

David Plank

Cambridge: Growth Beyond Reason

Let us avoid the perils
of more high growth

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About the author

David Plank is a former local government director of social services and chief executive. He is the author of three Cambridge Commons reports on social care in Cambridgeshire: 'From Crisis to Catastrophe', 'The Silent Catastrophe' and 'The Catastrophe Continues'. He is also joint author of the Cambridge Commons report, 'Cambridge Wealth and Want', an early warning of the extreme inequality in the city. He is active in the Trumpington Residents' Association (where he leads on transport matters) and the Workers' Educational Association.

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Summary

1. Cambridge and our near neighbours have experienced high rates of economic growth above the national average for decades. The supporting infrastructure, physical and social, that is essential to ensure a decent quality of life has not kept pace. High house prices and rents, many times beyond median incomes, have driven both middle-income and poor households out of the city to surrounding villages and further, swelling traffic congestion as they commute back into the city to work and experience damaging delays. Many of these commuters are 'key workers'- nurses, teachers, care workers, public transport workers, delivery drivers, cleaners, academic staff and public servants. Pollution levels, mainly from vehicle emissions, continue to be stubbornly high in parts of the city, with harmful effects on children's and adults' health. Natural resources such as water supply are under great strain. These adverse effects of growth significantly outweigh the benefits of high value economic prosperity, accompanied as it is by more intense inequality between an echelon of high earners and other citizens.

2. Despite this we are being urged by powerful voices to increase our rate of growth even more – to double its product over the next thirty years – lest we fail to satisfy the demands of the digital and life sciences industries which we are seen to be failing now – despite the current Local Plan's commitment to deliver an additional 33,500 homes by 2031. The threat behind this if we fail to step up to the plate, is departure of those companies to more amenable locations such as Singapore – a fate, which if not avoided, is seen by the government to threaten its prized target for the United Kingdom's economic growth.

3. These powerful voices are led by the government, and the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, in particular its Mayor. The "Devolution Deal" which created the Combined Authority commits all its member bodies to this high level of economic growth. They include Cambridge City Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council and Cambridgeshire County Council, supported by the Greater Cambridge Partnership which they set up with the government under the City Deal. Cambridge Ahead, an alliance of commercial and academic entrepreneurial organisations, a strong and well-funded pressure group within the city, is also an influential advocate for more growth.

4. This accelerated rate of economic growth is not possible without great harm through the collateral damage it would cause to Cambridge itself and to our near neighbours. Harm through even higher housing costs, increased traffic congestion and delay, even more unreliable public transport, environmental pollution exacerbating the climate emergency, yet more "densification" within Cambridge itself, destruction of large parts of the precious Green Belt essential to the "special character" ¹ of Cambridge and our neighbouring villages, and excessive strain on our

1. Words used in the current Local Plan: "Removing large sites from the Cambridge Green Belt could irreversibly and adversely impact on the special character of Cambridge as a compact historic city..." [Page 21, paragraph 2.29]

health, education and other social infrastructure. The least well off and able to cope would suffer most.

5. This threat is very real and close to us. All of the “six key districts” where this economic growth is to be “disproportionately located”, are on our doorstep in Cambridge. Namely – Cambridge City Centre; Cambridge Station, CB1 and Hills Road; Cambridge Biomedical Campus and Southern Fringe; Cambridge Science Park and Northern Fringe; West Cambridge; and Cambridge East.

6. The quality of life for all our citizens must not be exchanged for yet more economic growth for the benefit of a relative few. The damage would not be confined to Cambridge and our near neighbours. It would be more widespread in the further neglect of the very areas in our county and country who are rightly expressing strong resentment at their continuing exclusion from the high value added economic growth they most need. This “opportunity cost” is real not theoretical – in the low added value economic activity it would continue to countenance, with its heavy reliance on low wage industries and with continuing loss of much of its younger generation to other areas. **It is time to say no to growth beyond reason – to challenge its advocates in government, national and local, and make them face up to the unacceptable collateral damage it would cause – both for our area and for the low wage, insecure areas of the Midlands and the North – and in the multiply deprived areas elsewhere in Cambridgeshire.**

7. There is an opportunity for us to change this for the better – through the Greater Cambridge Local Plan which is being reviewed at present – reviewed by the joint Local Plan authorities, Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council – overseen and ultimately decided by central government. The Local Plan is important for the people of Cambridge and our neighbours. It allocates land for development over the next 20 years – strongly influences our surroundings – the place we live in and experience daily – things that are very important to us as individuals, families, neighbours and communities. This is threatened by the extreme pressure upon us to achieve an even higher rate of economic growth no matter what.

8. Local Plans are governed by restrictive national planning policy, but there is scope for the Local Plan authorities here to shape the content of the new Plan, and prevent the damage beyond repair which would otherwise occur– *if* there is the political will to do so. A better future is possible for Cambridge and our neighbours if we act individually and collectively to secure it.

9. Recommendations are made at the end of this paper to help us – all of us – get back some control over what we hold dear – through determined action to prevent the imminent climate catastrophe, create good secure jobs, and provide decent and sustainable housing which we can afford, not too far away from work on affordable public transport – while also nurturing a sense of place and identity for the future which values what we are fortunate enough to have inherited from the past – and is now at great risk.



The quality of life for all our citizens must not be exchanged for yet more economic growth for the benefit of a relative few.

Growth - good or bad?

10. Why the concern about growth? Surely, it's a "good thing". Don't we want our families, neighbours and society at large to have good jobs and the good things in life? At this trite level – yes of course we do. But no matter what the cost? Surely, we must be even more concerned to answer vital defining questions of: for whose benefit; where would be most beneficial; and at what climate change, environmental, social, transport, "place" cost? And is it deliverable without unacceptable collateral damage? We must also be willing to act on answers to these questions which indicate that less or even little "growth" in this place might be more beneficial to the commonweal – just as we would in any other field of human endeavour.

