

Cllrs Lorna Dupré and Mark Inskip

MONTHLY REPORT AUGUST 2020

Mepal Outdoor Centre

The major revelation of the end of July was the district council's intention to abandon plans to re-open Mepal Outdoor Centre and to instead build a crematorium on the site.

The news was broken by the local press, three days before the closed-door meeting at which the council leadership's long-hatched plan was to be voted through. Thanks to Mark's investigations, it has subsequently emerged that senior councillors and officers at East Cambridgeshire District Council had secretly started their crematorium project eighteen months earlier, with a payment (the first of five) to a consultant in January 2019.

We opposed their decision to hold the debate on 31 July behind closed doors, and opposed their decision to press ahead with this misguided venture. Mark has explained in his blog why the location is wrong—further away than other existing provision for most of East Cambridgeshire, and competing with the current facility at March and the new one being built at Huntingdon.

Lorna has written a letter to all parish council clerks in the district laying out the background to the council's decision and explaining why it is the wrong choice for our area, and we have launched a petition at eald.org.uk/moc

We have also been working closely with local residents who want to see the site restored to leisure use.

More information and background on our blogs at

- <https://markinskip.mycouncillor.org.uk/2020/08/02/secret-plans-for-crematorium-at-mepal-outdoor-centre>
 - <https://lornadupre.mycouncillor.org.uk/2020/07/31/mepal-outdoor-centre-to-become-a-crematorium>
 - <https://lornadupre.mycouncillor.org.uk/2020/08/02/mepal-outdoor-centre-the-inside-track>
 - <https://lornadupre.mycouncillor.org.uk/2020/08/12/mepal-outdoor-centre-a-short-history>
 - <https://markinskip.mycouncillor.org.uk/2020/08/04/in-the-words-of-kirsty-and-phil>
 - <https://markinskip.mycouncillor.org.uk/2020/08/16/secret-crematorium-plan-18-months-in-the-making-over-50000-paid-out>
-

Elean Business Park car meets

We have spent some time working with council officers and the police in recent weeks to address the car meets at Elean Business Park which have caused so much nuisance and upset to residents for so long.

The police placed a dispersal order on the site for the weekend of 14-16 August, and have acquired and been trained in new noise equipment that can be deployed as needed. Lorna was on BBC Radio Cambridgeshire on the day the dispersal order started, to explain the history of the problems at the site and to support this latest step.

We have also submitted an impact statement to Cambridgeshire Constabulary who are building the case for a county-wide car meets injunction.

Strategic planning

Last month we reported that council officers had successfully challenged a planning appeal decision in Fordham on the grounds that the Inspector miscalculated the council's supply of housing land as being only 2.1 years.

However, in a separate decision at Witchford, a second Inspector has reiterated the 2.1 year figure in reaching his conclusion to allow an appeal against refusal of permission to build on the locally iconic 'horse field' site there. The district council has decided to appeal this judgement too. This is significant because if the council does not have a three-year supply the protection of older neighbourhood plans is reduced.

But the rules are changing ...

The publication of the Government's Planning White Paper early this month is likely to be the biggest shake up of planning policy in this country since the Town and Country Planning Act 1947 which introduced the requirement for planning permission.

The proposals in the White Paper include

1. Simplifying and shortening Local Plans with a focus on classifying land into one of three categories—growth, renewal, or protected.
2. Increased digitisation.
3. Focus on design and sustainability, though with speeded-up processes for assessing environmental impact.
4. Changes to CIL and S106 contributions, bringing them together into a nationally-set, flat rate charge.
5. Nationally determined, binding housing requirements.
6. Shorter and more standardised planning applications.
7. Digitised, map-based, standardised Local Plans to a set template.

8. A shorter, statutory timetable for developing Local Plans.
9. Retaining Neighbourhood Plans with a similar focus to the Local Plans.
10. Faster build out of developments.
11. 'More binding' local design guidance codes.
12. A new national body to support delivery of design codes, with a local Chief Officer for design and place-making.
13. Homes England to give greater emphasis to design.
14. Fast-tracking applications that comply with local design guides, and more approvals through permitted development.
15. Amending the National Planning Policy Framework.
16. Speeding up environmental impact assessments.
17. Reviewing the planning framework for listed buildings and conservation areas.
18. Responding to the Future Homes Standard consultation.
19. Charging CIL as a fixed proportion of development value above a threshold, nationally set, and abolishing S106 planning obligations.
20. Extending the infrastructure levy to change of use through permitted development rights.
21. Ability to use the infrastructure levy on affordable housing.
22. Considering whether to give more flexibility in spending the infrastructure levy (while retaining the 15/25 per cent neighbourhood share).
23. Time limited funding for councils towards implementing the changes.
24. Reviewing enforcement powers.

