

Supersize Cambridge

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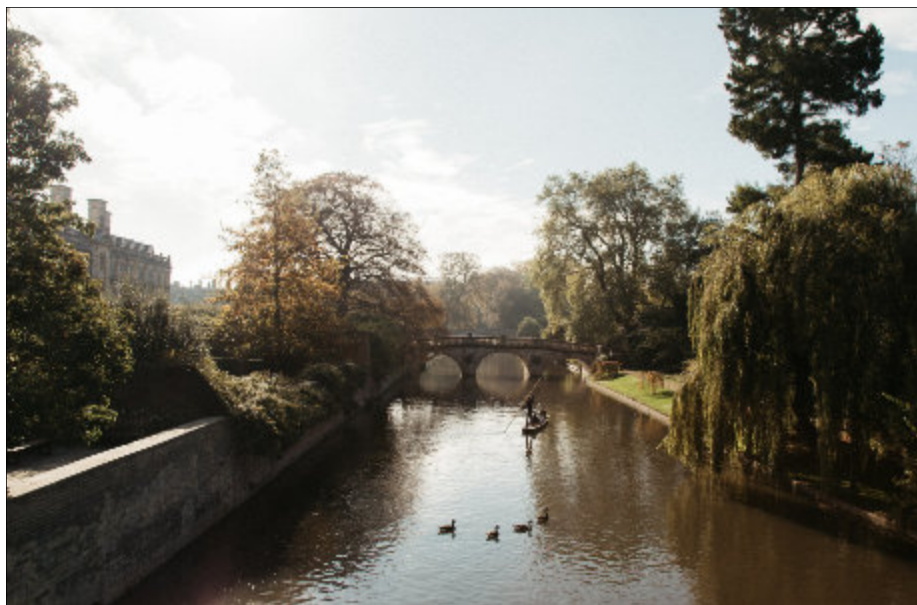
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Supersize Cambridge



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The unique appeal of Cambridge city

- 1 The people and environment of Cambridge are in danger of being irreparably damaged. The city and its surrounds have already been seriously damaged by decades of high economic growth and development that has brought traffic congestion and pollution, unaffordable homes and severe inequalities. Yes, commerce, jobs and wealth have been created, but the gains have been unequally shared and have not brought a widespread feeling of wellbeing. We have a declared climate emergency which demands we reduce our carbon emissions – not increase them with further runaway growth. But there is a powerful official and elite proposal, led by government, to double the rate of growth, or even more. The proposal is to saturate the city with dense development which will also breach the surrounding Green Belt which protects the historic compact city and neighbouring villages.

Opportunity knocks

2 The moment of decision is upon us. The two conjoined local authorities – the City and South Cambridgeshire councils – are drawing up a new joint Local Plan for the future of their joint areas up to 2040. The consultative document that they have released to the public makes it clear that they are committed to the proposed doubling of growth – and more jobs, more housing, more development – and are open to yet more growth on top of this, under the guise of being “flexible” but only upwards, not downwards. The need for sober judgment suggests that their flexibility should cut both ways. The two authorities should consider the options both of a lower rate of sustainable growth and of higher growth and consider the weight of evidence both ways.

3 The government is evidently in a powerful position to get its own way. Its position is essentially that growth is good and that it is in the national interest to ramp it up in Cambridge, even at the expense of yet more damage to the city and its inhabitants. The two authorities however are under a duty to consider what is best for the city and the surrounding area. They have a duty of care to the local populations; and they are in a strong position, being empowered by statute to draft what will be a legal framework for managing the local economy and the employment market; for determining future land use, planning and development policies; and providing homes to meet the desperate housing need locally. Their task is also to consider the services and infrastructure required to support the local economy and future social and environmental issues, including the wellbeing and social inclusion of citizens. They will therefore strongly influence people’s everyday lives – the place they live in, where they work,

The moment of decision is upon us ... The councils are drawing up a new joint Local Plan for the future

how they get about. They could provide a framework for a population of self-confident citizens and communities – the good life. Aggressive and divisive economic growth dominated by state and commercial interests would put an end to such an aspiration. The quality of life for all our citizens would be neglected for the benefit of relatively few people.

