**Planning for Growth: stakeholder views on prospects for growth in the Cambridge sub-region under localism**

**Project Report**

**January 2014**

Professor Martin Boddy, University of the West of England

Martin.boddy@uwe.ac.uk

Hannah Hickman, Hannah Hickman Consulting and Visiting Research Fellow,

University of the West of England

hannah@hannahhickman.co.uk

“In the south east of England, I don’t think there’s anywhere else that’s got quite such a joined up approach to the growth questions and doesn’t have that more traditional resistance thing … Cambridge is abnormal, Cambridgeshire is abnormal in its level of appreciation of the need to work together and a generally shared ambition about what we want to do and it’s pro-growth. And I think in the south east that’s unique” (Senior Local Authority Officer).

**Introduction**

Since the Coalition Government announced its intention to abolish Regional Spatial Strategies shortly after the election in 2010 and to transform the planning system in the name of localism, many local authorities across the country were quick to act in reducing their plans for housing growth. This was particularly the case in prosperous southern England. The think tank ‘Policy Exchange’ found that by mid-2012, nearly 60% of councils had reduced their housing targets, and that apart from the North East and the North West, every region was planning for fewer houses than under the previous system (Morton 2012).

Notably, however, in the context of more economically buoyant southern England, the Cambridge sub-region, rather than rushing to reduce planned housing numbers, acted quickly following the announcement that RSS was to be abolished to produce a joint statement, setting out publicly the on-going support of the constituent local councils for growth. The councils re-affirmed a strategy for growth set out, initially, in the 2003 Cambridgeshire Structure Plan, reiterated later in the Regional Spatial Strategy in the form of the East of England Plan. The 2010 policy stated:

“The Cambridgeshire authorities remain committed to the strategy for planning in the County, including the provision of housing, as originally established by the Structure Plan and as now partially set out in saved Structure Plan policies and as reflected by the policies and site proposals in the Cambridge Local Plan and District Councils’ Development Plan Documents” (Cambridgeshire Authorities 2010, section 2.1).

The authorities - Cambridge County Council, Peterborough City, and the five Cambridge districts within the County Council area joined forces to establish the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Joint Strategic Planning Unit. And although the districts are producing their own ‘core strategies’, Cambridge City Council and South Cambridge District Council are collaborating on joint timetables and evidence in support of their current local plan processes.

This report presents the views of local stakeholders across the Cambridge sub-region on the background to this continuing commitment to growth and to joint working. It goes on to explore the potential for this to continue under localism. It looks at whether public statements on collaboration and growth reflect the reality of what is happening in the sub-region and assesses the continuing appetite for some form of ‘larger than local’ or strategic planning. It is based on analysis of interviews with key stakeholders undertaken in the Cambridge sub-region between December 2012 and February 2013 together with a wide range of policy and other documentary evidence.

The focus of this work was primarily on the City of Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire District (referred to here as ‘the Cambridge sub-region’). This was set, however, in the context of the wider set of relationships with Cambridgeshire County Council in particular, but also the neighbouring districts of Fenland, Huntingdonshire and East Cambridgeshire.

**The Cambridge Sub-Region: historical context**

The development history of the Cambridge sub-region and the shifts which provided the basis for rapid growth and the ‘Cambridge Phenomenon’ are well documented. Policy in the post-war period had originally been to constrain growth. The 1950 ‘Holford Report’ led to the establishment of the Cambridge green belt and the principle that growth should be dispersed beyond the green belt to surrounding towns and villages to protect the historic core of Cambridge.[[1]](#footnote-1) Major growth of Cambridge itself was restricted on the basis that “one cannot make a good expanding plan for Cambridge” (Holford and Wright, 1950). It was not until the Structure Plan of 2003, more than fifty years later, that this approach was fundamentally changed.

During the previous decade, a number of major studies began to shift opinion towards the view that growth at Cambridge could be a positive force for change, and could potentially help ameliorate some of the negative consequences of constraint. High housing costs and significant congestion were rising up the political agenda at this time both locally and nationally - and both were increasingly seen as exacerbated by constraint. The late 1990s saw the coming together of the Cambridge Futures growth coalition, described at the time as *‘a non-profit making group of local business leaders, politicians, local government officers, professionals and academics who have been looking at the options for growth in and around Cambridge’.* Its purpose was described at that time as: “to investigate possible planning alternatives for Cambridge and its surrounding area …. and engage stakeholders outside the statutory planning processes as a way of achieving politically acceptable plans” (Echenique 1995, 113). It set out and evaluated seven different options ranging from those that restricted development to those that encouraged it. The original report did not actually recommend growth as the way forward as such - but was widely considered by respondents to this study to have provided the basis for those that favoured future growth. It included the scenario that the ‘Cambridge Phenomenon’, the expansion of private sector R&D and businesses in the fields of technology and biosciences closely related to Cambridge University, could be negatively impacted by growth constraint. Much of the underpinning work was led by Cambridge academics within the fields of architecture and urbanism. The study is however widely seen as leading to the coalescence of interests and stakeholders around an emerging growth agenda that was to be so significant. In recognition of the major contribution this work made to the debate in the sub-region, the options for growth study produced by Cambridge Futures was awarded the Royal Town Planning Institute’s prize for innovation in 2000 (Cambridge Futures, 1999).

The sub-regional strategy for Cambridge set out in the government guidance document RPG6 (Government Office for the East of England, 2000) provided the strategic context for major development at Cambridge. This was followed by the 2003 Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan which set out a sequential approach to development focussing development first at Cambridge and Peterborough and involving major release of land in the greenbelt and substantial housing growth. Seen as building on the work of the Cambridge Futures Group, the plan detailed the requirement for development both within the built-up area of Cambridge and on its edge including within South Cambridgeshire, subject to green belt review– a total of 32,500 dwellings over the plan period. This represented a major change to the policy of preceding decades. It was, however, a process that was driven at a local or sub-regional level, rather than simply reflecting external, top-down national pressures.

In support of this strategy, a local delivery vehicle, Cambridgeshire Horizons was established across the sub-region in 2004, “in recognition of the fact that no single existing agency or authority could be expected to implement this planned growth on its own” (Cambridge Horizons, 2011). The Horizons project team, which reported to a cross-sector board and member committee, helped project manage the delivery of the growth strategy with a particular focus on co-ordinating development and infrastructure implementation.

This development strategy for Cambridge was carried through, largely unchanged, into the Regional Spatial Strategy for the region – the East of England Plan. The latter specifically acknowledged the importance of focussing on the implementation of strategy as already agreed. Reflecting its continuing significance, the earlier Structure Plan was frequently referred to by those interviewed locally as a key influence, and the 2013 draft local plan for Cambridge again refers to the continuation of a strategy in the structure plan agreed well over a decade previously.

The University itself developed a strong and continuing interest in the physical development of new sites as it expanded the scale and scope of research, teaching, academic staff and student numbers, moved out of congested city-centre sites and worked increasingly closely with external partners located in the sub-region. Development of the West Cambridge site continued alongside plans for what is in effect the major, university-led urban extension at North West Cambridge. The impact of the scale and influence, formal and informal, of the university and university interests including extensive landholdings and access to financial resources are difficult to evaluate but were widely seen by respondents as very considerable. The scale and scope of the University-research-high technology industry nexus has also dominated the local economy and labour market in what is a relatively small urban area in a way which is not seen in most other localities across the UK.

**Why does Cambridge represent a significant case-study?**

Cambridge is clearly of particular relevance as a case study given the extent to which it has embraced growth at a sub-regional level - in contrast to virtually the whole of the rest of southern England. In practice as well, the sub-region has a history of rapid growth. The City of Cambridge has grown significantly over the last decade, with annual population growth of 1.2% making it the 5th fastest growing city in the UK. It grew by 14,000 to 123,900 over the period 2001–2011

It has also been seen by successive national Governments as a key economic driver in both a regional and national context: “an important locale in the wider economic nexus of Southern England” (Healey 2007, p. 163). In fact, it can be argued that the symbiotic relationship between Cambridge as a world-leading university and the many high-profile and international businesses in the sub-region, makes Cambridge and its growth itself of international significance in economic terms (see Moules and Pickford, 2013). The previous Labour administration included Cambridge as one of four major growth areas identified in the Sustainable Communities Plan – the London-Stansted-Cambridge corridor. These were areas identified as places where Government wished to see a step-change in housing supply to reduce imbalances in housing supply and demand, whilst simultaneously accommodating economic growth. There is every sign that the current Coalition Government equally wishes to support the economic success of Cambridge. Indeed, the current Coalition Government often cites Cambridge as one of the few places to have bucked recent economic trends by continuing to grow under the recession (Centre for Cities, 2013).

As indicated, however, there was something of a shift in the national context. The previous Labour Government had supported growth in the sub-region through a more top-down, macro-approach to planning and growth focussed on identified growth areas and with targets formulated through strategic policy. Under the Coalition, the political rhetoric of ‘localism’ has focussed on local authorities determining their own strategic direction, albeit within the context the National Planning Policy Framework and a strong emphasis on support for economic growth and sustainable development.

The Cambridge sub-region is of particular interest in this context of localism and the practical implementation of the National Planning Policy Framework. First, its political and administrative structures present potential challenges in the context of localism. Administratively, Cambridge City Council is tightly bounded and entirely encircled by South Cambridgeshire District. Much of the Cambridge green belt falls within the jurisdiction of South Cambridgeshire. Cambridge and South Cambridge, along with the outlying authorities of Fenland, East Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire, are then encompassed by the second tier, Cambridgeshire County Council. Politically, Cambridge City Council is controlled by the Liberal Democrats but with Labour close behind, whereas the County Council and the remaining districts were all, historically, Conservative controlled - until the most recent elections of May 2013 when a strong result for UKIP in the more peripheral parts of the County resulted in the Conservatives losing overall control. Reflecting these tensions, there have also over time been a number of proposals for boundary changes to Cambridge City Council or for the creation of a single, enlarged unitary authority embracing Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire.

Second, despite a strategy for growth for nearly a decade, and despite on-going economic growth which has in practice bucked the wider recession, delivery of growth and development in the sub-region has been seen by some as slow. Recent research has pointed to 2,188 so-called ‘stalled sites’ (Centre for Cities, 2013), and the Home Builders Federation (HBF) has recently reported a 60% slump in house-building in Cambridge as compared with 2006-7 despite strong demand reflected in what are amongst the highest house-prices and private rent levels outside of London (see Havergal, 2012). The HBF describe the slump in house building as ‘fuelling a crisis of affordability in the city’ (2013), and recent research by the Centre for Cities (2013), highlights Cambridge as having an affordability ratio of average house prices to incomes of 11.7 – third highest in the UK after London and Oxford. The University cites the shortage of high quality, affordable housing as a major constraint on its further growth given the increasing global competition from institutions worldwide to attract the top academics and researchers (*Cambridge University Special News Supplement*, Michaelmas 2012). There is a significant pipeline of planning permissions however. The draft Cambridge Local Plan 2014 shows that of the 14,000 homes proposed over the plan period to 2031, over 60% already have planning permission. The University itself, a significant player and stakeholder in the wider growth debate, secured outline permission in 2013 for major expansion at North West Cambridge: 3,000 homes, accommodation for 2,000 graduate students and 100,000 square meters of research facilities.