11. This may be difficult because it almost feels as though "growth", meaning economic growth, is part of our DNA. Regular boosts to Gross Domestic Product are seen as the norm, as things should be, almost an unmitigated good in their delivery of rising standards of living and material quality of life. As a general proposition, this seems more debatable now than at any time in living memory, with the Climate Emergency in particular existentially challenging its hard-wired assumption. It is not the purpose of this paper to engage in that debate, vital though it is. Rather it is to note more modestly that there is justifiable concern about the rate of growth experienced and envisaged in our area due to its adverse as well as beneficial effects.

12. It is no accident that the reduction in traffic, thought essential by the Greater Cambridge Partnership, has risen from 10 per cent below the levels in 2011 to nearly 25 per cent now. "Essential" to allow a civilised, reliable, rapid, affordable, far reaching public transport service to be provided – to reduce pollution levels; to cut excessive journey times; to help all citizens no matter how well off, or not, to meet their day to day needs – and perhaps even taste the good life. To achieve this – whereas it was thought necessary to take one in ten private cars off the road on the level in 2011, it is now thought essential to take one in four off the road. And why is this? It is down to remorseless and rapid economic growth with which our infrastructure has not, cannot and should not keep pace.

13. This is but one example. Clearly, it is true that growth in our knowledge intensive, particularly life sciences, sector increases the number of highly remunerated and valued jobs. Clearly, it is thought by many to be vital to our well-being as a nation – see the Government's Industrial Strategy – <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy-building-a-britain-fit-for-the-future>

14. At the same time, economic growth has been and is being accompanied by a significant increase in harmful inequality in our already highly unequal community. The cost of basic housing has rocketed, whether for purchase or rent, and the ratio of housing costs to personal income has exploded, squeezing personal real disposable income and forcing many, not only the less well-off, out of Cambridge – at the cost of increasingly lengthy and costly daily journeys. It is no accident that Cambridge is one of the most unequal cities in our increasingly inequitable country. It is no accident that at the same time as growth explodes here, resentment continues to fester in areas of the Midlands and the North whose economies were devastated in

the era of “Thatchernomics” and since – and in the multiply deprived low wage areas elsewhere in Cambridgeshire – resentment at the growing inequality between areas and regions and in the deployment of public investment that is perceived to exist. It is no accident that these contrasting fortunes directly relate to each other.

15. Pressure on our environment is another effect, with, for example, significant transfers from the Green Belt for development, particularly but not only in the previous 2006 Local Plan, which have produced in my home area – the “Southern Fringe” – large housing developments at Trumpington Meadows, Clay Farm, Glebe Farm and more. Our infrastructure has not kept pace with this, with a variety of deleterious effects. And with great pressure to develop more of the vital green space that remains to accommodate not only said infrastructure but also yet more growth.

16. Witness, for example, Network Rail’s proposals for Cambridge South Station, much to be welcomed in terms of the potential to reduce traffic on Trumpington’s increasingly congested roads – but also with potential damage to our local country park, Hobson’s Park, which forms a vital part of the Green Corridor into Cambridge, achieved as a trade-off for acceptance of the development set in train by the 2006 Local Plan. Witness, for another example, the related development of the Cambridge Autonomous Metro, again with significant potential benefits – and a likely adverse impact on the same Green Corridor where the “southern portal” is to be located.

17. Witness also the much needed increases in parking spaces at the existing Trumpington Park & Ride – and even more so on Green Belt land next to Trumpington Meadows Country Park, close to Junction 11 of the M11, where a new 2,260 parking space “Travel Hub” is to be built to take private cars exiting from the M11 and the A10, diverting their drivers on to public transport and taking their cars off Trumpington’s heavily congested roads.

18. It will be noted that all of these examples have their prime origin in the buoyant growth of the Cambridge Biomedical Campus. And it appears that we are now to expect even more growth from Campus-related development, if the government, the Combined Authority and Cambridge Ahead have their way.

19. Witness also the unordered queue of developers vying to get land for development into the new Local Plan, much of which targets the remaining Green Belt which ensures the separation that remains between Cambridge’s new city edge and our necklace of villages. Maintenance of which many – including the current Local Plan – rightly regard as vital to retaining Cambridge’s “special character” – and that of our near neighbours in South Cambridgeshire whose quality of life is also under great pressure – from the A10 in particular – as conversation with residents of Harston or Hauxton, for instance, would readily reveal.

20. Lest this be thought exaggerated, it is 100 per cent certain that in the long list of sites resulting from the Local Plan’s recent “Call for Sites”, will be bids from: the



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Grosvenor Group to build 750 houses² on the precious space that remains between the new city edge – at the boundary of the still under construction Trumpington Meadows estate – and the M11, following the withdrawal of its previous ill-fated 520 house “Sporting Village” planning application; *and* – just the other side of Hauxton Road (the A1309) – from Jesus College and its partner Pigeon to develop the College’s large landholding from Addenbrooke’s Road towards Great Shelford alongside the River Cam for a “Cambridge South” development comprising an 85,000 square metre science park as an adjunct to the Cambridge Biomedical Campus – plus 1,250 new homes: <http://cambridgesouth.azurewebsites.net/> 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 real not imaginary threat.

21. Residents in Trumpington are not alone – as residents in areas affected by the other five “key districts” for development in Cambridge will attest (see paragraph 47 below). Soon to be added to perhaps by the “key sites already identified” for development in the “Where to build?” section of the new Local Plan’s “First Conversation” consultation – i.e., “North East Cambridge” and “Cambridge Airport”. [Paragraph 5.2.1 on page 77]. Alongside the “large supply (135 hectares) of employment land that continues to be developed” – which 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”. With the creation also of an “Innovation District” at Cambridge Science Park and Cambridge North, which “will include homes, jobs, services and facilities” [“The First Conversation”, paragraph 4.5.2, page 53].