- 4 It is often assumed that the government has overweening power to determine a Local Plan like the one the two local authorities are now considering. In February 2019 the government established the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which sets out its planning policies for England and how they should be applied. It provides the framework within which the plans of the two authorities for housing and other developments will be produced. Locally, the government is pressing the local authorities to continue preparing for more growth, committing £400 million as a further round of funding for transport and infrastructure that was promised under the initial City Deal and hailing the “success and progress” that the Greater Cambridge Partnership has “achieved”, albeit out of sight (see paragraph 12 for more detail). It could also apply to its Housing Delivery Test, a new power to deal with recalcitrant local authorities and put pressure on the Green Belt.
- 5 But the two authorities would be far from powerless if they could be persuaded to re-think their position. They could act to challenge the growth agenda through their partnership in the Local Plan. They are in charge of the Plan’s content and can shape it to local needs and aspirations. The NPPF is very growth oriented, and it is easy to infer from the government’s latest NPPF guidance that its intention is to support quantitative contributions to development – how much growth, how many jobs and houses, and so on; and the more the better. But the NPPF promotion of growth is in terms of *sustainable* development, a theme which recurs throughout the document. Another constant theme is *strategy* and its interplay with sustainability. The fact is that NPPF allows qualitative criteria to be applied in local plans in ways which can mitigate, and have the power to overrule, growth proposals which conflict with the local authority’s strategic policies. The joint local authorities have put themselves in a very strong position, by agreeing and setting out four local

strategies, which they have called ‘themes’, all of which have the capacity to bring qualitative criteria about sustainability to bear on growth proposals brought before them.

6 So long as the local authorities make these four strategic themes – climate change, biodiversity, wellbeing and social inclusion, and “great places” - the cornerstones of the next Local Plan, the NPPF framework should enable the plan to do what NPPF requires: to be “a framework for addressing housing needs and other economic, social and environmental priorities and a platform for local people to shape their surroundings”. They have the power to produce a Local Plan that gives due weight to the crucial four themes and restrains the pursuit of unsustainable growth. If they did so, they could then submit the Plan to the Secretary of State, at which point it would go on to be examined by the Planning Inspectorate, in “the last stage of the process”.

7 The job of the appointed Inspector is to consider the evidence on behalf of the Plan and hear representations from interested parties and local people and decide whether or not to uphold them; and to judge the “soundness” of the Plan and ultimately whether or not the two authorities can adopt it. Their hearings are typically dominated by developers and their lawyers. The Inspectorate must send all post-hearing material and a fact-check to the Ministry for Housing, Community and Local Government in advance of issuing the verdict on the Plan. The crunch point for a robust Plan rejecting very high development proposals could come if the Inspector finds against the Plan and recommends “main modifications” to the authorities. If the authorities are resolute on the growth issue, then “exceptionally” the Secretary of State has the power to direct them to withdraw the Plan. By this point, the significant questions at stake are almost certain to inspire public debate and bring the fate of the Local Plan out of its usual obscurity to the attention of a wider range of local people; and the formal legal and political process would almost certainly end up in the courts under judicial review.



Three strategic themes: climate change; biodiversity; wellbeing and social inclusion

The impact of high growth rates

- 8 Cambridge's very high continuing rates of economic growth are very often regarded as a matter for pride. They boost the reputation of Cambridge University as a forward looking and dynamic institution. This report is one of two Cambridge Commons reports that argue that high growth has had damaging and divisive effects on the city and its environs that outweigh the benefits; and that local aims for a more equal and carbon neutral Greater Cambridge should take precedence over a come-what-may growth agenda. Here we argue that the two councils drawing up the joint plan for the area should withdraw their support for more growth and develop the wider agenda, considering the case for lower as well as higher rates of growth, developing social aims, wellbeing and social inclusion, reducing climate change and sponsoring bio-diversity alongside the economic and development objectives. The companion report, *Cambridge – Growth Beyond Reason*, by David Plank, is a weightier and more detailed document worthy of more study.
- 9 Runaway growth has had an immediate negative impact on people's lives. The supporting infrastructure within and around the small and ancient city – physical, economic and social – that is essential to sustain a decent quality of life has not kept pace. House prices and rents have been driven up many times beyond median incomes. It has become very hard for both middle-income and poorer households to live in the city and people increasingly turn to surrounding villages and further afield, swelling traffic congestion as they commute in lengthy queues into the city for work and out again. Local roads cannot bear the weight of traffic; bus services are rendered slow and irregular; delay is part of everyone's lives. Many of the commuters are “key workers”, nurses, teachers, cleaners, academic staff, public servants. The pollution count from vehicles continues to rise and damage adults' and children's health; some roads at times are open-air sewers.