Third, the Cambridge sub-region is at a particularly interesting point in the local plan process. Planning is understandably high on the political agenda, with both Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire mid-way through their local plan process. At the time of research, both authorities were consulting on their respective issues and options reports, and draft local plans were due out in the summer of 2013 for consultation. This has again opened up major debate about Cambridge going forwards and the city-region including levels of housing and economic growth and the capacity or role of the city region in accommodating further expansion. The future of Cambridge’s green belt has the potential to once again become a highly contested terrain, with some local vociferous objection already apparent (see, for example, stopbad.org.uk and www.greenbeltsos.org.uk). This is particularly significant in the context of localism and the potential for more local determination of outcomes.

Table 1: Proposed housing completions, Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire since the 2003 Structure Plan

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Local Authority Area | Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan, 2003  | East of England Plan, 2008  | Proposed RSS revisions 2010 (never adopted) | 2014 local plan issues and options consultation | Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Joint Strategic Planning Unit (May 2013) | Proposed submission local plan, 2011-31 |
| Period covered1 | 1990-2016 | 2001-2021 | 2011 – 2031 |  | 2011-31 | 2011-31 |
| Cambridge City | 12,500 (735pa) | 19,000 (950pa) | 14,000 (700pa) | Option 1Option 2 – 12, 700 (urban growth)Option 3 – 14,000 (current development strategy)Option 4 – 21,000 (enhanced levels of green belt and urban growth)Option 5 – 25,000 (significantly enhanced levels of green belt and urban growth) | 14,000 (700pa) | 14,000 (700pa) |
| South Cambridgeshire | 20,000 (1176pa) | 23,500 (1175pa) | 21,000 (1050pa) | Lower – 18, 500 (existing + 4,300) Medium – 21,500 (existing + 7,300)High – 23,500 (existing + 9,300) | 19,000 (950pa) | 19,000 (950pa) |

1. Annual figures are included a basis for comparison only. Actual rates implied by these totals vary depending on the level of completions already achieved which are

generally lower than the average, flat rate figure

**The research**

The research was based on interviews with key stakeholders in the Cambridge sub-region and extensive review of documentary sources. In-depth stakeholder interviews were conducted over the period December 2012 to April 2013. These included Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat councillors, developers and house builders active in the sub-region, planning consultants, and officers within local authorities. Interviews focussed on the views of respondents on planning for growth in the Cambridge sub-region both under the previous system of Regional Spatial Strategies, the current situation, and prospects for the future under the new planning regime.[[2]](#footnote-2) .

**Structure of the report**

Section 1 of the report covers the historical narrative and explores stakeholder views on growth plans under the preceding system of regional spatial strategies. Section 2 assesses the current situation and prospects for growth in the future under localism, the National Planning Policy Framework and the ‘duty to co-operate’. Section 3 then discusses potential implications for growth in the Cambridge sub-region under localism.

**1. Prospects for Growth – Historical Context**

**1.1 History**

“The 2003 structure plan was absolutely fundamental for Cambridge, you can’t overstate how important that document was” (Economic development consultant).

2003 represented a landmark in the history of planning for growth in Cambridge. Hitherto, growth in Cambridge had been heavily constrained by a policy environment that sought to deflect housing growth to places outside of the city, with Cambridge itself protected by an extensive green belt. The intention was to preserve the unique character and setting of Cambridge as a historic university town. The *Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan* (2003) was therefore a pivotal moment in planning terms for Cambridge as it made provision for major releases from the green belt to enable substantial housing growth both within Cambridge City but also within adjoining South Cambridgeshire.

Views differed as to the tipping point in the debate on growth. Respondents clearly, however, agreed with historical accounts that constraining housing growth was having negative consequences on house prices, resulting in high levels of commuting and serious congestion within Cambridge itself. The perceived impact of this on the continued economic success of the ‘Cambridge Phenomenon’ was keenly felt. Interviewees were quick to recall the history of growth constraint:

“I arrived in Cambridge in ‘91 and that was a low point, I suspect, of planning in so much as the ‘89 Structure Plan was the last gasp of what I would call the Lord Holford approach to planning … which was all about keeping Cambridge small really and exclusive and it, Holford’s view, was if Cambridge grew to more than about 100,000 population then it would lose its special character … there are lovely quotes in that report about, there was no such thing as a good expanding Plan for Cambridge and basically you can’t expand Cambridge. I had one Economic Development Officer in the department and his job was to try and stop people coming to Cambridge, to say wouldn’t you rather go to Wisbech or somewhere?” (Planning consultant and former local authority officer).

The 2003 Structure Plan was widely seen as a turning point:

“I think the planning policy for Cambridge was not working, it was just rubbish, it was all about dispersal pre-2003. So it was saying Cambridge is full and I remember at the time, one of the high-tech entrepreneurs who was around at the time, a guy called Peter Daw, literally writing articles in the press saying Cambridge is full we have to stop and the idea is we stop Cambridge and it will all go to Ely or elsewhere … which obviously it never did …” (Economic development consultant).

“Commuting just got worse and worse and worse, so, there was a general acceptance when that approach was scrapped in favour of a more sustainable development strategy” (Elected member, Conservative).

“By the end of the 1990s, it was quite clear that this was a completely ridiculous way of behaving” (Planning consultant).

“I don’t know whether it was a positive vision or a negative one but it was clear what the problems were at that point and the decision was made that Cambridge itself needed to be bigger” (Senior local authority officer).

Many inferred that it was the strength and coherence of the business and academic community and their perception of the need for Cambridge to grow that was the key to this major policy shift:

“The major employers and the academic community began to say we can’t stick our head in the sand, we need to look at this in a different way and that was then communicated back into local government” (Senior local authority officer).

‘Cambridge Futures’ was cited as being significant to this shift:

“What Cambridge Futures did was to say, essentially, Cambridge needs to find a way of growing more sensibly if it is to continue to be a prosperous and desirable place to live” (Senior local authority officer).

“[Cambridge Futures] had quite an influence on the local authority planning processes” (Preservation Society member).

Many participants felt that the desire for Cambridge to grow was generated through a creative rather than political process, which was thought to have ‘softened’ the way, such that when politics came into play “they [politicians] behaved sensibly”:

“there always have been dissenters in terms of people that still felt that Cambridge should be kept small, but I think that politically, I mean the Lib Dems took control of the City was it in about 2000, and there were some quite bright new Lib Dem Counsellors … who were quite visionary and they were prepared to stand up and be counted and go out and argue the case [for growth]. And also, the traditional focus for the small Cambridge approach was the Cambridge Preservation Society which by its name rather implied a sort of narrow view and, but even they, I think, recognised that we couldn’t go on trying to deflect growth, we had to get ahead of the game” (Planning Consultant and former local authority officer).

Stakeholders, in explaining the current situation, frequently referred back to this policy shift of a decade earlier. This seems partly to reflect the effort it took to change direction - “an incredibly long haul” (Planning consultant) - but it also seems to reflect the fact that this shift is seen as continuing to shape fundamentally the growth narrative under localism today:

“All the time I’ve been involved in Cambridgeshire and the Cambridge sub-region, the position on growth has been to embrace the need for growth and to try to shape it in the right way. And I think that goes back to the 2003 Structure Plan … the essence of the spatial strategy that we’re still pursuing is in that Structure Plan. So it said grow Cambridge, do strategic green belt release” (Senior local authority officer).

**1.2 Significance of the Regional Spatial Strategy for Cambridgeshire**

The Regional Spatial Plan for the East of England, the ‘East of England Plan’ was published in 2008. Many aspects of the Plan generated considerable controversy, particularly around its proposals for growth plans in places like Harlow, Hatfield, Welwyn Garden City and Hemel Hempstead. Proposals for Cambridge and Cambridgeshire on the other hand were perceived, locally, as relatively uncontroversial and to follow on from the earlier Structure Plan. The plan itself states: “the strategy for the sub-region in the Structure Plan is carried forward largely unchanged into the East of England Plan” (Government Office for the East of England 2008, para 13. 8).

The region, through the regional assembly, and then Government through the formal examination process, clearly accepted the work that had gone into the Structure Plan and the scale of ambition set out for growth in the sub-region, focussed around Cambridge. In contrast to many localities, the RSS was not, therefore perceived by local stakeholders as having been a particularly significant point in the history of planning in the sub region:

“It reflected the Structure Plan and it reflected the strategies of the Councils anyway” (Planning consultant).

 “The RSS from a Cambridge sub-region point of view, didn’t really change things very much … one of the easiest bits in the East was the Cambridge sub-region because all we did for the RSS was to lift the existing spatial strategy out of the existing Structure Plan and stick it in the RSS. We’d already sort of set our own aims and ambitions through the Structure Plan. They were ours. The RSS was, in strategic direction terms, immaterial. ” (Senior local authority officer).

“They’ve had an idea of growth for a long time” (Developer).

“I think Cambridge is quite unusual like that because it went for it [growth] a long time ago and has had good and strong political leadership all the way through and the East of England Plan, it was a happy coincidence in a sense, but it didn’t accelerate it, it didn’t really slow it, it didn’t really change it” (Economic development consultant).

This was emphasised by the representative of a national organisation:

“The East of England regional strategy was ahead of everybody else’s regional strategy. They came to terms with the idea of having a Cambridge sub-region quite early on in the game as opposed to Bristol who had moved the other way with the break-up of the former county of Avon. ”

Elected members similarly expressed their broad support for the East of England Plan, despite openly acknowledging the political challenges of dealing with housing numbers:

“I was very supportive of it actually” (Elected member, Conservative).

“What happened in the East was bottom up … the figures seemed to stack together. So obviously there was a lot of political controversy about housing numbers but essentially my picture in the East was that there was a lot of joint working going on, there was a lot of informality and there was a lot of trust between a lot of political leaders of very different political complexions and an affair embracing growth” (Elected member, Labour).

One elected member did, in fact, make the point that the top-down approach was perceived by some as less than helpful in a context of local support for growth:

“I think the top-down strategies were disastrous in terms of sort of public acceptance. We as an authority were very prepared to argue the case that we needed to build housing. Most of the authorities around us were kind of emasculated in the whole process by these top-down strategies. And it meant the people elected, the representatives, were just simply not engaging publicly in the issues” (Elected member, Liberal Democrat).