22. The deep concerns expressed in this section are not to be marginalized by epithet – to be consigned to the category of nimbyism – or seen as selfish refusal to support development facilitating employment, housing and shorter journeys to work – or, Luddite fashion, to stand in the way of the economic national interest. That denigratory straw man approach does not wash. The case for economic development is not an absolute trumping all other objectives. In a civilised, climate emergency concerned community, it has to be weighed alongside all other aspects of a “good life” for the common well-being of all.

23. Hence, as will be seen, there is no blank sheet for the revision of the Local Plan now underway. The arena is crowded, the players already have full scripts, the interests are powerful and active, and key parts of the plot, such as the minimum level of housing growth, appear already to have been written (see the section, “The Greater Cambridge Local Plan”, from paragraph 28 onwards). Some might even go so far as to argue that a perfect storm is brewing, with the S.S. Greater Cambridge at full steam ahead, with a pilot apparently determined to plot a course towards

2. Confirmed by a Grosvenor guest speaker on 19 September last year when addressing the Trumpington Meadows Community Group – and to be named “Trumpington South”.

the gathering clouds just over the horizon, no matter what the size of the cresting waves ahead. Yet, with some exceptions, the passengers, whether above stairs or in steerage, are not engaged with this, having many other daily preoccupations with which to contend. This needs to change – and *there is a chance to change it for the better* in the development of the new Local Plan.

What are “Local Plans”?

24. A silly question for some but for many not so – a topic well known in a relatively narrow circle but unknown to many otherwise informed people. The Local Plan is in fact a document of great importance to our City and Greater Cambridge as a whole – as it is in all parts of the country. It is a statutory plan, having legal effect, which allocates land for different uses – including land for development – for housing and employment in particular. It determines the amount of land allocated for growth – and where – for the next 20 years. Simplistically, if it’s in the Plan it’s likely to happen – if it’s not, it’s not.

25. The Local Plan shapes our City and Greater Cambridge more widely. The Plan greatly influences our surroundings – the place we live in and experience daily – it affects our environment in the widest sense, and affects climate change and biodiversity, for good or ill. It affects the availability and cost of our housing and influences the length and quality of our journeys, whether to work or for other purposes. These are things that are very important to us as individuals, families, neighbours and communities.

26. While called “local”, Local Plans are very much part of a national land use planning system, ruled by the government’s National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2> As its title indicates, this specifies the framework within which local planning authorities *must* operate. It is prescriptive. Nevertheless, local planning authorities are not entirely creatures of central government – they are able to influence what goes into the Plan – within limits – they are not mere pawns and do have some discretion, primarily through interpretation and persuasion.

27. Local planning authorities are also accountable to us, the community. Our Local Plan provides us with a real opportunity to have a much-needed say in our own future – an opportunity which due to the official review currently underway, presents itself *now*.

The Greater Cambridge Local Plan

28. The official review of our Local Plan for Greater Cambridge has already started. It began with the “Call for Sites”, part of the statutory process, which allows developers and others to identify – or bid – for development sites to be included in the Plan, which may not be designated for development now (See paragraph 20 above).

29. The first public stage of the review, called “The First Conversation”, concluded

in February. It was launched by Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council, the two councils responsible for our joint Greater Cambridge Local Plan, to seek the views of the public and interested groups on “Issues and Opportunities”, which is the statutory name for this stage of the process. This was shaped by initial information in the consultation document on what is likely to be in the Plan, including levels of growth.

30. “The First Conversation” gave the public an opportunity to see how the official mind is working before the publication of a draft Local Plan this autumn and to comment on it. However, given the low level of public knowledge about Local Plans, relatively little time was allowed for it, running for six weeks only from 13 January to 24 February, the deadline for responses. Despite publicity, many members of the public will not have been aware of the process and its importance until late in the day, if at all. “The Big Debate” which took place as part of the process, was not a debate with the public; there was little engagement by a distant platform with those on the floor of the Cambridge Corn Exchange.

31. Given its importance for all of us, much more opportunity for interactive engagement with the public is required – preferably before the next stage this autumn when a full draft of the Local Plan is to be consulted on – or, failing that, more time for discussion and preparation of responses during the draft plan consultation. *After all, who is the Local Plan for? Surely, it must be mainly for those whose lives it affects?* – who must be fully engaged no matter what timetable central government is pressing upon the councils, as it is claimed to be.³

32. Significant concern was being expressed about the level of growth envisaged by the authorities well before the current Plan review. For example, witness the responses made by the Trumpington Residents’ Association (TRA) to the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority’s draft Local Transport Plan, and to the Cambridge Biomedical Campus’s Transport Strategy 2018. In response to the first of these the TRA said:

“We are very concerned at the higher level of ambition for economic growth and development up to 2050 envisaged in phase 2 of the Non-Statutory Spatial Framework and the Combined Authority’s Growth Ambition Statement ... [and] are not persuaded that this level of growth is sustainable in transport or environment terms.”

The second of the TRA’s responses took account of the Biomedical Campus’s factual statement that –

“CBC is one of the largest traffic generators within both Cambridge and Cambridgeshire. In 2016 over 26,000 people visited the Campus each day and this



After all, who is the Local Plan for? Surely, it must be mainly for those whose lives it affects?

3. Confirmed by an Executive Cambridge City Councillor in response to my urging more time for fuller community consultation and engagement.

will increase with the current and further planned expansion.” (Paragraph 1.1)

It also took account of the Campus’s stated –

“... ambition ... to become one of the *largest* internationally competitive concentrations of healthcare-related talent and enterprise in Europe, while also serving the healthcare needs of an increasing local population.” [my emphasis] (Cambridge Biomedical Campus Transport Strategy, paragraph 4.1, page 9)

These statements should be seen in the context of the very substantial growth to which the Campus, one of the six “key districts” in Cambridge, is *already* committed (see the figures in paragraph 49 below).

The TRA’s response stated –

“We are **most concerned** at the apparent scale of growth envisaged for the Campus and **ask** for the Campus Authorities’ assurance that growth on or nearby the campus will be restrained within the capacity of the currently approved extension...