10 Economic growth is an ongoing and profound revolution in our economic, working and social lives. The workers it attracts from elsewhere and (much fewer) locally to fill skilled professional jobs, and the specialist companies which migrate to the area, the AstraZenecas and smaller enterprises, and those which spontaneously set up and grow, are creating a dynamic increase in the workforce – and an insatiable need for more and more homes in an area with its own indigenous failing housing supply. Hence the demands for ambitious new housing programmes, development sites for high-tech companies and action to clear the city’s clogged roads for more effective cooperation and interchange between them. The high rate of growth has also intensified extreme inequality: the gulf between the knowledge-based elite and richest and comfortably off residents and the middle-income and poorer people in and around Cambridge is huge; and significantly outweighs the benefits for the rich and of economic prosperity in the city.

11 The most obvious impact of high growth is the congested state of the city’s roads and radial roads in and out of Cambridge. Every day in 2018, some 194,237 motor vehicles crossed a cordon in or out (or out and in) of Cambridge on all radial roads into the city – say, 97,000 daily in all. Some 84 per cent of the traffic were private cars. This level of traffic is pulverising the city and its environs. In 2011, the Greater Cambridge Partnership aimed at reducing the traffic by 10 per cent to allow for public transport to provide a timely and reliable service, and to reduce pollution and excessive journey times and delays. That aim has now increased to 25 per cent of traffic. Thus, whereas in 2011 it was thought necessary to take one in ten vehicles off the roads, now it is one in four – a clear signal that our road system cannot keep pace with the demands of remorseless economic growth. Indeed, as David Plank notes in *Cambridge – Growth Beyond Reason*, “we are actually going backwards and have been for some time.” Time will tell whether or not the GCP’s transport plans (unseen as of now), and just hailed as a success by the government, will turn the tide or will be a Canute-like failure in concrete.

12 In spite of the harm that high growth has done and is doing, the government is leading a powerful lobby of local authorities and



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Chalk streams which feed the Cam and get much of the city's drinking water from the aquifer, could become exhausted

organisations to drive growth higher still – to double growth and even more – over the next thirty years. The local authorities consist first of the new regional Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (and its Mayor), a devolution structure which was cobbled together specifically by government to urge growth further in a “Devolution Deal”; and which commits the six constituent local councils in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough to the cause of greater growth. The leaders of Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council sit on the Combined Authority board. The two authorities are joined in the Greater Cambridge Partnership with the Cambridgeshire County Council, the University of Cambridge and the Combined Authority’s business board. The Partnership was set up with the government under the 2014 City Deal in which government offered a £500 million bribe in return for work boosting growth, improving the transport network and investing in infrastructure for housing and skills. Cambridge Ahead, an

alliance of commercial and entrepreneurial organisations, is a strong and well-funded pressure group within the city advocating more growth.

- 13** The government's plan for a high-growth Cambridge is part of a wider national strategy, the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, which aims to develop the potential of the sub-regional economy. Cambridge is the goose which lays a golden egg. Fears are expressed that unless the Greater Cambridge area satisfies the demands of the life sciences and hi-tech industries – which make a significant contribution to the UK economy – they will either depart to rival locations, Singapore is most commonly cited, or the UK will simply be outstripped in the global economy. Raising the fear of companies absconding is eerily reminiscent of previous political warnings that the rich would quit the UK if they were required to pay higher taxes.
- 14** The area is seen by government to be failing now in terms of the overloaded transport network and fears that the current Local Plan's commitment to deliver an additional 33,500 homes by 2031 will not be met – and anyway is not at all sufficient. True enough. But the drive to double growth – and grow further, as is now on the agenda – would choke Cambridge and its environs. Doubled growth would accelerate the harm that its exceptional growth has done already: higher house prices and rents, worse and deeper traffic congestion and delays, more unreliable public transport, more pervasive environmental pollution. Cambridge – “Supersize Cambridge!”, as a protest meeting in 2016 in Great St Mary's church dubbed it – would become too unsustainably dense; the climate emergency would revert to more permanent “normal” status post-Covid-19. The demands of developers, land-holding colleges and others would invade the Green Belt, essential to the “special character” of Cambridge and neighbouring villages. Chalk streams which feed the Cam and get much of the city's drinking water from the aquifer, could become exhausted. The area's health, education, social services, social care and other social infrastructure, already desperately under-funded, would struggle to meet the demands of a larger and denser population. Looking wider afield, what does channelling resources into affluent, though unequal, areas of the country bode for the neglected low-wage areas in the Midlands and north of the country which have been promised a “levelling up”.

