

2030 vision for the Cambridge sub-region

Topic summary: Land use

Thought

- In terms of GVA per head of population, Cambridge is punching well above its weight in comparison with Reading, Milton Keynes, Guildford and Oxford. Growth in economic activity (number of employees) should avoid crowding and congestion: this suggests the adoption of high-density 'nodes' in the city and sub-region, linked by fast public transport.

Issues

- London's growing economy is drawing Cambridge and the sub-region into the capital's orbit.
- Current growth strategy is employment-led. Housing land is worth a lot more than land for other uses. It is therefore hard for planners to allocate land for uses other than housing.
- At present, the high-tech cluster may have reached a plateau (owing to lack of finance) and research activities funded by the public and charitable sectors are finding funding difficult. Retail development in the city centre has reached its limit for foreseeable future. The public sector (a major employer in city) is in decline. Tourism has growth potential (hotel operators seem to think so) but there is unease about its impact on historic city centre.
- Housing packages in the 2003 Structure Plan (only now being gradually implemented) are very large and dependent on the urban extension sites – giving little flexibility.
- Business feels constrained by planning bureaucracy and hampered by class use restrictions.
- Localism has undermined the ability of local politicians to develop long-term visions.
- Greater clarity is needed on the purpose and progress of the LEP (and Alconbury EZ).

Propositions

- A programme is needed to change perceptions (of both 'outsiders' and 'locals') as to what the 'Cambridge' area constitutes and as to what are 'central' city locations. In the case of the former, the LEP Peterborough/Alconbury/Cambridge/Stansted spine (with improved rail connection to Liverpool Street) is a potential 'driver' while at Cambridge city level it is the proposal for a new station and the growth of Addenbrookes and the northern fringe that have the potential for reshaping the city, deflecting it from its current focus on a single centre.
- The Green Belt and Green Fingers define both the setting and form of the city. Their combination of land, water and woodland ensures biodiversity, space for recreation and for agricultural land – some of which feeds the aquifers below. The Green Fingers should be inviolate and clear guidelines drawn up for any changes to the Green Belt.
- The Green Belt was subject to significant changes in the 2003 Structure Plan. That is an argument for not tampering with it next time round. However, the issue of ARM's expansion could conflict with such an approach. This, like the City's rejection of IBM in the mid 1960s, could be a defining moment in the sub-region's development.
- Economic activity thrives in 'nodes' (concentrations). Such employment 'nodes' at central and peripheral locations with good access to public transport should be given priority in land allocations. The environs of the Science Park and Ely stations are obvious possibilities.
- Future expansion on successful, fully developed areas (such as the Science Park) should be vertical. Instead of 2 stories, 4 or more should be possible. Greater flexibility on permitted use should be exercised.
- Allocating land for employment must be given the same attention as that for housing.
- Business start-ups should be integrated into the city.
- The present housing delivery system is failing to deliver in terms of quality and time. Local authorities should be given a greater role and power to control their finances.
- The guided-bus route should be exploited (and expanded with spurs) as a spine on which to locate additional housing settlements and small business hubs.
- The market towns should be expanded as business locations (also 'nodes') in order to create better two-way commuting flows. The towns' capacity to absorb more housing without losing their quality and character may be limited.
- Despite current difficulties, the public sector should develop an attractive vision, inspire confidence that policies will be maintained and ease the process of planning consent. Likewise, master-planning is essential if the public is not to be surprised by developments.
- There appears to be unanimity that the sub-region's local plans must be fully integrated but – despite the protestations of the politicians and officers – many doubt that the local authorities are truly collaborating. A joint vision and managed orderly development are needed.