

## Stretham Ward June 2020

### East Cambridgeshire District Council Update from Lisa Stubbs

The Coronavirus pandemic struck East Cambridgeshire in March this year, but it feels as though we have all been living with it for a lot longer than that, and I have no doubt that it is going to have ramifications for a very long time to come.

With the outbreak still in its early phases, we are of course presently living in uncertain and worrying times. The pandemic, as awful as it has been and continues to be, has brought a collective examination of what is important in life with a new sense of increased value being placed on non-material things - our natural environment, our health, our family and friends and on the importance of having time to appreciate them. The recovery from the pandemic therefore requires us to think about a different future and to capture and nurture those positive things that people have experienced. East Cambs District Council, with its partners, is focussing on the future and how we can play our part in improving things for our residents for a better quality of life.

Looking back over the last year, the first year of the new four-year administration, I list the key activities and progress below:

#### Housing

- The Council has expanded its successful Housing and Community Support offer, which is:
  - **Preventative** - we work with people before they get into crisis
  - **Holistic** - we support people holistically, working with them over a period of time to help them sort out all the issues they face - mental health, financial (including licensed financial advice), housing, etc; it's not a one meeting process
  - **Accessible** - our services are immediately accessible (face to face activity is currently closed due to Covid 19, but support is still accessible via telephone, online and virtually):
    - people can use the drop-in service at the Council offices - open for over 40 hours per week; people can use our Community Hubs in Ely, Littleport, Stretham and Earith - informal, relaxed settings with multi-agency advice on hand (new Hubs are planned for Soham, Sutton and Bottisham); we have an out of hours service for immediate help; we visit people in their own homes; we also support people in other informal locations
- ECDC purchased the ex MOD housing site in Ely - 88 empty properties are being brought back into use, turned into 92 refurbished homes in total, with 15 being retained as affordable shared equity homes in a Community Land Trust and reserved for local working people. The project is managed by East Cambs Trading Company (wholly owned by the Council for the benefit of Council Tax payers). Progress had been in line with the business plan up to when Covid 19 struck and homes on the site have already been sold and let. Operations on site were closed for a period of 10 weeks during Covid, but work restarted on 11<sup>th</sup> May. It is expected that Covid will cause potentially significant delays to the project overall; work and financial plans are currently being reprofiled. The Phase 2 application for new homes on the site will however be submitted very soon and we will be looking for ways to deliver more than 30% affordable homes in Phase 2.
- Completion of the new homes at Barton Road, Ely by East Cambs Trading Company, including 2 affordable homes in a Community Land Trust for local working people.
- Stretham and Wilburton Community Land Trust (which began with support from ECDC) has continued its development at Manor Farm in Stretham and there are now 19 CLT owned

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homes that are occupied by local working people with ties to the Parish, soon to be 23; plans for the new on site GP Surgery which is being delivered as part of the community benefit of the site have moved forward. The CLT now owns £6m of property assets, exclusively for local people, and £12,500 is coming in to the CLT every month in rent, all legally tied to benefit the community.

- Planning permission was granted to East Cambs Trading Company for Kennett Community Land Trust - 500 new homes, 150 of which will be affordable, and far greater than normal community benefits from the scheme – including a new road to take traffic away from the village, low density housing, a business area, a new Primary School, 30 acres of green space including playgrounds, woodlands, orchards and allotments. Kennet Garden Village will be delivered as a near zero energy development, through investment in building fabric energy efficiency, on-site low or near zero carbon energy generation such as solar panels, air-source heat pumps and battery storage, and an emphasis on sustainable forms of transport, including electric vehicles, with car charging points accessible for occupiers of all domestic and commercial properties.
- New homes are being built by East Cambs Trading Company at Haddenham Community Land Trust, where again on-site activity was paused during the Covid outbreak, but work restarted on 11<sup>th</sup> May.
- Plans for new homes on the old Paradise Pool site in Ely have been developed and a planning application will be submitted by East Cambs Trading Company imminently.
- £100k Homes – ECDC has supported the Combined Authority’s launch of the new innovative housing product for people struggling to get onto the property ladder: £100k Homes. East Cambs is first to get going with delivering new £100k homes on a site in Fordham. £100k Homes are new one-bedroom properties available to buy for £100k. The “discounted home” model will work throughout every district of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough including Cambridge City. £100k Homes offer a truly affordable step onto the housing ladder for working people. Key features of this product include:
  - 100% freehold home ownership
  - Monthly mortgage payment likely to be significantly lower cost than private rent on a similar home (allowing people to make over-payments to build up increased equity if they wish)
  - No rent to pay (unlike shared equity models)
  - Can be sold at any time
  - Owner benefits from future value increases
  - Purchasable with a deposit and mortgage, just like any other home (deposit required is typically expected to be low, as purchaser can use the discounted element to show equity)
  - Owner builds equity as the mortgage is paid off
  - The home’s next buyer benefits from the same discounted step on the housing ladder

#### Infrastructure

- The Highways England A14 21-mile upgrade completed and the new road has been opened – ECDC contributed £1m to the funding of this scheme.

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- Plans for the new Soham Railway Station (which ECDC has supported financially (and in effort) from the outset) have moved forward significantly. In September 2019, the Combined Authority committed £18.6m to fund the delivery of the new station and reconnect the town of Soham with the rail network, which will also improve the prospects for economic growth, jobs and investment in the area. On 1 May 2020, Network Rail submitted a planning application to ECDC for permitted development of the station. Subject to gaining planning permission, the construction of the station is planned to begin later this year and is expected to be complete and open to passengers in 2022.
- A142/A10 “BP” and Lancaster Way roundabouts – the project to upgrade the two roundabouts (which it must be stressed is only a short term interim solution) has now received the final piece of the funding jigsaw. Work will begin on site on the BP roundabout in July this year, unlocking new growth at the Lancaster Way Business Park for around 2,500 new jobs. The scheme includes ECDC financial support from CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) developer contributions.
- Work continues in partnership with Cambridgeshire NHS organisations to push for the redevelopment of the Princess of Wales Hospital, to bring much needed new community health facilities to East Cambridgeshire.