One respondent reported that they had been concerned over the proposed revisions to the RSS that were published shortly before the intended abolition of RSS was announced by the incoming Coalition Government in 2010:

“The most recent iteration of the RSS for East of England that were effectively being bantered about, I think the numbers, the numbers quoted were getting rather silly because I think the feeling was that Cambridge had already made its big leap to respond to growth. In some ways what was beginning to discredit the RSS process as such was a loss of reality. The numbers were getting so huge because they were NHPAU figures which were, okay, fair enough, based on need, but with no real feel for what was conceivably deliverable” (Planning consultant and former local authority officer).

Proposed housing numbers in the East of England Plan published in 2008 for Cambridge City were in fact only marginally up on those in the 2003 Structure Plan on a per annum basis and numbers for South Cambridgeshire almost identical (see table 1). Significantly as well, there is no suggestion that the local authorities themselves were at the time pushing for any reduction in these numbers – in marked contrast to much of the rest of southern England including parts of the East of England. The proposed revisions to the Plan, published but not adopted, which extended the planning horizon up to 2031 did actually lower the targets slightly, to bring Cambridge City back to the original levels proposed in the 2003 Structure Plan and South Cambridgeshire just below this level. Perceptions that the government was pushing targets ever higher may have reflected experience more generally in different parts of the region and across southern England as a whole.

**1.3 Initial reaction to the abolition of the East of England Plan and its effect on growth plans**

Across southern England reactions to abolition regional spatial strategies were typically polarised between those, mainly local councillors and residents’ groups, jubilant at the prospect of local determination and reduced targets, and those, mainly from the development sector, who bemoaned the loss of strategic planning and the perceived impact of this on delivery. In the Cambridge sub-region, however, this was clearly not the dominant view. Little support was expressed for abolition. Some stakeholders locally – across the political spectrum, were frustrated and concerned at its impending loss, but many did not see its demise as being of any great significance locally. It was this latter view that predominated.

The only elected member who seemed pleased to see RSS revoked justified this on the failure to deliver in relation to housing rather than top down targets as such:

“I don't think the Labour government achieved it with the RSSs. I think the RSS just didn’t. They complicated the planning system and slowed it down enormously” (Elected member, Liberal Democrat).

Others, more typically, were frustrated at the proposed abolition:

“I think they threw the baby out with the bathwater … Having something set on the RSS was fantastically helpful because it gave a basic bottom line for developers” (Senior local authority officer).

“From my point of view, it’s bemoan, because there was a lot of good quality work actually put in, it was actually all there” (Preservation Society representative).

This also included house-builders who, perhaps unsurprisingly, were concerned about the loss of housing targets associated with the RSS:

“Certainly dropping of the regional spatial plan and targets hasn’t helped … most people would know that they still need housing, but those targets articulated the need and now they've been taken away which means people have to demonstrate their own sort of rationale for it” (Developer).

House-builders also expressed a more nuanced concern about the prevailing policy environment and the uncertainty which that created. Under the RSS system they had experienced what they considered to be clarity about New Labour’s growth plans – ‘pushing at an open door’ was one phrase used. With the loss of RSS, they were uncertain about the future level of support localism would provide for the implementation of large schemes.

However, in the Cambridge sub-region, the overwhelmingly *predominant* view was that abolition was relatively insignificant in terms of plans for growth locally, that the picture was one of continuity rather than change, summed up as follows:

“By and large the scale of ambition and the nature of it as defined in the Structure Plan was rolled forward into the East of England Plan and it’s carried on being rolled forward following the demise of the East of England Plan. So actually there’s real continuity before during and after and I don’t think there’s any evidence around here really that the loss of regional planning has adversely affected growth - if you think growth is a good thing that is… My sense is that Cambridge was never doing it because it was told to, it did it because actually it wanted something out of it which it largely has got. And therefore although people are nervous about it I think people can see both sides of the argument not just the negative one, and because it was never really constructed as a fight with central government the changing wider planning framework I don’t think has had a great impact on Cambridge. I think it has had a big impact on lots of other places so I think Cambridge is a bit unusual, but you know it’s benefitted from good leadership really despite its local government boundaries which are not helpful” (Economic development consultant).

This view perhaps reflected the swift action taken by the local authorities themselves to respond to the abolition announcement with a public statement on their on-going commitment to growth – the first, and only, of its kind nationally.

“Now when the coalition government came in and there was an announcement about RSSs are evil, top down, instruments of Stalin, and we’re going to abolish them, the leaders of the Cambridge Authorities, all six of them, put out a statement shortly after the announcements about RSS abolition that said, cutting to the chase, we understand why government wants to remove top down targetry through abolition of RSS, but we still believe in our spatial strategy and will continue to try and pursue it … I had this meeting with, as it happened, four leaders, all of them Conservatives on the morning that Caroline Spelman had put out some statement about it … it was urging Conservative Authorities to not comply with RSS and without me prompting it, they all went, but this is our Plan. We don’t need to withdraw consent from RSS, this is our Plan anyway. And I could have kissed them, although they weren’t particularly attractive. That to my mind showed we’d done it, we’d actually done it, we’d got the bottom up consent for growth and even when a senior Tory politician was saying, basically, frustrate the RSS, they were saying, we don’t need to” (Senior local authority officer).

Reinforcing this view, one Conservative member indicated that they would in fact have preferred to retain RSS:

 “We were very happy with it and we would rather not have that development plan status taken away because obviously the duty to co-operate involves all sorts of risks and uncertainties which we would rather have not had. As it happens, we seem not to have suffered too greatly partly because in the expectation that the regional spatial strategy would go, we all got together and said we rather like the growth strategy that we adopted. Furthermore, the one that we were working on, the East of England Plan review we quite like that too and we’d like everyone aware, to remain aware of that. The thing was it was essentially a message to developers and to some extent the government, you know they were less important an audience, the principle audience was for example business and anyone with a financial interest in development in and around Cambridgeshire, not to panic, that local authorities were going to stick with the growth agenda and ironically with the, even though we’ve seen lots of councils around the country, not so far from us wanting to reduce the housing numbers in their local plans, our districts all seemed terribly keen to have quite a lot of growth and that’s I think partly because we’ve all got used to growth and we rather like it” (Elected member, Conservative).

Whilst very positive about growth, this clearly as well, reflected some unease or uncertainty with the emerging policy environment at the time – reflected in the desire to set out clearly the collective view of the councils locally.

In the longer term narrative, the 2003 Structure Plan was clearly seen as having been much more significant to the strategy for growth locally than the East of England Plan itself. Concern at the demise of the RSS seems, therefore to have reflected concern over the loss of larger-than-local strategic planning as such and fears, consequentially, that localism might be less able to deliver growth in the future. This concern was clearly shared by the development sector:

“Without having that strategic framework, particularly for housing and employment provision, Local Authorities are all going to be on their own … losing the RSS in particular has caused us concerns about how Local Authorities are going to forecast the employment and population requirements” (Planning consultant).

So although the demise of RSS was seen as much less significant in the Cambridge sub-region than across most of southern England, stakeholders were concerned that the lack of any overarching strategic framework could in fact impact negatively.

**2. Prospects for Growth – the future**

Both Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire were at the time of the research part way through the process of reviewing their local plans, with issues and options consultations having closed for consultation at the end of February 2013. Unlike many parts of England, both Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire consulted on options which include housing and economic growth plans in excess of those in the now revoked RSS. The very fact that such options were actually put on the table for consideration is itself significant, regardless of whether such options were likely to prevail.

**2. 1 What is the sub-region now saying about growth?**

At the time of writing, no formal decisions have been reached in terms of the two local plans with no final outcomes in relation to aspirations for growth. It is nevertheless possible to assess emerging views.

“I think the thing that’s at least really positive here, as I say, is the members, local councillors have basically said economic growth is critical for us … they are trying to take a responsible view as to what the development needs of the area are but the challenges are doing it in a sort of un-structured context without a strategic plan to look to” (Local authority officer).

It is apparent, however, that there is a range of views on where the Cambridge sub-region currently is on growth. At the one end of the spectrum are those who believe Cambridge is still planning positively for growth. At the other are those who see future growth as a much more challenging concept, especially when the future of the green belt is taken into account – to an extent more a sense of scepticism that growth might be successfully delivered than outright opposition to growth as such.

Several respondents expressed optimism about the sub-region’s ability to plan for growth in the future emphasising that consensus on growth has roots far deeper than the RSS:

“The political consensus is still there as far as I understand it. I think they will stick to the same kind of pace and pattern, I think they’ve made hard decisions and you know bits of Cambridge are unrecognisable now compared to four or five years ago. But I think the thing with Cambridge which is something that not many other areas can claim and I think this is really important, is Cambridge has actually seen some of the benefits of growth as well as the costs” (Economic development consultant).

“Yes people, people have got used to it [growth]. People have got used to allocating large strategic sites and building them out” (National body).

“We in Cambridge have just simply not really changed our mentality with the change of government” (Elected member, Liberal Democrat).

“There's very little opposition to the idea that there needs to be growth. There is one of the independent councillors who keeps on sounding off about it. But when we had our 2030 vision workshop on land use, he kept quiet, to our amazement” (Preservation Society representative).

“Yes, so I think the line has held pretty well despite a lot of challenges” (Local authority officer).

There were also, however, more cautious views which, whilst acknowledging that growth was still on the agenda were more sceptical as to the extent that this would be realised, particularly at the higher end of potential growth scenarios. This was typically a concern of house-builders and developers:

“To a great extent, the growth agenda is still embraced by, certainly, by South Cambridgeshire and the County Council. I think probably to some extent less so by the City Council who consider understandably that they must always consider that the unique character of the City of Cambridge is more ruined by over development” (Developer).

“In terms of overall development, there is a lot of, I think, public concern about the levels of development and I think … South Cambridgeshire in particular I think it might be thought in certain circles that they are trying to manipulate the strategic housing market assessment figures to restrain levels of growth to levels below those previously accepted. There is some evidence of that in South Cambridgeshire’s published options and issues paper for their new style local plans” (Developer).

It was not only house builders who expressed caution. Other stakeholders felt that some of the public statements about local authority alignment on growth potentially masked underlying views on the part of politicians and officials that were not so positive about growth as compared to the 2000’s:

“There’s been a bit of a turnover of members within the City … so there is quite a lot of potential for tension around the place now … I think, my main concern at the moment is that it is quite often very difficult to find anyone who is speaking up for the growth strategy any more in Cambridge. People are terribly … a lot of the people are working on it, [but] both politicians and officers tend to be very low key, they keep their heads down, they don’t speak to the press very much, they’re very anxious about it …everyone is rather hunkered down in their little holes and that’s no way to plan and promote a dynamic city like Cambridge” (Planning consultant).

