

Cllr Lorna Dupré

MONTHLY REPORT DECEMBER 2024

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FUNDING

On 28 November the Government published its *Local government finance policy statement 2025 to 2026*. This lays out the principles for the funding of principal local authorities for the financial year starting in April.

There will be no change to the council tax cap, which will remain at three per cent for core council tax, with a two per cent adult social care precept. The cap for the police precept will be £14, and £5 for fire and rescue authorities. There will be no cap for Combined Authorities, or for town and parish councils. There will be a number of changes to grant funding. And in 2026/27 the Government plans to 'radically simplify the local government funding landscape'.

Local government reorganisation

Proposals to review local government arrangements are coming over the horizon yet again. In particular, all-purpose unitary councils are likely to replace the two tiers of county and district councils; and we are likely to see more directly elected Mayors in parts of the country which currently do not have them. There will be endless debate and consultations, and it is not clear to me that local government will necessarily be better as a consequence.

Remote meetings consultation

I have submitted my own personal response to the Government's consultation on returning to remote meetings.

My personal view is that I would be very happy if the Government were to permit meetings online, as this is more efficient, and better for the environment too—and it also enables more people, including those with disabilities or caring commitments, to participate in local democracy.

However, I believe that hybrid meetings, with some councillors physically present and others online, are less successful because they disadvantage those who are not in the room. I am confident technology, and training for chairs, will eventually catch up with that, but they have not done so yet.

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Special educational needs and disabilities funding update

The County Council's Children & Young People Committee received an update last month on the 'safety valve' agreement it made with the Government in 2023. The agreement was made because of the escalating costs of providing for

children and young people with high levels of need to meet their special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The agreement included a contribution of £49M from the Government to help repay the council's SEND deficit, with a further £9M to be supplied from the council's reserves. A further £11.3M has been supplied in capital to support new SEND provision in mainstream schools. Two new special schools are to be established in March and Gamlingay delivered directly by the Department of Education.

The intention of the agreement is that children with SEND should be supported to remain in mainstream education wherever possible. However, demand continues to outstrip supply, with an increase of over 46 per cent in the number of requests for Education Health & Care Plans in the last five years. This means that the terms of the agreement have not been met and are being renegotiated. Many 'safety valve' councils elsewhere in the country are in the same situation.

COMMUNITIES, SOCIAL MOBILITY & INCLUSION

Post office provision in Little Downham

The Post Office has announced that it will be opening a new Post Office 'drop and collect' branch at Nisa in Main Street, starting on Friday 10 January at 1:00PM. The branch will offer Post Office services from a handheld device.

Operating hours will be Monday to Saturday 7:00AM to 9:00PM, and Sunday 8:00AM to 9:00PM. Services available will be prepaid parcel collect and return, bill payments, and mobile top-up services.

I have asked the Post Office whether this will have any effect on the outreach post office service currently in place in the village, and have been told that the Post Office currently has no plans to change this service.

Pension Credit

A reminder that anyone wishing to qualify for a 2024/25 Winter Fuel Payment must apply for Pension Credit by 21 December 2024.

Pension Credit information at www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/pension-credit

ENVIRONMENT & GREEN INVESTMENT

Booking system for Witchford recycling centre

A new, larger Household Recycling Centre at Milton has been given the go-ahead. The modern, split-level facility will be built on the site of the existing centre, and adjacent land, at Butt Lane, Milton, and will include a purpose-built re-use area and more parking for cars and bikes. It will cover a larger area than

the current facility, already the busiest in the county, and is designed for easier, more accessible recycling for residents.

Work is expected to start on the new facility in autumn 2025 and will take around nine months. This will include the demolition of the existing centre, so while work takes place the site will be temporarily closed and residents directed to their closest alternative sites at Thriplow, Witchford and Bluntisham.

To help manage demand and tonnages at those sites, the council will be introducing a temporary online booking system while Milton recycling centre is closed. This will help reduce queues and waiting times, and aim to ensure residents can visit the three sites at a time convenient to them.

Flood funding for Internal Drainage Boards

The government last month announced that £50M will be distributed to internal drainage boards (IDBs). The funding will help projects to improve, repair or replace IDB assets, including flood barriers, embankments, and maintenance of watercourses. The funding will support projects which reduce risks and impacts from flooding to farmers and rural communities across England.

The government has also committed to look at the funding formula for allocating money to proposed flood defences. A consultation will be launched in the new year which will include a review of the existing formula to ensure that the challenges facing businesses and rural and coastal communities are adequately taken into account when delivering flood protection.

I have been advised that the Littleport and Downham IDB has been awarded £744K for temporary pumps and generators in case of issues at its pumping stations.

Community Energy Action Plan

The county council has approved a new Community Energy Action Plan which defines how the council will support communities in developing solutions of local energy supply.

