

Response to the Consultation on NE Cambridge proposed development

The NE Cambridge development, works against the commitment to act on the climate and biodiversity emergencies declared by the City Council.

A recent report 'Absolute Zero'¹ from researchers at Cambridge University argues that the most difficult problem in meeting our climate change obligations is cement. Its manufacture releases emissions regardless of which process is used to produce it, and there is no viable alternative in sight at the scale needed for current, let alone projected, use. Consequently, any attempt to convey an impression that the new development in NE Cambridge will be 'green' is misleading. Claiming that the development will be carbon neutral is incorrect, not least because it won't be taking into account all the carbon emissions produced overseas as a result of important building materials.

Development on the scale proposed in the area will put untenable strain on an already stressed water system.

Cambridge is experiencing rapid water depletion and increasingly poor water quality. Its iconic river, the Cam, has reduced flow and is experiencing higher pollution levels. It is predicted it will be stagnant within a very small number of years. The Cam and Granta now have a depth of 2 inches in places and at high summer the Granta has no flow. The chalk streams, described as the UK's rain forest since we have 85% of the global number of such streams, which feed the Cam, are drying up. The flow of the Cam is maintained by ground water pumped into it by Anglian Water which has also leaked polluted water directly into the Cam. There is a continuing groundwater emergency which the Environment Agency has failed to declare and so the alarm evident to many can be ignored by those with a 'growth at any cost' mindset. The NE Cambridge development will exacerbate the water shortage in the region.

Green spaces and biodiversity are already under development pressure.

The assertion that the NE Cambridge development will benefit local low income neighbourhoods is hard to justify. These neighbourhoods are already losing open space to development (eg the go-ahead for council homes building recently given on land taken from St Albans Road recreation land). Creating bridge and tunnel access to a supposedly 'high quality' recreational landscape, while not directly improving open spaces in Arbury, Abbey and Kings Hedges will exacerbate differences.

Moreover, claiming that introducing landscaped planting into what was previously a 'brownfield' site will increase biodiversity, may be disingenuous. According to Buglife in 2018, at least 12-15% of UK rare & scarce invertebrates are found on brownfield sites, including 194 invertebrate species of conservation importance

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https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/299414/REP_Absolute_Zero_V3_20200505.pdf?sequence=9&isAllowed=y

such as 50 red data book and 131 nationally scarce species; 50% of rare solitary bees & wasps and 35% of rare ground beetles. Brownfields are some of the UK's richest invertebrate sites on a par with ancient woodland.

Growth does not distribute widespread benefit

While the 'growth theory' approach to economics has promoted the idea that wealth 'trickles down' to those who are poorest, it manifestly doesn't. If it did, Cambridge would not be reported as the most economically divided city in the country. Cambridge ranked highest on the GINI co-efficient - 0.46 (0 is equality, 1 is complete inequality), by a survey of 58 cities measured by the Centre for Cities. Additionally, according to the ONS in 2019, Cambridge had one of the highest gender pay gaps in the country. As 'The Spirit Level' has amply demonstrated, from inequality follows, amongst other things, poorer health, higher teenage pregnancies, bigger prison populations and an eroded sense of community.

Cambridge Commons research shows that men in the most deprived areas in the city lived 9.3 years less than those in the least deprived; the differential for women is 7.4 years. The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment reports the gap in life expectancy between the least and most deprived areas in the city to be 'noticeably high' for both women and men. Differences between the poorest wards and the city as a whole reporting good and very good health relative to the national average is found to be statistically significant. Likewise, Cambridge is reported to have statistically significant higher than average levels of statutory homelessness, diabetes diagnosis, hospital stays for self harm and alcohol related harm, schizophrenia, bi-polar affective disorder and other psychoses.

Rampant house building does not satisfy housing demand nor bring prices down.

While Cambridge has seen the highest proportionate housing growth in England and Wales in the last 10 years (by 15%, almost twice the rate as London), unaffordability has risen, not fallen. According to research by the Centre for Cities which covered the 62 largest cities in the UK, Cambridge ranked 2nd on mean house prices in 2018 (but, in 2014, 62nd on mean welfare spend overall and per capita). 'Affordable homes' (priced at 80% of the market rate) in a city where house prices are inflated are not affordable to key workers such as nurses and teachers, and certainly not to others we depend on such as carers, bus drivers and shop assistants. Meanwhile, council homes do not provide the city with a permanent stock of homes for people on low incomes as long as there is the 'right to buy'.

Council tenants may buy their houses at 35% discount after 3 years tenancy (rising after 5 years, to a maximum of £84,000); their flats at 50% discount. Five years after their purchase, homeowners may sell their bought council house on the open market. Also, past experience suggests that developers approach council house owners with offers to help them buy the property and then sell it on. If national figures are anything to go by Cambridge can expect to lose 1 in 20 social homes (council and housing association homes) to the market between 2012 and 2022, as

calculated by the Local Government Association. Four in 10 of those bought are now owned by private landlords.

Growth means more pressure on already stressed infrastructure, while the city and region has an inadequate and environmentally polluting transport system

The A14 has just been widened at a cost of £1.5 billion, and is unlikely to be able to cope with the commuter traffic generated by the 20,000 proposed new jobs based in NE Cambridge. Trains to and from London are full, and at peak times are standing room only. The idea that residents moving into areas will take jobs in those same areas is fanciful, and cannot be assumed and certainly not enforced. The opposite is the case in new developments planned on live-work principles, from Milton Keynes to Poundbury. Creating more jobs (c20,000) than homes (8,000) can only make the housing and commuting situations worse. Moreover, Post-Covid 19, there is increasing evidence that there will be a reduced demand for offices as businesses are committing to reduce their office space, to benefit from more of the staff working at home.

The growth agenda will undoubtedly benefit College landowners, big private developers, estate agents and other members of corporate lobby group Cambridge Ahead, but this doesn't benefit residents, their associations and small independent businesses, whose voices need to be heard more loudly than powerful lobbies.

As an example of the failure of 'trickle down economics', and 'rising tides lift all boats' theories, Cambridge University is one of the unfairest employers in the city. Although the University adopted a living wage policy in 2018 for those it directly employs, only 8 of the 31 colleges paid all workers at or above a real living wage in late 2018 (£8.75), a time when Cambridge Colleges had a combined wealth of £6.9 billion². The college which paid worst (Robinson: with 128 staff on receiving below the real living wage, and with the lowest recorded wage of all the colleges of £7.38 an hour) has £89.5 million of assets, 25th out of the 31 colleges). Meanwhile, during the Covid-19 pandemic, some colleges (including Magdelene and Sydney Sussex), and the University Superannuation Fund have refused to negotiate lower rents for independent businesses. Two colleges stand to gain significantly, financially, by the NE Cambridge development, at the expense of local residents.

Indeed, the involvement of Cambridge University in planning for growth, continues the undemocratic position it has held in the City for centuries. It has to be made transparent, in order that it may be challenged. We should expect all proposals to be honestly assessed for environmental impacts from the proposal stage onwards and rejected if they cannot contribute to the rapid improvements needed to address the climate and biodiversity emergencies.

We should expect the City and its councillors to promote a vision for a just transition to a zero carbon city and area that reverses rapid biodiversity loss and

² <https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/17005>

then join with citizens to put it into effect. This includes the need to revive local democracy, with timely real consultation, rather than the promotion of schemes by developer-friendly planning departments.