

East of England Plan >2031 New Regional Scale Settlement

Briefing Paper for Huntingdonshire District Council
19 October 2009

Executive Summary

In late 2008 Arup was commissioned by the East of England Regional Assembly to investigate the potential for regional scale settlements and identify the most appropriate location(s) within the East of England. The overall conclusions of the study were that for the whole of the East England there may be a number of locations where new regional scale settlements may be possible, Alconbury; A5120/Midland Mainline Corridor; East Bedfordshire Strategic Corridor; Marston Vale Eco Town; South of A120, east of Stansted; and the Braintree area. The study suggested that a Regional Scale Settlement should have a minimum of 20,000 dwellings, which would accommodate about 40,000 people, provide or allow good access to 18,400 jobs and be a new geographical focus for growth. This is based on sustainability principles and the requirement for the new settlement to possess a regional role rather than simply being a new settlement

Huntingdonshire, as indeed Cambridgeshire as a whole, however has serious concerns about the viability of a new settlement as an option to deliver the regional growth agenda. In particular there are significant questions over the robustness of the findings of the Arup Report and their applications to Alconbury. Particular concerns relate to the impact on the existing settlement hierarchy; the detrimental impact on the viability and sustainability of other settlements, especially the market towns within Huntingdonshire and other areas in need of regeneration; the absolute carrying capacity of the area and the quality of life of those new residents, the significant environmental constraints such as water stress, sewage and stormwater management, cumulative impact of flooding in the area, and unsustainable travel patterns which will affect the sustainability of a new settlement in this location.

There are also severe doubts over whether Alconbury has a) the basic site availability to deliver this capacity and b) the scale of economic impetus which would need to be attracted to Alconbury as a new Regional Scale Settlement providing the necessary conditions for the site to become a regional economic driver.

Although the detailed sites analysis and investigation of Alconbury and its surrounding area has indicated a maximum site capacity of between 11,000 and 13,750 homes, there are some quite severe constraints not only in terms of physical and social infrastructure requirements but also environmental constraints which would need to be overcome if Alconbury airfield and an appropriate wider hinterland were to be redeveloped.

Furthermore it is important that the agreed spatial strategy within the county is not undermined. A new regional scale settlement would be destructive to the existing character of the rural landscape in Huntingdonshire and would completely alter the spatial relationships between settlements. This principle is strongly reflected in the response put forward by Cambridgeshire on behalf of the Cambridgeshire districts, which stated that, “The key objective of the overall strategy remains to locate homes in and close to Cambridge and to other main centres of employment whilst avoiding dispersed development which increases unsustainable travel and reduces access to services and community facilities”. This is crucial in the pursuit of sustainable living and the creation of successful settlements.

Alconbury has much stronger links with Peterborough than it does with Cambridge, a crucial point which the Arup Report overlooks. A new settlement at Alconbury would severely impact on Peterborough’s regeneration objectives if delivered before Peterborough has been able to establish further growth needed for regeneration.

The timeframe for build out and delivery of a regional scale settlement within the new plan period is also considered unrealistic. A new Regional Scale Settlement is assumed to need a build up period which would require the District to deliver over four times its current built out rate at an average of 2,112 units from 2020 onwards to deliver the full 24,080 units in EERA scenario 2. In addition to this it is highly likely that the necessary new Sewage Treatment Works that would be needed to support this growth would not be operational until 2022/23 at the earliest. This does pose serious questions as to whether a new Regional Scale Settlement, whether it be 11,000, 13,750 or 20,000 units, would be able to make a significant contribution towards meeting housing needs in the next plan period.

Related to this is also the question of the carrying capacity of the area. A new settlement at Alconbury which respects the capacity and constraints of the area, i.e. in the order of 11,000 to 13,750 homes, would inevitably need to compete with and be delivered alongside the growth agenda for the other market towns and key service centres. This scale of settlement would be highly unlikely to provide the necessary attributes to attract regional scale employers and would therefore fundamentally undermine the ability of these settlements to attract developers without diverting investment and opportunities from the established economic centres in the district i.e. the market towns and undermine the regeneration of

Peterborough. A key question therefore, is what is the pace and scale of growth that the market can sustain. This view is supported by all the Cambridgeshire Authorities and their collective view is the housing growth likely to be deliverable does not justify further new settlements.