The Association will **strongly oppose** any further physical extension of the Campus on-site beyond its currently approved extension, or by other means through nearby initiatives such as Jesus College / Pigeon’s mooted “Cambridge South” 85,000 sqm science park / 1,250 homes development east of the A1309/ Hauxton Road.”

33. Do not write this concern off with a stereotypical view of residents’ associations. In the wider public interest, the TRA supported the major new developments initiated in Trumpington, mainly on previously Green Belt land, in the 2006 Local Plan, together with the offsetting Hobson’s Park/Green Corridor. It also supported the development of the Campus as currently approved. But the Association is now rightly alarmed that the developers are returning for yet more to the detriment of our area and to the special character of Cambridge – encouraged by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority and its Mayor, and even more powerfully by the government

34. Further inquiry has added to this concern. For example, the “higher level of ambition for economic growth and development” up to 2050 set by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, goes well beyond that currently planned, so that –

“... economic output will double over the next 25 years, with an uplift in GVA (Gross Value Added)⁴ from £22 bn (billion a year) to over £40bn.” (Strategic

4. Gross Value Added (GVA) “... is the value generated by any unit engaged in the production of goods and services”. Office for National Statistics. February 2020

Spatial Framework (Non-Statutory) Phase One, page 46)

35. This aim has been agreed with the government as part of the Devolution Deal leading to the Authority's creation. It has also been agreed with the local authorities in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough, including Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council who are responsible for our Local Plan – and are constituent members of the Combined Authority.

36. By way of explanation, the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority was set up as part of the government's devolution programme and has mainly strategic functions, including responsibility for the Local Transport Plan and the Non-Statutory Spatial Plan, with some significant operational functions such as franchising bus services (if approved) and various employment and skills functions. In addition to its publicly elected Mayor, it comprises representatives of its constituent councils – the County Council and the City and District Councils – all or some of whose approval must be obtained by the Mayor for the exercise of its various functions such as adoption of the Local Transport Plan, the number depending on the function. Adoption of the Non-Statutory Spatial Plan quoted in paragraph 34 above, requires the unanimous support of the Combined Authority's members.

37. This concern is increased by "The First Conversation":

One big question affecting all these themes [the four themes in the document: climate change, wellbeing and social inclusion, biodiversity & green spaces, great places] will be the number of jobs and homes to plan for. Central government has set us the target of planning for a minimum of around 41,000 (additional) homes between 2017 and 2040. We are doing more work to understand future jobs growth and housing growth to support it. However, to give an indication, if the recent high level of jobs growth was to continue (which it is), there may be a case for making provision beyond the local housing need to include flexibility in the plan and provide for around 66,700 (additional) homes during this period. We already have about 36,400 (additional) homes in the pipeline for this period, but it will be for the new Plan to find sites for the rest" ("The First Conversation", page 4 – see also pages 61 & 62).

In total there are "120,790 homes in Greater Cambridge today" (page 59).

38. As they are already committed to the "higher level of ambition for economic growth and development" specified in the Non-Statutory Spatial Framework outlined above and in the Devolution Deal with the government, it seems reasonable to assume that this inclines Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire District Councils towards the top end of this growth range of between 41,000 and 66,700 additional homes to be built over the next 20 years to 2040, i.e., towards an additional 2,900 additional homes per year rather than 1,800 at the lower end (and 1,675 per year in the current Local Plan up to 2031). An increase at the top end of this range would be an increase of **55 per cent** in the total number of homes over the next 20 years. As "The First Conversation" itself 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” (“Greater Cambridge Local Plan: The First Conversation”, Issues and Options consultation document, January 2020, pages 4, 59, 61 & 62).

66,700 additional homes are equivalent to nearly 17 Southern Fringe developments, or 7 Northstowes.

39. Another way of putting this is that ***over the next 20 years, half as many homes would be added in Greater Cambridge to the total achieved in the previous 2,000.*** Even at the government’s mandatory minimum, the total number of homes would be increased by one third.

40. When I asked about this in “The Big Debate” at the Corn Exchange earlier this year – the Head of the Shared Planning Service replied that “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.” As “the recent high level of jobs growth” is indeed “continuing” – see paragraphs 37 & 44 of this paper – there is a ready supply of 135 hectares of land already allocated and available for additional economic development/jobs, and the government is pressing hard for economic growth in our area, I did not find this response reassuring. A reaction supported from the same platform by another speaker, Meredith Bowles of Mole Architects, who in response to the Head of Shared Planning’s comment, noted the “massive growth already going through” and said that the issue of growth “shouldn’t be downplayed”. Neither should it be. *This imminent issue is far too important for our City’s and our neighbours’ future to be other than at the very forefront of all our minds.*

National imperatives

41. Increasing the pressure for high growth on our Local Plan authorities are particular imperatives in two already mentioned government documents. The first is the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) – the second the government’s “Local Industrial Strategy”.

42. As explained above, the Combined Authority is responsible for deciding the region’s Non-Statutory Strategic Spatial Framework, which is based in the “higher level of ambition for economic growth and development” it has set. This derives in significant part from the exhortation in the government’s National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), within which local planning authorities are also required to plan – and of which the government takes account in the employment and housing targets it sets for individual planning authorities:

“At the heart of” the NPPF “is a presumption in favour of sustainable development”. Its “core principles” include a responsibility on planning authorities to “*proactively drive and support sustainable economic development to*



...over the next 20 years, half as many homes would be added in Greater Cambridge to the total achieved in the previous 2,000.

deliver the homes, business and industrial units, infrastructure and thriving local places that the country needs.” [my emphasis] [National Planning Policy Framework, pages 4 & 5]

43. The second document is the government’s “Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Industrial Strategy: A Partner in the Oxford – Cambridge Arc”, “Priorities for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough”. [HM Government, July 2019 – Foreword signed by the Business Secretary, the Mayor of the Combined Authority and the Chairman of the Business Board]. This expresses in no uncertain terms the government’s pressure for major development in Cambridge. It embodies “three priorities”, starting with, “Improve the long-term capacity for growth in Greater Cambridge”; and the third is “Expand and build on the clusters and networks that have enabled Cambridge to become a global leader”. Representative passages are:

