

2030 vision for the Cambridge sub-region

Topic summary: Business and retail

Issues

- The city's quality of life is declining. Growth, if poorly handled, could stifle it. Quite apart from the impact on the existing population, this creates serious problems for businesses and institutions trying to attract skilled staff.
- Although the sub-region makes a significant contribution to the national economy, there is a high degree of unanimity that it is not achieving its full potential. The current Structure Plan and the City's Local Plan may be good plans but we need to think further ahead and more broadly if the sub-region's potential is to be fully exploited.
- Local government, business and university could collaborate more effectively.
- The administrative boundaries and local government set-up do not reflect the reality of a cross-boundary local economy (although, on the development of the urban extensions, the local authorities are collaborating far better than in the recent past).
- Transport infrastructure is woefully inadequate and there is a desperate need of affordable housing for both existing workers and new incoming skilled workers.
- Restrictions on state aid, the inability to raise local taxes and issue investment bonds inhibit the funding and initiation of infrastructure improvements.
- The private sector invests to make money. Public sector participation – involving a degree of risk – is essential for infrastructure and social housing.
- The city's cultural and sporting life tends to be dominated by the older university and its colleges. There are some excellent initiatives (by the university museums and in the Festival of Ideas) but the lack of a large performance hall, the concentration of sports facilities in college ownership and so on prevent an appropriate scale of activity.
- Debate on economic and development matters tends to be city-centric. And yet it is becoming apparent that the centre of this green belt-encircled historic market town will be unable to support endless peripheral expansion without further affecting quality of life.

Propositions

- Central government must be persuaded that the sub-region has a massively important role to play in the UK economy for which it requires both support and autonomy.
- The 'Cambridge brand' is extremely strong. Instead of restricting it to the city, the opportunity should be grasped to expand its coverage (and reduce the pressure on the city). Such an extension might be to the area within 25 miles radius of the city or to the LEP area (which includes Peterborough and, most significantly, the new Alconbury EZ). The physical and political form of the sub-region needs to be 're-imagined'.
- If the sub-region is to develop its full potential, it must acknowledge the pull of London and strengthen links to the capital. Chesterton Parkway promises well. Stansted, which can handle aircraft up to Heathrow standards should also be exploited for its 'linking' potential.
- In parallel with the 'current' Structure Plan, a long-term, cyclically adjustable 'concept' plan and a fast, locally autonomous control system should be adopted to enhance aspiration and nurture innovation and regional integration.
- Local leadership should be simplified and more visionary – and fulfil a 'championship' role. There needs to be a single, clearly articulated vision for the sub-region.
- Fiscal devolution is required – with control of the local growth dividend (eg bonds, tax revenues and increments) with the public and private sectors taking risks together.
- Businesses come and go but the sub-region has 'eds and meds' which, well tended, tend to stay put and grow. It should build on these and set targets for attracting top businesses.
- The older university (at the centre of the Cambridge brand) should play a major part in developing and protecting the brand regionally and internationally.
- A concerted effort should be made to find ways of more fully exploiting the economic potential of university research. Given the nature of the older university this will be difficult.
- The universities and colleges should continue to open up events and resources and generally help develop a more integrated city and sub-region.
- Businesses need greater freedom to operate and innovate and grow organically.
- In retail terms, historic Cambridge should not be allowed to become a clone city. The challenge of its summer-swamping by short-stay low-spend tourists needs addressing.