#### Other Activities

- The Council declared a climate emergency and the first Environment and Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan is due to come to Committee in June.
- The Council has been running an extensive Bus, Cycle, Walk consultation – a survey was sent to every household in the district asking residents to put forward their ideas for improvements to bus routes, cycling and walking infrastructure. When Covid 19 hit the consultation deadline was extended to the end of May to ensure everyone could have their say. With significant new money from central Government (£5bn nationally) the timing could not be better for the District Council to collate the results and make the case to the Combined Authority and other funding bodies for improvements.
- The Council is developing new planning policy documents in the form of Supplementary Planning Documents (SPDs). SPDs add detail to the policies in the Local Plan and because they form part of the material considerations in planning decisions, they strengthen the Council’s ability to secure development that complies with the requirements of each SPD. New SPDs are currently being developed on the *Natural Environment* and *Custom and Self Build Housing* with more to follow on *Developer Contributions*, *Climate Change* and *Design*. All new SPDs will be subject to public consultation.
- The Council regained control of its 5-year land supply in April this year, meaning that the development envelopes around villages and settlements are now back in place.
- Fordham and Witchford became the latest two Parishes to successfully complete their own Neighbourhood Plan to control development in their parishes.
- East Cambs Trading Company has delivered over £1.6m benefit to the District Council and it made an early loan repayment back to ECDC.
- ECDC set its budget in February 2020 and was able to show a balanced budget for the next two years. We froze the East Cambs element of Council Tax for the seventh year in a row. Looking to the future, following the Covid 19 pandemic, there are now bigger than ever

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uncertainties surrounding the future of local Government funding and it will be a long time before the full social, health and economic effects of the pandemic are understood.

#### Coronavirus Covid 19 Pandemic

The rate of transformation at both the District and County Councils has been unprecedented. All services at the District Council are operational with some changes. Beyond its normal services, the District Council is focussed on two key areas: getting Government financial support out to businesses; and ensuring support is in place for everyone that is self-isolating.

#### Finances

The Government is providing financial support to Local Authorities and has announced two rounds of c.£1.6bn nationally. ECDC is allocated £43.4k in round 1 and £895k in round 2. Many District Authorities are reporting huge costs and losses arising from increased costs for rough sleepers and loss of car parking income. ECDC is relatively shielded from both of these as it has only a small income from car parking charges (the majority of its car parks being free of charge) and has been able to support most people prior to them losing their accommodation so there are only very low numbers of people with accommodation issues. A joint Finance document has been developed by all Section 151 officers from the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough County and District level Councils and information is regularly provided to Government. Looking forward the finances are hard to predict, but work is ongoing all the time to model the various scenarios.

#### Council Tax Hardship Support

The District Council has received £429k from Government to support people in difficulty with paying their Council Tax. This was immediately applied in line with Government guidance so that people on the Local Council Tax Reduction Scheme received a further £150 off their bill, or reduction of their bill to £0 if it was previously lower than £150. Further opportunities to help more people facing difficulties with their Council Tax bills may be possible in the future.

#### Business Support

**Business rates:** the business rates discounts have been applied automatically to all businesses that are eligible.

**Grants:** there are 1,363 businesses that have been identified in the district that may be eligible for assistance from the Small Business Grant and the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant. We have contacted all 1,363 businesses asking them to complete and return a simple form to claim the grant so that information can be checked and verified. Some Local Authorities took the decision to pay grants by cheque to named company directors and straight into the bank accounts of businesses where they held bank details on file; at East Cambs we took the view that information needed to be verified before public money was handed over. We are up to date with payment to all eligible businesses that have provided their information and payments have been made to around 80% of businesses to date.

**New grant:** A new discretionary grant will be available from 1<sup>st</sup> June and is designed to help small businesses that have not yet benefited from other grant schemes, these include: small businesses in shared premises that do not pay business rates, B&Bs, charities that get business rates exemption, and market traders. Up to date information will be available from the home page of the East Cambs website: [www.eastcambs.gov.uk](http://www.eastcambs.gov.uk).

**Combined Authority COVID 19 Capital Grants:** the Combined Authority created two funds for small and medium sized companies. An initial £2.4m has now been increased to a total fund of £5.4m. For

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grants of £2,000 - £49,999, the CA will fund up to 80% of the total equipment costs. For grants between £50,000 - £150,000 the CA will fund up to 50% of the total equipment costs. For sole traders and non-limited companies such as partnerships and companies with less than 5 employees a separate fund of £500k has been set up to support with capital grants of between £2,000 and £5,000. The Combined Authority is leading the economic recovery plan for the county.

#### Community Support

The support to communities is a co-ordinated effort between the County Council, the District Council and Parish and community support groups.

You can contact the **Countywide Coordination Hub** which is focussed on the “shielded” group on **0345 045 5219**.

The District Council is focussed on everyone else not in the shielded group, and is working to support the community efforts and to ensure no one falls through the cracks. Early on ECDC wrote to everyone over the age of 70 with information about how to get support. People contacting the District Council for support are referred to the local scheme if one is in place; where no scheme is in place the District Council fulfils the request. You can contact the **District Hub on 01353 665 555**.

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