

North East Cambridge Area Action Plan:

Response on behalf of Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire Green Parties



1. What do you think about our vision for North East Cambridge?

We acknowledge that Cambridge is experiencing a housing crisis, with many people unable to live near to where they work, and those on low incomes particularly at risk of insecure or unsuitable housing situations. However, we believe that building large numbers of new homes in this already densely populated city, while creating even more new jobs, is fundamentally unsustainable. The chalk aquifer that supplies the region's water is already greatly over-abstracted: adding thousands of new homes and businesses (even if they are designed to be water-efficient) can only make this problem more acute. In social and economic terms, Cambridge is already in a 'bubble', with high costs of living (see for example <https://cambridgeshireinsight.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/savills-greater-cambridge-report-june-2017.pdf>) and horrendous levels of inequality (<https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/18-01-12-Final-Full-Cities-Outlook-2018.pdf>). The Green Party rejects the notion that these problems can be solved by a top-down focus on economic growth or 'competitiveness'. Overall, we are therefore opposed to the plans to redevelop North East Cambridge as put forward in this consultation.

We believe that this important area of the city needs much more careful planning to ensure any development there helps to provide solutions to the escalating, and rapidly changing, issues of inequality, poverty, climate change and water shortages. We provide some more detailed comment on the content of the plans in the following sections.

As a general point, picked up in our answers to the specific questions, we are concerned about the likely mismatch between the strategic vision and what developers will ultimately deliver. It will be vital for the local authorities to monitor the progress of the development and use all powers available to them to ensure that developers are meeting (or ideally exceeding) the targets set for environmental and social sustainability, that measures such as social housing and public green space are protected in perpetuity, and that the rapidly changing circumstances in terms of people's working and commuting arrangements are taken account of.

2. Are we creating the right walking and cycling connections to the surrounding areas?

We welcome the fact that the new area is being designed around walking and cycling. However, we share the concerns raised by the Cambridge Cycling Campaign around the ability of the planning service to ensure consistent quality of routes and facilities across a site which encompasses several different landowners and developers.



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The use of phrases such as ‘where possible’ in describing the planned cycling provision provides loopholes which means vital elements such as adequate cycle parking and priority for active travel modes on streets and roads may not be delivered.

We also have concerns about how journeys will link up with the wider area. Providing connections to existing routes is a vital step but not sufficient in itself. Many pedestrian paths and cycle paths/lanes around the city, but particularly on Milton Road are in poor repair, badly designed and fundamentally inadequate, even at current levels of use. With particular importance to this development, the cycling provision down Milton Road into the city centre needs to be redesigned and improved as it is currently inadequate and unsafe.

Immediate action to reduce traffic levels in the north of the city is needed to enable high levels of walking and cycling before, during, and after development. Cycling provision must be dramatically improved to provide a better mode of transport into and around the city, as set out by the Cambridge Cycling Campaign <https://www.camcycle.org.uk/cycling2020/>.

3. Are the new ‘centres’ in the right place and do they include the right mix of activity?

The four new centres proposed must be very carefully planned to avoid repeating problems seen in Cambridge. Cambridge City has been dubbed a ‘clone town’, reflecting the low diversity of its shopping facilities, dominated by large chain stores (<https://neweconomics.org/2010/09/reimagining-high-street>). We believe that the vision for North East Cambridge should be to create a circular economy, where everyone can afford to buy essential goods locally, where money and goods circulate within the local economy rather than flowing outwards to large corporations, and where minimal waste is generated. We welcome the focus on ‘creative local businesses’ and the provision of space for market stalls. It will be important to provide good facilities with suitable access that meet the needs of traders, learning from experiences in established markets (such as Cambridge Market Square).

4. Do we have the right balance between new jobs and new homes?

No. We note that, despite the stated aim of helping to address housing demand in Cambridge, that the proposed development will actually bring a net increase in demand.



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The development is intended to accommodate 18,500 people (not all of whom will be in employment) while creating 20,000 new jobs in the area. According to these figures, additional housing will be needed for more than 1,500 new workers in the area.