“Greater Cambridge is a magnet to companies from across the globe and the home of world leading digital ... and life science clusters. Its labour supply and research and innovation reputation are of the highest order. But there are signs that constraints are starting to bite ... housing, energy capacity and transport issues will significantly reduce the success of Greater Cambridge if not dealt with [water supply might be added to this list⁵]. Local partners *will* act, with government’s support to reduce the risk of any stalling in the long-term high growth rates Cambridge has enjoyed for several decades. This *will* be achieved by the Combined Authority and local government investing heavily in housing, transport and infrastructure ... *Keeping Cambridge strong is crucial* to leveraging the strengths of this globally-important and hugely successful cluster *for the greater benefit* of the two other economies [elsewhere in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough] and *the UK as a whole*.” [my emphasis, page 15]

“... the success of Greater Cambridge cannot be taken for granted. There are serious risks that without investment in housing, transport and infrastructure that the area needs, the global businesses there may take flight to more attractive global centres of innovation-based growth and it will make it harder to achieve the national 2.4 per cent R&D target. *Avoiding long-term risks to the productivity and growth of the local and national economy requires a focus on these issues in Greater Cambridge and its business base*.” [my emphasis, page 16]

44. Local voices sing from the same song sheet – see “Call to support Cambridge region as growth outstrips UK’s”, *Cambridge Independent*, March 18-24, pages 44 & 45. This reports the findings of a study by the Centre for Business Research at the University of Cambridge – commissioned by Cambridge Ahead whose view is reported as:

5. See <https://www.cambridgeindependent.co.uk/news/water-company-forum-divided-about-cambridges-development-9089349/>.

See also <https://www.cambridge-water.co.uk/media/2546/final-wrmp-2019-cambridge-water.pdf>.

For example, section 1.8, page 19

“The acceleration of knowledge intensive employment through the uncertainties of the Brexit debates is striking. Cambridge’s contribution is a matter of national significance and much of the economic growth we are seeing here would be lost to the UK if it were not happening in the Cambridge area. It is therefore essential that central and local government work together urgently to track this growth and increase transport and housing capacity in greater Cambridge. If this is not done, acute stresses in congestion and house prices and rents will act as a brake on future growth to the detriment of the local area and the country as a whole.”

Matthew Bullock, Vice-Chairman, Cambridge Ahead and Master Emeritus of St Edmund’s College, Cambridge.

45. Prominent members of Cambridge Ahead are the Grosvenor Group and Jesus College/Pigeon who will have answered the Call for Sites with bids for development in the Green Belt in the beleaguered precious gap between Cambridge’s new city edge and its necklace of villages – in this instance Great Shelford, Harston and Hauxton.⁶ [See paragraph 20 above]

46. Reference in these imperative statements to the climate emergency, to the personal, social, place and environmental effects of such growth and to the correction of chronic regional imbalance is notable by its absence. The Local Industrial Strategy is totally silent on these existential matters. On the other hand, in the same Cambridge Independent piece, Cambridge Ahead does report the recent establishment of a quality of life group. Noting that it has taken 23 years to do this since its inception, some with a jaundiced eye might see it as a recently affixed fig-leaf.

Very close to home

47. The effects of removing these vexing obstacles to national economic growth by extra investment in additional housing, transport and other infrastructure, would be very close to home. The economic growth that underlies the startlingly high level of housing growth countenanced in the emergent Local Plan – at whatever end of the range in the “The First Conversation” – is expected to be “disproportionately located” in “six key districts” in Cambridge. These are: “Cambridge City Centre”; “Cambridge Station, CB1 and Hills Road”; “Cambridge Biomedical Campus and Southern Fringe”; “Cambridge Science Park and Northern Fringe”; “West Cambridge”; and “Cambridge East”.

“Collectively, these sites account for 63% of all jobs within the Cambridge urban area, and 40% of all jobs within Greater Cambridge. Growth is expected to be *disproportionately located* in these areas, which benefit from agglomeration and good labour market accessibility.”

“Future growth is expected to be focused at such sites.” [my emphasis] (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, Local Transport Plan, pages 94 & 96).

6. To see the full membership of Cambridge Ahead, visit: <https://www.cambridgeahead.co.uk/our-members/>

48. Already in the here and now, the “six key districts” are struggling with their inability to date to reduce private vehicle traffic and peak-time congestion levels – and to provide adequate public transport. As has been noted, the Greater Cambridge Partnership’s traffic reduction target, which was 10 per cent below 2011 levels, is now nearly 25 per cent below current levels to provide the conditions essential for a reliable and frequent bus service, which is a key part of the public transport repertoire – as the Combined Authority and the Greater Cambridge Partnership rightly emphasise (see respectively, “Strategic Bus Review”, and “City Access Programme”). It could be said that here and now, some years before a number of important transport initiatives go live, we are actually going backwards and have been for some time. And this at the very same time as the economic growth advocates nationally and locally are urging us to go up a gear so that our contribution to the global/national economy does not “stall” – without regard, it appears, for the social, environmental and climate emergency consequences.

49. My home area, Trumpington, is greatly affected by one of the six “key districts” – the Cambridge Biomedical Campus, which is on our “doorstep”. As already noted, the Campus’s “... ambition is to become one of the largest internationally competitive concentrations of healthcare-related talent and enterprise in Europe...” (Campus Transport Strategy and Implementation Plan, 2018, page 9). The Campus’s approved extension is currently being implemented and will increase the number of staff working there from 17,250 now to 26,000 by 2031 and up to 30,000 beyond then (building on the 56 per cent growth in jobs on the Campus between 2011 and 2020 anticipated in the Campus’s 2017 draft Transport Strategy). In addition to this, the number of patients and visitors is growing significantly with the recent arrival of the Royal Papworth Hospital, the future development of the Cambridge Children’s Hospital and Cambridge Cancer Hospital – and on top of that the planned conference centre and hotel. This is very close to home indeed – and is replicated to a greater or lesser degree in all of the other five key districts.