“In comparison to many other cities, Cambridge is actually quite accommodating in many ways. Although now obviously the current review of the local plan with more housing, it’s definitely upset more people with more extensions, particularly at the edge of the city, so there’s more, I think, concern again” (Preservation Society representative).

There were suggestions that localism and the current local plan process could provide an opportunity for local authorities potentially to move in different directions – an opportunity that had not previously been there in the context of larger-than-local strategic planning and creating increased uncertainty for the development sector:

“It is very difficult to second-guess because you’re not sure whether they’re going to stay with the same strategy as set out in the Structure Plan, or whether, actually, they are now going to go off in sort of different directions. And it could become extremely political” (Planning consultant).

“There is some indication in there [the local plan] and in the options that they are putting to the public that there are the beginnings of some degree of restraint over and above the levels that existed before - although of course they have got to be compliant with the national planning policy framework that still requires them to give their five years or more supply of land and what’s more, to base that on a proper evidential base which of course in the Cambridge area is a very dynamic housing requirement, an area of critical housing need, particularly for affordable housing” (Developer).

Asked whether the local authorities were likely to pursue higher end growth options, one developer simply stated:

“My belief is that having offered I think probably three levels of growth based on different forecasts of households, population, demographics and so on, household formation … I think they will go for a lower option. ”

Another stakeholder reported that:

“Cambridge City and South Cambridge as districts are currently going through that process at the moment in updating their LDFs [Local Development Frameworks], they are putting forwards some growth forecasts, low medium and high, and we don’t think the high is high enough” (Planning consultant).

A number of respondents, whilst emphatic about their support for the growth that has taken place in Cambridge over the last 10 years, expressed the view that Cambridge had ‘done its bit’ and should not be continuing to grow at the same rate as over the preceding decade – at least in housing terms. In this context, concerns were expressed about some of the higher-end growth options being consulted on in the South Cambridgeshire and Cambridge local plans:

“My hope is that the Local Authorities will take a fairly firm line on this in the next round and say, we’re only just starting to build out the major allocations that we’ve made in the last Plan, that now is not the time to be making further huge allocations unless there are particularly good reasons … but I personally think that a green belt is a good idea for Cambridge and that one shouldn’t just be coming back and taking nibbles every time you review the Plan” (Planning consultant).

“I think there's a genuine feeling which I entirely understand that actually we've taken a significant amount of growth and planned for it and therefore looking at the same again it's potentially something that both politically, physically, practicably isn't really very acceptable and therefore we may need to temper this. So the sort of statements within the NPPF about what is your objectively assessed need in an area, again, that is economically strong, is proving to be very challenging” (Local authority officer).

Historically, as noted earlier, a prominent view prior to the 2003 Structure Plan was that Cambridge was ‘full up’ and the associated strategy had been to disperse housing growth beyond the green belt. There were hints that this sort of view was starting to resurface locally in some quarters:

“So I think we have got some major potential constraints, as well as a view which has grown that Cambridge is full and that's enough, there shouldn’t be any more … Yes, there is still that view. That isn’t our current view but you know …, we haven’t finished this plan process” (Elected member, Labour).

It was also suggested that although the local authorities were currently purporting to be pro-growth, this would be more difficult in practice when detailed numbers and forecasts were being thought through. It was also suggested that whilst the local authorities are very supportive of economic growth: “the members have said our number one priority for Cambridgeshire is economic growth” (Local authority officer) they had not necessarily fully thought through the implications in terms of housing numbers. Asked if the local authorities accepted the housing numbers that went with growth, one respondent’s view was:

“Yes, entirely, yes, yes. I mean there are within that some very, as you can imagine, some very difficult debates” (Senior local authority officer).

Implications of growth in relation to the green belt were a particular issue and a key factor in terms of public opinion:

“Further green belt release is, and my own view on that is, that if there are green belt releases, they’ll only be small scale because we did a green belt review not so long ago and green belts are supposedly permanent for a reason” (Planning consultant).

“… albeit that I'm not proposing major additional takes from the green belt” (Elected member, Labour).

“So we are promoting a scheme now, which we've put forward in the SHMA requests and we are now making representations on that at the moment for… an exceptional case for a green belt relief. This is not quite as - well it is not at all as supported by the authorities as the last one” (Developer).

“We decided three years ago that we would not oppose growth; all we would try to do is to influence it to be done well… with the current local plan, we’re not yet quite convinced that all the housing really needs to go in the green belt. We do oppose it being done in the green belt. But the local plan consultation is all about how many houses we can cram into Cambridge. And a lot of us think that we should rather get preference for employment land in Cambridge and try to move the houses out beyond the green belt” (Preservation society representative).

**2. 2 Prospects for collaboration and the duty to cooperate?**

The Localism Act and the National Planning Policy Framework set out for local authorities ‘the duty to cooperate’. This requires local authorities to collaborate across boundaries on strategic issues. This is potentially particularly critical for a place like Cambridge with tightly delineated boundaries around the city, tightly drawn green belt, and on-going growth pressures.

The Cambridgeshire authorities are among only a handful nationally, which set up formal governance structures initially, in response to abolition of RSS and subsequently seen as fulfilling the need to demonstrate compliance with the duty to cooperate. These included the cross-authority, Joint Strategic Planning and Transport Members Group and the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Joint Strategic Planning Unit which describes its purpose as being to “coordinate work on the production of a high level, non-statutory spatial framework for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough on behalf of the constituent local authorities” (C&P JSPU 2012). It produced a report detailing ‘objectively assessed housing need’ for all the local authority areas (C&P JSPU, 2013). Two joint development control committees also exist to deal with fringe sites and new settlements, and although they have existed for some time, no plans are in place to end their function.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Several respondents cited the earlier Structure Plan process as being instrumental to laying the groundwork for good cross-boundary collaboration. With such a substantial amount of development being allocated on the Cambridge city fringe, the two authorities had to talk together to deal with strategic sites. The general view was that the cross-boundary collaboration stemming from this process endures, and several participants commented on this being particularly notable given that Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire have had such different political make-ups:

“Cambridge is abnormal, Cambridgeshire is abnormal in its level of appreciation of the need to work together and a generally shared ambition about what we want to do and it’s pro-growth” (Senior local authority officer).

“I think it’s pretty good, actually” (Elected member, Liberal Democrat).

“The irony is we have always got on very well with the Liberal Democrat leadership on the city council even though we’re a Conservative district and Conservative county, partly because we probably are socially Liberal or Conservative as well as being economically Liberal and the Liberal Democrats running the city council were generally economically Liberal Democrats” (Elected member, Conservative).

“I mean there has been a spirit of cooperation and dialogue and that's been officer as well as member” (Elected member, Labour)

Some participants inferred that the introduction of the ‘duty to co-operate’ was not significant – or did not change anything in the sub-region – because it simply reaffirmed processes and relationships that were already in place:

“My sense is that Cambridge was never doing it [collaborate] because it was told to, it did it because actually it wanted something out of it which it largely has got … the changing wider planning framework I don’t think has had a great impact on Cambridge. I think it has had a big impact on lots of other places so I think Cambridge is a bit unusual but you know it’s benefitted from good leadership really despite its local government boundaries which are not helpful” (Economic development consultant).

That said, others cited evidence of a pro-active approach towards the ‘duty to cooperate’, triggered by its introduction, particularly the establishment of the ‘joint strategic planning unit’ as detailed above. Views seem to coalesce around this being both a proactive and a defensive action: proactive in the development of shared evidence and a coherent vision; defensive in offering a strategy against unplanned development. It was also clear that some respondents had observed the planning inspectorate taking a more ‘hard-edged’ approach to the duty to co-operate in other parts of the country (including the Bristol sub-region) as compared to when the NPPF was first introduced, and saw the importance of being able to effectively demonstrate compliance beyond ‘we had a chat’ (Senior local authority officer).

“The whole service is bilateral, the partnerships are practical. It makes sense doesn’t it, to come together as one? It is a member steering group and it’s a small unit but it pulls, does a lot of the work for you. And by utilising that and helping to shape its non-statutory spatial strategy, which is what it’s doing, it means you’ve then sort of already got a fairly strong thing to say, well look, we’re already from the very outset, we were cooperating dutifully though this route … So there’s an attempt to do something that in the absence of a joint core strategy is probably the best thing you could do with the current system … to have simultaneously developed plans with an underpinning non-statutory framework which you operate to” (Senior local authority officer).

“The proposal that I put forward was, let’s have a Joint Strategic Planning Unit because actually we want to keep working on this together. For so long we’ve tried to work on these things together, we recognise the economic geography and therefore, going back into being only parochial is bad, isn’t it. And everyone went, yes, let’s try to do that. So again, readily committed to the Joint Strategic Planning Unit” (Senior local authority officer).

“Our key role as a small unit is helping to bind the authorities together, and all of this is badged under the duty to cooperate if you like. That’s the main raison d’etre for us, it’s to support them on collective work on the evidence base for local plan reviews as we talked about, but also I guess to, in the absence of a strategic statutory plan, to have something that can demonstrate a more concrete output based way the way that these plans add up to more than hopefully some of their parts across a wider area, to be a spatial framework … the crude way of describing it is a light touch structure plan for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, but because we had a vision and set of objectives that were in place for the RSS review that have been agreed at a member level by the authorities, we use that as a starting point” (Local authority officer).

Some respondents credited the local authorities for producing core strategies to joint timetables and with shared consultation exercises (on Cambridge City Fringe - Joint Consultation of Development Strategy and Site Options on the Edge of Cambridge), which they described as being ‘a nice change’ as compared with many other authorities. Others however questioned why, if the level of co-operation is a good as people have described, have the authorities stopped short of producing a joint core strategy?[[4]](#footnote-4)

“What a lot of other people are saying which I have some sympathy with is that it’s a bit crazy that the City and South Cambs are doing separate core strategies rather than doing a joint core strategy. I think it rather expresses the limit of cooperation. I think that there wasn’t, there’s enough trust to have informal coordination, but not enough trust to actually pool the voting and the power” (Planning consultant).

“So the three Authorities are simultaneously taking forward these three separate strategies to try to recognise the inter relationships and manage them. It’s difficult, and wouldn’t it be better if we had a single Plan? Yes, of course it would be we can’t at the moment” (Senior local authority officer).

There was a sense with some respondents that when talking about effective collaboration between the authorities, they were viewing this historically – citing the importance of the diplomacy and leadership of key people (some no longer involved), both officers and members in the past. When looking to the future, there was a feeling that the real test of the capacity of this collaboration to endure in the absence of an explicit strategic framework was still to come. This was particularly in the context of plans moving from issues and options consultations to firmer choices in terms of direction and site allocation:

“I think that over the next 12 months, I think that the sort of the more informal arrangements are going to be put under quite a lot of pressure, I suspect” (Planning consultant).

