

Cllrs Lorna Dupré and Mark Inskip

MONTHLY REPORT DECEMBER 2024

NEW LIB DEM & INDEPENDENT GROUP SETS COUNCIL BALANCE ON KNIFE EDGE

The formation of a new Liberal Democrat & Independent Group on East Cambridgeshire District Council has set the political balance on the 28-strong council on a knife edge.

The new Group has fourteen members—thirteen Liberal Democrats plus one independent (James Lay, Woodditton). So does the ruling Conservative Group, which is expected nonetheless to cling onto control of the council and its committees.

The formation of the new Group will now force the council to review the size of council committees and the number of members on them.

Cllr Lorna Dupré has been elected as the Group's Leader, and Cllr Christine Whelan has been elected as the Group's Deputy Leader.

The new Group has submitted a requisition to the Chair of the Council calling for an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Council to agree sizes and membership of committees. By law these must be proportional to the balance of the membership of the council as a whole.

The meeting will take place on Wednesday 11 December.

OPERATIONAL SERVICES

Waste and street cleaning services

The Council's Operational Services Committee noted at its meeting on 18 November that two large fly-tipping incidents had cost approximately £40,000 to remove, which was about three times the existing budget. Consideration was being given to how to address any future challenges.

Air quality

The Committee approved an updated Air Quality Strategy for 2024 to 2029. The Scientific Officer explained that the level of nitrogen dioxide had reduced since 2018 and this indicated that concentrations of fine particulate matter (PM2.5) had also reduced, although this was not measured specifically as the Council was not required to do so by the Government. He also reported that all emissions in the district were below the legal limits.

Members of the Committee suggested ways in which air quality could be improved:

- Promoting sustainable transport
- Sustainable development
- Including air quality measures in the new Local Plan
- Promoting ultra-low emission and zero emission vehicles
- Regular inspections of rented properties to measure internal air quality

Dog fouling

The Committee agreed an extension of the Public Space Protection Order for dog fouling, first introduced in the district in 2018. The fixed penalty charge has been increased to £100.

AUDIT

Disclaimed audit opinion

New Government legislation enacted in September requires all council audits up to and including the financial year 2022/23 to be concluded by 13 December 2024.

The external auditors had carried out the minimum amount of work required by the regulations to move to a disclaimed audit opinion. This meant that they were unable to obtain sufficient evidence to provide an audit opinion on the council's 2022/23 financial statements and could not provide any assurance for these accounts. It would take four financial years after a disclaimed audit opinion to recover to an unqualified audit opinion, as matters such as the opening and closing balances would have to be recalculated.

This appears to be a national issue, with auditors EY alone issuing over 200 disclaimed audits. According to the external auditor there was nothing the council could have done differently to avoid the disclaimed audit opinion.

LICENSING

The Licensing Committee has approved a review of the council's licensing fees, and reviewed its mobile homes licensing fees policy. Mark asked whether the council had undertaken an analysis of cost recovery when agreeing to mobile home fee increases in previous years, and was told it had not. He also asked whether the council ought to have undertaken an annual review every year, which had not happened since 2014.

The Licensing Manager reported on current and emerging issues in licensing, including changes to animal and primate licensing, and tobacco and vape sales.

FINANCE & ASSETS

Littleport Market Town Fund

We were somewhat shocked to see a report proposing to approve the allocation of £867,822 'Market Town Fund' from the Combined Authority towards a new community building in Littleport, consisting of only one and a half sides of A4, with no appendices or background documents. The proposal may very well be excellent, but spending of over three quarters of a million pounds deserves rather more evidence than that.

The proposal will also be going to the Combined Authority's Investment Board, so after some discussion and a counter-proposal from Lorna, the committee agreed to *recommend* to the Investment Board the *use* of the fund for this project—in the hope that the Combined Authority will do more due diligence than the district council.

Local council tax reduction scheme

Once again, like last year, we proposed that the maximum council tax discount for people on very low incomes should be 100 per cent rather than 91.5 per cent. And once again this proposal was refused by the ruling Conservative group.

