

Cllr Lorna Dupré

MONTHLY REPORT MARCH 2025

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION

All principal local authorities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough need to respond to the Government no later than Friday 21 March to outline what they are considering for new, larger, unitary councils for our area.

The criteria continue to include an expectation that the new councils will cover populations of at least 500,000 unless there are special circumstances; and that existing district council boundaries will be the building blocks, again unless a strong argument can be made against this.

A further submission will need to be made to the Government in the autumn.

There will be advantages to moving to a unitary council system, not least more clarity and accountability over who is responsible for services such as street lights or waste. But it's clear that the Government is wanting a 'quick and dirty' solution, rather than taking the time—and consultation—to do it properly.

COUNCIL SHORTLISTED FOR FOUR NATIONAL AWARDS

Cambridgeshire County Council has been shortlisted as a finalist in four categories of the Local Government Chronicle Awards.

- Community involvement: two projects from the Fenland Youth Work Network supporting young people aged 11-18 who are at risk of serious violence, exploitation, and involvement in county lines.
- Health and social care: Cambridgeshire Shared Lives Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse Project, working with survivors of domestic abuse with learning disabilities and/or autism.
- Future places: innovative connectivity projects including a private 5G Open Radio Access Network (RAN), development of an augmented reality experience, and enhanced mobile coverage analysis.
- Innovation: Cambridgeshire's 'Dig Once' policy, integrating fibre ducting into new transport infrastructure projects, resulting in a large CO₂ reduction and significantly less disruption to road users.

The winners will be announced at a ceremony on 11 June.

ASSETS & PROCUREMENT

Old Shire Hall

The sale of (old) Shire Hall in Cambridge is on the agenda of the Assets & Procurement Committee for Friday 7 March.

The premises was put back on the market for disposal in February 2024, and attracted fifteen bids. Following evaluation this number was reduced to a shortlist of four.

An exclusivity period with Bidder A ended in October 2024 without a sale being completed. Subsequent discussions took place with the other bidders on the shortlist. An unconditional long leasehold bid from Bidder E has been recommended for acceptance, together with draft Heads of Terms.

Pending Committee approval, the Heads of Terms will be agreed, and an exclusivity period will be entered with Bidder E, with a view to exchange contracts within this three-month period.

County farms

I attended an absolutely packed annual meeting of county council farm tenants in Landbeach early last month. The county council's rural estates team introduced the event saying that the council is looking for innovation and a reduction in its carbon footprint.

Martin Lines from Nature Friendly Farming Network, who farms near St Neots, spoke about improving farms' bottom line, biodiversity, and carbon footprint, and illustrating the multiple benefits of a nature-friendly approach to how he farms.

We need to eat less meat, but better meat, he says. And climate change is the biggest challenge. "We need to change agricultural practices, including a shift towards regenerative system thinking."

Many farmers have been affected by hare coursing and are concerned how vulnerable rural communities are.

CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Witcham and Mepal children in free breakfast club pilot

Fourteen primary schools across Cambridgeshire are set to run a free breakfast club as part of the pilot for a new Government scheme in April. 750 schools across the country have been selected to take part in an 'early adopters' scheme which will test the delivery of the programme before it is implemented nationally.

The pilot is set to launch in April and will run until July, before it is introduced across the UK. The schools chosen for the pilot will offer a free breakfast to all pupils and at least 30 minutes of childcare before school. The fourteen Cambridgeshire schools selected are:

- Buckden CofE Primary School, St Neots
- Peckover Primary School, Wisbech
- Mepal and Witcham CofE Primary School, Ely
- Hartford Junior School, Huntingdon
- Hartford Infant and Pre School, Huntingdon
- Stapleford Community Primary School, Cambridge
- Upwood Primary Academy, Huntingdon
- St Laurence Catholic Primary School, Cambridge
- Great Wilbraham CofE Primary School, Great Wilbraham
- Meldreth Primary School, Royston
- The Spinney Primary School, Cambridge
- Kings Hedges Primary School, Chesterton
- Northborough Primary School, Peterborough
- St John Henry Newman Catholic VA Primary School, Peterborough

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said that the free breakfast clubs would help break the link "between background and success" for families.

The scheme has been welcomed by the headteachers' union, though they fear that the funding allocated by Government will fall short of the cost, and have said it is 'crucial' that concerns are addressed before the national rollout.

