

Cllr Lorna Dupré

MONTHLY REPORT NOVEMBER 2023

STRATEGY RESOURCES & PERFORMANCE

Mind the [budget] gap

Cambridgeshire County Council's estimated budget gap for 2024/25 has increased from a predicted £16M to more than £23M—largely due to increases in demand for services and inflationary pressure. Without action being taken this gap will grow, and is predicted to be more than £20M in the following year, and a further £19M and more the year after that.

Cambridgeshire is not alone. The Local Government Association currently reports that councils across the country face an 'inflationary storm' with a predicted £4Bn funding gap over the next two years.

A report from the Council's Chief Executive Stephen Moir and Executive Director of Finance and Resources Michael Hudson says:

"In 2023-24, pressures on our budget have arisen principally due to several very high-cost children's social care placements and a delay in receiving income from a newly constructed solar farm (which requires connection to the electricity grid). In addition, we are seeing that demand for bed-based care for older people is also rising, following a period of reduction in demand and then stability stretching back for some time, to the beginning of the pandemic."

The report also points to wider national and international issues which have an impact on the council's pressures—such as interest rates which the Bank of England has said are likely to remain above five per cent until 2026. This will affect all goods and services the council buys, the cost of borrowing, and pay award costs for council workers as well as for a large externally commissioned workforce which includes staff working in residential care for vulnerable adults and children.

The report highlights how all services in the council have been the subject of a comprehensive exercise to find efficiencies, alongside a number of specific reviews into particularly high cost areas such as home to school transport, children's social care placements, and high levels of historic adult social care debt.

Proposals to set the Council's 2024/5 budget will be discussed by councillors in December before a period of scrutiny during January, including an opportunity for residents to comment on the plans.

Quality of life survey shows mixed picture

Most Cambridgeshire residents feel happy and safe in the county, well connected to their local communities, and believe it's a great place to raise children.

That's the headline finding of the County Council's first annual Quality of Life survey involving more than 5,500 residents. But the news is less good for some specific groups, with a stark finding that loneliness in Cambridgeshire is far higher than the national average. Loneliness was most likely to be reported by those aged 18 to 25, who also reported more struggles with their mental health.

The County Council commissioned the report from national independent market research agency Thinks Insight and Strategy, and plans to use the results to help councillors set business plan and budget priorities for the coming five years. The survey will also be used to inform the Public Health Joint Needs Assessment, a mandatory document which local organisations use to identify the health and wellbeing needs of a local population.

The survey found the council itself plays a relatively trusted role in residents' lives, with just over half of residents trusting it to make decisions. Residents' views about whether the council acts on their concerns and delivers value for money were in line with Local Government Association averages for England. Satisfaction with council services was mixed—highest across library, waste management, street lighting, and registration services, and lowest in road and pavement maintenance.

Residents reported high concerns about the cost of living and many said they were changing their behaviour because of it. 48 per cent have cut back on heating use, 27 per cent have cut back on nutritious food, eight per cent have used a foodbank and nine per cent have stopped using prescription medicines. The council intends to run the survey again next year.

84% feel safe in their local community

72% report high or very high levels of happiness

52% of 18-24s feel lonely—compared to only 18% of those aged 55+

37% have struggled with mental health (61% of 18-24s, 59% of 25-34s)

52% trust the council to make decisions about services

44% think the council delivers value for money (national benchmark 42%)

86% are concerned about cost of living increases

48% have cut back on heating use

FLOODING

Storm Babet

Storm Babet hit Cambridgeshire on Friday 20 October, leaving some households with external or even internal flooding to their homes, or without flushing toilets, as well as seeing a number of roads closed. County Council highways officers have been working through the various incidents logged, and the Flood & Water team is pulling together an overall picture of events.

If you were affected by flooding, and have not yet reported it to the County Council, please do so, as it is really important to build up a full picture of what happened.

- You can report flood issues affecting your home or property at **cambridgeshire-self.achieveservice.com/service/Flood_reporting** (This is *not* the place to report flooding in an emergency.)
- You can report highways-related flooding (blocked road drains, sewers, gullies, for example) at **highwaysreporting.cambridgeshire.gov.uk**

FULL COUNCIL

Going through the motions

Five motions for debate as usual generated more heat than light at the Full Council meeting on 17 October.

