published a joint NHS and Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) 'Dental Recovery Plan' to try to address the growing crisis. This includes

- a 'new patient' payment of between £15 and £50 (depending on treatment need) to treat around a million new patients who have not seen an NHS dentist in two years or more

- focus on prevention and good oral health in young children and an expanded dental workforce
- advice for parents and parents-to-be on taking care of baby gums and milk teeth
- one-off payments of up to £20,000 for dentists working in under-served areas for up to three years.

The minimum value of dental activity under the dental contract will increase from £23 to £28. This will affect only a small number of contracts across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and any additional funding will need to be covered from the current dental budget of the local NHS Integrated Care Board.

Mobile 'dental vans' will be launched in rural and coastal areas, with at least one of these vans coming to Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Cambridgeshire NHS has put in place a local Dental Improvement Plan, and identified the areas most in need as being Fenland, Littleport, Ely, and Peterborough.

Have your say on creating Healthy Places

Cambridgeshire's public health team is inviting residents to have their say on how new and existing communities can be healthy, supportive and inclusive.

Work is currently under way to develop the Healthy Places Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. To inform this, the team has launched a survey asking for views on access to healthcare services, inclusive and accessible green spaces, opportunities for active travel and healthy play and leisure, and the provision of affordable healthy food options.

The survey is at <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/WNC1CB/> and is open until Monday 15 April at 5:00PM. It will take around 10-15 minutes to fill in and may be completed on behalf of yourself or someone you care for. If you would prefer to complete a paper copy, you can pick one up from your local library.

If you have any questions about the survey or the Healthy Places Joint Strategic Needs Assessment for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, please email healthinallpolicies@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

More pupils get first choice of secondary school

A greater percentage of Cambridgeshire students will be going to their first choice secondary school this September.

A total of 87.9 per cent have been offered a place at their first choice school—up from 87.1 per cent last year. The proportion offered a place at their first, second or third preference school has also risen, from 95.4 per cent in 2023 to 95.8 per cent this year. The total number of places offered this year was fewer than last – 7,220 compared with 7,413.

Supermarket vouchers

More than 23,000 supermarket vouchers were distributed during the February half term to eligible families in Cambridgeshire.

Rackham School expansion

The county council is currently developing a scheme to expand Rackham primary school in Witchford to 420 places, and to increase the number of early years places. The site is quite complex in terms of current accommodation and this process is taking some time. The council is in the process of appointing Faithful & Gould, consultants it uses on such schemes, with the aim of completing the project for September 2026 .

Any Section 106 funding the county council has collected from developments in the Rackham catchment for early years and primary provision will be used for this scheme.

COMMUNITIES SOCIAL MOBILITY & INCLUSION (COSMIC)

Mobile library changes

Mobile library visits to a number of villages including Sutton and Witchford have been reduced from fortnightly to monthly for two months. The council's Head of Libraries says:

“Recently one of the mobile library drivers resigned from his role. While we seek to recruit a replacement, or redistribute hours to other drivers, we plan to adjust mobile library stops in nine locations. The majority of locations across the county receive one stop per month, however nine locations served by the Fenland Mobile currently receive fortnightly stops. These stops are receiving very low usage; therefore, we feel the resignation of the driver is a helpful time for us to consult with customers regarding the frequency of future visits in these locations. During this period of consultation and review, we plan to move to monthly visits in line with most other areas—please be reassured that no locations will lose their mobile library. We propose to engage with the relevant communities in February 2024.

Given the low use of the stops in these locations, I propose a temporary move to monthly during February and March with a review of the situation to inform any future recruitment.”

Free data SIM cards for low income households

A reminder that Cambridgeshire Libraries are part of Good Things Foundation's National Databank, O2 and Vodaphone scheme, which makes free data SIM cards or vouchers available to anyone aged 18+ from a low-income household. Recipients can self-declare as eligible, and the support is available for a maximum period of twelve months. The data can be used with any SIM-enabled device.

This offer is available at a range of libraries including Ely. Ask library staff for more details.