COMMUNITIES, SOCIAL MOBILITY & INCLUSION (COSMIC)

Security support for domestic abuse survivors

The council has renewed a scheme which helps survivors of domestic abuse to feel safer and more secure in their own homes.

The scheme provides additional security measures which can delay or prevent a perpetrator from entering a property. It supported 525 people across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough between April 2023 and March 2024.

Measures offered depend on the level of risk, and may include window alarms, additional bolts, lock changes, security advice, video doorbells, dummy cameras, and response lights. The service is available for all types of housing, whether owned, privately rented, or social housing.

The contract will be funded by a Safe Accommodation grant from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), enabling the council to carry out its statutory duty.

Benefits of play

The committee received a report last month on the benefits of play, which concluded: “five place-based teams within the Communities service will continue to provide support to community organisations, including town and parish councils, who have an ambition to create or update spaces for young people. This support extends to training in good practice in engaging young people throughout the process.”

ENVIRONMENT & GREEN INVESTMENT

Badger damage to barrier banks

Further to the issue with the Cradge Bank at Sutton Gault, I have followed up with the Environment Agency reports of badger damage to the banks at Pymoor. This is the response I received on 28 February.

“Thank you for your email of 12 February 2025 regarding the badgers on the South Level Barrier Bank (SLBB). I fully understand your concerns and can assure you that our Asset Performance (AP) and Field teams have been working on this issue for a number of years. Following on from your phone conversation with me earlier this week please see the details below of what work has and is due to be conducted to rectify this issue.

I can confirm that we are aware of the badger setts within the embankment, adjacent to the Coveney Habitat area. Over several years, we have been working to reduce the number of setts within the SLBB and the likelihood of further setts becoming established. We have prioritised the works so far using available finance, resource and advice from a specialist badger ecologist to exclude the badgers and repair the damaged areas where activities have had the greater impact on the embankment. Works to date have included the destruction of 58 setts, installation of 950m of above ground predator fencing, 150m of trench sheet piles driven below ground, 2094m of buried vertical mesh and 2194m Subterranean barrier to prevent the re-entry by badgers. All these works are Natural England licensable activities.

We have engaged a badger ecologist to undertake a survey and provide the scoping documents to allow a licence application for this year’s works. This survey will be undertaken within the next few weeks. Through early engagement we have confirmed this year we will be working to remove the main sett within the area, This will require the construction of an artificial badger sett at the landward toe of the SLBB, to allow us to destroy the existing setts.

Under licensing rules set by Natural England the displacement of the badgers from the embankment can only be undertaken between July and

November. We are planning to undertake the enabling works (construction of the artificial sett) with our contractors during July and August. Once we can demonstrate that the new sett is then being used, we will carry out the displacement from the existing setts within the embankment and install mesh barriers to prevent re-entry.

We will also be looking at an area near Oxloode pits. This is where damage has been caused to badger proof fencing (by unknown persons) which has allowed badgers to enter the badger proof area and dig a single hole into the embankment. This sett will likely be gated, destroyed and fence repaired with no further work required as there is already an established artificial sett associated with this social group of badgers.

Whilst any hole / sett is undesirable within a flood embankment, priority has been given to repair those sections deemed to have the greater impact on the integrity of the defence. Works are programmed, subject to funding and issuing of the required license to repair prioritised lengths again this year. The SLBB is a large embankment with active setts within its widest and strongest point at the base of the embankment. Surveys to date and ongoing monitoring have satisfied us, that there are no immediate concerns with the integrity of the embankment. It is our intention to fully badger proof this length of the SLBB using subterranean mesh within the next 2 years, subject to funding."

Drainage on Ely Road Little Downham

I attended the drop-in session at the new development site next to Old Fir Close at the end of February and am due to meet with representatives of Lindum, Accent, and the county council's Flood & Water and Highways teams in early March.

Hare coursing

I was very pleased indeed to see more arrests in connection with the dreadful and intimidating disorder across Fenland and East Cambridgeshire in January. The Chief Constable has acknowledged that the response at the time wasn't good enough. It's important that the guilty parties are found and brought to justice, and that a strong message is sent and received that this sort of behaviour will not be tolerated.

Sunnica update

There is no programme in place yet for delivery of the Sunnica solar farm. Sunnica have said it will take time to mobilise and prepare. The relevant local authorities believe it is unlikely they will receive any documents for discharge of requirements any time soon—this may not be until 2026. Sunnica needs to start within five years of consent being granted.