1. A motion instructing the County Council's Chief Executive to convene a meeting to discuss how to move forward after the collapse of proposals for road charging in Cambridge was voted down as being devoid of solutions to the county's transport problems.
 2. Another motion promoted the divisive notion of a 'war on motorists' to argue that planners should return to the old ways of 'predict and provide' to allow for more and more cars, rather than the 'monitor and manage' approach of seeking to avoid developments leading to congested roads and lack of public transport options. This was also defeated.
 3. A third motion called for the publication of the council's action plan for addressing the (eye-wateringly expensive) problem of the many 'soil-affected' roads in the county. An amendment to improve the motion was accepted by the mover, and it was agreed unanimously.
 4. A fourth motion was again altered to accommodate an amendment, and was also agreed unanimously. This asks officers to bring forward a report on what can be done to stop lorries rat-running along the A1421 from Haddenham crossroads to Witcham Toll.
 5. Finally, a motion on plans to review the council's policy on weed control was amended and then approved. The review was already scheduled for January 2024.
-

ADULTS & HEALTH

Be Winter Wise

The County Council has launched its *Be Winter Wise* campaign to help residents with information and advice throughout the winter. Its aim is to draw together a range of services, activities and offers, keeping communities across Cambridgeshire informed and prepared to stay safe and healthy during the winter months of 2023/24—and to signpost to services offered by partners.

The campaign links together everything from winter gritting and road safety activities to falls prevention, flu vaccination support, and the Household Support Fund which helps people with urgent expenses, or by issuing vouchers to every child eligible for free school meals in the half term and Christmas holidays, under a single *Be Winter Wise* banner.

Activities include

- Work being carried out on the county's road network, including gritting, gully and drain clearance, and getting ahead of expected impacts of bad weather.
- Road safety activities and advice, such as encouraging pedestrians, cyclists and motorists to wear reflective clothing, check lights and brakes, and always travel according to road conditions.
- Information to help residents stay warm and well through the colder months, with an emphasis on activities to reduce loneliness and support mental as well as physical health.
- Further work to promote the council's Household Support Fund, open to eligible residents who are most affected by the cost of living crisis.
- Supporting NHS colleagues by promoting flu, COVID and MMR jabs to eligible groups.

For more information, search on social media for #BeWinterWise

Care quality initiative

A new initiative to improve the quality of care and support for Cambridgeshire residents has been approved by the council's Adults and Health Committee and is to be launched by the County Council.

The new initiative for the adult social care workforce, supported by investment of over £1M, seeks to address problems of recruitment and retention in the sector, support skills development, and drive up quality of services.

The County Council already requires care providers with whom it contracts to pay the Real Living Wage. The Council will now also seek to embed the new approach to build skills in the workforce into future contracts with care providers. A high quality Care Certificate will be offered by the Council at low cost to care providers and to care workers themselves.



CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE

Supermarket vouchers continue

The supermarket voucher scheme will continue to operate in the October half term for all eligible families in Cambridgeshire.

Cambridgeshire County Council will run the scheme until the February 2024 half term using the Household Support Fund from the Department for Work & Pensions and additional funding provided by the Council. Eligible families were automatically sent a £15 voucher via email or text on Saturday 21 October. The voucher can be used at a choice of ten supermarkets.

The voucher scheme has been a huge success since it was introduced and appreciated keenly by families struggling in the current financial climate. A survey revealed that over seventy per cent of families said the vouchers had helped them cope with the rising cost of living.

Appeal volunteers needed

Volunteers are urgently needed to hear appeals when children are not offered a place at their preferred school.

All parents or carers have the right to make an appeal to an independent appeal panel if their child is not offered a place at their preferred school. The role of the panel is to decide whether a child who has been refused a place by the County Council should be given a place.

All parties involved must be given an appeal hearing that is transparent, accessible, independent and impartial. The appeal panel is independent of the local authority and its decisions are binding on all parties, unless overturned by the courts.

Volunteers will sit on the independent admission appeal panels and ensure that parents feel they have had a fair and independent hearing and have been given every opportunity to put their case and have been taken seriously.

