

Big Issues for the Cambridge Area

Topic Summary: Social Cohesion. (Rob Howard and Alan Coulson)

Introduction

Introductory slides showed that the sub-region is one of the wealthiest parts of the country, but it is the worst in the country for inequality. There are areas of deprivation, and an increasing elderly population, social isolation, immigration, housing and lack of appropriate education are likely to be particular problems.

Issues

Harry Gelsthorpe led the discussion and began by asking how many of the class were born in Cambridge. Only 3 people were. He described his impression that people used to be more sociable, and may still be so in poorer areas of the city, but that changes in, for example, work practices mean that people in wealthier areas with larger houses tend to leave in their cars and have relatively little interaction with their neighbours.

Increasing population mobility has led to fragmentation of families and hence greater social isolation of older people (in particular for less mobile older people). The correlation of social isolation with depression is well established. Social media are probably not a compensation for most older people, but this should change with time. The benefits of voluntary work to both the volunteer and the recipient were emphasised.

Regarding housing, the importance to social cohesion of integrating social and private housing ('pepper-pot' planning) was raised. This is, in fact, happening and there is an increasing proportion of social housing. There is currently £70M available for social housing in Cambridge. However, Cambridge is very packed and it is not easy to find places to build. It was suggested that many old people live in unnecessarily large houses that could be replaced by smaller dwellings. There is a lack of flats for older people in Cambridge. Most are aimed at students. Council house building is about to restart.

Several aspects of education were discussed. There was a feeling that more vocational training would be of benefit both for individuals (giving young people a sense of purpose) and for the local high-tech industries. There was some discussion as to whether we should, in fact, be encouraging more high-tech industries but it was felt impossible to stop.

It was felt that young people would benefit from being taught how to manage their finances. Some 5% of people in Cambridge are illiterate, another isolating factor. Fixing this is not simply a matter of improved schooling. Dyslexia and ADHD, for example, are contributing factors but it was thought that voluntary input could help.

Alcohol abuse is a major problem, but young people appear to be drinking less. Rough sleeping is a problem but is being addressed by, for example, Jimmy's and churches. Winter fuel allowance can be diverted to Jimmy's by those who can afford to. It was felt that, in general, our attitudes towards the underprivileged have to change.

It was suggested that some problems might be alleviated if employment was more local, in particular in nearby market towns.

There was suggested that when thinking about problems such as funding the NHS (for future discussion) we should look ahead to 2030 and not be constrained by current legal and political restrictions.

Harry ended a lively discussion by saying that he detected an upbeat feeling.