Responsibility for the majority of these next steps will be for East Cambridgeshire District Council and West Suffolk Council.

A Battery Fire Safety Management Plan will be required, and this will go to both County Councils to consult with the respective Fire and Rescue Services. Sunnica have yet to confirm the type of battery as new types with different materials are coming to market all the time; this is a key ask when Sunnica start to produce details for submission to discharge requirements. The Health and Safety Executive has stated it does not wish to be a consultee to the Battery Fire Safety Management Plan.

Augmented reality at the Corn Exchange

I took up a fascinating chance last month to take part in a new augmented reality trial at the Corn Exchange in Cambridge.

The project—Cambridgeshire Open RAN Ecosystem—shows how 5G and Open RAN technology can contribute to live entertainment and digital experiences.

When we arrived, we were equipped with a backpack, headset, and headphones. With these, we were able to see a transport exhibition, with a black cab, Delorean, bicycle, and Sinclair C5 appearing in front of us in succession. We could walk round them, climb into them (being very careful about sitting in the seats as *those seats aren't real!*) and use two big control buttons to summon the next vehicle along. The Delorean took off into the air in very spectacular style! We then saw three music performances on the Corn Exchange stage showing how it would be possible to use this technology to present concerts in future.

The difference between virtual reality and augmented reality, I was told, was that virtual reality cuts off your real external environment: you are completely immersed in the world in your headset. With augmented reality, however, we could see the room, the people we were with, and hear what was going on in real life, but with added computer-generated moving imagery.

The trial is one of nineteen across the country funded by government. It's led by Connecting Cambridgeshire and a consortium of technology experts, with support from Cambridge City Council, the Corn Exchange, and the University of Cambridge.

HIGHWAYS & TRANSPORT

Chain Causeway Sutton

After the initial rocky start things seemed to be progressing well, until late last week contractors began work on the obstinate piece of highway at the bottom of The America outside Squirrel Cottage. On 26 February I was informed:

"On 26/02/25 at approximately 15:30, we encountered what appears to be a historic void within the carriageway of The America. This large void is adjacent to the UKPN substation, near the layby at the entrance to the village. Over the years, we have routinely patched this section of carriageway as it has repeatedly failed in this localised spot.

We have contacted UKPN who are sending out a site safety engineer to review today. Whilst we wait for the engineer's review, and for UKPN to rectify their construction to allow our works to proceed safely - we will not be excavating or running heavy plant in proximity to the void. As I'm sure you can understand, this complication will cause delays and extension to our programme of works.

We are in the process of safely cordoning off this void to prevent residents, vehicles and plant from getting close - as this is a safety concern with a limited understanding of the extents. Our site team have also informed residents of the issue. We are currently working closely with the contractor to assess the impact on the programme and will provide an updated schedule as soon as possible.

Any necessary extensions to the programme will be communicated to ensure all stakeholders remain informed. Streetworks officers and inspectors are aware of the situation, and updates will be provided as the matter progresses."

Two days later, on 28 February, I was advised by the project manager:

"I was on site this morning with UKPN who have approved our contractor to vacuum excavate the void to expose the issue. This will happen on Monday next week [3 March]. Anglian Water have also attended site as they have a leak in close proximity, which looks to also be part of the problem.

Once we have excavated the void, we will be in a much better position to safely make an assessment.

I appreciate this isn't a definitive answer of a programme extension, but until we fully understand the issue - it would not be sensible to make recommendations.

I hope to have a more conclusive update early next week."

This is at least good news in that it should enable the county council to better understand why repeated repairs near Squirrel Cottage have failed, and Anglian Water to solve their water leak.

Meanwhile at Hillrow Causeway Haddenham

The road from Haddenham crossroads to Earith Bridge has taken a serious pummelling from the extra traffic using it while Chain Causeway is closed. I have asked whether officers will survey its condition once the route from Sutton to Earith is reopened.

Fen roads trial

A trial to investigate new and innovative ways to repair soil affected roads is being considered by the council.

£1.5M of external funding has been secured, and an extra £5M of capital funding has been assigned specifically to repair and reconstruct soil affected roads before the end of the next financial year. The £1.5M from Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority is for the development, design, and delivery of possible long-term solutions to address roads built over peat soils.

Some of the trial options could include using lightweight recycled products, an 'ultra-low' carbon material, or a technique that involves treating materials on site to improve their strength and durability. The exact processes will be decided on following further design and development work.

