



Accordia



Orchard Park



Cambourne

CAMBRIDGE GROWTH AREA

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CAMBRIDGE GROWTH AREA

This report is based on a coach tour led by Peter Studdert, Director of Joint Planning, and Jane Green, Major Developments Manager from South Cambridgeshire District Council, to look at what is being achieved with new housing in and around Cambridge. We visited three sites: Accordia, Orchard Park (formerly Arbury Park), and Cambourne. The tour was followed by a presentation from Peter Studdert in the new South Cambridgeshire offices at Cambourne, and a discussion, which focussed on the strategic planning process, how quality can be secured, and filling the skills gaps. We were also joined for a short while by Glen Richardson, Head of Joint Urban Design Team.

Overview

The Cambridge Growth Area now extends over the whole of the County of Cambridgeshire, which has been targeted for major growth in the Regional Spatial Strategy. Cambridge was founded as a city in 1201, where a Roman bridge crossed the River Cam. It remained as a small university and market town until the railway came in 1840 on the Eastern side of the city. In the 20th century it spread as far as the A14 and green belt, but the prevailing view was that it should stay small, so ‘people could go home for lunch’. The planner Holford asserted *‘there was no such thing as a good expansion plan for Cambridge.’*

However, following exceptional economic growth, with new science parks on university owned land on the edge supporting the ‘Cambridge Phenomenon’ or ‘Silicon Fen’; the 2003 Country Structure Plan accepted the need for much more housing, through a sequential approach. House prices in Cambridge are as high as in London, and the city is only 45 minutes away from Kings Cross. The bold decision was taken following the Regional Spatial Guidance in 2000 to build some 42,000 new homes, of which 5,820 were built in the period 2001-6, and to expand the city’s population from 110,000 to 160,000 by the end of the plan period.

An options study in the 1990s carried out collaboratively under the title Cambridge Futures, and led by Professor Marcial Echenique, assessed seven different options, from ‘green swap’ and urban extensions to growth along the transport line, and a new town (see www.cambridgefutures.org). A sketch produced for the City by DEGW suggested growth to the East to turn the railway into more of a central spine, with a new station to the North. The final strategy includes major developments of the current Cambridge Airfield, owned by Marshalls, intensification around the station, the new town of Northstowe on the route of the Guided Busway (which replaces the old Huntingdon to

Cambridge railway line), and extensions to the South and around Addenbrooks Hospital, plus some growth in the ring of market towns around the City.

Peter Studdert joined the City Council in 1991 from positions in London, and then worked for Cambridgeshire Horizons on the strategic plans before being asked to head a new joint unit that brings the City Council, Cambridgeshire County Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council together. Through positive planning, the City succeeded in stopping out of town retail developments, and instead has a splendid new covered shopping centre, anchored by John Lewis. It has also improved a number of special places in the city's heart. There is some splendid modern architecture as a result of college expansion. The new medical centre next to Addenbrooks is expected to create 17,000 jobs. However the challenge remains of how to secure the necessary quality in the major housing developments, which has led to the development of design guides and a Quality Charter for Growth, drawing on best practice in both the East of England and comparable places in Continental Europe.

The planning system is currently being put to the test in a public inquiry over a refusal to allow the agreed plan for Clay Farm to be fundamentally revised to reflect the downturn in the property market, which raises fundamental issues about land valuation, advanced infrastructure, and the provision of affordable homes. At the end of this report we set out some possible conclusions based on a comparison between what we had seen and learned in Holland, and the situation in the UK.

Assessment

Though the tour was inevitably brief, we had the benefit of previous assessments of the three sites, and a short discussion of members' reactions to what they had seen.

Character

The Quality Charter calls for *Places with distinctive neighbourhoods and where people create pride of place*. The three sites are quite different in character, reflecting fundamental differences in location.

Accordia, which won the Sterling Prize for Architecture, is located in a rich landscape near some of the most expensive housing in Cambridge, and 20 minute walk from the railway station. It redeveloped a former government office complex. The units are relatively large, and some cost over £1million. There is an average net density of 50 to the hectare, achieved through roof



Accordia mews houses with courtyards and private outdoor space



Accordia two storey terrace social housing overlooking large green open space

gardens, and patio courtyards, creating a 21st century version of the mews. The distinctive character comes from the use of a brick, and some design features that reflect Cambridge vernacular, tight streets, a rich woodland setting, and the involvement of three very different architectural practices. There is also room to personalise individual homes through the way the courtyards are used, and the space for planting in front of the houses. The social housing is largely provided in a two storey terrace, but there are also some

flats. The same high quality materials have been used on both private and social housing. The Group liked the different architectural styles and sense of maturity, the sense of trust, and the superb quality of all the detailing, which included some wall-mounted street lights. However the scheme may suffer from the lack of community facilities, such as a shop, and the way it is cut off from the adjoining new government office building.