A key local driver

50. Despite not having the statutory power, the Combined Authority, and its Mayor in particular, is in practice a key local driver, given his hotline to government ministers of a similar political kidney. The Authority’s plans are influenced by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Economic Commission, which the Authority set up to give it advice. The terms of reference for the Commission’s Report were set by the Authority, which adopted the Report in 2018. The terms ask how high economic growth rates are to continue to be achieved, not whether they should be; and make no reference at all to the environment or climate change – a fact fully reflected in the pages of the Commission’s Report which, astonishingly, contain no substantive mention of the environment or climate change. Its conclusions include the following –

“Cambridge is at a decisive moment in its history where it must choose whether it wants to once again reshape itself for growth, or let itself stagnate and potentially wither ...” (Report, Executive Summary, ninth page)

“... a dispersal strategy (for spatial development) is unlikely to be successful, as it is “agglomeration” ... that attracts companies to the area. Other options, such as densification, fringe growth, and transport corridors all have potential benefits, and should be pursued to an extent, though none should be taken to its extreme.” (tenth page)

COMMENT: Dispersal of housing development to significant clusters to conserve Cambridge’s “special character” through the Green Belt separation between Cambridge and its “necklace of villages”, is fundamental to the current adopted Local Plan – following major releases of land from the Green Belt in the preceding 2006 Plan in the “Southern Fringe”, which are reaching fruition now. To date the City Council has resisted further releases of land from the Green Belt for development. Further “agglomeration”⁷ associated with growth of the Cambridge Biomedical Campus, “fringe growth” and, possibly to a lesser extent, “transport corridors” would be direct threats to the remaining area of Trumpington’s Green Belt.

The Commission’s Report continues, “... the local business environment is unique in the UK ... with a business growth which is self-perpetuating and strongly supported by local characteristics ... many innovation-rich firms, if pushed to move, would relocate abroad. This highlights the importance of this area to the national economy ...” (tenth page) “... the knowledge-intensive sectors in and around Cambridge and the southern part of the area are strongly clustered, densifying and highly dependent on their location ... it is Cambridge or overseas.” (page 11) [my emphasis] “Ensuring that Cambridge continues to deliver for KI (knowledge intensive) businesses should be considered a nationally strategic priority.” (page 11); and,

“... the levels of planned housing⁸ are insufficiently high to accommodate the existing, let alone anticipated growth in the economy ... We believe the accumulated housing deficit in Cambridge and Peterborough is so acute that the local authorities should re-examine their assessments of housing need, setting higher numbers, which at least reflect under-delivery” (page 12); and,

“A package of transport and other infrastructure projects to alleviate the growing pains of Greater Cambridge should be considered the single most important infrastructure priority facing the Combined Authority in the short to medium term.” (page 13).

7. The Independent Economic Commission’s membership can be found at: <https://www.cpier.org.uk/media/1671/cpier-report-151118-download.pdf>

It includes Matthew Bullock and Dr David Cleavelly, two of Cambridge Ahead’s Honorary Vice Chairmen.

8. i.e., the commitment in the current Local Plan to provide an additional 33,500 homes by 2031.

The Commission’s conclusions and recommendations on health and well-being, education and skills are scant. There are *none* on the environment or climate change (pages 14 to 17).

51. It appears that as far as the Combined Authority and its “Independent Economic Commission” are concerned, the high level and form of economic growth and development in and around Cambridge they envisage, is already *a done deal* – at the outset of the process to review and renew the 2017-2040 Greater Cambridge Local Plan – and before we, the public have had any real say.

52. As observed above, Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council, as constituent members of the Combined Authority and parties to the Devolution Deal, are in practice committed to the higher level of economic growth and development as the basis for our joint Local Plan. Though this is not stated explicitly in “The First Conversation”, it does say very significantly:

“The Councils have committed to a goal of doubling the total economic output of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough area over 25 years [measured as Gross Value Added – GVA – which measures the value of goods and services produced in the area]. This vision formed part of the devolution deal with government which created the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority. It has implications for future jobs and homes growth in our area” (page 51).

It is this same “vision” which underpins the high economic growth agenda of the government, the Combined Authority and its Independent Commission, and of Cambridge Ahead.

Alternative futures must be assessed

53. While this high ambition level of economic growth and its associated housing growth might be *one* proposition, alternative futures with lower levels of growth must also be assessed before this keystone to the new Local Plan is put in place. In this regard it is unfortunate that the “Greater Cambridge Local Plan: The First Conversation” did not include a sufficiently incisive question to ensure that consultees’ views on alternative futures were tested adequately. Instead, it blandly asked:

- a. 24. How important do you think continuing economic growth is for the next Local Plan? Please choose from the following options: Very important / Somewhat important / Neither important nor unimportant / Somewhat unimportant / Not at all important
- b. 32. Do you think we should plan for a higher number of homes than the minimum required by the government, to provide flexibility to support the growing economy? Please choose from the following options: Yes, strongly agree / Yes, somewhat agree / Neither agree nor disagree / No, somewhat disagree”. (This question omits a “No, strongly disagree” option).



The Commission’s conclusions and recommendations on health and well-being, education and skills are scant. There are *none* on the environment or climate change

Given their lack of context, the form of these questions makes it likely that there will be a significant number of positive answers from which, objectively, it will not be possible to discern anything about the level of growth the Greater Cambridge public prefers, if any.

54. It is also notable that there are no climate change and environmental impact assessments of these options in the “The First Conversation”, with which to inform our choice. The assessments which are reported relate solely to elements within the Plan rather than the total impacts of different growth options, which are vital. Therefore, *the sustainability assessment framework* proposed for the various stages of the Local Plan’s development is *significantly deficient*. Wider impact assessments at the level of whole growth options are essential but are not proposed (Sustainability Appraisal of Issues and Options: Non-Technical Summary, November 2019; Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report: Non-Technical Summary, December 2019).