ENVIRONMENT & GREEN INVESTMENT

Weekly food waste collections

The Government is moving towards weekly food waste collections across the country, with financial support to district councils for changes to collection of the waste, but not to county councils for disposing of it.

Any councils not taking up the arrangements would be 'named in legislation' as being exempt from these collection arrangements, until such time as their existing waste contracts expired. In Cambridgeshire's case this is 2037, when the PFI contract at Waterbeach ends—a long time to wait.

After prolonged discussion between Cambridgeshire's county and district councils, they have been able to agree to move to weekly collections, and avoid being listed in the legislation.

Wisbech incinerator given the go-ahead

A proposal for a large incinerator in Wisbech was given permission by the Secretary of State last month. Medworth CHP Ltd applied for planning permission to create an energy from waste combined heat and power facility, capable of generating over 50 megawatts of electricity.

Due to the size of the proposed development, the planning inspectorate, rather than any local authority, examined Medworth's application. The planning inspector made their recommendation to the Secretary of State for the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, the Rt Hon Claire Coutinho MP, who has made the decision to approve the proposal.

Councillors from all parties at Cambridgeshire County Council were united in opposing this development. It was also opposed by Fenland District Council, Norfolk County Council, and the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk, as well as hundreds of local Wisbech residents. Fenland District Council has resolved to begin the process of considering whether it has any grounds for judicial review of the decision.

The scale of the development put forward by Medworth CHP and its effects on the surrounding area has raised serious concerns. In representations at the public inquiry earlier in the year, the county council highlighted the impact of the suggested development on the landscape, carbon emissions, and transport links in and around Wisbech.

But when it comes to nationally significant infrastructure projects like this one, the decision—and responsibility for the decision—lies with central government.

In a strange twist, the decision by the Minister was removed from the planning inspectorate's website the day after it was announced—but it was reinstated within a matter of days. A separate decision by the Environment Agency on permitting for the facility has not yet been made.

Envar incinerator 'called in' for Government to decide

The owners of the Envar waste facility at Woodhurst near Somersham are currently appealing against the decision of the county council to refuse their application for a clinical waste incinerator—and an appeal hearing is ongoing. However, the Government has now intervened and 'recovered' the application for the Secretary of State to determine. The Planning Inspector will therefore only make recommendations to the Secretary of State.

Community Flood Risk newsletter

The Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Flood and Water Partnership (CPFloW) which I chair has agreed to start publishing a Community Flood Risk newsletter to help support residents, businesses, and communities in relation to flooding. This will include input from organisations such as the Environment Agency, Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs) and water companies.

Reporting flooding

If you are in Cambridgeshire and have experienced flooding, please do report it, even if it is not internal flooding, and even if the immediate danger has passed. In the event of a flood, if there is a threat to life call 999. To report a non-life threatening flood emergency to the police, please call 101.

Outside of those events, the County Council's flood reporting page **<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/travel-roads-and-parking/roads-and-pathways/report-a-flood>** provides options to:

- Report a flooding problem on roads and pavements
- Report flooding in a property, home or garden
- Report flooding from water pipes or sewers
- Report flooding from surface water, groundwater or ordinary watercourses
- Report flooding from a main river or the sea

as well as information on how to prepare for flooding, and flood emergency contacts.

Crucifixion

The skeleton of a man who was crucified in Roman-era Cambridgeshire is on display as part of a blockbuster exhibition at the British Museum, after a loan of the remains was agreed by Cambridgeshire County Council. The British Museum's exhibition is called *Legion: Life in the Roman Army* and will run until 23 June 2024 in the Sainsbury Exhibitions Gallery.

Discovered as part of an excavation in Fenstanton, the body is only the second confirmed example of the Roman use of this barbaric punishment ever unearthed, and the first found in Europe. It was possible to prove death took place through crucifixion, as a nail was found lodged in the man's heel.

The find was the subject of a BBC4 documentary *The Cambridgeshire Crucifixion* which aired in January. It showed a facial reconstruction of the man as well as scientific analyses which indicated that he was likely to have been a lower status Briton who lived his whole life in Cambridgeshire.