The consultation states that around 40% of new homes will be genuinely affordable, with 'affordable' rents defined as 80% of market rates. We welcome these measures but would like to see more ambition. The Cambridge Green Party set out its strategy for 'housing for all' in our 2016 Manifesto for Cambridge (<https://cambridge.greenparty.org.uk/policies/>). In this, we call for 50% of new homes built to be truly affordable. We believe a suitable definition of 'affordable' for Cambridge would be around 65% of market rents. We believe that council and social housing stock is a vital part of the housing market, and therefore welcome the goal for a minimum of 60% of the affordable homes to be social/affordable rent. These homes must remain as social housing in perpetuity and not be sold to private landlords, as has happened to too much of Cambridge's social housing.

It is worth noting that there are a large number of vacant properties in Cambridge (government figures for 2019 estimate 1,365 vacant properties in Cambridge plus 1,791 in South Cambridgeshire: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-dwelling-stock-including-vacants>). These should be brought back into use as a priority, through measures such as council tax premiums and Council purchase of empty homes.

5. Are we are planning for the right community facilities?

Appropriate and adequate community facilities are vital to the successful delivery of the vision for NE Cambridge. We are concerned about the vagueness of some proposals that we see as vital, for example a secondary school "if needed", a nursery "pending further engagement with Cambridgeshire County Council", health provision "pending further engagement with health providers" and indoor sports and swimming provision "pending further engagement with Sports England and through the updating of the Sport Strategies for both Councils". Community facilities must be in place as the first new residents move in, to avoid locking residents into car ownership. In the absence of adequate provision on site, huge stresses will be placed on already over-subscribed schools, health centres and exercise facilities in the surrounding areas.

6. Do you think that our approach to distributing building heights and densities is appropriate for the location?

No.



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The proposed building heights will be a major intrusion on the landscape as their extreme height in relation to surrounding buildings and in such a flat landscape will make them visible for miles around, to the detriment of local neighbourhoods and surrounding natural landscape. We are aware of significant concerns among residents about the proposed heights of the buildings. We would propose a maximum of 6-8 stories (as per the height of Eddington development). We would also encourage that individual dwellings with private outdoor space (i.e. houses not flats) are increased in number, as the coronavirus pandemic has shown us that having access to private outdoor space is beneficial to wellbeing and safe social interaction.

7. Are we planning for the right mix of public open spaces?

We are very concerned at the apparent lack of open space in the plans. According to the Cambridge Local Plan (<https://www.cambridge.gov.uk/media/6890/local-plan-2018.pdf>), the standard for new developments is 2.2 hectares of informal open space per 1000 residents (in addition to other types of open space such as sports facilities). The 18,500 people to be housed in North East Cambridge should therefore have at least 41 hectares of informal open space. However, only 10 hectares of public parks and squares are set out in the plans, which seems at odds with the statement that “our expectation is that all open space requirements will be met on-site”. We note that North East Cambridge will be connected to existing open spaces outside of the development area, notably Milton Country Park and Chesterton Fen, and that access, capacity and biodiversity are to be ‘improved’ at these sites. We question the feasibility of this aim: the plan to improve both biodiversity and access on limited parcels of land seems likely to result in conflict. Milton Country Park in particular is already often at capacity and other developments (particularly Waterbeach New Town) are set to increase visitor pressure. We broadly support Cambridge Sport Lakes’ plans to expand the park to create a strategic green corridor between North Cambridge and Waterbeach (as set out at <https://edition.pagesuite.com/html5/reader/production/default.aspx?pubname=&e;did=e1813ee5-0168-4fb0-acb2-6c6b798ffa26>).

Green Party policy encourages community involvement in food growing, for example allotments and community orchards. The plans for North East Cambridge do not appear to provide much opportunity for residents to grow food. If food growing would be unsafe because of the site’s history as a sewage treatment works, this should be made clear.



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8. Are we doing enough to improve biodiversity in and around North East Cambridge?