A number of participants saw potential differences between Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire over the accommodation of future growth:

“At the moment, we have Cambridge City for instance, suggesting that the new settlement option for housing growth is a good option and conversely South Cambridgeshire is a little bit more wary of that. They would prefer to see more development in Cambridge and at the edge of Cambridge” (Planning consultant).

“The city is tightly encircled by South Cams, and they don’t really get on” (Preservation Society representative).

“How those decisions will be made, remains to be seen” (Planning consultant).

“If you can't accommodate it in your area then you’ve got to accommodate it somewhere else and that’s what the duty to co-operate is about so those are the sort of debates we’re having at the moment, that are actually proving, unsurprisingly I guess, pretty challenging” (Local authority officer).

A number of elected members, whilst positive about co-operation did also acknowledge the potential limitations:

“Obviously the duty to co-operate involves all sorts of risks and uncertainties” (Elected member, Conservative).

“If there were a change of political direction in one or the other council, then that could jeopardise that” (Elected member, Labour).

One elected member said his interpretation of the duty to co-operate was that it was for Cambridge City to put pressure on South Cambridgeshire because the latter has more developable land to meet needs during the plan period. Using the planning process to ‘exert pressure’ is one potentially more politically challenging interpretation of the meaning of co-operation.

There was also some cynicism about the real purpose of effective co-operation between the two authorities. That they seek to work well together to avoid a boundary change was mentioned by a number of interviewees:

“Cambridge City has always wanted to expand its boundaries and South Cambridgeshire has fought tooth and nail to keep them where they are” (Planning consultant).

Only one participant held completely contrasting views on collaboration and described Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire as not getting on nor showing any attempts towards producing coherent plans.

**2.3 The role of the Local Enterprise Partnership in planning for growth**

“It's still economically very strong and the arguments that the LEP and others have been making back into government, is if anywhere is going to lead the national recovery then it will be places like this” (Local authority officer).

A degree of ambiguity exists over the role of Local Enterprise Partnerships in respect of planning, given that they have no statutory planning function. In some parts of the country (Greater Birmingham and Solihull for example) LEPs have been working closely with their respective local authorities to link economic ambitions with planning objectives (see Geoghegan, 2013). Elsewhere, it is less clear how proactive these relationships are. It is however clear that the primary role of LEPs is that of driving ‘economic growth’. This clearly relates, therefore to planning activities at a local and sub-regional level particularly in the context of the NPPF and its emphasis on support for sustainable growth. Indeed, this was the view of a national body we spoke to:

“LEP’s are a good idea because they are trying to pull together a theory of that functional economic area and then that’s where a lot of decisions should be taken, particularly one’s that have cross boundary issues such as transport in particular but also houses too. ”

The Greater Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership (GC&P LEP) was established in October 2010 and launched in 2012 a ‘prospectus for growth’ – a consultation document designed to engage partners in discussion over barriers to growth and priorities for overcoming these. No mention was, however, made of the potential role of planning in support of economic growth, and, unlike many other LEPs, it had not, at the time this research was conducted, set out its ambitions for economic growth. Activity seems to have mainly been focussed on the Enterprise Zone at Alconbury, on the fringes of Cambridgeshire. There was not therefore, an economic development strategy at a regional or sub-regional level for the Cambridgeshire area, at the time of the research.

There was a widespread view at the time, among stakeholders locally that the GC&P LEP had not so far been particularly engaged in the growth agenda in the Cambridge sub-region:

“You do not come across the LEP making pronouncements or trying to focus the Local Authorities on bringing forward economic and housing development” (Planning consultant).

“Not a particularly significant force in terms of economic development promotion” (Developer).

In relation specifically to the Cambridge sub-region it was suggested that up until now at least, the LEP had ‘taken a back seat’, ‘focused on other things’, and been ‘not very proactive’. Concerns were also raised over its geographical coverage, including as it does two rather separate functional economic geographies and both with closer economic connections to London than to each other. The LEP also, it was suggested, lacked the appetite or resources at the time to engage proactively in relation to the planning and housing agenda although acknowledging that business saw a direct relationship between work-force potential and the availability of housing at the right price.

Some participants felt that even if the GC&P LEP was more proactive, strategic planning would be a tricky area of engagement:

“the trouble with LEPs is that they haven’t got a democratic mandate” (Planning consultant).

“The LEP said we can’t, we haven’t got legitimacy to do strategic planning” (Senior local authority officer).

And more bluntly:

“The LEP will not be allowed to put their tanks on the lawns of the planning authority” (Elected member, Liberal Democrat).

There was reported to have been some discussion early on as to whether the LEP might have some kind strategic planning function but as elsewhere, this was not supported locally. The need for underpinning engagement at a strategic level led to the establishment instead of the Joint Strategic Planning Unit:

“I think there was a very strong consensus that it was the right thing to do once that decision about whether it was done by the LEP or somewhere else had been taken” (Local authority officer).

Some suggested that the LEP had not engaged in planning for growth because the sub-region was seen as effectively managing to do this itself. However, there was also a view that should local authority processes fall short, then perhaps the LEP should get more closely engaged:

“I think they will need to give more strategic direction to the Cambridge sub-region if the Local Authorities are knocked off their current strategy which is to provide the growth in Cambridge and surrounding Cambridge to meet the aspirations of Great Britain PLC. So I suspect that they are looking at what happens in Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire with interest, not getting involved at the present time, but I would hope that they would get involved if the Local Authorities decide to go with lower growth strategies” (Planning consultant).

“I think if Government is going to put pressure on, they should be putting pressure on the LEP to actually ensure that the Cambridge sub-region doesn’t fail, that the new planning policies don’t try to water down the vision and the growth” (Planning consultant).

In common with LEPs elsewhere, the GC&P LEP was subsequently required to draw up a Strategic Economic Plan for the area as a whole (BIS, 2013). LEPs have been resourced in order to draw up Plans which will provide a framework for more significant funding flows from both government and the EU channelled through LEPs. It is yet to be seen how the role of the Cambridge sub-region will be seen by the LEP and the relationship of its Economic Plan to core strategies and planned housing numbers.

**2. 4 Infrastructure funding and delivery issues**

“I think people are realising now it’s one thing to make a plan, and it’s another thing to deliver it in a sustainable way and that infrastructure has been a huge issue and the inadequacy of the government’s mechanisms for funding infrastructure” (Planning consultant).

“Oddly it’s not the political NIMBYism stuff, I mean it’s here, but it’s not in the ascendency, it’s the cash thing” (Senior local authority officer).

As discussed earlier views differed locally on the extent to which the Cambridge sub-region would continue to plan for growth. Two critical considerations raised by respondents, however were a view that many of the strategic site allocations resulting from the 2003 Structure Plan had in practice been slow to come forward despite strong demand and second, problems relating to the availability of infrastructure funding.

Several respondents highlighted slow delivery as an issue and expressed surprise at this “even in an area like Cambridge where you’ve got very high land values” (national body representative). There was a sense that there is little point in allocating a whole series of new sites if those that were allocated a decade ago have still not been delivered - particularly if new sites involved further, potentially unpopular, green belt release. Public opinion on this matter was unsurprisingly seen as influencing political choices.

“This is my speculation, in Cambridge, some of the big land releases, housing land, which came forward and have not been delivered. So I think the fact that the likes of some land owners around the fringe of Cambridge and the green belt are saying we can deliver, we can deliver, it’s a rather uncomfortable discussion that the council have to have because it forever always reminds them they haven’t delivered on those bigger sites which were heavily promoted” (Developer).

“Things are beginning to come out of the ground now, at last, but gosh it’s taken a long time” (Planning consultant).

“South Cambridgeshire has always been quite pleased to be able to say to the private sector, we’ve allocated all these new sites for you, it’s you guys that are not delivering, it’s not us. And I suspect we’ll get a bit more of that as well” (Planning consultant).

“There was big ambition for development to come forward quite quickly I guess on the back of the 2003 structure plan. I mean with hindsight some of the things that were in there were quite unrealistic and challenging, probably the biggest one of all being Northstowe having made a start in terms of building by 2006 and we’re now into 2013 and we haven't had a brick laid” (Local authority officer).

One respondent emphasised that the bar was set high by the Cambridgeshire Authorities in relation to the standard and nature of development, possibly in order to enhance the acceptability of growth and that this extended the time scales for development:

“… most of the growth in and around Cambridge has been on big urban extensions and I think the very nature of those means they’ve had long lead in times, and an expectation of the authorities for very high standards of development which has led to a lot of negotiation to achieve the right outcomes on environmental sustainability, levels of affordable housing, they necessarily, they do involve a lot of discussions about viability, deliverability etc.” (Local authority officer).

Many hypotheses were put forward as to why Cambridge has been slow to deliver and a well-rehearsed set of arguments, often articulated at a national level stage, were suggested: that the 40% affordable housing requirement was too high in terms of financial viability; delivery reflected development finance issues not the planning system; large sites inevitably took time to build out given developer resources; some sites had been purchased at the height of the market and developers were potentially in negative equity, and resources within local authorities meant that they were slow to respond.

The recession too was highlighted as an issue, but in comparison to other parts of the country this was not the predominant ‘excuse’ for slow delivery. There was an almost universal sense that given the high demand, Cambridge really ought to be able to deliver more quickly. There was little suggestion, as frequently made in other parts of the country, that developers locally were keen to manage the flow of new units in order to avoid flooding the market and depressing prices – given that prices are already amongst the highest in the country.

There was considerable frustration locally over the government’s real commitment to growth and the extent to which this had influenced infrastructure funding and delivery in particular. Developers and elected members alike cited the case of Northstowe ‘new town’ development pointing to the decision of the Coalition Government on election to immediately cancel improvements to the A14 (on which much of the development hinged), only to then reinstate the decision but some considerable time later:

“Yes well of course they [Central Government] didn’t get off to a very good start by scrapping the A14, targeted programmes of improvements upgrade … Cambridge went ballistic, so this is just cutting a nose off to spite your face. You won’t get the growth you want in and around Cambridge without the A14 upgrade across Cambridge, so very, very quickly they reassembled and got to the stage of re-announcing that a significant upgrade would occur and we’re back kind of where we might have been, well a few years late now, but it’s not going to happen in this spending review period, but it might happen, we do need it though” (Elected member, Conservative).

Clearly there was still perceived uncertainty which was likely to impact on the future pace of investment and development. Other respondents were of the opinion that successive Governments had contributed to slow delivery where they were owners or part owners of sites which could not, on commercial grounds, be released until price and profit-sharing arrangements had been agreed. They also pointed to the fact that the MoD had put forward 26 objections to the proposed relocation of the privately-owned Marshalls airfield – a major greenbelt site to the East of Cambridge allocated for housing - cited as stark evidence of Government hindrance.