Orchard Park is a scheme of 900 homes on a former army barracks between a Council estate and the main A14 road, and on the guided busway. It applies new urbanist thinking to create modern looking terraces, with a landscaped open space overlooked by crescents. There is a mix of uses, including a new primary school, a community centre, just over 500 occupied houses and a hotel on the edge bordering the A14. The scheme suffered when the housing market collapsed and builders walked off the site. There have



High quality landscaped public spaces in Orchard Park



Social housing in Orchard Park

also major problems with the quality of the detailing and construction, and the divergence from what had originally been agreed. Ubiquitous timber cladding, and social housing that can be picked out for its porches, and what seemed a poorly coordinated public realm. In some areas the pavements look oversized and unnecessarily bleak in places. The scheme has come in for criticism, and for example was described in an article by Germaine Greer in the Guardian the day before our visit as looking like Beirut, and for not implementing the original public art proposals. This was

immediately challenged by local residents and the Community Council, and an invitation extended to Germaine Greer to attend the opening of the Community Centre. It raised the problems of how you deal with phasing, particularly in an economic downturn. The council and partners have been working closely together to explore innovative measures to bring forward key undeveloped sites, and housebuilders are now back on site actively developing three key sites.

Cambourne is virtually a small new town, with some 4,000 houses, and has proved very popular with young families because it provides family home with gardens and caters for a car-based life style in a country setting. The housing is made up of the standard volume house-builders products, though there is some quite innovative social housing, with solar panels on the roofs. It was designed as three separate villages. Again there have been some departures from the original masterplan,



Popular volume house-builder homes in Cambourne



Library and health centre in Cambourne

some resulting from unforeseen demands. Thus the hotel at the entrance to Cambourne has 100 bedrooms instead of the small family hotel originally conceived. Similarly instead of a country store in the Farrell Masterplan there is a big Morrisons and three estate agents offices out of the twelve small shop units. Members commented on the quality of the schools and the public realm compared with Orchard Park, and the obvious appeal of providing a kind of modern suburb, with lots of trees and hedges, and varied places thanks to the curving streets. Apparently the Parish Council, who look after the public realm and community facilities, have set the highest precept in South Cambridgeshire, commensurate with being the largest village in South Cambridgeshire. All of the sites benefited from the roads not having yet been adopted, which meant there were far fewer signs and yellow lines than usual.

Community

The Quality Charter calls for *'Places where people live out of choice and not necessity, creating healthy communities with a good quality of life'*. Accordia scores well through its playgrounds, and layout, which is highly walkable. Orchard Park could suffer from an over-provision of social



New school in Orchard Park with wind turbine

housing as a result of the ‘credit crunch’, but could benefit from a primary school at its heart that includes provision for community events, and possibly a small medical facility. There is a purpose built community centre with a green roof, two well equipped play areas and the development is nearby one of the best community centres in Cambridge. In Cambourne, many of the owner occupiers are away at work during the day, and there were issues early on when people in social housing were moved in without any support.



Cambourne’s popular pub

The building of a pub opposite the shopping centre was a popular move, and there is now another mother and toddlers group meeting upstairs. The development is large enough to attract a more balanced community over time, such as homes for elderly people, but initially surprised everyone with its birth rate, which is several times the national average, leading to more schools being required than anticipated.

Connectivity

The Quality Charter calls for *‘Places that are well-connected and enable easy access for all to jobs and services, using sustainable modes.’* Accordia is the best located (more centrally in Cambridge), which has enabled car usage to be kept down, despite the fears and objections from wealthy residents living nearby that there would be insufficient car parking provided. In Cambridge some 28% of peak hour trip are by bike, the highest level in the UK. Orchard Park, though it feels peripheral, should benefit from its location on the Guided Busway. Strangely the main route into the site runs through the middle of the landscaped open space, and was seen as potentially dangerous for children. Cambourne is very car dependent, in part through its location away from public transport, but also due to the kind of people it attracts. A weak point is that the Council’s offices are marooned at the far end of the business park, cut off by an undeveloped site, but also by a large roundabout from the retail facilities, thus further reinforcing car dependency.