Planning Greater Cambridge's future

- 15** Opportunity knocks. As we have seen, the four “themes” that the City and South Cambridgeshire councils have adopted, set out a framework from which they could develop a *sustainable* alternative plan for growth and the area’s overall future. These “themes” were set out in the first public stage of the Greater Cambridge Local Plan, a review, called “The First Conversation”. At the heart of this review was a consultative “Issues and Options” document issued to seek the views of the public and interested groups. This consultation was backed by a series of public meetings and events, including a roadshow around the area, using social and news media and publicity on local TV.
- 16** However, it is questionable how far the effort to reach the public, sincere as it was, touched public consciousness. Ordinary people know very little about local authority matters and the remote role of Local Plans, but little time was allowed for them to engage. The centrepiece of the consultation was “The Big Debate”, a carefully managed public event in the Corn Exchange, which was not a debate at all; a platform of selected local bodies simply presented their views; the planners eluded any direct engagement with the people present. Given the importance of a process which will shape the future of Cambridge, the two authorities must open up with full transparency, and engage in real inter-active debate. Who is the *Local Plan* for after all?
- 17** The “First Conversation” options and issues booklet is a pre-lockdown “old normal” document. It is impossible to know as of now how far its propositions will be relevant in the “new normal” era post lockdown, dominated by an old-fashioned recession and higher unemployment, not a buoyant economy that “bounces back”. In any event Cambridge will be in competition after lockdown ends for government funds against the government fulfilling other spending pledges and meeting the promise to

“level up” neglected areas. One big question must surely be how able the government is to fund further infrastructure and transport plans of the Combined Authority, Cambridgeshire county council and the Greater Cambridge Partnership.

18 The booklet is premised wholly on options for further growth, obviously assuming that it is a done deal. There is no sense of commitment to the four themes which are only discussed superficially. Alternative proposals or lower growth don’t get a look in. It fails to suggest how most of the issues it identifies can be developed, apart from listing questions to be answered and pronouncing that the new Plan is capable of providing solutions to awkward issues.

19 The brief section on “Wellbeing and social inclusion”, a crucial theme in a city known to be the most unequal in the country, skates over the long-standing obstacles to remedying Cambridge’s profound inequality and vainly boasts that the Local Plan “can be a powerful tool to improve wellbeing and social inclusion.” How exactly? The national government is in charge of the policies that most affect poor and middle income people; and whatever the prime minister says, continuing austerity policies, especially the benefit system, its punitive rules, the bedroom tax and benefit cap, reductions in housing allowances, the two-child limit in universal credit, actually reduce wellbeing and reinforce social exclusion. The two local authorities are also gravely weakened by savage cuts and Cambridgeshire county council has had to devastate its social provision, notably in social care (as David Plank has shown in three Cambridge Commons reports). Finally, there is no recognition of the desperate levels of deprivation, engrained over generations in poor areas in north Cambridge, that have proved unassailable through the years of the “welfare state”. There is only a brief graphic mention of the staggering inequality in life expectancy – at over 11 years – between different areas in the city and no mention of child poverty. No answers to basic questions,

There is no recognition of the desperate levels of deprivation, engrained over generations in poor areas in north Cambridge

just a lame conclusion asking how should the Plan “help us achieve ‘good growth’” that promotes wellbeing and inclusion. A specious gesture.

19 The issues and options booklet is also silent on two other important issues: the crippling level of congestion around and in Cambridge, and its effect on bus services and air quality; and the need to make the water system more resilient and avoid ecological disaster. On congestion the tangled structure of local government in the area is a culprit. Greater Cambridge ought to be a unitary authority with wider powers, including over roads and transport. Cambridgeshire county council is however the responsible local authority and can block the City’s efforts to reform transport, for example, clearing traffic out by declaring traffic-free streets in the centre. Thus, congestion, probably the most salient issues for most people, is neglected because the two authorities are not formally responsible for traffic issues; that is down to the county council and the Combined Authority.