Finance

The council is projected to underspend by £477,000 this year. Most of this is from increased interest income (£350,000) and neighbourhood planning grants (£150,000).

Whistleblowing

The council has approved a revised Whistleblowing Policy. Lorna and her colleagues proposed at a previous meeting that the council should engage the services of Protect, an independent charity, to review the draft policy and recommend improvements. The council agreed to do this, and the revised policy that has come back is much stronger as a result.

BUSINESS GRANTS

Capital grants of up to £50,000 are now available to existing local SMEs or micro businesses to create or safeguard jobs or bring new products to market. Businesses can also use it to invest in new technologies, processes or measures to improve productivity.

The funding has been made available to East Cambridgeshire District Council from the Rural England Prosperity Fund.

Applicant businesses should have in place a strong business plan that:

- demonstrates plans to grow the business
- how funding will be used to support this growth
- where applicable how funding will support job creation including apprenticeships
- how the funding will support the business to respond to market changes
- a clear delivery plan for the project that funding is supporting
- how the funding will be of benefit to the wider local economy, for example, the supply chain

Interested businesses can submit an Expression of Interest form from Monday 25 November until midnight on Friday 3 January 2025.

If approved, applicants will be invited to submit a Full Application by midnight on 14 February 2025. Successful applicants will be notified after 28 February 2025.

The minimum award available to any successful applicant is £10,000 and the maximum award is £50,000. Access to grant funding for those businesses who are approved will be up to a maximum of 50 per cent of the total project cost.

More information at <https://eastcambs.gov.uk/business/business-finance/business-grants-and-funding/capital-growth-fund>

PLANNING

Vistry Phase 2, Mepal Road

The Reserved Matters application for Phase 2 of the Vistry development at the top of Mepal Road is set for determination on Wednesday 4 December. We have written to the Planning Department as follows:

“Well-founded concerns about drainage from this development were expressed by residents during the consultation process for Phase 1. The consequences of that phase for properties in adjacent streets were predictable, and indeed predicted. One property in St Andrew's Close has been internally flooded twice, and a property in Tower Road has experienced repeated external flooding to the front and rear. In the second case, it took considerable community effort to prevent internal flooding via the front of the property, and the flooding to the rear would have overwhelmed the interior of the property without intervention from the homeowner. Investigations into the causes of the flooding to the rear of the property since the completion of Phase 1 have still not concluded.

The applicant proposes to rely on this same drainage system to manage water flows from Phase 2 of the development. The Middle Level Commissioners have noted that they have a capacity issue in the

downstream Catchwater drain to the east of Sutton, which eventually takes the runoff from the highway system in Mepal Road, and have commented on the potential impact of these proposals much more widely through the village.

We would want to see a conclusion of the investigations into the flooding caused by Phase 1 of the development before drainage arrangements for Phase 2 are signed off; and robust measures in place to alleviate further flood risk from this development. We would also request a condition on the developer that they carry out a detailed condition survey of the full length of the drain along Mepal Road and be held responsible for repairs to bring it up to standard should issues be identified, given the additional flow of water which would be introduced by the new drainage scheme in this phase of the development. Furthermore, we would want the Local Planning Authority to impose covenants on the properties in Phase 2 to prevent hard-paving or astroturfing of gardens which exacerbate high levels of surface water run-off."

COUNCIL MEETINGS

The following meetings are scheduled for January.

- Planning Committee. Wednesday 15 January
- Licensing Committee, Wednesday 22 January
- Operational Services, Monday 27 January
- Finance & Assets, Thursday 30 January

MEET YOUR COUNCILLORS

Our next surgeries will take place in the Community Room at Sutton School:

- Monday 6 January, 6:30-7:30PM
- Monday 3 February, 6:30-7:30PM

Between surgeries, residents can contact us by email, Facebook, or phone.

A very merry Christmas and a happy new year to all our parish councils and to the residents of Sutton, Mepal, Witcham, and Wentworth.

Cllr Lorna Dupré

Cllr Mark Inskip

District Councillors for the Sutton ward