In conclusion, whilst in principle there is the potential for 11,000 to 13,750 homes to a new settlement at Alconbury, the severe environmental, infrastructure, job creation, spatial arrangements and delivery challenges posed by this growth make it an unsustainable and unrealistic option in the next plan period.

East of England Plan >2031

Scenarios for housing and
economic growth

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The East of England is faced with some ambitious growth targets up to 2021 and beyond. The current Regional Spatial Strategy sets out the strategy for delivering this growth up to 2021. When the plan was adopted in May 2008, it was agreed that an early review should be undertaken, which would look forward to 2031. As part of this review, various options for accommodating future development within the East of England region are being explored, including the potential for a number of regional scale settlements. These scenarios are:

- **Scenario 1: 26,000 per year regionally 2011-2031**
Huntingdonshire – 11,080 homes
- **Scenario 2: 30,100 per year regionally 2011 - 2031**
Huntingdonshire – 24,080 (including a new regional scale settlement)
- **Scenario 3: 30,000 per year regionally 2011 - 2031**
Huntingdonshire – 17,960 (based on economic potential of areas)
- **Scenario 4: 33,700 per year regionally 2001 - 2031**
Huntingdonshire – 24,000 (based on household projections)

The report examines the implications for Huntingdonshire of the various scenarios.

Scenario 1

- This scenario is in line with a roll forward of the current RSS targets.
- Scenario 1 would require 554 units per year
- In rolling forward the current RSS approach Scenario 1 would use the same spatial growth pattern as the approved Core Strategy so that not to undermine the

sustainable pattern of development being promoted nor harm the important character of District or its historic settlement pattern.

- Both Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire have reduced targets in Scenario 1 on the basis that their initial targets were ambitious and have been compounded by the recession which has further delayed delivery. However, the East of England Plan set ambitious targets for all the districts, including Huntingdonshire. The recession is nationwide and therefore all districts are suffering delays in delivery rates and will need time to get back to strong market conditions in order to achieve their requirement up to 2031.
- Huntingdonshire's Local Investment Framework highlighted concerns that significant extra growth above existing targets set out in the Core Strategy would severely compromise the sustainability of settlements. The Inspector supported this view, stating that there were "absolute limits to the capacity of settlements to accommodate growth no matter what time period". Critical areas include, transport and access including public transport provision; the provision of utilities including water supply and sewage treatment, and supporting community infrastructure including health facilities and education.

Scenario 2

- The Arup's report identified Alconbury as a potential location for a regional scale settlement in Huntingdonshire. However, no convincing argument is put forward in the Arup report that new settlements are sustainable growth options.
- Evidence suggests that there is a stronger case for future investment in existing towns on a suitable scale, rather than committing scarce resources to the creation of additional new settlements.
- A new settlement at Alconbury would undermine the approved Core Strategy spatial geography for growth within Huntingdonshire and completely alter the spatial relationships between settlements.
- The timeframe for build out and delivery of a regional scale settlement within the new plan period is also considered unrealistic. A new settlement would require a build up period i.e. part of RSS and LDF planning policy, achieving planning permission, site assembly, etc; which would require the District to deliver almost four times the current rate of growth in 2021/22 (1,761 units).

- There is limit to carrying capacity of the area in terms of the pace and scale of growth that the market can sustain
- A new settlement could fundamentally undermine the ability of the market towns to attract developers by directing investment and opportunities to the new settlement.
- The scale of development required at Alconbury would undermine the delivery of approved regional and local strategies and draw investment away from centres such as Peterborough and Bedford.
- There is also a risk of coalescence of existing villages into the new settlement
- There is no immediately apparent new economic sector which could be established at a new regional scale settlement to supplement the current employment geography of the District. Instead it is highly likely that any new employment opportunities at Alconbury would deflect investment from the market towns and strategic employment sites and therefore undermine their successful delivery.
- Due to the strategic highway connections and lack of sustainable transport options, employment travel would be predominately car based
- A new regional scale settlement at Alconbury would also draw investment and resources away from areas identified for regeneration priority such as Peterborough and Fenland. Also impact on on the vitality and viability of the Huntingdonshire market towns.
- The start up costs of investment in infrastructure is a significantly higher compared to upgrading or expanding existing provision.
- There are serious concerns of water stress and wastewater treatment in the Alconbury area.
- A regional scale new settlement would also have a significant impact on road congestion in the District and on movement patterns. The Core Strategy states individual developments within the Huntingdon SPA may take place ahead of the improvements subject to demonstrating either 'minimal impact' or 'nil detriment' on traffic flows on the A14".