55. So, in these two vital regards – whole growth option / alternative futures’ impact assessments and public views informed by them – we are boxing in the dark. This extraordinary situation must be remedied.

Where to build? Extra housing

56. And where is all the additional housing to be built – from the government’s obligatory minimum level of 41,000 between now and 2040, up to the 66,700 or beyond for the “flexibility” needed to accommodate continuation of the current high rate of job growth?

57. In “The First Conversation”, the Local Plan authorities adopt a non-committal approach to this awkward self-set question. They do not express a preference for the location of the associated housing growth amongst a number of options that are outlined: “Densification of existing urban areas”; “Edge of Cambridge – outside the Green Belt” – noting that Cambridge Airport is the only large site in this category and the Plan cannot rely on its availability unless or until Marshall’s obtain a replacement, which they have not as yet; “Edge of Cambridge in the Green Belt”; “Dispersal – new settlements”; and “Public transport corridors” (“The First Conversation”, pages 75 & 81 to 88. Useful information is given on the authorities’ “current approach to locating development” (pages 75-76). And it is noted that:

“The Green Belt covers around 25% of South Cambridgeshire. It adjoins much of the built edge of Cambridge and surrounds villages sitting within the Green Belt, including several of the largest villages.”

And that “... the Green Belt ... also restricts growth on the edge of Cambridge, a location that has sustainability advantages ... (and) recent changes also mean that alternatives have to be fully explored before land can be removed from the Green Belt” (page 79, para 5.2.4).

Presumably, we will have to wait for the draft Local Plan in the autumn to get a less

equivocal answer. This is not satisfactory.

58. And what does the high economic growth school of thought propose? In common with what appears to be its general approach to these matters, the government's economic growth silo does not address the question at all in our Local industrial Strategy.

59. The Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority expresses its preference in aspirational terms:

“The Combined Authority has also stated its ambition for everyone to have access to a good job within easy reach of home. To achieve this will require not only an increasing level of jobs, but also provision of high-quality housing and commercial spaces *within and near existing communities* to accommodate a growing population and workforce” (Local Transport Plan, page 14) [my emphasis].

60. As noted above, the Combined Authority's Independent Economic Commission's answer to the question is more forthright – viz. as near as possible to where the new economic growth is taking place:

“... a dispersal strategy (for spatial development) is unlikely to be successful, as it is “agglomeration” ... that attracts companies to the area. Other options, such as densification, fringe growth, and transport corridors all have potential benefits, and should be pursued to an extent, though none should be taken to its extreme.”

Thus, one of the options put forward by the City Council and South Cambridgeshire, the Local Plan authorities for the new Plan, which also has a significant place in the current one, “Dispersal – new settlements”, is dismissed out of hand.

61. The developers' answer leaves no room for doubt – build in the Green Belt. Witness likely responses to the Call for Sites (paragraph 20 above) and comments made by various agents, for example on the government's 2019 Housing Delivery Tests.

Where to locate? Jobs growth

62. And where would all the additional high-added value jobs be located? The Local Plan authorities' answer is difficult to discern at the moment. It could be read as – 135 hectares of readily developable land for employment purposes already exists, which should be more than enough?

“Through the allocation of sites (in successive Local Plans) and granting of planning permission there is a large supply (135 hectares) of employment land that continues to be developed. This includes developments in the centre of Cambridge around the station, and on the edges of Cambridge at the Cambridge Biomedical Campus and West Cambridge. There is also capacity at a range of sites outside Cambridge” (“The First Conversation”, page 53).

63. And the high economic growth school of thought – where does it stand on this question? I think it likely that a proportion of the 135 hectares is not in the locations desired by that school – for “agglomeration” reasons in particular. It is likely that pressure is being exerted now to take more land out of the Green Belt and other environmentally and place sensitive locations for additional high added value jobs so that it can be located as close as possible to the “six key districts” in Cambridge – to achieve the prized benefits of agglomeration, high academic reputation/return on land held – and global competitiveness in the national economic interest. Most, if not all of these locations are in the Green Belt encircling Cambridge and protecting its necklace of surrounding villages – which many argue contributes much to the “special character” of both – including the current Local Plan.

64. So, *the pressure is really on*. The high economic growth school of thought’s nostrum is – *Cambridge for high added value growth in the national economic interest* (or lose it overseas as the threat) – predominantly in Cambridge-located job growth, including substantial areas currently within the Green Belt. And for the large amount of additional housing needed to support it – mainly in the Green Belt as well plus a bit elsewhere – located as close as possible to the existing job growth for agglomeration reasons and to minimise the cost of the associated mainly tax-funded infrastructure. Sustainability an afterthought at best. *No matter what the collateral damage* this would undoubtedly cause to Cambridge and our neighbours’ quality of life and “special character”. Or is this slightly unfair?

A perfect storm?

65. Theoretically, there are two possible ways of viewing the situation we are in. To address the present reality as it is and the decisions that must be made. Or to embark on a deeper analysis and review of the growth and market driven national framework within which Local Plans are obliged to operate, enforced with the government’s formidable array of tools designed to have its way “in the national interest” – at the expense in our area of damaging beyond repair the special character of Cambridge and harming the quality of life of the marginalised local communities of Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire; and in doing this to take account of the Government’s imminent Planning White Paper⁹. The prime purpose of this paper, however, is to address the present reality which is both imminent and urgent. The deeper analysis must wait for another day.

