

Agriculture and Green Spaces

Big Issues for the Cambridge area

U3AC meeting of 15 November 2017, chaired by Bruce Knight.

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Agriculture, science and technology

Cambridge should be more widely promoted as the leading centre of agricultural science and technology in the UK. It boasts a significant presence of public sector institutions as well as the UK headquarters of many global agri-tech companies. There is a perceived need for an umbrella organisation that promotes Cambridge as a centre of agricultural excellence.

The agri-tech sector already contributes significantly to employment and training opportunities in the wider Cambridge area. However it is often seen as the poor relative of the Biotech sector, which is considered to be more 'sexy'.

Cambridge is located in a highly productive agricultural area but the local farming industry faces plenty of fresh new challenges as well as opportunities. With more land given over to wind farms and solar panels, for example, there is a comparable reduction in output of conventional crops or livestock. At the same time, the developing use of satellites and drones is beginning to play a big role in reducing wastage on farms.

Over the long term, there is concern that the Fenland region could become increasingly vulnerable to the threat of sea-level rises. Meanwhile farm productivity in Fenland is beginning to witness a gradual deterioration in soil quality.

The threat of a ban on glyphosate is of great concern to the farming industry. If it is applied, there will be knock-on effects on the region's production mix.

Globally, the need for increased food production is growing rapidly, and this can be expected to generate conflicts between different interests. And with the more immediate approach of Brexit, it remains likely that the local farming industry will continue broadly to abide by existing (and future) EU rules. Security of food supplies is critical and with farming yields having seemingly plateaued in the last ten years, this is likely to become critical. However with presently 20% of produced food going to waste there are significant opportunities to improve this security. In Cambridgeshire 40% of the strawberry crop goes to waste.

There were no statistics available on the amount of GM research that is conducted in the Cambridge area.

There may be an issue with the decommissioning of earlier agri-chemical sites. Housing has been built on what was the Fison site but extensive site decontamination had to be carried out.

The work of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) covers all matters with a direct or indirect impact on food and feed safety, including animal health and welfare. Our agri-companies will need to continue to collaborate with this agency in a post-Brexit UK.

There is evidence that both the commercial and public funded agri-research agencies tend to work in silos and collaboration levels need to improve to ensure the Cambridge agri-tech bubble continues to have a global impact.

Green spaces

The Cambridge area has a clear need for more and better protected reserves around the city itself, not just for conservancy reasons but to provide health benefits to the urban and peri-urban community. The north-east side of the city is currently poorly served in this respect, although country parks and cycleways are being proposed as a new link between Cambridge and the imminent Waterbeach housing development (15,000 new homes), with the involvement of the National Trust. (The existing agricultural producers there will be directly affected.)

The east of the city is still awaiting decisions on an orbital road and the Wing Development of 1,300 homes by Marshall Group Properties, behind the car sales sites on Newmarket Road (between the Cemetery and Park & Ride). In general, more parkland and accessible open spaces are required. Wherever new house building is proposed there is a need to increase the ratio of open space to each newly built area. Marshalls have proposed retaining existing woodland and creating open public space with sports facilities and allotments.

The Greater Cambridge Partnership is responsible for the Greenways project that aims to establish a high-quality network of 12 separate routes into Cambridge from surrounding towns and villages. They will primarily be commuter cycle paths but with additional benefits to pedestrians, horse riders and leisure.

The Cam Valley Forum and other voluntary environmental groups have stimulated an encouraging level of local commitment to conservation in different communities around the city. This is a promising sign, particularly as this work in places such as schools can help break down social disadvantages and exclusion.

Do all Cambridgeshire residents know where they can go for a walk?
Information on access to existing open spaces in the greater Cambridge area should be more readily available than at present.

Better communication with the local commercial farmers is suggested, and they in turn could be encouraged to be more welcoming and allow visitors. Pemberton Land provide limited access along footpaths and bridleways but they could provide more accessibility (though controlled) to their commercial activities. There is no City Farm in Cambridge, Peterborough or Ely.

Water management and conservancy

In view of the ongoing and substantial housing development around the area, there is concern that water supplies across the area are beginning to need much better informed planning scenarios, for both water and sewage, than hitherto.

Cambridge is dependent on a chalk aquifer, which lies to the south of the City. These have been deteriorating in quality over a number of years because of rising nitrate concentrations in the raw water. This is mainly as a result of historical farming practices and land use. Many of the sources are now close to, or at risk of, exceeding the limit required for nitrate in drinking water. Nitrate filtration plants are planned for the medium term but longer term 'catchment management' is necessary in collaboration with the landowners to reduce the nitrogen input at source.