

## Wendy Blythe Chair's report – FeCRA AGM 2025

At our last AGM, we spoke about the growth agendas for Cambridge and this region's water scarcity. The Chancellor Rachel Reeves said in January that the Oxford to Cambridge area has the "potential to be Europe's Silicon Valley" and announced plans to create an 'Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor' which she said could add up to £78 billion to the UK economy by 2035. In a shift away from the Conservative "levelling up" agenda she focused on unlocking new housing and laboratory developments in and around Cambridge, as well as improving transport links between Oxford and Cambridge. She highlighted that the Environment Agency has lifted its objection to plans for 4,500 new homes in Waterbeach after work to address water scarcity concerns and she also announced that the Environment Agency has lifted its objection to the Beehive Centre redevelopment in Cambridge where Railpen has proposed to build office and laboratory space.

Peter Freeman, the chairman of the government-appointed Cambridge Growth Company says that the 150,000 new homes target set out by Mr Gove and the previous government is not set in stone. However, he does not deny the 150,000 homes figure as a possibility. He says the need to fix the city's water scarcity, congested transport and affordable housing shortage is the 'trinity of hurdles that need to be cleared away for Cambridge to grow'. He will talk about his vision for supersizing Cambridge at Great St Mary's on 15 May at an event that FeCRA are hosting. The Committee will be asking RA's to send us their questions

The destructive nature of the transport schemes planned for Cambridge continues to concern residents who say that routing GCP's proposed busways through the green belt has very little to do with improving public transport. The real reason and claimed major benefit is 'land value uplift'. The proposals for Cambourne to Cambridge and Cambridge South East have been designed to break up prime agricultural farm land and the countryside within the green belt for further development. Residents highlight that the route for Cambourne to Cambridge's scheme involves the destruction of Coton Orchard, the county's oldest orchard. rich in wildlife. And the five mile route chosen for CSET will destroy the habitat of water voles and concrete over the top of Hobson's Conduit with a large bridge close to Nine Wells

Nature Reserve. Residents find it incomprehensible that the proposals now also include a huge and intrusive construction right next to the nature reserve. They say it is shocking that the route crosses the River Granta twice, creating the need for another two large road bridges. This damage is totally unnecessary because the alternative route along the A1307 wouldn't need to cross the river or Hobson's Conduit. Residents find it disturbing that the applicant does not think that the Gogs landscape is worth protecting and is happy to build a road through a countryside park.

The future of the city centre and Cambridge Market and the livelihoods of the market's small businesses continues to be a concern. Residents have noted the growing number of empty stalls at Cambridge Market, the increase in fast food outlets, American candy shops and expensive new galleries and have asked why the market is being allowed to deteriorate. Is it to facilitate the redevelopment of the city centre as a visitor destination and event centre that generates income for the council and its business partners? There are concerns that the £41m Guildhall revamp, which includes the removal of two-thirds of the permanent stalls on the market square to create entertainment space, will probably be obsolete soon given the anticipated local government reorganisation that means that Cambridge City Council as it stands will cease to exist from 2028. No decision has been made about where the unitary authority replacing the city council will be based.

The future of the Cam chalk streams and the quality of their water is an ongoing concern. There are big anti-pollution campaigns now all around the country as people wake up to the state of the rivers and the record of the water companies. Anglian Water's sewage dumping record is horrific.

In Jan 2025 it was reported that Anglian Water, the development partner of Cambridge City Council, Landsec, Homes England and Cambridge University, had passed thousands of pollution tests at sewage plants that weren't even carried out and that it had the highest number of "no-flow" samples of any water and sewerage company in England and Wales over the decade.

Anglian Water wants to build a new sewage plant on the green belt of Honey Hill so the existing one on Milton Road can be closed for what has been publicised as providing much-needed housing for North- East Cambridge. But as Honey Hill campaigners and residents have pointed out the amount of new housing being provided is much less than has been publicised. As the real estate platform Costar reported, Landsec the development partner of the City Council, control the master plan for a £3billion North East Cambridge development. The relocation of the functioning sewage works being funded by Homes England is providing offices and science parks. It does not address the problem of all the sewage dumped in the Cam by out of date village treatment works.

There is a need for a landscape strategy for Cambridge and the Cam that involves residents and green space groups, one that will help people to understand the importance of the river to Cambridge as a city and its ecology and social history and the impact that overdevelopment is having on it and its ecology and wildlife.

RA's all over the city are working hard to protect the amenity of their neighbourhoods. Madingley Road Residents want to ensure that all the hard work they put in earlier on advising GCP on bus stops and trees and landscaping for the Madingley Road cycleway is retained. But they say this is hard when consultants and teams change and the designs go back to square one

The Save Histon Road Playground Steering Group is leading a campaign to save the green space of Histon Road Playground from a planned housing development which does not have its own large green space. In order for the development to receive planning approval from the Council, the developers Cambridge City Council and their development partner Hill want to "borrow" BNG (Biodiversity Net Gain) and the amenity park land of Histon Road Recreation Ground adjacent to it. This entails creating a new access point leading directly into the playground and reconfiguring the current railings. Save Histon Road Playground say this is setting a dangerous precedent whereby public and protected land can be used to facilitate developer's profit margins. Their petition against the park changes has attracted over 1, 500 signatures.

The Friends of Paradise Nature Reserve and Newnham Residents are also working hard to ensure that the planning conditions set for Queen's College's Owlstone Croft development on the border of Paradise Nature Reserve are followed. The college submitted a construction traffic management plan for the Short Lane access track from Grantchester Street to Owlstone Croft as Condition 14. The proposal to remove all the verges, and trees and shrubs, and removal of the boulders protecting pedestrians on the blind bend attracted local outrage. The battle of Owlstone "Henge" as it was dubbed, and the creation of a road was described as an act of environmental vandalism impacting not just amenity and safety but also the adjacent Paradise Nature Reserve that runs alongside Short Lane. So local residents were delighted when Queens' College's submission for Condition 14 was not approved by the council.

This has been a very challenging year for Cambridge residents. As Stephen Kelly the Director of Greater Cambridge Planning Service, reflecting on Mr Gove's house-building programme for Cambridge, said in 2023 :

"It sometimes feels like people are operating in something of a conceptual vacuum and that these are just numbers, but if you understand that the City of Cambridge has 53,000 houses, then the idea of building five more Cambridges in 20 years begins to look somewhat challenging". Mr Kelly noted that it took 50 years to build only slightly more than 100,000 homes in Milton Keynes. Speaking about the Cambridge Delivery Group led by Peter Freeman chair of Homes England, now the Cambridge Growth Company, he went on to say "Our communities need to understand more transparently who it is, what's its role, who are the decision makers in that space? How do decisions get made and how does the local voice get represented in that?"

I think on this Stephen Kelly spoke for many Cambridge residents.

So it gives us great pleasure to end here with the South Newnham Neighbourhood Plan which was adopted in February 2025 and about which Jean Bevan is going to talk next, as this is an initiative on which planners and residents worked very hard on together.

The South Newnham Neighbourhood Plan grew out a desire of Newnham residents to decide the future of the places where they live and work.

It is nice to end with a win. Family, health, community, public realm, and environmental issues are key issues for Residents' Associations and community groups and they appreciate councillors and planners with values who view the planning system as a process that is intended to protect the city's communities, schools, river and green spaces and wildlife.