Scenario 3

- Huntingdonshire would be required deliver 900 homes per annum, this is twice the current build out rate

- The majority of growth under Scenario 3 would be directed to the most sustainable locations of market towns and other settlements within the SPAs
- Focussing growth in the most sustainable locations which supports the local economy does help to address the important balance of jobs and homes and in principle could improve the homes/jobs ratio within the District. However, it needs to be of an appropriate scale.
- This principle is strongly reflected in the response put forward by Cambridgeshire on behalf of the Cambridgeshire districts, which stated that, “*The key objective of the overall strategy remains to locate homes in and close to Cambridge and to other main centres of employment whilst avoiding dispersed development which increases unsustainable travel and reduces access to services and community facilities*”.
- However, it should be recognised that Scenario 3 will overstep the capacity of the economic centres in the District.
- Job projections suggest that there will be fewer jobs than is currently envisaged in the current RSS and that the employment assumptions in the EERA models are much too high.
- The policy-based projections for employment show a greater share of growth towards Cambridge and South Cambridgeshire of 69% with only modest growth expected for, East Cambs and Huntingdonshire of 14% and Fenland at 3%.
- Job projections do not reflect the distribution of housing across the County with Huntingdonshire projected to have a lower share of employment growth than South Cambridgeshire but a significantly higher share of housing growth. This, coupled with the fact that Huntingdonshire also currently suffers from high out commuting, is not a sustainable pattern of growth for the region.
- Aside from the issues on the appropriate carrying capacity of the market towns to accept the spatial consequences of scenario 3, substantial investment in sustainable modes of transport would be needed if the housing targets in scenario 3 are to be met whilst adhering to the sustainable principles established in the Core Strategy and reflected in the Inspector’s comments.
- The Core Strategy Inspector highlighted that there is an absolute limit to capacity of settlements within Huntingdonshire which needs to be recognised.

Scenario 4

- This scenario is based on trend based population projections
- It requires Huntingdonshire to deliver 1,200 dwellings per annum, this equates to double its RSS roll forward target
- This would need to be distributed either through Huntingdonshire's approved spatial strategy of Spatial Planning Areas or through a combination of SPAs and a new settlement. Either of these options would pose significant environmental, infrastructure and job creation challenges
- Huntingdonshire's growth is projected forward with a similar growth rate as the other districts based on their existing populations.
- As the size of Huntingdonshire's existing population is significantly larger in comparison to the other districts in the County it therefore takes the largest share of the County's required additional households. However, this is not a sound basis on which to base growth assumptions, especially without the economic prospects or infrastructure to support that growth
- Huntingdonshire has experienced high levels of migration, particularly high levels of international in-migration with a particular flow from Eastern Europe, it is the County Council Research Group's view that the level of migration flows will not be repeated over the coming years and therefore the ONS population projections cannot be relied upon in planning for housing growth
- The analysis shows that Huntingdonshire is assumed to have a projected smaller average household size due to it experiencing a distinctive aging population due to its post-war population boom. This trend may be undesirable and it would be more appropriate to create more balanced communities with a much greater emphasis on encouraging people of working age and families into the District.
- Migration patterns do not always translate into a focus on centres of economic activity and does little to capitalise on the region's strengths
- Projecting past population projections forward will also undermine the regeneration objectives for places such as Peterborough or Fenland. As these places have not seen high levels of growth in the past, projecting these trends forward will not assist in attracting investment into these areas.

- Dispersed growth will need to be managed sensitively to ensure that whilst supporting the economic viability of these settlements it does not alter their unique character.
- There are major infrastructure challenges in the delivery of the higher growth options.

In terms of the various implications of the four scenarios, it should be noted that even the current strategy poses serious challenges for all districts within Cambridgeshire. All scenarios therefore create additional environmental, infrastructure and job creation challenges in addition to current strategy and even more so at the higher levels of growth. These challenges are even more significant for the new settlement option. In addition, it does not appear that the true effect and impact of the recession has been fully accounted for in the setting of scenarios on the scale and distribution of growth and the ability to meet targets over the period.

In terms of the scenarios, scenario 1 is deemed the most appropriate, whilst at the same time there is an acknowledgement that there may be some flexibility for additional capacity in some Spatial Planning Areas to help meet the target in scenario 3. However there is an absolute limit to the capacity of settlements within Huntingdonshire which needs to be recognised and was a conclusion of the Inspector Report into Huntingdonshire Core Strategy.

