

# The Growth of Cambridge

Peter Studdert exposes the strengths and weaknesses of UK city governance



1

Cambridge is a small city with a global reputation. People are often surprised that the population of the city is only 126,000 people, a figure that includes a large proportion of the 29,000 students who attend the city's two universities. However, Cambridge lies at the heart of a wider sub-region. South Cambridgeshire District surrounds the city like a doughnut; its 105 villages contain a larger population than the city (150,000 people), and the ring of market towns beyond bring the total sub-regional population to over 400,000.

This distributed spatial context has presented Cambridge with significant challenges of governance and political leadership, requiring close co-operation between the City and South Cambridgeshire Councils as planning authorities at the heart of the sub-region, and Cambridgeshire County Council as the authority responsible for transport and other strategic services.

Despite this complex governance structure, Cambridge has taken a proactive approach to meeting the challenges of growth that has its origins in the Cambridge Futures initiative of the late 1990s. Up to that point the planning strategy for the city had been shaped by the 1950 Holford Plan which asserted that Cambridge should not grow beyond a population of 100,000 or else it would lose its status as the 'only true University town'. Holford's assertion that 'one cannot make a good expanding plan for Cambridge' became the guiding principle for the subsequent 50 years, and the Green Belt was tightly drawn around the city to reinforce the point. Housing was exported to the surrounding 'necklace villages' and to new settlements beyond the Green Belt at Bar Hill and Cambourne. New jobs were decentralised to low-density rural business parks, and a proposed out-of-town shopping centre at Duxford, south of Cambridge, was only averted at the last minute by the decision of the Secretary of State John Gummer in 1994.

1 North-west Cambridge local centre, photograph University of Cambridge

## GROWTH STRATEGY

Cambridge Futures challenged this centralising process, and as a joint initiative between 'town and gown' stimulated an open debate about the choices open to Cambridge and the economic, environmental and social consequences of those different choices. Out of this debate came a balanced strategy that accepted the need to accommodate growth, and to take a sequential approach to its location which started with urban regeneration, then moved to a review of the inner boundary of the Green Belt, then to finding a location for a new settlement beyond the Green Belt with good transport connections back to Cambridge. The strategy was predicated on a vision of compact new neighbourhoods built around convenient public transport and cycling links to centres of employment, and with excellent local facilities and easy access to the surrounding countryside. This built on the characteristics that already made Cambridge such an attractive place to live.

The 2003 Cambridgeshire Structure Plan became the main vehicle for developing this strategy. In setting the basis for the review of the inner boundary of the Green Belt in subsequent Local Plans it allocated four areas for major growth:



2

to the south, new neighbourhoods around Trumpington and a new biomedical campus at Addenbrooke's Hospital; to the north west, two new neighbourhoods including one specifically for University expansion; employment growth around a new station to the north close to the Science Park; and crucially major development to the east, relocating the privately-owned Cambridge Airport and establishing a new neighbourhood of 12,000 homes and a new centre to accommodate uses that would complement and relieve pressure on the historic centre. All this new development was to be within a 25-minute cycle ride from the centre of the city. The Structure Plan also identified Northstowe, eight miles to the north west of Cambridge, as the best site for a new settlement of 10,000 homes linked to Cambridge by the Cambridge to Huntingdon Guided Busway.

This ambitious strategy had a natural fit with the Labour Government's 2004 Sustainable Communities Plan, and the Cambridge authorities were rewarded with generous funding to establish Cambridgeshire Horizons as a locally-controlled delivery vehicle to co-ordinate the implementation of the strategy, and most crucially to develop a vision for the quality of the new neighbourhoods that were to be created. A particular focus was the adoption in 2010 of a Quality Charter for Growth that was drawn up with the help of Nicholas Falk at URBED following study tours to exemplar developments elsewhere in the UK and northern Europe. The Charter focussed on the four 'C's of Community, Connectivity, Climate and Character, which became the template against which the developing masterplans were assessed. The commitment to quality was reinforced by the appointment of an expert Quality Review Panel to advise the Joint Development Control Committee that was established to oversee the planning of the new communities, and which has survived the winding-up of Cambridgeshire Horizons following the cuts of 2011.

### SUCCESSSES

Twelve years on from the adoption of the Structure Plan, and following an economic recession and changes in national and local political control, how has the strategy stood up and what lessons can be learned about city governance?

The market downturn that affected most of the UK has in reality had little impact on Cambridge, and the city's economy continues to expand at a dramatic rate, fuelled particularly by the biotechnology and pharmaceutical sectors linked to Addenbrooke's Hospital. The growth of Cambridge University is continuing particularly in research, and it has strengthened its position as one of the top universities in the world. Its North West Cambridge development is on site and will provide 3,000 new homes, half of which will be affordable homes for University key workers, as well as 2,000 new student rooms and 1 million square feet of research and academic floorspace.