The plan is to trial this on the B1099 Upwell Road near March. This is because it is built over peat soils, forms part of Cambridgeshire's rural road network with both heavy vehicle and agricultural traffic making it comparable to a lot of other similar routes, and is due for renewal soon.

If approved, design work including on-site investigations and stakeholder engagement would start in May. The aim is for the trial to begin in summer next year.

Flood affected roads

Flooding at Mill Lane Little Paxton and other key flood affected roads is being discussed at the Highways & Transport Committee on Tuesday 4 March.

Mill Lane in Little Paxton forms an important link between St Neots, Little Paxton and the A1 trunk road in Huntingdonshire and has two bridges over the River Great Ouse. High rainfall in 2024 led to the road being closed due to flooding on four occasions. These closures were lengthened by the damage to the road surface caused by fast-moving floodwater. In October 2024, the road was repaired and strengthened at a cost of approximately £15,000.

St Neots Flood Action Group have already carried out considerable research into the historic drainage of the area surrounding Mill Lane. Officers from the Flood Risk team met them on site in January along with officers from the Environment Agency. The chair of the Flood Group has identified some small scale works that

could be completed to reduce the frequency and duration of flooding of Mill Lane and these are subject to further investigation.

Work to investigate and address flooding across Cambridgeshire more widely is already under way and St Neots is included within this project. The Environment Agency is also undertaking a *Great Ouse Strategic Intervention Study* to better understand the current and future flood risk from river and surface water sources across the Great Ouse Catchment.

A programme to upgrade electronic flood signage is also under way. The first place to receive this will be Little Paxton, and new signs are also planned for Earith, and for Welney Wash in conjunction with Norfolk County Council. These are all expected to be installed by June.

If agreed, £100,000 will be allocated towards short-term interventions to support flood risk and improved recovery times at Mill Lane Little Paxton, and £150,000 for a high-level options assessment for three key flood affected roads at Little Paxton, the A1123 at Earith, and the B1040 at Whittlesey.

Highways procurement

The current highways contract in place with Milestone Infrastructure is set to expire on 30 June 2027, with an option for up to five years extension dependent on performance. The contract has not delivered the efficiencies and service levels expected or required by the Council.

The current model of sub-contracting under the contract does not enable value for money to be easily demonstrated and there is a lack of contract options and investment in skills, processes and systems. CDM [Construction (Design & Management)] and health and safety compliance has been poor in the past but is improving. Response times and quality of work are continued concerns.

Based on an assessment of options for the future post-2027 council officers have recommended a mixed economy model which would include:

- In-house delivery for Asset Management, Design, Commercial Management, Client Management, routine maintenance works
- Contract(s) for reactive/cyclical works, emergencies, winter maintenance
- A Professional Services Contract
- Use of Frameworks to deliver planned maintenance and major schemes.

Highways spending

Capital maintenance and improvement works

On Tuesday 4 March the Highways & Transport Committee will consider proposals for spending on capital maintenance and improvements. This includes the additional £8.146M from Government for highways maintenance.

The total capital budget for highways maintenance and improvements in 25/26 is £59.332 million. This is funded through a combination of grant funding and council investment.

Specific items for the Sutton division in the coming year's programme include the following:

- Carriageway reconstruction: Hundred Foot Bank (Little Downham) from junction with footpath 3 to the county boundary
- Reconstruction: Straight Furlong (Pymoor) throughout
- Footway resurfacing and widening: Station Road Sutton from end of houses to industrial park

A full list of proposed capital maintenance and improvement works for Sutton division and the rest of Cambridgeshire can be found at

<https://cambridgeshire.cmis.uk.com/ccclive/MeetingsCalendar/tabid/70/c/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/397/Meeting/2350/Committee/62/SelectedTab/Documents/Default.aspx> (Item 7, Appendix A).

Active travel hierarchies

I reported some months ago that work was being undertaken to create a hierarchy for active travel routes across the county. This will be used to help prioritise maintenance and repairs of routes used by pedestrians and cyclists in future.

The updated hierarchies can be seen on the online map at

<https://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/active-travel-hierarchy-map> and maps for each district area are also available at

<https://cambridgeshire.cmis.uk.com/ccclive/MeetingsCalendar/tabid/70/c/ViewMeetingPublic/mid/397/Meeting/2350/Committee/62/SelectedTab/Documents/Default.aspx> (Item 10, Appendices 6 to 13).