Climate proofing

Though good work has been done in looking after the landscape, for example by the Wildlife Trust in Cambourne, none of the developments have done much to address the challenges of saving energy, water and waste. Accordia has an attractive looking SUDs system, and the buildings are highly insulated. Orchard Park has a small wind turbine by the school, and some solar panels and ground source heat pumps on



Accordia SUD system and one of the blocks of flats with large balconies and underground parking

the social housing. The housing association homes at Cambourne are built to Eco-Homes targets of good to very good. One area of social housing has achieved much higher levels through photovoltaics and solar panels on roofs and conservatories attached to warm air storage and circulation system. This was achieved due to the housing association ongoing interest in the property. The Eco Park and many green spaces including allotments also help promote bio diversity on the site.

Impact

Though there is still a long way to go, Cambridgeshire does seem to be one of the leaders in providing a choice of new housing, and developing what could become in time sustainable urban neighbourhoods. There are now a huge variety of different types of design, and some examples which stand comparison with schemes we have visited in Europe. Quality materials clearly make a difference, which design guides and Section 106 agreements seem unable to resolve. It is almost impossible to get everything right in a guide, and expensive landscaping does not compensate for poor design, particularly when the guide is not used intelligently. There are big issues where master developers sell sites on to house builders for the maximum price, and minimise investment in infrastructure. There are also difficulties in retaining the original ethos and ideas behind a masterplan when volume house builders dominate the process, and when ‘signature designers’ are dropped once planning permission has been secured.

Despite a very well-thought out strategy, and some of the most sophisticated options assessment ever carried out, joining up infrastructure and development remains a huge problem. Thus the masterplan for the expansion of East Cambridge may never happen, as it depends on finding an alternative airfield site for Marshalls. Similarly a start on Northstowe, which has already been over a decade in its planning, is still up in the air, with difficulties in reaching an agreement between the Homes and Communities Agency and Gallaghers, the original developer, and disagreements over whether sustainable infrastructure will be installed. The University, who owns some of the major sites to the North West, is being required by an Inspector’s report to go for Code Level 5, which means installing Combined Heat and Power, but is under pressure to sell off its sites for the maximum price, rather than innovate. Hence however good the location, and the strategic and masterplans, there are doubts over whether the planning system as it stands can ever deliver what people expect from it.

A further issue is uncertainty over whether the transport investment necessary to support growth will be forthcoming. The government’s funding offer was based on the introduction of Congestion Charging, and this is still not agreed. Yet without a huge further investment the City could easily grind to a halt, and fail to offer the quality of life needed to attract or retain international experts. At the same time, if Northstowe does not go ahead for some years, the economic viability of the Guided Busway could be

harmed, and with it confidence in the idea that it is possible to shift modal choices away from the private car.

Good practice

Despite some doubts over impact, a number of features of the Cambridge ‘model’ can be highlighted, which may offer lessons for planning and development in London:

- 1. Proactive planning** For some decades Cambridge has sought to lead rather than just respond to what developers come up with. This in turn helps in attracting and retaining good staff. There has been a focus on quality, reflected in all the work on the Quality Charter, for example, and the attempt to break down the barriers between different sectors and professions. Though South Cambridgeshire has come in for criticism on some assessments, it was in fact the first authority to have its Core Strategy judged sound and has adopted Area Action Plans for all of the major Growth sites (many produced jointly with Cambridge City Council).
- 2. Strategic options assessment** The British planning system has become very complex and protracted, but the kind of work done between the Council and the university on options appraisal, including public involvement, may offer a better way forward than simply commissioning vast reports. It is unlikely that major public investment would have been made in the Guided Bus, for example, if there had not been a ‘big picture’ or shared vision of how Cambridgeshire might grow.
- 3. Collaborative working** The creation of joint units reflects a tradition of joint working, for example the Greater Cambridgeshire Partnership which deals with economic development, the recognised need to work together on major schemes that cross boundaries, and the availability of support from Cambridgeshire Horizons, a unit that was set up by all the local authorities, and which has won substantial funding from government. This is likely to result in even greater integration, not so much to save money as to produce greater results.
- 4. Investment in skills development** There are serious attempts to engage the widest possible group in the process, from study tours to exemplary schemes in the East of England and Europe, to work to embed the Charter in the planning processes. Thus the Charter involved no less than a hundred people in various events and has been followed up by masterclasses. Work is also underway at Anglia Ruskin and through the Regional Centre of Excellence Inspire East and the Architecture Centre Shape East to build skills at every level.
- 5. Intelligent leadership** None of this would have been possible without a relatively high calibre of Councillors, who have been prepared to work across party boundaries for the wider and greater good. It is significant that the civic society has changed its name from the Cambridge Preservation Trust to Cambridge Past Present and Future! This is possibly easier in a university town than in other places, in what is an

