

Cllr Lorna Dupré

MONTHLY REPORT JANUARY 2021

COVID-19

England entered its third national lockdown on Monday 4 January. The latest Government guidance on what this means in practice can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/national-lockdown-stay-at-home>

Schools

Confusion has abounded for schools and parents. On the morning of Sunday 3 January, the Prime Minister said on national television that it was 'absolutely' safe to reopen schools the following day. Many felt it was distinctly *not* safe in view of the escalating numbers of the sick and hospitalised. The National Education Union advised its members that they should not return to the classroom, and launched a petition.

On the afternoon of Sunday 3 January, Cambridgeshire County Council advised schools and parents that 'a blanket closure of schools is not the correct response', but that 'where schools are unable to operate safely due to a lack of staff, all maintained schools will be fully supported to make decisions over either partial closure or full closure of the school', and that the situation would be monitored bi-weekly.

On the evening of Monday 4 January, the Prime Minister said on national television that schools 'may act as vectors of transmission' and—having opened for just one day—would therefore close again from Tuesday 5 January for all except vulnerable pupils and children of key workers.

This has all been extremely frustrating for school staff putting huge amounts of effort into preparing to meet Government requirements that it is obvious to all will not be viable; very difficult for parents having to completely reorganise complex work and domestic arrangements at the drop of a hat; and confusing for children. A huge shout-out to all who have had to spend so much time and energy making things work, at school and at home.

Vaccines

The roll out of the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines has begun, though yet again the picture is confused, with the gap between the two doses having been extended from three weeks to twelve weeks, and some patients who had been booked for their second dose being cancelled and given revised dates three months further on. The reason for this change is to give more people their initial dose, as it has been judged that this will offer greater protection to the public as a whole as the virus moves faster through the population.

Different vaccination arrangements are in place across East Cambridgeshire, with practices based in Ely, Soham, Haddenham, Burwell, and Littleport well under way, while as part of the Fenland Group of practices Priors Field will not offer vaccinations until the week beginning 18 January.

Vaccination call-ups for Priors Field patients will be coordinated by the 'West Cambridgeshire Federation' of GPs, and at the time of writing are planned to be administered at Doddington Hospital. The local Patient Participation Group is working with the practice to assess the logistical challenges of this proposal. In the meantime, patients are asked not to contact the practice about COVID vaccinations as the surgery has been given very little information.

Patients are being advised to wait for their call-up, and to be alert for vaccine scams trying to con people out of personal data such as bank details. You will not be asked to pay for the vaccine, or to provide financial information.

Staff travel costs

The Council is proposing to save over half a million pounds in the coming year's budget in staff travel costs, due to the increase in home working during the pandemic—and possibly beyond. I asked whether this also meant that the Council might be reviewing its need for satellite premises for staff to work from under its new 'hub and spoke' model after it moves out of Shire Hall, and the Chief Finance Officer agreed that this would be sensible.

Note: the 'hub and spoke' model envisages the new Alconbury Weald HQ as a 'hub' with fewer staff working there than currently work at Shire Hall, and more staff working in various premises distributed around Cambridgeshire.

COVID help

In the meantime, help is at hand. Details of local COVID support groups are at <https://www.eastcamb.gov.uk/content/coronavirus-community-support>
Residents can also call

- Cambridgeshire Covid-19 Coordination Hub on 0345 045 5219
- East Cambridgeshire District Council hub on 01353 665555

People who are 'clinically extremely vulnerable' are required to fully shield as they did in the first lockdown—further guidance is due and local support groups are standing ready.

Flooding

The end of December saw domestic flooding in a number of places in Cambridgeshire—most notably in Huntingdonshire where a number of residents had to be evacuated from their homes. More locally, there were concerns for a number of residents in Sutton and Mepal, and the Environment Agency set up

pumps and generators towards Welches Dam to pump water from the Counter Drain into the Washes.

The waters reached record levels at Sutton Gault, where the barriers were closed at the causeway, and also at the Jolly Bankers. A strategic group met twice daily for several days to assess the severity of the incident, with a tactical group also meeting to cover the need for practical intervention.

A1123

A motion was passed by the ruling group on Cambridgeshire County Council at the December Full Council meeting, calling for the reclassification of the A1123 along its entire length to a B road.

This is problematic for a number of reasons, not least the loss of £250,000 a year in road maintenance funding from Government that is likely to result from it, and I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues abstained on it after our amendment to try to improve the motion was defeated. I spoke at the Council meeting to explain why, and this is what I said.

I'm wearing my Alice in Wonderland earrings today, as I usually do when I'm attending a council meeting at which something even more absurd than usual is about to be decided.

They're particularly apt today, because it's in Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* that the Queen of Hearts makes her famously preposterous demand. "Sentence first—verdict afterwards."

