

Oxfordshire Futures

**Growing Oxford and its county:
lessons from Cambridge**



Much has been made of the way in which the city of Cambridge and its region has excelled at attracting research-led investment, much of it associated with the university, and employment growth. A success story that has evolved over 50 years has crucially seen the creation of essential infrastructure too, including housing provision. The city of Oxford and its region has made slower progress. What then can Cambridge teach us?

Having reviewed the findings of an Oxford Innovation Engine 'business oriented' delegation to Cambridge in 2014, Oxford Civic Society (OCS) decided to send its own, more 'citizen oriented' mission to Cambridge in spring 2016. The aim was to consider what has been working in Cambridge that could or could not be applied in Oxford.

The differences between the two cities were clear:

- **Cambridge University** had been able to inspire a collective vision, to speak with a single university voice, to engage with the local authorities and to be instrumental in influencing development across the city-region;
- despite fragmentation of development planning and management responsibilities across several local authorities, a collective will enabled **working together** to create compatible and integrated development plans to achieve the vision;
- public and community **opposition to development was muted** – perhaps because of a relatively less-sensitive environment, perhaps because of better engagement and understanding;
- the management of development planning has been placed in the hands of **high-calibre individuals**, committed to delivering a real vision of the future of the whole city region.

Some things are similar however. Cambridge and its region has just as big a problem with housing availability and affordability as the Oxford region and equally big problems with traffic congestion.

A different policy context

The OCS delegation noted that it is only partially helpful to look at the way Cambridge has enjoyed alignment of development stakeholders to achieve a consensus vision of growth. The national policy context now is very different to the context that existed when Cambridge was planting the seeds of alignment so long ago.

Localism

Since the coalition government of 2010 we now have a central government-driven set of 'localism' policies which, in Oxfordshire, constrain the alignment of the parties involved:

- there is a prevailing leadership stasis which is at least partially a product of entrenched district and city party-political allegiances. This is evident in the significant problems with allocation of the city's unmet housing need in the neighbouring districts, Green Belt management and differing views on the justification for Oxfordshire's economic growth;
- the strategic regional and county development planning mechanisms which existed in the early days of the 'Cambridge Phenomenon' and which facilitated alignment, no longer exist. 'Localism' has led to reliance on a 'Duty to Cooperate' between local authorities for strategic planning that has proved to be ineffective in many areas, especially in Oxfordshire;



Cambridge's guided busway with adjacent cycle track has enabled thousands of commuters to travel into the city by public transport or by bike. This is the result of coordinated planning of where people live and work and investment in infrastructure



High quality new housing



The OCS study group in front of Spillers Mill, converted to city-centre apartments



Apartments near the station. Cyclists are well provided with parking spaces in much of the city



Some new commercial development is bland but the absence of cars is notable

- separated spatial planning at district/city level and transport planning at county level is a continuing major development constraint.

Devolution

This could be a very rare opportunity to create a governance structure within Oxfordshire which enables leadership, transparency, efficiency, collaboration with the wider community and with the business community. These are all vital if we are to achieve the consensus vision of the future of Oxfordshire that is currently lacking.

However this great opportunity is at risk of not being seized locally. The spectacle of the Oxfordshire district councils and the County Council preparing devolution bids in competition with each other was profoundly disappointing. This stance can only be compared unfavourably with Cambridge which for some years has collectively known where it wants to go, recognised the difficulties and has worked hard collaboratively to achieve its ambitions.

Brexit and its implications

The Brexit vote has led to greater uncertainty and may mean loss of European funds for regional development and scientific research. It is likely to reduce some of the region's comparative advantages thus heightening the importance of those which remain. **More than ever, the Oxford city-region must contribute as much as it can to the national economy.**

Oxford/Oxfordshire must innovate now because time has been lost and jobs and private investment could disappear in the aftermath of Brexit. In particular the public sector contribution to science-led growth is already constrained by lack of public resources rather than lack of public will. Both Oxford and Cambridge city-regions will need to be pursuing public-private partnerships to ensure adequate infrastructure support.

Conclusion

OCS concludes that a shared vision or ambition for growth is vital. Lack of vision is partially a lack of civic leadership, which we highlighted in our 2014 *Oxford Futures* report. One of our recommendations to deal with this problem was to introduce an **Oxford Futures Commission** which could act as a catalyst for the development of a vision around which a consensus could be built. Such a Futures Commission could be an integrated feature of devolved local government in Oxfordshire.

Similarly, OCS recommended Development Forums which would help to ensure the collaboration of the wider community and business community in more local (e.g. district) development decisions. These could also be integrated into devolved local government in Oxfordshire.

Both of these recommendations would help to ensure a more adequate response to public and community opposition to development which is evident in Oxford and its region to an extent not evident in Cambridge and its region. Collaboration with the wider community would allow for more effective debate on the justification for economic growth and its environmental and social implications. It would enable consensus to be achieved on sustainable developments.

OCS also hopes that the University of Oxford will significantly contribute to the vision and consensus building with an up-to-date and clear strategy for its science-led business development. Successful progress requires nothing less.

This report summarises the findings of an OCS study group which visited Cambridge in spring 2016 to find out what Oxford could learn about planning and development.

The group concluded that Cambridge's success story has much to teach us – about the role of local government, the contribution of the university and the dedication of key individuals committed to finding a shared vision.

The report is one of a series of documents on Oxfordshire Futures (formerly Oxford Futures), an initiative of OCS working in partnership with others. The report, *Oxford Futures: Achieving smarter growth in Central Oxfordshire* is available from the address below price £10 incl p & p (discounts available for multiple copies – contact us for details at info@oxcivicsoc.org.uk). Readers are also welcome to download the full report and a summary from our website www.oxfordfutures.org.uk

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We welcome your comments

Comments on this report can be posted on the Oxford Futures blog at www.oxfordfutures.org.uk or may be emailed to comment@oxfordfutures.org.uk

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