

FeCRA AGM Notes July 2020

“The Growth Agenda & its Impact”

AS MANY NEW HOMES IN THE NEXT 20 YEARS AS IN THE LAST 2,000?

1. Cambridge and our neighbours have experienced high rates of economic growth for decades. The infrastructure essential to a decent quality of life has not kept pace. Very high house prices and rents have driven middle-income and poor households out of the city, swelling traffic congestion as they commute back to work – including the ‘key workers’ on who we depend. Pollution levels remain stubbornly high in parts of the city, with harmful effects. Natural resources are under great strain, and in the case of water could run out. These adverse effects significantly outweigh the benefits of high value economic prosperity, with its more intense inequality between an echelon of high earners and other citizens.
2. Yet we are urged by powerful voices to increase our rate of growth – to double its product over the next thirty years – lest we fail to satisfy the demands of the digital and life sciences industries. With the threat of their departure abroad - which the government sees as a threat to national economic growth.
3. These powerful voices are led by the government and the Combined Authority’s elected Mayor. The “Devolution Deal” which created the Combined Authority commits all of our local councils to this high level of growth. Cambridge Ahead, the strong and well-funded commercial pressure group within the city, is another influential advocate.
4. This accelerated growth is not possible without great harm through the damage it would cause to Cambridge itself and our near neighbours. Harm through even higher housing costs, increased traffic congestion and delay, even more unreliable public transport, environmental pollution exacerbating the climate emergency, yet more “densification” within Cambridge itself, destruction of large parts of the precious Green Belt essential to the “special character” of Cambridge and our neighbouring villages, and excessive strain on our health, education and other social infrastructure. The least well off and able to cope would suffer most.

5. This threat is very real and close to us. All of the “six key districts” where this growth is to be “disproportionately located”, are on our doorstep in Cambridge.

6. The quality of life for all our citizens must not be exchanged for yet more economic growth for the benefit of a relative few. Such growth would also add to the decades long neglect of the very areas in our county and country who rightly express strong resentment at their continued exclusion from the high value-added economic growth they most need.

7. There is an opportunity to change this for the better – through the Greater Cambridge Local Plan which is under review. It allocates land for development over the next 20 years – strongly influences our surroundings – the place we live in and experience daily – things that are very important to us as individuals and communities.

8. Local Plans are governed by restrictive national planning policy, but there is scope for the authorities here to shape the content of the new Plan– if there is the political will to do so in Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire Councils. (See written question and answer appended).

YET “The First Conversation” anticipates growth of at least 40,000 new homes by 2040 and if economic growth continues, possibly 66,700. **This could mean as many new homes in the next 20 years as were achieved in the previous 2,000.** This is not acceptable and must change. The Councils deny they are working to these figures but their public commitment to high economic growth belies this.

9. A better future is possible for Cambridge and our neighbours - **if** we act to secure it. My report, Cambridge: Growth Beyond Reason – available on the FeCRA and Cambridge Commons websites¹ - makes a dozen recommendations to help us get back some control over what we hold dear – to prevent the imminent climate catastrophe, create good secure jobs, and provide decent and sustainable housing which we can afford, not too far away from work on affordable public transport – while also nurturing a sense of place and identity for the future which values what we are fortunate enough to have inherited from the past.

¹ <https://www.fecra.org.uk/the-growth-agenda/>

<https://www.thecambridgecommons.org/our-future/>

David Plank, 13th July 2020

Question and written answer

Q for David Plank

At a recent meeting with residents, Stephen Kelly, the Director of Planning and Economic Development pointed out that the national policy framework demands support for growth.

He said that such an agenda was as important, if not more so, than local views.

In this context, how can residents have a voice?

Answer:

The National Planning Policy Framework does NOT demand support for growth no matter what. It says:

“The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of *sustainable development*. [My emphasis] At a very high level, the objective of sustainable development can be summarised as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs

Achieving sustainable development means that the planning system has three overarching objectives, which are interdependent and need to be pursued in mutually supportive ways (so that opportunities can be taken to secure net gains across each of the different objectives):

a) an economic objective – to help build a strong, responsive and competitive economy, by

b) a social objective – to support strong, vibrant and healthy communities, by ...

c) an environmental objective – to contribute to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, helping to improve biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy.

So that sustainable development is pursued in a positive way, at the heart of the Framework is **a presumption in favour of sustainable development ...”**

[NPPF July 2019, page 5]

The NPPF also says:

“Plans should:

a) be prepared with the objective of contributing to the achievement of sustainable development; ...

c) be shaped by early, proportionate and effective engagement between planmakers *and communities*, local organisations, businesses, infrastructure providers and operators and statutory consultees; (my emphasis)

[NPPF, page 8]

Then there is the truism that if we do not speak out our voices will most certainly not be heard. And if we cannot speak out against yet more economic growth leading to half as many new homes in Greater Cambridge in the next 20 years as were achieved in the previous 2,000, what can we speak out about?

David Plank, 16th July 2020