“My own view is that governments just constantly look at the planning system to try to solve the housing crisis and actually what you’ve got is a land ownership problem … no one wants to face up to the fact that unless you intervene in the land ownership structure, you won’t get this done. You’ve got somewhere like Cambridge which has got a powerful economy, or at least it’s a better economy than most. Massive allocation of the green belt. Massive amounts of money made by land owners. There was £66 million made on one site, just the cash taken away, and very few houses being built. How can you possibly stand back and say that’s a problem with a planning system? I think it’s shocking that landowners can walk away with huge amounts of money, you know, irrespective of whether any housing gets built or not” (Elected member, Liberal Democrat).

Some participants felt that changes to the funding and development finance environment might substantially alter the way people – and in particular politicians – feel about supporting further growth. There was a definite feeling that there is less Government funding available to support growth now – particular infrastructure funding than over the previous decade. Whether or not this represents reality is in a sense immaterial – the perception was undoubtedly shaping opinion.

“If you asked most house-builders and developers, although they like to moan about the planning system, they don’t see that as being the main problem. It’s all about finance at the moment” (Planning consultant).

“What has started to become more difficult is this question of funding. Because as budgets are shrinking, part of what’s always made the growth acceptable has been the level of corollary investment in infrastructure. As our grant income shrinks, as our social care costs in particular go very rapidly north, we don’t have anything left to cover off the capital investment. So for the first time in very recent weeks really, I’ve heard politicians going, can we afford this? You know, we recognise it, we still realise this is important for UK economy and everything else but we can’t not have a balanced budget. We have no choice but to meet the adult social care needs because that’s a statutory duty, this is discretionary, we can’t raise Council Tax, we don’t get rewarded for the investment in growth because the tax benefits that flow go to the Treasury, they don’t come back to us. What do we do?” (Senior local authority officer).

“Probably the dominant thing to remember is there was a report a couple of months ago which says that the infrastructure deficit in Cambridgeshire is £1. 2bn. And there's no hope of finding £1.2bn” (Preservation Society representative).

It was not clear, at the time the research was conducted, whether the potential flow of UK government and EU funding through the LEP might serve to unlock and accelerate delivery. At the time, however, the LEP as described earlier, was not closely involved in supporting or driving growth in the Cambridge sub-region itself – this might change over time.

In practice, institutional capacity and governance structures in support of growth had if anything diminished. Some cited the winding up of delivery bodies – particularly Cambridgeshire Horizons - as indicative of less overall support for growth:

“So we’re not very good about developing big new places in the way that the Dutch are or the Germans are or the Scandinavians are and I think we still haven’t learned the lessons because I think this government is even less wedded to local public sector agents. They’ve wound up Horizons, they’ve wound up the RDAs, they’ve emasculated the Homes and Communities Agency to the point where they can’t really do much anyway. So the capacity just isn’t there to deliver the sorts of schemes that make sense in terms of sustainability and a lot of the criteria for strategic planning. So my worry is that we’re just going to go back to a much more ad hoc, nothing will get delivered and that the government will get more and more frustrated and go round in ever decreasing circles and therefore will allow appeals for bits of housing here and there just to get something going” (Planning consultant).

“We worked quite closely with Cambridgeshire Horizons. We thought that as a focus for targeting growth and as a channel of funding, quite a lot was achieved” (Developer).

“We had Cambridgeshire Horizons until autumn 2011 as the delivery body and that was one of the, I think, more mature if not longest standing ones in the country so that reflected I think Cambridgeshire’s desire to promote growth and obviously seize opportunities where they existed like government funding” (Local authority officer).

One participant reflected upon the importance of the strategic planning work being done by the Joint Strategic Planning Unit but acknowledged that on-going funding was tentative:

“We’re down to the barest of bones in relation to the available resource, so we’re just about keeping, keeping it going” (Senior local authority officer).

The above comments about delivery and finance provide some evidence of future uncertainty for the growth agenda. A potential factor at the time of the research was the emerging City Deal for Cambridge – this was being finalised for submission with negotiation underway between the Cambridgeshire Authorities and Government about the submission. No details on its likely content were in the public domain at the time. Nevertheless, what some interviewees – including those involved in the submission – implied was that the City Deal could result in substantial changes to the governance and financing environment which could potentially resolve or at least ameliorate some of the funding and other governance issues identified.

The City Deal potentially also again represented clear evidence of pro-active collaboration in support of the growth agenda across the city region, partially at least in response to the incentive of additional resources:

“If we were to land a City Deal, one of our commitments, I expect, would be to say we will basically integrate housing, transport, planning across the city-region and have decisions on that at the strategic level taken by the City Deal board. So the three Authorities would basically dilute their sovereignty and pool it into a City Deal board and take future decisions around that in a completely integrated manner” (Senior local authority officer).

**3.1 What are the risks for the Cambridge sub-region’s growth strategy under localism?**

Many respondents were clearly optimistic that the growth narrative would continue to be played out in the sub-region. Others however raised what they saw as potential ‘risks’ going forward arising specifically from uncertainties generated by localism as a political strategy.

“We actually feel that localism lives in Cambridgeshire but whether it has been taken to lengths that now make it more difficult to achieve the government’s current agenda which is to give greater sway to jobs, prosperity, growth, house-building is, we think … it has made it more difficult because of that sort of action by local authorities” (Developer).

There was a strong view from a number of participants that localism - even in the context of strong Government messages about the need for local authorities to provide for growth - when interpreted at a local level by local politicians, will mean that local issues, rather than a wider set of concerns, will dominate choices. Against that background, some perceived there to be an increased possibility of communities, local authorities and their partners seeking to resist ‘unwanted’ development under localism.

Understandably it was predominantly, although not exclusively, developers and consultants who feared this possibility most acutely:

“The difficulty for members in terms of from a localism point of view is wanting, with an eye on the ballot box, to support the idea of local objections but on the other hand wrestling with the idea of strategic development requirements. It has never been any different has it?” (Planning consultant).

“… it’s providing the opportunity for people to become involved, but if it’s all overdone, if the pendulum swings too far and expectations arise in terms of what can be achieved, it is much more difficult, then, when there are difficult decisions to be made, it makes the process much more difficult against a crescendo of local objections” (Developer).

“… it becomes completely rational from a personal point of view to try and block plans that could reduce your house price or value and obviously that’s where localism starts to get a bit tricky“ (National body).

“… the idea of localism was rather worrying because it would just allow pragmatic decisions to be taken and therefore when companies like my own have to make major decisions about investing in something, it just raises the degree of risk involved” (Developer).

This was seen as particularly the case in relation to the green belt, where localism was definitely seen to have increased the potential strength of opposition to further review:

“There’s definitely a tension about further green belt release, some would say, actually that it’s sensible to look again, others would say, we’ve done it once, not yet. (Senior local authority officer]

Some, on the other hand, suggested that the tension between local electoral concerns and consideration of wider issues has always been a challenge and that little had changed under localism. The majority view was, however, that localism could potentially amplify such tensions and reinforce a more localist perspective. More formal strategic planning was seen as having been able to help manage tensions on growth. It was, in fact, elected members who were most vocal on this subject – reflecting the fact that they are most directly exposed to the opposing forces:

“I think my group is really still fearful that at the end of it things will fall down the cracks, despite duty to cooperate obligations, despite the fact that we have now got a linked consultation … I don't have yet, I haven’t got confidence that the process is going to come up with meeting the need on housing, jobs and transport” (Elected member, Labour).

“Yes there’s certainly more resistance this time” (Elected member, Conservative).

“It [consensus on growth] could well disintegrate” (Elected member, Conservative).

“… the position is starting to appear in Cambridge and that leads, I think it is fair to say, to a few tensions between the two authorities, not the least of which is in relation to competition for resources” (Developer).

Even the local preservation society shared these concerns, providing the specific example of a large village six miles north of Cambridge:

 “Waterbeach could easily accommodate 10,000 homes, but the local people are saying that’s too much. So how do you decide that? Because the local council is going to fight for the views of the local people because they need to be re-elected” (Preservation Society representative ).

There were some oblique references to tensions that had existed between Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire in discussions preceding the 2003 Structure Plan – suggesting that all had not seen eye to eye at the time as a rosier view of history might imply and with the inference that such tensions might re-emerge under localism.

Many respondents also saw a lack of clarity from Central Government itself on the relationship between ‘localism’ and ‘growth’ and felt that this had created a level of uncertainty that was also potentially allowing tensions to (re-)emerge locally Many, including elected members representing the political parties in Government, felt that localism began as an expression of local authority self-determination (de-facto allowing a greater possibility for resisting development), but that a growing realisation within Government that planning for growth under self-determined localism might not deliver growth sufficient to support economic recovery, has resulted in a plethora of statements and announcements about delivering growth under localism and a National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) which place greater emphasis on objectively assessed need. Some referred to this as ‘shifting ground’ on localism, making it difficult for local authorities – and other partners – to know how to act:

“Well I think its message was such complete rubbish right from open-source planning onwards … they just hadn’t thought through what on earth they were doing. On the one hand they were trying to play for the Shire kind of audience, the NIMBY audience by saying we’ll give you more power, but on the other hand, they were being reminded by the house-builders that you’ve just put things in the hands of local NIMBYs, nothing much is going to happen” (Planning consultant).

“My view, I probably wouldn’t be thanked for it, is I think we've got two planning systems in a way: one that’s being designed by CLG and one that has been designed by the treasury and the treasury has won out unsurprisingly again … we had Eric Pickles, Grant Shapps and others talking about localism very strongly and we had George Osborne and others, you know, coming forward with a strong view that in terms of supporting construction, economic growth - the needs of the country - housing supply needs to be boosted and that’s what the NPPF says” (Local authority representative).

In stark contrast to original perceptions about self-determined localism, several respondents felt that Government was in fact now expressing such a strong message on growth – particularly the role of housing delivery in stimulating economic growth – to almost yield the concept of localism irrelevant:

“We are trying to understand how more central intervention by the government [recently] and the government’s growth agenda, sits alongside localism and it seems to us that trying to work out exactly what the government are trying to achieve is based on a series of decisions…it appears to be in our view moving the balance back towards a greater weighting towards, you know, the need to give planning permission for housing and greater weight given towards economic development” (Developer).

“The Conservative Party ought to remember that one of its happiest periods was under Harold Macmillan and he was responsible for building hundreds of houses, and you know that didn’t seem to do that much harm. They seem to be waking up to the fact that their notion that it was all the fault of top-down housing targets may not actually have been the reason and so this is why they’re working really hard to accelerate” (Elected member, Conservative).