The assumption in the White Paper is that local authorities are a road-block to development, and that fast-tracking processes will result in more developments being built more quickly. The local government sector has been quick to point out in response that more than a million homes granted planning permission in the past decade have not yet been built.

The consultation on the White Paper closes on Thursday 29 October

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-for-the-future>

Full Council

The regular Full Council meeting in July moved to avoid debate on two motions from our group—one on the Local Electricity Bill, and one on Black Lives Matter—by referring them to council committees. The Black Lives Matter motion was discussed by the Finance & Assets Committee, which significantly changed it, not least by deleting the words 'black lives matter'. Any discussion on the Local Electricity Bill has been delayed until at least September.

The Council also agreed a revised Corporate Plan. Just a fortnight before the 31 July meeting which agreed to press ahead with a crematorium at Mepal, this enormous and expensive proposal was not included in the Plan.

COVID costs

The Council has received a number of Government grants towards COVID-19 costs, but has also lost income. Most obviously there has been a considerable drop in income from GLL who operate the Council's A10 leisure centre. GLL is predicting a net loss for the year; they will be unable to pay the £595,000 management fee due for this year, which is being deferred to March 2021, and will be asking the Council for more money.

Among other impacts, the commuter car parks could see income fall by around £133,000 this year, and fees and charges fall by £373,000. Ely Markets are expected to make a loss of £16,000 rather than a profit of £44,000. Overall the effect on the Council's financial position this year is likely to be a negative impact of around £553,000.

The Council's waste company ECSS has asked for and been awarded an increase of £91,000 in its management fee for the first six months of the year to cover agency staff costs due to COVID, though it is not clear on what contractual basis this has been granted.

Meanwhile the Council's other trading company ECTC will not be in a position to repay either of the loans due to be repaid to the Council in March 2021. The Council has agreed various changes to its current loans:

- The original £5M loan due to be repaid 31 March 2021 at an interest rate of 5.22 per cent will be replaced with a new loan with a final repayment date of 31 July 2023 and a reduced interest rate of 3.5 per cent.
- The loan for the MOD properties in Ely due to be repaid 31 March 2021 at an interest rate of 5.22 per cent will be replaced with a new loan with a final repayment date of 31 March 2023 and a reduced interest rate of 3.5 per cent.

The Mayor's Combined Authority has also agreed a request from the Council for a reprofiling of its loans for several developments:

- Haddenham: to extend the loan until March 2023 (current balance £2.8M) with an interest free period of twenty-two months between April 2020 and March 2022.
- MOD Ely: to extend the loan until March 2023 (current balance £24M) with six month interest free period between July and December 2020.

We have expressed our grave concerns about the financial situation of the companies and the assurance given by financial officers and auditors.

Loss of council tax and business rate income is likely to be felt in future years, with the Council's external advisers suggesting there could be a drop in income of around five per cent in both funds next year.

We are awaiting an update to the Council's Medium Term Financial Strategy, as well as full financial information from the two trading companies which has been promised but not yet delivered.

Bus, walking and cycling questionnaires

We are concerned at the time taken to analyse and report back on the public input to these questionnaires. The deadlines for submission to both tranches of Government funding for walking and cycling infrastructure have already passed without being informed by these questionnaires.

Key documents rejected

The Council's Finance & Assets Committee was persuaded by Liberal Democrat councillors to send back two key policy documents—the Council's Governance statement and Equalities policy—for further work as they were not adequate.

Meet your councillors

We are continuing to offer online Meet Your Councillors events to replace our face to face ones in the Community Room. The next ones will take place on Tuesday 8 September and Tuesday 13 October from 6:30 to 7:30PM. Email mark@markinskip.org.uk to book a slot.

Cllr Lorna Dupré

Cllr Mark Inskip

District Councillors for the Sutton ward