20 The section on biodiversity contains bland under-stated references to the region’s water crisis: “The River Cam is a designated County Wildlife Site in recognition of the river’s importance ...” and – “chalk streams which feed the River Cam . . . have been very low in recent years.” You wouldn’t know it from the issues and options booklet, but the simple fact is that growth is a major threat to the area’s water supply and biodiversity. The Cam is running dry. The Environment Agency has classified the river’s flow rate as “exceptionally low” and the Cam Valley Forum warns that the river doesn’t have enough water flow to function properly. The low flow creates poor water quality and pollution; the flora and fauna of the river and the wetlands around Cambridge have, as the forum reports, “declined markedly.” Its recent manifesto warned: “we are already well beyond the water resource limit for Cambridge – given the growth that is projected and now under way. The water resources are not adequate for such consumption, let alone the additional population planned to be moving into the area in coming decades.”

The growing growth agenda

21 The City and South Cambridgeshire both signed up to the devolution deal agreed when the Combined Authority was created in 2017. The deal included the vision of doubling the total economic output of the area over the next 25 years. This deal was concluded high over the heads of the local populations whose lives are affected, for ill and good; and above a society that became even more unequal. Since then economic growth has continued to grow fast without restraint. The response of the two Local Plan authorities is acquiescence in official encouragement of still further growth and the perceived need to provide an enormous expansion of new housing to meet the consequent growth in jobs.

There is a widespread assumption that economic growth is a good thing

22 There is a widespread assumption that economic growth is a good thing. The political parties rely on GDP (Gross Domestic Product) to deliver rising standards of living. That's the way things go. But as we have seen, growth has had a damaging effect on Cambridge and if left unrestrained it will destroy the city we know. It is about time that we take a hard look at the growth agenda, our local experience of growth in action and ask searching questions. What about the congestion it causes daily on our roads? Do we want to carry on polluting the air we breathe? Need we continue to collude in the destruction of biodiversity? Are the shocking consequences of a life-style of dependence on oil and of the climate change that is crowding behind Covid-19 something we can continue to ignore? And as a society can we be happy to accept the hugely divisive effects on inequality that growth is driving through? These are significant questions which the two councils' consultative document fails to raise. They should be questions at the core of preparing the Local Plan.

23 Meanwhile there is equivocation over the amount of new housing the area needs. The current Local Plan set a target of 1,675 new homes a year. The government has however set a “standard method” for measuring the need for housing, which indicates a minimum need here for 1,800 new homes a year, or 40,900 homes in all for the Local Plan period of 2017-2040. But even this staggering total is eclipsed by the plans being fomented by those above us. The supposedly “independent” Economic Review (CPIER), set up by the Combined Authority, has calculated that some 2,900 homes a year – i.e., a total of 66,700 homes over 2017-2040 – may be needed to meet growth-driven jobs. The planners employed by the two Plan authorities are commissioning research into the case for an additional 30,000 homes in the next Plan, given that 36,400 homes are in the pipeline to be built between 2017 and 2040; “it will be for the new Plan to find sites for the rest”!

24 The motivation for such ambitious thinking is set out clearly in the “First Conversation” issues and options booklet: the need to make additional housing provision to “provide flexibility to support our potential economic growth” and to determine the jobs growth “to be planned for”. The complexity and possible dire consequences of this growth agenda wasn’t on the table for the “First Conversation”. At the “Big Debate” in the Corn Exchange, the chief planning officer (who only identified himself after protest from the audience) was clearly unwilling to allow public debate on growth, even after being urged by several people to open up on the authorities’ position. He said, “Work to determine what level of growth is deliverable and sustainable is ongoing”; and “66,700 is not the figure the authorities are working to.” Yet the “flexibility”, a reassuring label, is only for flexibility upwards, not downwards, in terms of growth, housing and development.

25 Both authorities are already committed to the “higher level of ambition for economic growth and development” up to 2050 specified in the Combined Authority’s Non-Statutory Spatial Framework and to the Devolution Deal with the government. Close attention to the “First Conversation” booklet reveals an astonishingly benign belief in the effects of economic and housing growth:

If we do not plan for enough homes, this could worsen affordability, limit our local economy, damage social inclusion, and have implications for climate change as people travel further to access jobs.

The planners for the City and South Cambridge councils are clearly in favour of higher growth towards the top end of the growth range of between 41,000 and 66,700 additional homes to be built over the next 20 years, i.e., towards an additional 2,900 additional homes a year rather than 1,800 at the lower end of the scale.. A top end increase would result in a 55 per cent increase in the total number of homes over the next 20 years. As “The First Conversation” says:

To give a sense of the scale of this potential additional provision, Orchard Park in the north of Cambridge is around 1,000 homes, whilst the total number of homes on the Cambridge Southern Fringe developments is around 4,000 . . . The new town at Northstowe when complete will be around 10,000 homes.