Once the exhibition ends, the remains will be transferred back into the guardianship of Cambridgeshire County Council's Historic Environment Team.

HIGHWAYS & TRANSPORT

Gully clearing

The council's Joint Administration has reinstated the programme of regular, cyclical gully clearing that the previous Conservative administration ceased—a decision which had contributed to many local flooding problems. The programme has now reached our area, with cyclical gully clearance due to come to Coveney, Wardy Hill, Witcham, Mepal, Sutton, Haddenham, Aldreth, Wilburton, Stretham and Little Thetford this month. River Close Mepal is marked for attention following recent floods on the carriageway there.

A10 BP roundabout safe crossing

The county council's Highways & Transport Committee is being asked to agree to accept £550,000 from the Combined Authority to proceed with a feasibility study and develop a preferred option to make the crossing safe for pedestrians and cyclists.

20MPH in Ely ... and this year's funding round

Ely's 20MPH scheme is being installed this month, covering most of the city.

Applications are open until Friday 15 March at 5:00PM for funding for the 2024/25 round of 20MPH schemes. The process is open for new applications, as

well as providing existing long-listed applicants who were unsuccessful last year to review, update, and reapply if they wish.

Questions or comments should be directed to the Local Projects inbox at **Local.Projects@cambridgeshire.gov.uk**

<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/residents/travel-roads-and-parking/roads-and-pathways/improving-the-local-highway/20mph-funding>

Highways capital programme

A draft highways capital spending programme has been put to the council's Highways & Transport Committee for comment. It remains in draft only, and further work will be done to prioritise the use of the council's capital funding.

Busway works

Safety works are under way on the Guided Busway to allow the busway to return to full, two-way operation.

Since February 2022, a section of the Guided Busway in one direction has been closed between Cambridge Railway Station and the Cambridge Biomedical Campus. A temporary fence was installed whilst an independent safety review was in progress, and following ongoing communications with the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) and as part of continuous safety reviews on the busway.

Since then, the county council has been working with the bus operators and emergency services to risk-assess and design a fence to be installed next to the upstand along sections of the southern busway. It has been specifically designed with removable sections to allow for safe evacuation. This work is being carried out in sections to minimise disruption to passengers.

Contractors are working seven days a week and the busway and maintenance track are currently programmed to re-open on Saturday 30 March.

Rail upgrade plans for Ely remain unclear

The Minister of State for Rail has responded to a joint letter from across the private and public sectors which welcomes government's commitment to upgrading rail capacity at Ely and urges funding to be released as soon as possible so that its benefits can be realised for the country.

The letter, co-ordinated by the England's Economic Heartland sub-national transport body, lists six core reasons why prioritising this would benefit the UK.

In response, minister Huw Merriman MP said that the Department for Transport is currently engaging with the Treasury to understand when funding will be made available for progressing the scheme. Investment in Ely was highlighted by

government as it announced its target to grow rail freight by at least 75 per cent by 2050.

Meanwhile on the Combined Authority

No sooner had the Mayor announced the list of bus improvements which the £2 per month (at Band D) increase in his precept would bring, than Stagecoach announced it would be slashing the service offered by the No 9 bus which operates between Littleport, Ely, Stretham, Landbeach and Cambridge. The Combined Authority is considering next steps to ensure a usable service continues.

MEET YOUR COUNCILLORS

- **Sutton:** Cllr Mark Inskip and I will be in the school Community Room on Monday 4 March and Monday 8 April 6:30-7:30PM.
- **Witchford:** I hope to be at the coffee morning in St Andrew's Hall briefly on Wednesday 20 March at some point between 10:30 and 11:30AM.
- **Coveney:** I hope to be at the coffee morning in the village hall on Wednesday 13 March from 10:30 to 11:30AM.
- **Little Downham:** I hope to be at the Book Café in the Village Hall on Friday 15 March from 10:00 to 11:00AM.

I can also be contacted

- by email at lorna@lornadupre.org.uk
 - on Facebook
 - by phone on 07930 337596
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Cllr Lorna Dupré

County Councillor for the Sutton division