

Valley Farm, Station Road, Meldreth

Axis Land Partnerships is promoting land at Valley Farm for delivery of mixed use development including new residential land uses and upgraded commercial land uses.

The site was previously submitted to the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service 'Call for Sites' exercise in 2020 that formed part of the evidence gathering for the emerging Greater Cambridge Local Plan (the emerging Local Plan). However, it was submitted as part of a larger site comprising of a number of separate parcels. The site is now submitted as single smaller opportunity.

The Site & Proposal

The site has an area of approximately 12ha and currently comprises a mix of previously developed land and agricultural land and buildings.

Proposed uses are for retention and redevelopment of the existing dilapidated commercial units on the site to provide enhanced commercial units and for delivery of new housing. Approximately 2.4ha of the site is currently given over to commercial land uses (providing in region of 7,000sq.m of floor area across a number of separate buildings), it is proposed that the existing commercial floor space would be retained (with potential alterations and enhancements) and that an additional 145-200 dwellings would be provided on the currently undeveloped parts of the site along with associated infrastructure.

In a statement on 26 January 2025, the Chancellor announced bold reforms of the planning system, in which she advocated 'new plans for more houses near commuter train stations to kick start economic growth'. The Government announced that 'Untapped land near commuter transport hubs will be unlocked to build new housing for working people, as part of bold new steps to reform the planning system and unlock growth to deliver win-win outcomes for the country and the economy'.

In light of the above announcement from Government, it is highly relevant to note that the Site lies next to Meldreth railway station, which is an intermediate stop on the Cambridge line, which runs between Hitchin on the East Coast Main Line and joins the West Anglia Main Line just south of the new Cambridge South railway station, which is scheduled to open in early 2026. A direct and high quality pedestrian cycle link to Meldreth has recently been provided through the site and this provides direct access to the platforms at Meldreth Station.

Alignment with National Strategy for Cambridge Biomedical Campus (CBC)

National Growth Strategy for Cambridge

In 2023, the then Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Michael Gove, presented a vision of significant growth in and around Cambridge, with particular focus on the life sciences sector and the pivotal role of the Cambridge Biomedical Campus (CBC). Peter Freeman, then Chair of Homes England, was appointed to chair a new Cambridge Delivery Group.

The government's commitment to accelerating growth in Cambridge was restated in Michael Gove's Written Ministerial Statement (WMS) of 26 March 2024¹ and the accompanying *Case for Cambridge*, with funding for key transport schemes and the development of growth plans relating to the CBC as well as the announcement of the creation of a Growth Company for Cambridge.²

A further WMS of 8 May 2024³ set out specific policy support for 'the early expansion and coherent delivery of this foremost UK life sciences cluster' at CBC. This WMS recognised that housing provision is a barrier to the growth of CBC. The new Growth Company was therefore tasked with supporting 'the accelerated delivery of any associated housing development and the provision of appropriate levels of affordable housing to meet the housing needs of those working at the campus'.

On 4 July 2024 a general election saw a change in Government, with Labour winning and forming a new Government. However, this change in national politics did not affect the continuing focus on Greater Cambridge as a location for significant growth. In his letter to local leaders of 23 August 2024,⁴ and then in his WMS 31 October 2024,⁵ the new Minister of State Matthew Pennycook confirmed the new Labour Government's support for 'ambitious and high-quality sustainable growth in Cambridge and its environs'. The leading role of Peter Freeman was also confirmed with his appointment to a new Cambridge Growth Company.

Supporting the Growth of the Cambridge Biomedical Campus

Alongside the evolution of national policy on Cambridge growth, Cambridge Biomedical Campus Limited (CBC Ltd), which brings together the tenants and landowners of the existing campus, commissioned Lichfields to carry out a review of the future housing needs of the growing campus workforce. The April 2024 report, entitled *Cambridge Biomedical Campus Housing Study*⁶ suggests that the major challenges for housing provision are affordability and travel accessibility.

With the number of people working at CBC anticipated to grow from 22,000 now to 40,000 in coming years, additional housing demand will be significant. The 2024 Housing Study concludes that there is a need for 4-5,000 affordable homes across tenures. Clearly it would be beneficial both to life sciences/medical business/organisations, and employees alike for homes to be built close to these jobs and with access via existing sustainable transport.

¹ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-03-26/hcws390>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-case-for-cambridge>

³ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-05-08/hcws447>

⁴ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66cdf3f68e33f28aae7e1f67/housing-minister-letter-to-greater-cambridge-leaders.pdf>

⁵ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2024-10-31/hcws181>

⁶ <https://cambridge-biomedical.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/CBC-Housing-Study-Report-Final-May24.pdf>

The 2024 Housing Study does not assess individual sites for their contribution to the housing needs of CBC. Rather, it sets out on page 6 ‘specific asks’ for strategic sites within each of three travel time zones: central catchment, middle catchment and wider catchment. Having regard to the map on page 6, the Site is identified to lie within the middle catchment, and the ask for this area is:

2. Sites well connected but further away from CBC, within our middle catchment, may be suitable to meet our central catchment asks, but otherwise should:

- reflect our ‘basic ask’ providing affordable homes suitable for CBC workers;*
- consider provision of housing to meet our specific housing needs of those in the biomedical sectors and professions; and*
- reflect our principles on placemaking and enhance accessibility to CBC.*

The 2024 Housing Study includes travel times maps for CBC on pages 6 and 25-27. While we agree that these maps give a good overview of the relative travel times, we believe that there is an insufficient level of granularity to guide policy makers.