The new town
at Northstowe
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10,000 homes

*Developers' visual of Inholm,
Northstowe Area 2a*

Enter the developers

26 The starters' pistol has been fired. The first stage of the Greater Cambridge Local Plan was a "Call for Sites", a statutory requirement under which developers and others can bid for development sites to be included in the Plan. Many bids will target the Green Belt which preserves the essential separation between the city and outlying villages and Cambridge's "special character" as a "compact historic city". The Green Belt also protects the integrity of the surrounding villages of South Cambridgeshire against inappropriate development. There have already been significant transfers of land for development on the south of the city, in part through the previous 2006 Local Plan – notably the Trumpington Meadows, Clay Farm. Glebe Farm estates. Note the evocative rural names for what are emphatically not rural places. The local infrastructure has



Cambridge's "special character" Lower Park Street in Cambridge, taken from Jesus Green

Ben Wicks/Unsplash

failed to accommodate the additional strain they impose, the bus services are entirely inadequate to cope and get squeezed out by the weight of traffic into and out of the city.

27 The danger is that the momentum of growth will put on pressure to develop more of the remaining green spaces for housing and for infrastructure. For example, Network Rail's plans for a Cambridge South Station, a key to reducing traffic congestion in Trumpington, but which will also constitute a threat to Hobson's Park, which forms a vital part of the Green Corridor into Cambridge. Witness the developers and land-owning colleges queuing up to get land for development into the Plan, much of which targets the remaining Green Belt. It is pretty well certain that in the long list of sites resulting from the Local Plan's "Call for Sites", will be a bid from the Grosvenor Group to build 750 houses on the precious space that remains between the new city edge – at the boundary of the Trumpington Meadows estate still under construction and the M11 – following the withdrawal of its previous 520 house "Sporting Village" planning application. Just the other side of Hauxton Road (the A1309) Jesus College and its partner Pigeon plan to develop the College's large landholdings alongside the River Cam; and also a "Cambridge South" development comprising a science park as an adjunct to the Cambridge Biomedical Campus, plus 1,250 new homes. Both sites are in the Green Belt. The remaining Green Belt gap between Cambridge and our neighbouring villages essential to Cambridge's "special character", is under attack.

... bus services are entirely inadequate to cope and get squeezed out by the weight of traffic into and out of the city

The big squeeze

- 28** The economic growth underlying the very high housing growth being contemplated – at whatever end of the scale in “The First Conversation” – is expected to be “disproportionately located” in “six key districts” of Cambridge. They are “Cambridge City Centre”; Cambridge Station CBI and Hills Road; Cambridge Biological Campus and Southern Fringe; “Cambridge Science Park and Northern Fringe”; “West Cambridge”; and “Cambridge East”. Collectively, these sites account for 63 per cent of all jobs, we are told, within the Cambridge urban area and growth among them will “benefit from agglomeration and good labour market accessibility”. This potential strategy is to take place in areas which are struggling to reduce traffic and peak-time congestion which crowds out bus services; and hey, the Combined Authority’s transport plans anticipate that “future growth is expected to be focused at such sites” without reckoning on the obvious consequences for local communities.
- 29** The governing impulse is for “agglomeration” rather than “dispersal”, as this is seen as being more attractive to new high-tech enterprises; the Combined Authority’s Independent Economic Review argues that a dispersal strategy is unlikely to work as it is “agglomeration . . . that attracts companies to the area”. Agglomeration is a relatively new concept. It stands for a localised economy in which a large number of companies, services, and industries exist in close proximity to one another and benefit from the cost reductions and gains in efficiency that result from this proximity. The government’s local industrial strategy in July 2019 identified it as a key priority, “Expand and build on the clusters and networks that have enabled Cambridge to become a global leader”. Let us be clear: The emphasis on agglomeration is purely for the benefit of the area’s high tech businesses, not the quality of life for residents. Further, agglomeration, as associated with the growth of the Biological Campus, one of the six priority areas, directly threatens the Green Belt.