Both Scenario 2 and 4 are deemed unrealistic and not sustainable. Scenario 4 is not based on any sustainable principle of managing growth. By merely projecting population projections forward bears no relationship with directing housing growth to areas with strong economic prospects which will help reduce unsustainable travel patterns. For Huntingdonshire, the impact will be particularly severe with extremely high levels of growth needed to be accommodated in market towns which are at or nearing capacity, fundamentally damaging their unique character.

There are several concerns in relation to the new settlement option in terms of the impact on the settlement hierarchy; the detrimental impact on the character, viability and sustainability of other settlements, especially the market towns within Huntingdonshire and other areas in need of regeneration; the unrealistic timeframe for delivery; the absolute carrying capacity of the area and the quality of life of those new residents as well as a variety of infrastructure and environmental constraints which will affect the sustainability of a new settlement in this

What is clear is that there are some fundamental sustainability principles which should be adhered to. A crucial principle is the close relationship between homes and jobs which should underpin all the scenarios, as one of the key objectives of creating sustainable communities is to achieve a balance between jobs and homes. Directing housing growth to those areas with the strongest economic prospects would help manage growth across the region, reducing unsustainable travel patterns and increase the vitality and viability of sustainable market towns and areas in need of regeneration. Development needs to be undertaken to a high standard with adequate provision of jobs, affordable housing, social and physical infrastructure and opportunities for sustainable travel options.

Another important principle is ensuring that the scenarios do not compromise the agreed spatial strategy within Cambridgeshire which respects the historic settlement pattern, and also within those districts where approved Core Strategy sets out an agreed spatial approach to managing growth.

This principle is also strongly reflected in the response put forward by Cambridgeshire on behalf of the Cambridgeshire districts, which stated that, “*The key objective of the overall strategy remains to locate homes in and close to Cambridge and to other main centres of employment whilst avoiding dispersed development which increases unsustainable travel and reduces access to services and community facilities*”. This is crucial in the pursuit of sustainable living and the creation of successful settlements.

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Cambridgeshire Development Study

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The document assesses the Cambridgeshire Development Study's response to the EERA scenarios. As a result of preliminary analysis, the original scenarios provided for testing by EERA were not considered realistic for Cambridgeshire given the severe downturn in the economy and the validity of some of the population and job projections. Three more realistic and potentially achievable growth scenarios were tested by the study.

- Baseline = 75,415
- Medium = 90,415
- High = 110,415

Detailed analysis suggests that the most appropriate scenario for Cambridgeshire is the baseline of 75,415 as this is the committed land supply. The study further concluded that there may be some flexibility for further delivery above the baseline up to but no higher than the medium growth scenario of 90,415 homes. The study also provided an evaluation of the potential spatial options for growth in Cambridgeshire and concluded that the priority for distributing this growth should be firmly based on the current approved and agreed spatial strategy of:

- Urban extensions around Cambridge
- New settlement at Northstowe, and
- Expansion of existing sustainable market towns

All further options to the existing strategy pose additional environmental, infrastructure and job creation challenges, especially at the higher levels of growth. These would be even more significant for the new settlement options. The evaluation of the study's findings therefore leaves the new settlements option extremely challenging and not necessary under these levels of growth.

The key objective of the overall strategy remains to locate homes in and close to Cambridge and to other main centres of employment whilst avoiding dispersed development which increases unsustainable travel and reduces access to services and community facilities. In terms of the economic prosperity of the region, there is still a fundamental need for the immediate Cambridge area to remain the economic driver and focus for employment growth in the county. For areas such as Huntingdonshire, this is particularly important to help support spin off industries such as knowledge based and creative industries.

Although the improvement of Cambridgeshire's market towns is widely supported in principle across the County, as per the findings of spatial portraits, the ability of market towns to take further growth varies, with many of the towns at capacity or nearing absolute capacity limits. Of the 4 Spatial Planning Areas in Huntingdonshire, St Neots and Huntingdon have the greatest potential for sustainable growth within agreed limits set out by the Huntingdonshire Core Strategy Inspector's Report, St Ives has a much more scaled down potential for limited growth and Ramsey has the least potential for sustainable growth due to its relative remoteness and weak economic performance.