Panel members must be able to listen to two sides of a case and weigh up evidence objectively and impartially. They must also be able to:

- Communicate effectively with a wide range of people
- Read and assess information and identify key points
- Listen to key information
- Ask questions to obtain information and clarify points being made
- Analyse information and use it to form opinions and conclusions
- Obtain and weigh up evidence to reach a decision
- Work as part of a team, take advice and develop their own skills

All volunteer Panel Members receive initial and annual refresher training and will be fully supported by the Appeals Service. The time commitment depends on

how much time volunteers are willing to give. While appeals are held throughout the year, the peak months are between April and July. The appeals are arranged either for half a day or a full day. Hearings are currently held online using Microsoft Teams.

Anyone interested in applying or who would like an informal chat about the role should contact clare.cronk@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

COMMUNITIES SOCIAL MOBILITY & INCLUSION (COSMIC)

Cambridgeshire Priorities Capital Fund

Cambridgeshire Priorities Capital Fund is a £1M fund to help upgrade and improve community buildings and assets to better meet the needs of the families, households and communities who use them.

Many expressions of interest were received by the September deadline. More than 85 per cent of them met the eligibility criteria and those applicants have been invited to submit a full proposal. This next stage will be competitive, with only one in four applications likely to be successful.

All applicants who have made it through to this second stage have been invited to attend one of three virtual briefing sessions:

- Monday 30 October 4:00-5:00PM
- Tuesday 31 October 6:30-7:30PM
- Wednesday 1 November 12:00-1:00PM

East Cambridgeshire applications which have made it to this stage have come from Burwell, Brinkley, Coveney, Ely, Haddenham, Kirtling, Little Downham, Little Thetford, Littleport, Mepal, Soham, Stetchworth, Stuntney, Sutton and Witchford.

ENVIRONMENT & GREEN INVESTMENT

Swaffham Prior Community Heat Network

I joined residents, contractors, council officers and others at the village hall in Swaffham Prior recently to celebrate the anniversary of the first connections to the new renewable energy centre.

100 external connections are now completed, and by November 65 properties will be fully connected to the heat network. Connections will recommence in Spring. The council is keen to complete these in batches to ensure works are carried out effectively and efficiently and disruption is minimised. Further testing of the heat network will take place over the winter to optimise the system.

I recently passed on landscape and lighting concerns to the County Council officer team who have been swift to respond to these.

Climate scorecard

Campaigning organisation Climate Emergency UK once again published a 'scorecard' for each council to measure how it was responding to climate change. As the methodology changes every year it is not possible to compare present against past scores.

Cambridgeshire was ranked fifth out of all county councils on this year's scorecard, with a gold star for our work on decarbonising buildings and heating. We scored lower than average on biodiversity, and on waste reduction and food. This is unsurprising, given that Cambridgeshire is the most biodiversity-deprived county in the country, and that the Waterbeach waste facility is out of action while the council and its contractor Thalia seek to resolve compliance issues.

<https://councilclimatescorecards.uk/scoring/county/>

HIGHWAYS & TRANSPORT

Getting Cambridgeshire's roads winter ready

Cambridgeshire's gritting crew spent several nights in mid-October carrying out a trial run ahead of winter. Gritters including Buzz Ice Year and David Grittenborough were on the roads, along with quad bikes on cycle routes in Cambridge.

The salt domes and barns have already been filled with 10,000 tonnes of rock salt ready for the start of the cold season.

Last year gritting crews went out 51 times, many of them working throughout the night and early hours. Anyone interested in volunteering to help the council grit Cambridgeshire during the winter months is invited to visit the council's website to find out how they and the local community can get involved.

www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/help-with-gritting/

20MPH schemes—the next round

The council plans to reopen the window for new applications for 20MPH funding from Monday 15 January 2024, and close it on Friday 15 March 2024 at 5:00PM. There was intense interest from parish councils in this opportunity, showing how much popular support there is for road safety and speed reduction initiatives.

In the meantime, the council plans to review and update its 20MPH website pages to provide additional information and assistance to applicants.

HS2: will there be winners?

The sudden announcement by the Government in October of the scrapping of HS2 to Manchester was followed by a list of transport schemes across the country that would receive a share of the funding instead. This list was then

withdrawn from the Government website, with the explanation that these projects were simply 'illustrations'.

In East Cambridgeshire these illustrations included Ely railway junction and the A10 between Ely and the A14. However it is not clear how much money there will be to reinvest in genuinely new transport projects.

Cllr Lorna Dupré

County Councillor for the Sutton division