30 The Campus already radiates pressure for higher growth, more traffic, more parking space. Its ambition is “to become one of the *largest* internationally competitive concentrations of health-care-related talent and enterprise in Europe” [our emphasis], while also serving local health-care needs. It has approval to expand its staff from 17,250 now to 26,000 by 2031, and up to 30,000 beyond then, and is taking on significant numbers of extra patients. Its buoyant progress is a prime factor in proposals for a Cambridge South Station and additional parking spaces; and it is already (as it says)

... one of the largest traffic generators within both Cambridge and Cambridgeshire. In 2016 over 26,000 people visited the Campus each day and this will increase with the current and further planned expansion.

31 The search for development space is ongoing. The “First Conversation” options and issues booklet explores development options in a “Where to build” section, alongside mentioning the “large supply (135 hectares) of employment land that continues to be developed”. This land is already allocated for development in the existing Local Plan and “includes developments in the centre of Cambridge around the station, and on the edges of Cambridge at the Cambridge Biomedical Campus and West Cambridge”. To be added is an “Innovation District” at Cambridge Science Park and Cambridge North, which “will include homes, jobs, services and facilities.” There are easy pickings on the brownfield North East Cambridge site and possibly at Cambridge Airport which could create a “Major new urban quarter” on the airport and associated sites, supplying 10-12,000 new homes and “a strategic scale of jobs.” In both cases, there are connectivity issues and use of the “safeguarded” airport site depends on whether or not, or when, Marshalls at last decide to move.

32 The “first Conversation” is casting envious eyes on sites of the edge of Cambridge, both within and outside the Green Belt. Such sites, the planners say, benefit from the services and infrastructure of the existing centre, maximising the potential for sustainable transport. But “large-scale urban extensions present the opportunity for new on-site infrastructure”, schools, local centres and green spaces, “that can bring benefits to the

existing and new community”. National planning policy demands that Green Belt boundaries be respected except in “exceptional circumstances”, a handy discretionary “get out of gaol card”. The Green Belt is also vulnerable to possible proposals for development along and around “key public transport corridors” by expanding or intensifying existing settlements or creating them. Advantages here, say the planners: concentrating development with “opportunities for high quality public transport”; and the “expansion of economic benefits from Cambridge”. Given government pressure and the temper of the times, defending the Green Belt and the “special character” of Cambridge it preserves is clearly a huge problem. Both sets of encroachments on Green Belt land being contemplated have profound implications for the nature and size of the city and the encircling Green Belt. Supersize Cambridge beckons.

33 We are at a watershed moment in Cambridge’s history. It is a time to stop and think. We can decide whether to subject the city, its environs and people to the rigours of a high growth expansion, truly a Supersize Cambridge, or instead to invest in a lower growth and sustainable city. Here we express deep concern about the unsustainably high levels of growth urged on us by the government and its local partners. We will be accused of “nimbyism” – not in our backyard – which alleges a selfish opposition to change, especially to proposals for new housing. In fact, we are in favour of meeting Greater Cambridge’s urgent need for new and affordable housing, and for social rented homes in particular. But we are also committed to preserving what is best about Cambridge and its surroundings:

→ The consequences of a high growth future, drawing on the experience of recent decades, must be squarely faced in the planning process, acknowledging the serious inequalities, social and economic, climate emergency, environmental and bio-diversity, “place” and other serious challenges the City and Greater Cambridge have had to deal with. The government must be made aware of the current ill effects of the already high level of local economic growth and the implications of doubling the rate of growth.

- The Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council should re-consider their commitment to the unsustainable level of economic growth urged on them by the government and undertake a serious appraisal and comparison of the effects of lower levels of growth as well as the higher levels being entertained now. This appraisal should consider the need for truly sustainable growth – economic, social, “place” and environmental – which would deliver the net zero carbon future, to which the City Council is committed and halt the processes of inequality which further “ambitious” growth would encourage.
- One of the options to be considered should be to keep jobs and housing growth within the already considerable level of the 2006 Local Plan (33,500 additional homes between 2011 and 2031). The “First Conversation” disingenuous proposition that “flexibility” should be included in the Local Plan solely as a means of stoking up growth should be withdrawn in the interests of good governance and the search for higher growth should be openly acknowledged.
- The higher level of growth urged is incompatible with the governmental Climate Change Panel’s advocacy of a cut in emissions by half to keep alive the global aim of keeping global heating within safe limits.
- Above all, the authorities should build on their efforts to involve the public and genuinely open up debate at the next stage of the Local Plan process in a transparent consultation that presents options to the public in an honest and open way and rejects the tick-box approach of the “First Conversation”. Let there be a true conversation. ●