The eleven actions in the Plan are:

1. Facilitate the set-up of a Cambridgeshire community energy co-operative.
2. Provide match funding for feasibility studies.
3. Employ a council community energy development officer.
4. Offer guidance and advice to community energy groups.
5. Broker customer relationships between community energy groups, host sites and customers for community delivered rooftop solar.
6. Search for sites.
7. Promote uptake of domestic energy efficiency grants.

8. Raise awareness of innovative energy tariffs.
9. Support neighbourhood uptake of domestic renewables.
10. Promote domestic retrofit with private landlords.
11. Continue education and awareness raising.

Packaging fees

The Government has published an update on the introduction of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)—the ‘polluter pays’ scheme whereby those responsible for producing and circulating packaging must pay for the cost of its disposal over the course of its life.

EPR for packaging fees has been deferred for a year. No EPR packaging fees will be payable in 2024. However, businesses must report their packaging data for 2023, and will be required to pay any related fees in 2025 based on 2024 data. They must also continue to pay any fees due under previous regulations.

HIGHWAYS & TRANSPORT

Winter preparations

Preparations for winter are well under way with the county council’s fleet of 37 gritters and two quad bikes on stand-by to keep the county’s roads, paths and cycleways safe for residents in the colder months.

The team’s annual preparatory ‘dry runs’ are now complete. The council’s salt barns are fully stocked with 10,000 tonnes of rock salt ready for the start of the cold season, and grit bins across Cambridgeshire have been refilled. The council maintains over 108,000 drains across the county, and has been clearing and repairing these where necessary before winter sets in.

Crews will be on standby across the council’s four winter service depots at Huntingdon, March, Whittleford and Witchford, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, between now and April 2025. Around seventy community volunteers also go out to help grit paths and pavements to keep them safe for those on foot.

Link Lane bramble hedge Sutton

Following the cutting back of the bramble hedge along Sutton Footpath 2 at the back of Link Lane, a number of residents asked about the possibility of planning a new hedge along the footpath, and I took this up with the county council’s Rights of Way officer.

His response was that Cambridgeshire County Council has a duty to maintain the Surface of Public Rights of Way under Section 41 of the Highways Act 1980. As a reflection of this duty, the council would not give consent for the planting of any form of hedgerow in the surface of the Public Right of Way on the northern side of the ditch.

He suggested seeking permission from the landowner of the field to plant a hedge along the southern side of the ditch. This would then be the landowner's responsibility to maintain.

Red Lion Lane Sutton vegetation

Following communication from a resident about overgrown vegetation along the top of Red Lion Lane—a regular issue at this location—I have approached the Local Highways Officer who will attempt to contact the landowner and get the foliage cut back before spring.

Street lighting in St Andrew's Close

Following a complaint about a street light out in St Andrew's Close Sutton I have been seeking to clarify ownership of the light. It is of a different design from others in the estate, which suggests it might be a developer installation. I have asked the district council to review the records of planning permissions for St Andrew's Close to see whether these hold information about street lighting plans and requirements.

Witchford to Lancaster Way cycle path

The county council has agreed to allocate funding from the 2025/26 Delivering Transport Strategy Aims budget for design and investigation work for this project, and make a future budget allowance in case of overrun if the grant from the district council cannot be extended beyond May 2027.

I have contacted the district council to investigate the potential to extend the deadline for spending of the grant to the parish council for this scheme; or alternatively for the district council to pay the grant directly to the county council. At the time of writing I am awaiting a response.

Prioritising the Highways capital programme

The county council's Highways & Transport Committee on 3 December is asked to approve a new scoring system to set priorities for planned capital highways maintenance schemes.

The total proposed allocation for capital highway maintenance in 2025/26 is subject to the council's business plan being agreed in February, but is expected to total £40.576M. This excludes £5.5M set aside for specific work on the de-trunking of the A14 and reactive capital work throughout the year,

The aim of this new system is to provide a more transparent process for building the programme, based on weighted scoring of a range of factors relevant to each asset type (for example, carriageways, footways, bridges, signing and lining, rights of way, traffic signal replacement).

Meanwhile on the Combined Authority

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority is developing a Fen Roads Economic Impact Assessment for Peat Soil Affected Roads. This is something I have been asking the Combined Authority to get involved in, given how important our peat soil affected roads are to our area.

The Combined Authority has also received an update on the project 'to address existing and future challenges around capacity and road safety' on transport corridor between Ely and Cambridge. The Department for Transport asked the Combined Authority to put forward a preferred option that includes both junction improvements and dualling, and a lower cost alternative option. Further work is in progress or about to begin, and is expected to conclude by the end of January.

The Authority's Best Value Improvement programme is closing down, now that the 'best value notice' improved by the previous government has been lifted.

MEET YOUR COUNCILLORS

Cllr Mark Inskip and I will be in the Sutton school Community Room on Monday 2 December and Monday 6 January at 6:30-7:30PM.

I can also be contacted

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

Wishing all parish council members and residents of the Sutton division a very merry Christmas and a happy New Year.

Cllr Lorna Dupré

County Councillor for the Sutton division