66. Reference is made earlier in paragraph 23 of this paper to the possibility of a “perfect storm” brewing not far beyond the horizon. This is *not* an exaggeration. Powerful interests are focused on Greater Cambridge, and Cambridge in particular: the Government at national level; and “locally”, Cambridge University – for

9. See Statement by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on 12 March 2020: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2020/march/statement-on-planning-for-the-future/>

academic reputational and entrepreneurial considerations, and landholding (the Colleges in particular); life sciences research and development; Big Pharma and other commercial entities; property developers, agents and builders – all present in the membership of Cambridge Ahead ¹⁰. The National Planning Policy Framework demands that all development must be “sustainable” with “net biodiversity gain” – and at the same time demands that economic growth, particularly that which “is in the national interest” *must* be pursued in our globally competitive world. When these objectives conflict, as they do in our area, and push comes to shove, these powerful interests clearly prioritize high economic growth.

67. Less powerful public voices – many or most of whom are unaware of the even greater turbulence ahead – raise justified concerns about the very real climate emergency, social, environmental, and place consequences of the growth that is already occurring here and now – let alone in the “high ambition level for economic growth and development”. And argue for decent places to live in, which “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (National Planning Policy Framework, page 4, paragraph 7).

68. If not tended carefully, these seemingly irreconcilable views are likely to produce storm clouds ahead – not least in these Extinction Rebellion days.

69. *Remember the authorities are planning over the next 20 years to increase the existing number of houses in Greater Cambridge by between one third and one half to support a high ambition level of economic growth which aims over the next 30 years to double Gross Added Value from £22 billion to more than £40 billion a year across the Combined Authority’s area, a disproportionate part of which would take place in “six key districts”, all of which are in Cambridge. When in the here and now we are struggling not to fall even further behind remorselessly increasing traffic, congestion, delays and journey lengths – our place’s special character is beginning to be eroded before our eyes – and a Climate Emergency has been declared by the City Council. Are we being asked to sacrifice what we hold dear in the national economic interest, and, if so, what is our answer? Is not this growth beyond reason? And whose place is Cambridge anyway – does it belong to people who live here or the powers that be?*

70. I believe that without a constructively restraining hand on SS Cambridge’s boiler room and tiller, we are heading for a perfect storm – the consequences of which, if not forestalled, would harm many of our people, particularly but not only those who have at the same time both little and a lot to lose.

71. My conclusions on the present reality are expressed in the form of recommendations for action. They are not cast in stone – more a starter for ten.



Are we being asked to sacrifice what we hold dear in the national economic interest, and, if so, what is our answer?

10. <https://www.cambridgeahead.co.uk/our-members/>

Recommendations

Individually and collectively we should:

■ Express great concern at the social, climate emergency, environmental, place and other serious implications for our City and for Greater Cambridge more widely, of the unsustainably high levels of economic growth urged on us by the government in its Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Industrial Strategy of July 2019 – and in the “higher level of ambition for economic growth and development” planned for the Greater Cambridge area by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority/ Mayor in their “Strategic Spatial Framework and “Growth Ambition Statement”; a level to which, in the “The First Conversation”, our Local Plan authorities, Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council, state they are committed.

■ Urge the Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council to replace their commitment to this level of economic growth and development with a different commitment which facilitates truly sustainable growth for the commonweal – economic, social, place and environmental – which will deliver a net zero carbon near future, to which we understand Cambridge City Council to be committed – while also nurturing a sense of place and identity for the future which values what we are fortunate enough to have inherited from the past.

■ Note with alarm the incompatibility of the higher level of ambition for economic growth and development with the Intergovernmental Climate Change Panel’s call to cut global emissions in half by 2030 to have a chance of keeping global heating within safe limits; the Combined Authority’s less precise commitment “... to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 2050”; and Cambridge City Council’s Declaration of a Climate Emergency;

■ Urge that the Greater Cambridge Local Plan now in preparation, rejects as its basis the level of economic growth and development pressed upon us by the government and the Combined Authority, and mirrored in “The First Conversation’s” suggestion that “flexibility” may need to be included in the Plan through the provision of an additional 66,700 new homes during this period (2017 – 2040) should the recent high level of growth in the number of jobs continue;

■ While noting the ultimate power central government has to determine economic and housing growth in Local Plans, and seeking to support Cambridge City Council in its Declaration of a Climate Emergency – Urge Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council to keep economic growth and housing development in the Greater Cambridge Local Plan at the very least to the lower end of the number possible – and, preferably, well below the level of housing growth set as a minimum by the Government’s new “standard method” ;

■ Demand that as a next step in the development of the Local Plan, serious and active consideration be given to lower level growth options for alternative futures including: (i) capping jobs and housing growth at the already considerable level planned by 2031 in the currently approved Local Plan (33,500 additional homes between 2011 and 2031 and no more beyond that); and (ii) the government’s minimum housing growth target identified through its new “standard method” of around 41,000 additional homes between 2017 and 2040 (“The First Conversation”, pages 4 & 60/61);

■ Recommend that alternative futures to the higher ambition level of economic growth and development in and around Cambridge envisaged in the Strategic Spatial Framework, are assessed and the findings made public before this keystone to the new Greater Cambridge Local Plan is put in place – including the options specified in the preceding recommendation. This assessment to be at whole option level to allow informed comparison between them, and to include a full environment/ climate change impact assessment;

■ Recommend that full assessments are made of the economic, social, traffic/transport, climate emergency, environmental and place implications of the higher level of ambition for economic growth and development for each of the six “key districts” in Cambridge as an important element in the assessments proposed in the two preceding recommendations;

■ Urge the two Local Plan authorities to include growth as an explicit and distinct theme in the forthcoming draft Greater Cambridge Local Plan, alongside the four themes adopted in “The first conversation”, so that it gets the dedicated attention and scrutiny it warrants;

■ Ask that the Local Plan authorities create more opportunities and allow more time for consultation and interactive engagement with the public during the preparation of the new Plan, including a 12-week consultation period on the draft Plan this autumn;

■ Last but not least, urge the Local Plan authorities and those who represent the high economic growth school of thought, locally and nationally, to develop an “agglomeration transfer/sharing model” which rejects the easy way out and replaces it with creative and practical determination to ensure that the less favoured/excluded parts of our county and country in the North and Midlands in particular, benefit equally with others from the high added value industry so successfully created in Cambridge.

David Plank

April 2020