inherently fragmented system with a number of tiers. It has been assisted by making the process more satisfying.

6. **Commitment and continuity** One lesson that emerged from the masterclasses on Amersfoort, Freiburg and Harlow, but also could apply to Cambridge is the importance of people working together over a long period. Though there have been bitter disagreements, for example over Clay Farm at present, there is a better understanding by all of the different objectives and constraints that each sector is under. However there is a legitimate fear that local authorities are constitutionally incapable of delivering the growth that is needed.

Future implications

In the light of what we have seen and learned in Cambridge and in Holland, a number of members of the group discussed the kinds of changes that are needed in the system, particularly in the run-up to an election and in the aftermath of the Credit Crunch, and breakdown of the traditional business model for development. They may serve to focus future discussions and joint working, and possibly could lead to some experiments or demonstration projects where ambitious schemes are planned, but not necessarily secured:

1. **Agree strategic opportunities for growth** The UK is gradually moving towards a more contractual approach with Local and Multi Area Agreements. The HCA's Single Conversation could help, so long as the focus is on creating sustainable urban neighbourhoods, not just building homes. A good place to start would be areas around railway stations and shopping areas that are under-used.
2. **Set up joint units for complex schemes** It is much easier to be proactive and to exert authority if there is a properly staffed and motivated team. A start could be made by pooling specialist staff concerned with economic development, sustainability, regeneration, and estates, and hiring appropriately skilled urban designers.
3. **Raise funds for land assembly and advanced infrastructure** A natural extension of having a joint unit would be to set up a company with the capacity to package funding from a combination of grants and loans. The funds would be used to invest in better infrastructure in advance of selling off sites, playing the role of a master developer. It is possible that no money need change hands for land assembly by working through options agreements.
4. **Upgrade public realm in advance of housing development** An important element in building confidence is transforming derelict and visible sites before development begins. In some cases trees can be grown in tubs and moved around, while a general greening will enable a semi-mature landscape to be developed before people move into the site. Pioneering uses, from children's play to allotments or self-

build/self commissioning schemes can all be used to start the process of raising land values.

5. **Enter into real public private partnerships** By combining an interest in the land with the capacity to set values through planning consents, the public authority should be in a good position to lead a proper partnership, not just a talking shop. The delivery mechanisms set up for the Growth Areas provide some inspiration, but the need is for a body that can go further and take the initiative, not rely on arm-twisting.
6. **Establish community based trusts to undertake long-term stewardship** There are plenty of good examples of trusts being set up to manage areas of open space, and promote bio-diversity, But what is better is to ensure that the development trust is endowed with a property asset, as the great success stories like Coin Street Community Builders or Letchworth Garden City Foundation have done.
7. **Tap land value uplift to make schemes viable** Finally land values have to be used more productively to get innovative schemes going. The idea of 'best consideration' does not have to mean highest price, and ways can be found of avoiding the restrictions associated with European conventions, such as the Roanne judgement. There is a lot to be said for getting bidders to compete on the basis of quality, with the price set on a formula, as it is in the Netherlands, for example.

Useful websites

- CABE's Accordia case study www.cabe.org.uk/case-studies/accordia
- Building for Life use 20 questions to evaluate the quality of new housing developments. A 20 minute film where they use Accordia as an example can be viewed at www.buildingforlife.org/criteria
- South Cambridgeshire District Council webpage on Orchard Park www.scambs.gov.uk/communityandliving/newcommunities/majordevelopments/orchardpark/default.htm
- Cambourne Community newsletter *The Cambourne Crier* website (includes link to Resident Survey) www.cambourne.info
- Cambourne Parish Council website www.cambourneparishcouncil.gov.uk

Appendix A

Participants and apologies

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