We have therefore undertaken travel time modelling for the two most relevant modes of transport relevant to the site: cycling and train. The travel isochrone plans are appended to this submission. For cycling, the Site at Meldreth benefits from existing segregated cycle links which will be further improved as part of the Melbourn Greenway project being delivered by the Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP). Our modelling shows that cycle access to the Biomedical Campus can be achieved with a travel time of no more than 45 minutes. For train journeys, the Site is adjacent to Meldreth station, which will have direct rail half-hourly services to Cambridge South station when it is opened in early 2026. Journey times from the station to Cambridge South will be approximately 11 minutes. To Cambridge Central the journey time is around 15 minutes.

Growth of the CBC is of international importance, and recognised as such by successive governments. One of the principal barriers to growth is the availability of affordable and accessible housing in close proximity to the CBC. The Site would make a substantial contribution to the identified need for both market housing and, in particular, affordable housing, in a location just 11 minutes from the Campus via a high quality public transport corridor and which therefore could potentially be linked to employment at CBC.

Helping Deliver a New Local Plan

The strategy for the Greater Cambridge Local Plan set out in the First Proposals is *‘to direct development to where it has the least climate impact, where active and public transport is the natural choice, where green infrastructure can be delivered alongside new development, and where jobs, services and facilities can be located near to where people live, whilst ensuring all necessary utilities can be provided in a sustainable way’* (S/DS).

Most of the development identified for potential allocation in the First Proposals document prepared by the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service (GCSPS) (either existing allocations or new ones) is in locations where the required public transport does not currently exist and the delivery of which is outside the control of the Councils (e.g. Cambourne new allocation, Bourn Airfield, Waterbeach, Cambridge Airport). Other than faster delivery at Northstowe, no significant new allocations have been proposed that utilise and benefit from already functioning public transport infrastructure that has capacity, notably the rail network.

The Site is located adjacent to Meldreth Railway Station and therefore lies on an existing high quality public transport corridor. The typical 8-car train that stops at Meldreth in the morning and evening peaks has capacity for over 1000 passengers (the equivalent of 13 double-decker buses or 20 single-decker buses) as well as a considerably faster journey time avoiding any potential road congestion.

Furthermore, it should be noted that while previous Local Plans have tended to focus additional housing growth to the west, north west and north of the city of Cambridge in locations including Cambourne, Bourn Airfield, Northstowe, and Waterbeach, most of the growth in jobs and employment has taken place to the south and south-east of the city in locations such as the CBC, Babraham Research Campus, Granta Park, the Genome Campus, Melbourn Science Park, and the Chesterford Research Park – indeed significant additional jobs growth in these locations is predicted to occur over the new plan period. Given the significant job growth to the south of Cambridge (both past and future) it is clear that some additional housing growth should be directed to these areas, and particularly in locations that benefit from existing public transport infrastructure such as close to Meldreth railway station, rather than on proposed public transport infrastructure yet to be built, which may not ultimately be delivered.

The 2021 First Proposals suggested an average annual housing delivery rate of 2,111 (against a standard method requirement at that time of 1,769 dwellings). The 2023 Development Strategy Update proposed an increase to 2,463 homes per year, an uplift of 7,392 homes over the plan period (not including any buffer for flexibility). Since then, in December 2024, the standard methodology for calculating housing need has been revised, with the annual requirement for Greater Cambridge now standing at 2,309 per year. The local housing evidence base for the draft Regulation 18 Local Plan scheduled for consultation in Autumn 2025 will be revisited.

In addition, the 2023 Development Strategy Update recognised that higher levels of housing growth present delivery challenges. One way of dealing with this suggested in 2023 is a stepped housing trajectory, with higher rates later in the plan period. However, it will be difficult to meet further increases in identified housing need using existing approaches.

The Valley Farm site is readily deliverable with minimal external dependencies. High quality public transport infrastructure and segregated cycle routes, as required by the Local Plan strategy, already exist. Delivery of the site could begin within 3-4 years of allocation, with the majority of the up to 200 homes completed well within the first half of the plan period. Therefore, as well as potentially contributing towards the specific needs of CBC, this Site would enable the Greater Cambridge Councils to produce a sound and deliverable local plan, providing housing close to the major concentration of jobs and reducing the need to travel long distances.

Conclusion

The Site remains an excellent opportunity for the Greater Cambridge Local Plan to allocate growth for a sustainable development that can be delivered early in the plan period, that supports the growth of the internationally important CBC, that lies on an existing high quality public transport corridor within a few minutes of Cambridge South and Cambridge Central. This Site is a strong strategic fit with both national and local policies.