And that's where this motion is today, really. It puts forward an answer to a problem that it hasn't properly considered. It completely ignores the council's policy on such matters, and its requirement for evidence, facts, and reasoned argument. And jumps feet-first into an unproven conclusion, with no consideration of its effects on other roads and other communities.

Cllr Hunt has referred to the officers' briefing on this motion. Well, downgrading the A1123 will, on officers' calculations, cost the council some quarter of a million pounds a year in lost maintenance funding. But it is highly unlikely to reduce either the cost of maintaining the road or the amount of traffic on it.

To take just two examples, the B1381 through Sutton, and the B1050 through Willingham, both of which intersect the A1123, also experience unacceptable volumes of HCV traffic, despite their classification as B roads.

The amendment that has just been rejected would at least have taken a wider view of the issue. Because it is an issue. A significant issue. Not just

for Cllr Hunt and the residents he represents. But also for the residents of Sutton, Willingham, Godmanchester, Cottenham, and many other towns and villages who have been campaigning for years against this blight on their communities—a blight this council has ignored for far too long, and is likely to continue to ignore so long as it remains under the present administration.

We will wait to see the evidence to justify what is being proposed. The strategic role of the road. The general level of traffic and proportion of goods vehicles it carries. Wider traffic management and routing strategies in the vicinity. And the standard and classification of other nearby roads.

We will wait to see the technical evaluation, and to hear whether this proposal complies with Government guidance. We will await a full financial analysis. A study of the impact on other parts of the road network. And at that point we will be able to take a considered view on whether this quarter-million pound proposal can be justified (as it must be) to Government ministers.

Council officers will now spend time drawing up more information about what this proposal will entail, and will bring a report to the Highways & Transport Committee, where I hope a more evidence-based approach will be taken.

Lancaster Way roundabout

After the good news that a signalised crossing would be provided as part of the redesign of the Lancaster Way roundabout, and the even better news that the County Council's Highways Committee had agreed to consider a Pegasus crossing to the west of the roundabout, the disappointment that the Project Board has now received a feasibility study and decided to press ahead with a Toucan crossing to the east of the roundabout.

I am currently in discussions with the Ely Cycling Campaign, British Horse Society and others, to try to address the deficits in the feasibility study. As pointed out at the time, a Toucan crossing to the east of the roundabout will be less helpful for pedestrians and cyclists, and continue to leave liveried horses south-east of the roundabout stranded with no safe crossing of the busy A142.

Strategic Framework

The Council's General Purposes Committee received a 'Strategic Framework' document which purported to bring together the ruling Conservative administration's various strategies, in order to inform budget planning. I was astonished to see that the section on *Cambridgeshire: A well-connected, safe, clean, green environment* made no reference whatsoever to public transport. I am

told this will be rectified when the document is brought to Full Council in February alongside the budget proposals.

Youth Service funding

I was very pleased that with only a couple of minor amendments, my motion to the Full Council meeting just before Christmas on Youth Services was agreed unanimously. The motion committed the Council to engage with the Government to seek more funding for locally-determined year-round youth provision—something that is very much needed.

Farmgate

The investigation into 'Farmgate'—the award to the Deputy Leader of the Council of a County Council farm for use as a doggy day care centre, against stiff competition from other applicants, along with improvements to the accompanying residential property, while the councillor concerned was in a position of influence as the Council's 'member champion' for the Council's county farms estate—continues to drag on.

There is mounting concern that the outcome of the investigation will not be made public before the Council is required to go into 'purdah' for the local council election period, which would prevent it from publishing the findings until after the elections are over. The Council's Audit & Accounts Committee is keen to receive the findings in the interests of transparency and accountability.

This Land

I asked a number of written questions at the County Council's Full Council meeting about the Council's development company This Land.

Local authority property companies have been much in the news recently.

- In November Croydon Council's financial situation became untenable prompting the issuing of a Section 114 notice, the equivalent of bankruptcy, in part due to the non-payment of £36million by the Council's development company Brick by Brick owed in dividends and interest payments on a £250million loan.
- In December Merton Council closed down its development company Merantun after a review showed that costs had soared, predicted returns had plummeted, and the original business case was no longer viable.

My questions were as follows.

1. How much was CCC's original loan to This Land?
2. How much has been loaned subsequently?

3. How much of the principal was expected to be repaid between the initial loan and the present date?
4. How much of the principal has actually been repaid in that period?
5. How much interest was due between the initial loan and the present date?
6. How much interest has actually been received in that period?
7. Councillors were advised that the council would receive a 3.0-3.5 per cent margin on all loans to This Land. What margin is CCC actually receiving?
8. How many sites is This Land now disposing of on the open market?
9. Does the value of the land owned by This Land outweigh the Company's financial obligation to the council?

The answers to my questions can be seen at <https://tinyurl.com/2020-12-CCC-WQs> and I am currently following them up with further questions.