“Personally, I still think that the NPPF is still very top-down. I think they [the Coalition] are all over the place. I think they’re absolutely all over the place. I don't really understand where he’s [David Cameron] coming from. They come from this neo-liberal kind of way of thinking - if it’s not working it can’t be the fault of the market; it must be the fault of the legislation. Everyone’s approach is very characterised by their political philosophy, and Labour had this top-down approach that didn’t really work. Conservatives have got this neo-liberal approach. And I just don't know if that will work. I think it is market failure as much as it’s regulation failure … ” (Elected member, Liberal Democrat).

In relation to growth targets, several respondents noted the requirement set out in the NPPF for local areas to plan for objectively assessed need. It was suggested that local authorities might be surprised about what this would reveal in an area as economically strong as Cambridge:

“… the other irony is that when people are required to do a new strategic housing market settlement and it comes up with numbers which exceed the allocations that the regional spatial strategists gave them they are put in a bit of a quandary, what do we do now?” (Elected member, Conservative).

The suggestion was that the requirements set out within the NPPF to plan for growth in accordance with the evidence might actually surprise some Members who might have seen localism as an opportunity to reduce levels of provision. Reinforcing this, the view of one national body representative was that ‘localism’ is actually being more centrally shaped with an increasing emphasis on planning inspectors dealing ‘correctly’ with the requirement to evidence core strategies and to demonstrate cooperation[[5]](#footnote-5):

“And whilst there are commentators out there saying ‘oh localism is dead’ I think localism probably never had life breathed into it - certainly not localism in terms of the open source planning style of localism” (National body representative).

Many respondents, including elected members, were thus acutely aware of the potential for contradictions in the localism discourse in the context of what has been in the case of the Cambridge sub-region, very much a locally-driven growth agenda. In a sense it is ironic that in the Cambridge sub-region, where the local authorities on the face of it are pursuing a growth narrative, localism is still perceived as potentially posing a risk and allowing tensions to come to the fore. At the same time, the difficulties of maintaining the rhetoric of localism given the strong desire to support economic recovery are also particularly apparent in a sub-region better able than most to realise that desire.

Some respondents, developers more explicitly than others, did favour greater central direction on growth:

“… and by having abolished all regional mechanisms and any kind of recognition that there is a top-down view that has to be mediated with a bottom up … . to say that we’ll remove the top down and just throw everything down and hope that the bottom up will sort out the problem is, I think, is just abrogating responsibility. And I think that there is a need for central government to also play a role in explaining why all this needs to happen and providing the resources to the agencies who can do that on the ground” (Planning consultant)

It was perceived that an inherent risk under localism was that messages on growth would become confused. Some expressed the view that ‘nobody is standing up for growth anymore’. It was perceived that there was less work pertaining to ‘vision’ or ‘strategy’ at a sub-regional level. There was greater introspection on the part of the local authorities. Growth – it was felt – is ultimately a persuasion game. Over the last decade the Cambridge sub-region had been successfully ‘persuaded’ to grow, to in effect buy in to a growth narrative. The localism agenda had introduced an element of doubt. This was in part seen as perhaps a generational issue:

“Most objectors tend to be people of my sort of age who own properties that they’re trying to protect. But we still have children and grandchildren who are struggling to find a house to live in and so you’ve got to set out the reasons why one needs growth and what the options are and as far as possible, bring people along” (Planning consultant).

The particular social characteristics of the local population were also seen as playing a part. A significantly higher than average number of residents have degree level or higher qualifications than anywhere else nationally, “*probably a greater percentage of lawyers and academics per square metre than anywhere else in the country, all ready to sharpen their pencils and take up judicial review*” (Planning consultant). This, it was suggested, led to a higher level of engagement than elsewhere. A significant and growing section of the population also saw themselves as potentially priced out of the local housing market. A more engaged local population could influence political choices either way. One elected member asserted that the Cambridge electorate was more articulate in its mobilisation against growth whilst another claimed that it was easier to persuade the Cambridge electorate (many of whom had been in-migrants themselves) to accept the wider benefits of growth than elsewhere and to recognise the special place of Cambridge in a national or global context:

“Localism is not a threat to growth if the South Cambridgeshire example is anything to go by, people want more growth than the district had in mind for them and we have quite a few little villages actually, who have been passed by for having allocations or many rounds of local planning who would quite like some, and they’re seriously considering neighbourhood plans but only because they like the positive aspects of more growth, not because they think a neighbourhood plan will enable them to stop things from happening” (Elected member, Conservative).

Indeed, in this context, local determinism was not always perceived as a risk. Some actually felt that greater ownership of the growth agenda would be a positive benefit, in stark contrast to views across much of the rest of southern England:

“So there has been something of the control shift with the localism stuff which the District Councils have picked up, this is for us to determine, but we do respect this underpinning thing. So it’s not, it has shifted it a bit I think to feel that there’s more self-determination at the local level and that’s not necessarily a bad thing because it might instil more ownership” (Senior local authority officer).

This suggests that whilst localism could potentially open up tensions and possible opposition to growth it could also deliver continuing growth based on a more fundamental, underlying commitment to growth across the sub-region. This is likely to depend on the extent to which the particular configuration of interests and stakeholders in the sub-region first articulated through the Cambridge Futures group which has, historically, shaped and supported the growth agenda and the wider ‘Cambridge Phenomenon’ are sustained in the future, potentially through the 2030 Vision initiative to which we return below.

**3.2 Views on the need for Strategic Planning**

We have explored, elsewhere, views on and arguments around the need for larger-than-local strategic planning as a key component of the overall planning system (Boddy and Hickman, 2013). This is particularly pertinent in the context of the Cambridge sub-region and the stance of local stakeholders including political groupings, local government officers and local residents groups compared with much of the rest of southern England.

“I think we are, in the end, going to reap economic dis-benefit from the removal of the strategic planning tier” (Senior local authority officer).

“I am bemoaning it in general terms [loss of strategic planning] I think it’s an absolute total disaster to be honest, I think Cambridge is the one exception that I’ve seen that has had good enough local leadership and sensible people with a long enough perspective to be able to deal with it, I think for everywhere else it’s absolutely horrendous and districts just not knowing what they’re doing. It all seems to be now to be terribly negative, they are very scared of being challenged rather than being positive about what they want to achieve and I think that’s horrendous” (Economic development consultant).

Given the degree of commitment to growth, historically, at a sub-regional scale, it might have been that there was little perceived need for a formal, overarching framework at a strategic level. Clearly, however, there were those who saw localism as a potential threat. There was also near unanimous support among respondents for some form of strategic framework. This was expressed, variously as the need for leadership in terms of sub-regional vision, a degree of central direction or coordination and the need for an overarching framework for the assessment of individual plans. For the development sector the need for strategic planning was about certainty:

“I think it is fair to say that developers take a great deal of comfort in having in place a strategic framework as part of the overall system or the planning framework, that you could actually then rely on than if there was a dispute about whether a development could go ahead” (Developer).

For others, the need was more conceptual, about the functioning of places:

“The key reason that it’s important is that the way that places evolve and develop depends on their economic geography. Unless you’re in a very large unitary, the administrative systems that one overlays on that in relation to planning don’t fit, so in any two tier system you’ve got a divorce of transport and planning. So the only way that makes any sense to fit the realities of life, to actually recognise what the market is going to do, and the way that the economy works, is to have something that is bigger than a District Council to understand the strategic direction and to have some degree of recognition of the inter relationship between, between areas and across tiers of government. And in the absence of strategic planning, you’re always going to struggle because it just doesn’t … a District Council strategy on its own won’t ever match the economic realities. So the single reason that you need strategic planning is to match reality and if you don’t do that, you’ll basically hamper the economy’s ability to function effectively, and people’s ability to access employment effectively. That’s why it’s important” (Senior local authority officer).

“ … a lot of the issues we have in Cambridge are not just neighbourhood-based, they’re actually wider – they’re city-wide or cross-boundary” (Preservation Society representative).

“Economic and spatial geographies don’t stop at district boundaries, I mean that’s a no brainer and I'm sure from a personal point of view and I'd quite happily say it, okay, you might abolish regional spatial strategies but replacing them with nothing, with no structure plans or anything else, is pretty bonkers, it's pretty crazy when actually one of your key objectives is trying to boost housing growth. Because you're not going to do it unless you can look at some sort of wider context for where is most appropriate” (Local authority officer).

Or as one elected Members simply stated:

“ … if the regional plan is good enough for London why is it not good enough for other parts of the country and [as in] other nations in the United Kingdom” (Elected member, Conservative).

One planning consultant commented that England was now the only place in Europe without any formal strategic planning system and that “the Coalition seem to be proud of this fact”.

There did not seem to be a polarisation of views locally found elsewehere between those who favoured some form of strategic planning and those more in favour of localism. There was more a sense that if localism was to work it needed a sense of an ‘underpinning’ if not ‘overarching’ framework’ if it was to work in practice and if there was to be continued and effective delivery of growth. The demise of RSS galvanised thinking and this was articulated as described earlier, in the Joint Member Group and Joint Strategic Planning Unit which were explicitly seen as providing some form of continuing strategic framework:

 “… we recreated a degree of strategic planning even though the system has sought to abolish it. So we’ve said, okay well there is no such thing as strategic planning any more, really, in any outside of London, in any, apart from the national level which is very, very light. Anyway, but basically it’s gone, but we think it’s important still so we’re going to do it anyway, so we sort of made it, no one’s stopping us from doing this sort of thing so we’re trying to still do it” (Senior local authority officer).

One respondent commented on the unanimity at the first meeting of members on the JSPU board about its purpose:

“The decision was made at the first meeting, we’re not going to do nothing, we simply had no strategic planning function, just do our own thing from a localised point of view because that’s not acceptable … as a matter of principle, I think there was a very strong consensus that it was the right thing to do, once that decision about whether it was done by the LEP or somewhere else had been taken” (Local authority officer).

For some, though positive about the role of the JSPU, these arrangements fell short of full strategic planning as such. The plan being prepared by the JSPU was to be ‘under-pinning’ rather than ‘overarching’:

“Quite carefully, we always describe it as being underpinning not overarching. So we recognise that sovereignty is with the local Plan, but by having an underpinning framework through the JSPU, it creates an environment in which we hope the individual local plans will already try to speak to each other before they come out. Now it’s not perfect, but it might be the best you can do in the circumstances. The test will be in looking at what happens when the local Plans come out. In the City and South Cams area, we’ve got parallel processes on the two local Plans” (Senior local authority officer).

So there was a definite sense that the sort of strategic planning being undertaken was perhaps not optimal, but the best that could be achieved under localism:

“We’re keeping the flag flying but through, through stealth almost” (Senior local authority officer).