2. North-west Cambridge postgraduate housing, photograph University of Cambridge

To the south of the city around Trumpington a new community of 4,000 homes is well advanced, providing new homes including 40 per cent affordable homes, together with new primary schools and a new secondary school and two new country parks linking to the wider countryside. The development provides new homes close to Addenbrooke's Hospital and its Biomedical Research Campus, and is linked to the city centre by guided bus and segregated cycle paths. The Abode development by Proctor and Matthews for Countryside Homes has won the top prize in the 2014 Housing Design Awards, building on Countryside's earlier success in winning the 2008 Stirling Prize for the Accordia development, which was the largest regeneration site within the city. Judged against the four 'C's of the Quality Charter, the Trumpington development sets a high benchmark.

### SETBACKS

Progress elsewhere has been slow. Although regeneration of the former railway land around Cambridge Station is beginning to move ahead, the new station on the north side of Cambridge is not due to open until 2018, delaying the much needed regeneration of Chesterton railway sidings and the reconfiguration of the Cambridge Sewage Treatment Works. A Joint Area Action Plan is in preparation to guide the development of this area. The fragmentation created by privatised public transport and utility companies has made co-ordination a particular challenge, adding layers of additional complexity to an already complex development challenge.

Progress has also been slow in starting work on the new settlement at Northstowe. This has principally been caused by a failure of central government, which deferred crucial investment in the congested A14 road corridor in the 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review, together with Treasury Green Book rules preventing the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) from playing the lead role in driving forward investment in their supposed flagship development. Northstowe has been delayed by wrangles over infrastructure provision and affordable housing, and although Gallagher Estates, the HCA's private sector partner and the original promoter of Northstowe, has secured outline planning permission for the first 1,500 homes on the northern green field element of the development, the original aspirations for a model Eco-town have long since been watered down.

The biggest disappointment of all has been the inability to relocate Cambridge Airport to allow for the essential eastern expansion of the city. After years of searching for a satisfactory relocation site, the Marshall group which owns the airport and which was an active



3

**Locally controlled Development Corporations, building on past experience ... would be the model best equipped to address the complex challenges that developments at this scale have to overcome**

participant in the growth strategy from the days of Cambridge Futures, decided in 2011 to remain on their current site for the foreseeable future, and only develop relatively small sites adjacent to but outside the airport perimeter. This has given the local authorities major headaches as they update their Local Plans, and South Cambridgeshire in particular has had to allocate new sites around Cambourne to the west of Cambridge and at a further new settlement on surplus Defence Estates land at Waterbeach to the north of Cambridge to make up the shortfall in housing. A faint hope has arisen, however, from the announcement that the US Air Force is vacating their base at Mildenhall by 2020, fifteen miles to the east of Cambridge and an ideal place to relocate the airport; too late to influence this round of plan-making but in time to underpin the next.

In spite of the abolition of regional planning and the winding-up of Cambridgeshire Horizons in 2011, the local authorities around Cambridge have maintained their commitment to the growth strategy through a joint Memorandum of Co-operation on housing growth, and have retained a small Joint Planning Unit within the County Council. Closer joint working is also a prerequisite of the City Deal agreed between the core authorities, Cambridge University, the Local Enterprise Partnership and the Government in 2014.

**CONCLUSION**

The Cambridge story highlights the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the UK delivery model for accommodating growth. It expects local authorities to operate largely as regulators of a dysfunctional market rather than as active partners with the private sector. When the local authorities rise to the leadership challenge with vision and tenacity, and where the market works well, as at Trumpington, North West Cambridge and many of the regeneration sites, high quality development can be brought forward to meet demand.

But the regulatory model struggles to bring forward larger new developments in challenging locations such as at Northstowe and East Cambridge. Locally controlled Development Corporations, building on past experience of the New Towns and more recent northern European practice, would be the model best equipped to address the complex challenges that developments at this scale have to overcome. Lessons can also be learned from the 2012 Olympics and the way in which a well-resourced public agency can deliver high quality large scale regeneration in a challenging location to a tight timetable, working in partnership with the private sector and with local authorities.

The need to provide new and affordable housing in places such as Cambridge deserves no less a priority than the Olympics. Given the right resources and more purposeful public/private



4

3-4 Green fingers run through Abode housing development at Great Kneighton, Cambridge by Proctor and Matthews for Countryside Properties Pictures Peter Studdert

partnerships, Cambridge could become a showcase for how attractive new neighbourhoods can be created to support economic growth. A good start has been made around Trumpington and on the University's North West Cambridge development. But although design quality is high, delivery is slow and the larger sites need new locally controlled development agencies to drive them forward and to maintain a high quality vision. There also needs to be a far greater decentralisation of financial control from central government than that offered by the current City Deal, on the grounds that well-targeted public investment would be recouped many times over by the tax revenues that would flow from the wealth created. ●

Peter Studdert, Independent adviser on city planning and design based in Cambridge, Chair of the Quality Review Panel (London Legacy Development Corporation)