Public transport to Alconbury

At a meeting of the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority Board on Wednesday 25 September 2019, the Board was asked what assurances could be given to ensure that an interim public transport solution would be in place when Cambridgeshire County Council relocated to Alconbury. The minutes of the meeting recorded that 'The Mayor commented that Cllr Count had assured him that there would be a solution in place by 2021 which both the Combined Authority and Cambridgeshire County Council could support'.

I therefore asked a written question to December's Full Council meeting: "What public transport solution will be in place by 2021 to provide public access to Alconbury Weald and how has the County Council indicated its support for it?"

The response was that "The proposal would see Cambridgeshire County Council commissioning a public bus service (available to staff and members of the public) between Cambridge North Station, an additional pick up in Bar Hill, before completing the journey at Alconbury Weald. The service would be commissioned for a fixed period of one year to support the transitional period for staff. If this proves successful the Council could consider extending beyond this period."

Details of the 'public bus service' have now been made available on the Council's internal web site. It consists of

- 8:00AM pick up from Cambridge North Station
- An additional pick up from Tesco Bar Hill
- Drop off at Alconbury Weald
- For the return journey it would carry out this route in reverse with the pick up from the Alconbury Hub at 5:15PM

This will clearly be of very little use to part-time or flexi-time workers, or anyone wishing to attend meetings in person at Alconbury Weald. Indeed, it looks very

much like a tokenistic sop to those who pointed out, quite rightly, that the move to Alconbury Weald would force people off public transport and into their cars.

Black Bank

Shortly before Christmas I visited Black Bank near the junction with California in the company of the Chairman of Little Downham Parish Council to see the spot where an HGV toppled off the road where the edge had crumbled. Remedial works to the surface of the road were due to begin on 4 January, and the Local Highways Officer was also pursuing the option of getting the verges built up along the road to prevent further such incidents. I strongly support the need for this work to take place and am liaising with the Local Highways Officer.

Pymoor Lane

I have been asked about the potential for paving to be extended further along Pymoor Lane now that there has been further housing development along the road. This is something the Parish Council could consider as a Local Highways Initiative, though the cost of making footways is prohibitively high. The County Council's Highways department is now aware of the issue here, as is the District Council's Planning department, so the need to improve pedestrian provision can be borne in mind with any further planning approvals on Pymoor Lane.

Local roadworks

- The footpath between the Three Pickerels and 17 Bridge Road Mepal is set to be closed for some time between the beginning of February and the end of June while roof and ground floor extension works are carried out to the Three Pickerels.
 - Cambridgeshire Highways will begin carriageway patching and preparation works on Thursday 7 January in advance of surface treatment later in 2021. Works are expected to last two days, and whilst the work is in progress the road will be closed from 8:00AM to 4:00PM with vehicle access restricted. A signed diversion route will be in place.
 - Early March should see micro-asphalt resurfacing works in The Orchards, Westway Place, and Silver Street, all in Witcham, and Laurel Close in Mepal. Some of this work should have been undertaken last year but was put off by inauspicious weather.
 - The first half of the year will also see road maintenance works to Cross Lane Little Downham, and Elizabeth Court and The Orchards in Sutton.
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Reservoir extension at Sutton Gault

I have written to the County Council's waste and minerals planning officer about planning application CCC/20/052/FUL (Construction of an extension to irrigation

reservoirs at Blaby's Drove, Sutton Gault), to ask for responses to the following issues which have been raised with me.

1. Height of the sound bunds and a wish for their reinstatement.
2. A view that HGVs should start at 7:00AM rather than 6:00AM.
3. A suggestion that HGVs should not be permitted to carry gravel along the drove due to its condition and lack of maintenance.
4. A request for an assurance that water sports will not be permitted on the reservoir.
5. The overall timescale for works, and date for the promised landscaping.

Parliamentary boundary review

News just in that the Boundary Commission has begun a new review of all Parliamentary constituencies in England. The number of constituencies in England will increase from 533 to 543, with three more in the East of England. Initial proposals are expected in early summer, with a final report in July 2023.

Meanwhile on the Combined Authority

There is still no news about the release of the £45M (out of the £100M originally committed in 2017) being held back by Government for affordable housing, or the ongoing disagreement about whether the deadline for spending of the £100M is March 2022 or March 2021. The Combined Authority is looking to remove some schemes from its list, which then runs the risk of overturning the 60:40 split agreed by the Mayor and ministers between grants and revolving loans to be repaid to the Authority.

The Mayor's bus strategy is being updated, with plans for new provision in Peterborough, Fenland, and Huntingdonshire—but not East Cambridgeshire.

The Combined Authority now reports that Network Rail is predicting a December 2021 opening date for the reinstated Soham railway station.

Meet Your Councillor

Sutton ward district councillor Mark Inskip and I will be holding our virtual surgery via Zoom from 6:30 to 7:30PM on

- Tuesday 12 January 2021
- Tuesday 9 February 2021

Please contact Mark at mark@markinskip.org.uk to book your timeslot.

Cllr Lorna Dupré

County Councillor for the Sutton division