We welcome the stated aim of biodiversity net gain, but 10% is not enough. Natural Cambridgeshire (a partnership of which Cambridge City Council and Cambridgeshire County Councils are members) has set a target to double the area of land in Cambridgeshire that is managed for nature. While an increase of 10% is the target for NE Cambridge, we are concerned that the aims and aspirations for biodiversity improvements will not actually be delivered by developers. Phrases such as “where an adverse impact on biodiversity is unavoidable, this shall be minimised as far as possible and appropriate measurable mitigation provided” can provide loopholes if a developer is looking for them.

As discussed in our answer to question 7, we are concerned that there are potentially conflicting objectives for Milton Country Park and Chesterton Fen. Increasing access to and use of an area often has detrimental effects on biodiversity (for example disturbance, trampling of ground cover, litter). Cambridgeshire as a county has one of the smallest proportions of land managed for nature in the country (according to Natural Cambridgeshire). Biodiversity targets cannot be achieved by intensifying the use of existing green space: we need to radically increase the area managed for biodiversity. As mentioned, we broadly support Cambridge Sport Lakes’ plans to expand the park to create a strategic green corridor between North Cambridge and Waterbeach (as set out at <https://edition.pagesuite.com/html5/reader/production/default.aspx?pubname=&e;did=e1813ee5-0168-4fb0-acb2-6c6b798ffa26>).

9. Are we doing enough to discourage car travel into this area?

We welcome the stated aims of reducing the need to travel and making active and sustainable modes of transport the norm while ensuring the needs of all members of society are met. The aspiration of no additional car journeys on Milton Road is laudable, but the plans are not robust enough to make this a reality. At a rate of one parking space per two dwellings, this development will add 4000 cars to our already overcrowded local roads. Milton Road already suffers from congestion at almost all times of day, and a slew of developments (including A14 and A10 upgrades, Northstowe, Waterbeach, the various Cambridge developments) are set to make this worse.

Policy 22 states that “appropriate space for [...] car pool hire scheme vehicles” will be incorporated into parking provision. We call for a greater emphasis on such schemes and a more ambitious reduction in private car ownership.



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The consultation mentions the existing “good public transport links” to North East Cambridge. It will be necessary to continue to invest in services such as the Guided Busway and Cambridge North Station and increase their capacity as needed to keep pace with demand. Requiring additional Park & Ride capacity simply pushes additional car journeys into the surrounding areas.

We echo concerns raised by Cambridge Cycling Campaign that trip budgets rely heavily on external schemes such as the Milton Road ‘bus improvements’ and CAM network, neither of which will be completed by the deadlines quoted in the document. If services such as transport links, cycle hire and car clubs are not in place before residents move in, car dependency becomes locked in. Care must also be taken to maintain high-quality walking and cycling access throughout the different periods of construction, including to any ‘meanwhile projects’ on the site or in surrounding communities.

10. Are we maximising the role that development at North East Cambridge has to play in responding to the climate crisis?

We welcome the focus on energy and water efficiency and sustainable travel, but ambitions fall short of what is required. The issue of regional water shortage is particularly pressing: this is already a water-stressed region and abstraction is causing a range of problems, even before the projected impacts of climate change are taken into account (see the Cam Valley Forum report ‘Let it Flow’:

https://camvalleyforum.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Cam_Valley_Forum_Let_it_Flow_Full_report_26-05-20-compressed.pdf). The water use target for this development is 110 litres ppd. In contrast, the Eddington development had a target of 80 litres ppd, by using grey water and rainfall capture. To achieve this Eddington employed an Ecology Officer from start of project. The ‘target’ of the North East Cambridge development is poor in comparison to Eddington and is woefully inadequate considering the water-stresses this area is already facing. There is no specific commitment to green energy, district heating or highest residential building standards (Passivhaus/Sustainable Homes). By only ‘proposing robust targets’ and ‘encouraging ... low carbon lifestyles’, the development plans leave themselves open to loopholes and the potential for not meeting any of their ‘targets’. However ‘efficient’ this new development turns out to be, the fact remains that introducing 8,000 new homes (with up to 4,000 private vehicles) plus businesses will increase the environmental footprint of Cambridge.



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