‘Underpinning’ as an approach also perhaps implied that the work of the Unit would focus more on technical evidence rather than perhaps more forward-focussed visioning exercises potentially driving the overall strategy.

There was little support from respondents for a return to regional structures as such – none of our respondents spoke up for the re-introduction of strategic planning at the regional level. Consensus was more for the need for strategic planning at the sub-regional level. One national body representative asserted in this context that Government itself would have to end up accepting the need for sub-regional strategies of one sort or another:

“In somewhere like, somewhere like Cambridge, having a sub-regional strategy seems the most obvious answer … I think over the next year or two maybe there we will see a much greater case for sub regional planning and I think that both the government and the inspectorate will place more pressure on local authorities to do a lot more work under the duty to cooperate and to produce sub regional strategies in terms of joint working and therefore we will get back to some form of to use the RTPI phrase larger than local planning”.

So while the Joint Unit has not in any sense recreated structure plan processes it does represent a very different form of governance than has developed more generally across southern England and continues to reinforce – and underpin – a continuing commitment to future growth.

**4. Conclusions**

The coalition of interests developed from the Cambridge Futures group and formalised in the 2003 Structure Plan, carried through into the East of England Plan and subsequent local plan process following the demise of formal strategic planning at a larger than local level. Whilst the nature of the debate has changed in detail over time there has nevertheless been a strong element of continuity and continuing broad-based commitment to physical and economic growth. This was evidenced with publication in July 2013, of the *2030 Vision* report, a reprise in many ways of the earlier Cambridge Futures group.[[6]](#footnote-6) The contrast with much of the rest of southern England and indeed many other localities which have been at best ambiguous about growth and often actively sought to contain physical expansion has been marked. Many such localities saw the demise of larger than local planning as a clear opportunity to roll back levels of expansion which had been promoted previously under what they saw as top-down targets and regional spatial plans.

A combination of factors appears to have set Cambridge apart from other localities in southern England. First, the nature of Cambridge as a world-ranking research-based university and all that this implies. Second, and with the university a key driver, the development of the Cambridge Phenomenon, the rapid growth of large numbers of high technology companies. Third, the coming together in the late 1990s of Cambridge Futures, the influential growth coalition bringing togetherlocal business leaders, politicians, local government officers, professionals and academics*,* widely credited with securing broad-based support for future growth. Fourth, the University itself developed a strong interest in the physical development of new sites as it expanded the scale and scope of research, teaching, academic staff and student numbers, moved out of congested city-centre sites and worked increasingly closely with external partners in the sub-region. Fifth, local communities appear to have been much more favourably disposed towards the benefits of growth than has been the case in many other localities across southern England. More had a stake in the benefits of growth directly or indirectly including those living beyond the boundary of the City itself in South Cambridgeshire and diluting what might otherwise have been more traditional ‘conservative’ interests more instinctively opposed to future growth. Finally, local political interests were more favourably disposed towards growth and development (presumably reflecting the character of the local electorate and influential interests locally referred to above) and less polarised than might have been expected – particularly given the geography of Cambridge City closely bounded by both greenbelt and South Cambridgeshire.

For the Cambridge sub-region as elsewhere, however, the advent of localism does clearly represent a significant phase in the longer-term narrative of growth and physical development. There is still a strong commitment to continued growth as evidenced by joint arrangements, the draft local plans for the sub-region and the continuing reference back to the trajectory established by the 2003 Structure Plan. This degree of resilience is itself, significant in an immediate sense. Localism has, however, brought with it an element of uncertainty or instability – the potential, at least, that historic coalitions of interest and commitment could, to an extent, prove less durable than in the past. It provides the first real test of this coalition of interests and the commitment of the two local councils in particular to continuing growth in the absence of an overarching strategic planning framework.

There is strong evidence of an enduring commitment to growth, as reported by the majority of stakeholders taking part in this study. Particularly significant was the 2010 joint statement by the Cambridgeshire authorities expressing their on-going commitment to strategic growth. This was backed up by their collective decision to support the establishment of the Joint Strategic Planning Unit to provide a common evidence base, a common process and to underpin development of local plans by the individual authorities. This was later underlined by the ‘Memorandum of Cooperation’ on the provision of additional housing agreed by the Joint Member Group in May 2013 (Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Joint Strategic Planning Unit 2013). A number of stakeholders also noted that the most recent Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire local plan consultations included options for growth both in excess of commitments in existing local plans and strategies as well as lower options – the local authorities did not automatically see this as the opportunity to propose significant reductions in existing proposals as happened more generally across southern England and were prepared, in principle at least, to entertain higher levels of growth.

A wide range of local stakeholders suggested that, unlike elsewhere, residents in the sub-region had been able to see and understand the benefits of planned growth in terms of housing provision, community facilities, jobs and investment in infrastructure such as the Cambridge guided bus-way. There was reported to be a definite sense that the impact of planned, managed growth had been positive for many people, if not everyone, locally. There was also a conscious feeling locally, that Cambridge as a place was of wider than local significance – that it was significant nationally and even internationally and that failure to provide for growth would have more than simply local implications. It was suggested that there was a sense of maturity to the debate and a broader understanding of the need for and benefits of growth.

The perception of high levels of co-operation, trust and collaboration between key stakeholders in the sub-region was striking. Elected members from differing political parties shared similar views on the ability of partners in the region to work on the growth agenda - including those of differing political affiliation - and there was little sense that there were voices that were not being heard. The more formal coalition of interests in the form of Cambridge Futures which emerged in the latter part of the 1990s is no longer prominent as such, but a less formal but nevertheless powerful coalition of stakeholders and interests has continued to evolve and to encompass shifts in formal powers and structures and vehicles for development over time. In this, the University has clearly played a key role both as a landowner and with a strong interest in supporting future growth in student and staff numbers, enhancing its international standing, research base and links with external partners, R&D and technology-based commercial interests co-locating in the sub-region. This has included the major development at West Cambridge and more recently approval for major new residential development along with university and commercial space at North West Cambridge – the initial phase including 3,000 homes (half for university staff) and accommodation for 2,000 students.

Both here and elsewhere, there are significant levels of development already in the pipeline and planned, large-scale development will ensure significant levels of future growth going forwards into the medium term. As noted, however, the demise of formal strategic planning at a larger than local level, and the advent of localism and voluntarism does raise the prospect that the coalition of interests which have up to now strongly supported continuing expansion could be tested more significantly than in the past. It has been suggested that whilst collaboration and joint working arrangements remain strong, there has been less in the way of strategic thinking or commitment to a more holistic vision – as elsewhere, there has been more of a technocratic focus on housing numbers with the Joint Planning Unit ‘underpinning’ local plans rather than providing a more ‘overarching’ framework or vision. It is not clear how powerful an influence the JSPU will be going forwards and whilst its value was widely perceived it was seen as sub-optimal by some stakeholders compared with more formal strategic planning structures. With the demise of Cambridge Horizons there is also no longer a delivery body to drive the overall strategy and there was clear concern about the level of resource available to support growth through infrastructure funding for example. So far at least, the Local Enterprise Partnership had not played a very significant role in the sub-region as such.

Some stakeholders also suggested that there were some signs that political differences might start to emerge including historic resistance to growth on the part of South Cambridgeshire and that communities on the fringe of the urban area which had up to now accepted growth and the benefits it brought might start to think that they had made their contribution and should not be expected to do more. This might be reinforced if infrastructure and community facilities did not meet expectations. The emergence of the 2030 Vision initiative does suggest there is still a broad-based coalition of interests supporting growth and development across the sub-region, more explicitly in some ways in fact than in the case of the Cambridge Futures group over a decade earlier. That said, there is some unease that the 2030 Vision initiative might in fact seek to pursue a strategy of growth dispersal, with development once again leapfrogging the green belt, rather than focussed on the urban area.

Uncertainty has been reinforced by a degree of ambiguity or tension in the Coalition Government between ‘sustainable growth’ on the one hand and the rhetoric at least of ‘localism’. Cambridge has, historically, been seen by government as a key centre for growth, driving the knowledge-based economy. Elsewhere at least, localism has been seen as the basis for local communities to determine – and restrict – levels of growth. This might, similarly, serve to reinforce emerging reservations with regard to continuing growth amongst some communities in the Cambridge city-region.

At one level, the outcome of the local plan process and the numbers arrived at are a potential test of resolve in terms of future growth. The latest projections for economic growth and related housing targets published by the Joint Strategic Planning Unit suggest that the local authorities should be planning for levels of growth towards the lower end of the options on which they consulted. The suggested targets are also lower than rates of house-building proposed in the East of England RSS - but still roughly in line with earlier structure plan figures and the proposed Revision to the RSS for the period up to 2013 (see table 1 earlier). This reflects the impact of the extended recession, the scale of development already in the pipeline and, possibly, realism given rates of actual completions which have been somewhat slower than originally planned. Figures emerging in the local plan process do not, however, suggest any significant rolling back of earlier commitments to continued expansion and physical development. House prices and rents remain very high even by norms for southern England (Centre for Cities, 2013). Neither the evidence from the Joint Unit nor representations from other stakeholders seem, however, to be pushing Cambridge or South Cambridgeshire into uncomfortable territory in terms of housing numbers. In practice therefore, in the short term at least the continued trajectory of growth, post-recession, seems unlikely to be challenged. The capacity of the local authorities to collaborate and reach agreement on future housing numbers – and the potential disruption to future growth posed by localism on the ground - is unlikely, therefore to be put to serious test in an immediate sense. Potential risks and uncertainty do however remain under localism. Realisation of continuing expansion in the Cambridge sub-regional economy and capacity to address issues of affordability and congestion are in practical terms, however, more likely to be determined by issues of delivering planned growth and the necessary infrastructure provision to support this, than target numbers for housing completions. There is a sense that if it does not prove possible to deliver growth in the Cambridge sub-region even under localism, given the strong degree of alignment of stakeholders, then the chances of securing this anywhere else in southern England are somewhat remote.

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1. Proposals developed earlier by the influential Cambridge Preservation Society, forerunner of Cambridge Past, Present and Future (Cooper, A., 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo qualitative analysis software. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Recent committee papers for the joint strategic planning unit member group interestingly point to the difficulties experienced by other authorities, Bath and North East Somerset being named as a specific example, in demonstrating to the satisfaction of inspectors at core strategy inquiries that they have fully met the requirements of the duty to cooperate. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There is a statutory requirement for each local authority to produce a separate core strategy but the process itself could be fully joined up. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As noted earlier, the Joint Planning Group in the Cambridge sub-region were aware of developments in places like Bath and North East Somerset where the inspector has taken the local authority to task on just this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. www.2030vision.org [↑](#footnote-ref-6)