Mepal to Sutton walking and cycling route

The council plans to carry out further development of options and preliminary design for pedestrian and cycle route improvements between Mepal and Sutton.

A1421 Witcham Toll to Haddenham crossroads

The County Council recently carried out a survey of all its A-roads, using the International Road Assessment Programme (iRAP). This assesses the potential risks associated with the highways infrastructure and its surroundings, and provides a star rating for each of four different road user types—pedestrians, cyclists, motorcyclists, and vehicle occupants.

Key points from the study are that:

1. The County's older rural A-road network presents the greatest risks to all road user types should collisions occur and is 1-star rated on significant lengths, including on the A10, A141, A142, A505, A605, A1096, A1101, A1123, A1198, A1304 and A1421.
2. Where the A-roads enter a restricted speed limit / zone then the star rating typically increases.
3. The star rating for cyclists on rural A-roads without a segregated cycle facility is generally 1-star. When such a facility is in place, a rating of 3, 4 or 5 stars is generally seen.
4. Where there is no pedestrian facility the iRAP study does not produce a star-rating as it assumes that a pedestrian should not be walking there. iRAP can only score facilities that are provided. It can therefore be assumed that a route without a footway / parallel path that did nonetheless accommodate pedestrian movements would have a *de facto* 'zero-star' rating. The iRAP assessment is helpful in highlighting routes that have no pedestrian provision, although to understand the actual risk of collision, the level of pedestrian usage would need to be understood.

Further information is available on the A1421 from Witcham Toll to Haddenham crossroads. When compared to similar A-roads on the County's highway network, the iRAP awards the A1421 broadly similar star ratings, although there are areas of 1-star rated road within some speed restricted lengths of other A-roads. The pattern of star-ratings on the A1421 in the rural (60mph) stretches is also consistent with those seen elsewhere on the rural A-road network.

The A1421 is currently rated as 1-star in iRAP for cyclists, vehicle occupants and motorcyclists between Haddenham and the A142, and is unrated for pedestrians due to the lack of any facility for them. However, no collision cluster sites have been identified for the A1421 or other routes in Haddenham.

The iRAP assessment suggests 'countermeasures' to improve the star rating of the A1421, with estimated costs and benefit-to-cost ratios. According to the assessment, the interventions with the greatest benefit-to-cost ratio would be raised profile edge lines ('rumble strips' along the edges of the road), and improved curve delineation. Other interventions are listed, with lower ratings. Council officers will use this data to inform the capital programme.

The report also noted the feasibility study by Sustrans commissioned by East Cambs District Council to link pedestrians and cyclists from Haddenham to the A142 and neighbouring villages. There is no funding available to provide this.

Mepal byway

The council has recently made a Definitive Map Modification Order to upgrade a public footpath to a restricted byway in Mepal. The byway is the one running north from the layby on Witcham Road to meet the footpath running east-west.

Public footpaths are open only to walkers. Restricted byways are open to walkers, horse-riders, and drivers and riders of non-mechanically propelled vehicles (such as horse-drawn carriages and pedal cycles).

The order is available to view on the public notice board at East Cambridgeshire District Council from 6 March 2025 to 17 April. The order will also be placed on deposit for the public to view on request during council opening hours.

Meanwhile on the Combined Authority

The Mayor has now signed into effect a decision to introduce franchising of bus services in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. This would put control of routes, fares and timetables into democratic hands, and enable profit-making routes to subsidise socially needed but less used ones. However, as he is not standing again in May, this will be for his successor to implement.

The Environment & Sustainable Communities Committee considered plans for the completion of the Local Nature Recovery Plan by the end of this calendar year.

MEET YOUR COUNCILLORS

Sutton surgery

Cllr Mark Inskip and I hold our monthly councillor surgery at Joy Bistro 65 High Street Sutton. Forthcoming dates are Monday 7 April and 12 May.

Or catch me on ...

- Wednesday 5 March, 10:00-10:45, Witchford St Andrews coffee morning
- Wednesday 19 March, 15:30-16:30, Little Downham Village Hall Book Café
- Wednesday 26 March, 10:30-11:00, Coveney Village Hall coffee morning
- Friday 28 March, 13:00-14:00, Scott Court Sutton Nellie's community café

The above may change at short notice subject to late changes to my diary.

I can also be contacted

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

Cllr Lorna Dupré

County Councillor for the Sutton division