



Growing Fenland – Strategy Proposals for the Fenland District

A report from Metro Dynamics to the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority and Fenland District Council



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Introduction

Metro Dynamics were commissioned by the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority in October 2018 to undertake the preparation of economic and social master plans for four of the main market towns in Fenland: Chatteris, March, Whittlesey and Wisbech.

The principal means through which this work has been undertaken is a series of research projects gathering data on each of the market towns, consultation with the general public, businesses and with town teams comprising elected members, officers and others. On the basis of this work, reports have been prepared on the issues facing each town. Each report sets out recommendations arising from both the research and consultation and deliberation.

Three of these reports were issued in interim in the early summer of 2019 and were the subject of revision subsequently following a further process of consultation. The exception was with Wisbech, owing to the work already underway through Wisbech 2020 Vision.

Links to the Final Reports are here **[link to be added]**.

The proposals set out in each of these reports have been the subject of development through the preparation of strategic outline business cases for each of the proposals where this is possible at this stage.

It was clear to the Metro Dynamics team at an early stage of the process that, whilst each of the town reports contains valuable and specific proposals, some of the most important issues facing the towns are actually common. In addition, there are issues which lie beyond the scope of town and District councils and in some cases beyond the scope and funding of the County Council and Combined Authority too.

The purpose of the project was to identify important priorities and programmes, the pursuit of which would change the trajectory of the market towns in the short, medium and long term. As we presented our findings to Fenland District Council and the Combined Authority, we made the argument for a second and parallel stream of work which looks at these cross-cutting issues with a view to bringing forward proposals for all the market towns to complement the ideas emerging from the individual town reports.

This report sets out the conclusions of the Growing Fenland project in this area.

The Town Team Reports are very much the reports of the people who worked on them and arise from the process of engagement we undertook. This report is different. It considers issues, most of them applying across larger areas than one time. Several of the issues considered here apply to all four towns. Unlike the Town Team reports these are our proposals to the Councils.

For the most part, this report sets out policy issues and proposed steps to start to tackle them. In some areas the proposals are clear and specific, but in other areas, further work needs to be done to enable the precise policies, programmes and initiatives needed to be developed. They will also need to be integrated into other policy work – such as the new Fenland local plan.

The final proposal considered in this paper is about implementation. The officers of the District Council and partners in Town Councils have worked hard over the process of the Growing Fenland project to devote time and resources to its work. The next stages of the project will require even more effort. This report therefore concludes with a mechanism which we believe will galvanise the efforts of those needed to take the Growing Fenland project forward in the months ahead.

Summary

This report sets out outline proposals, eleven in total, grouped into themes:

- infrastructure, transport and housing (I)
- people: education and health (P)
- jobs and enterprise (J)

The final proposal sets out a mechanism for taking forward the work of Growing Fenland.

The table below sets out the proposals in summary form.

Growing Fenland: Summary of Strategy Proposals		
I	1. Nene River Barrage	This proposal which will reduce flood risk and stabilise river levels is a gamechanger. It can drive value into proposal 4 and potentially reduce the cost of proposal 3 dramatically.
I, J	2. Opportunity for full bus franchising	The case for rethinking the model of bus delivery in Fenland is compelling. As the Combined Authority considers options to take more control over bus services, Fenland is the natural place to start.
I	3. A47 Dualling	More even than the proposals for connectivity between

		March and Wisbech (and helping the business case for it), this project will rectify poor connectivity across the whole area.
I	4. Wisbech Garden Town	This proposal is sound, but needs to happen in concert with proposals 1, 3, and 5. The Garden Town can play a major role in meeting housing ambitions right across Fenland, but only if developed with excellence at its heart with high quality schools, a regenerated Wisbech Town Centre and improved connectivity.
P	5. A New Deal for Education	The Opportunity Area proposal has made progress but a considerably more developed and better resourced programme is needed to help schools to counter the educational disadvantage facing the area.
P	6. A New Partnership for Skills	One key reason for low incomes in the market towns is poor pay arising from the jobs people do. Improving skill levels more systematically is key to changing that so that the proposals at 9 and 10 can really have the impact needed.
P	7. Early Years Support	A disproportionate number of children in the towns arrive at school without the skills in part because of the lack of home support needed. Improving school attainment in the way envisaged (see 5 above) without further pre-school support will be very challenging.
P	8. A Health Action Area	Breaking the cycle of poor health and low wages is vital to delivering for the Fenland market towns. Getting people into jobs and keeping them there (projects 6, 9 and 10) requires them to be healthy throughout life and able to acquire and use new skills (6).
J	9. The Manufacturing and Agritech Launchpad	Metalcraft are a great story for Fenland and have been working on exciting proposals for developing a launchpad to build a stronger cluster of related companies.
J, P, I	10. Cambridgeshire Jobs Compact	In the short term, bringing good jobs into the market towns will yield some but limited results. The towns need to benefit from the higher levels of income in Cambridge and Peterborough near term. Getting Fenland residents into jobs there is therefore a priority.
Imp	11. A Mayoral Implementation Taskforce	These projects will drive the long term transformation of the Fenland market towns. The challenge will be implementing them with the ambition and drive needed. To deliver this, we are proposing a Mayoral

		Taskforce with the Council to spearhead implementation.
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It is clear from the foregoing that there is no one easy way to grow the Fenland market towns sustainably. Maximising the opportunities and addressing the challenges will take years, and will take a generation to fully have effect. But the work on these and the shorter-term proposals emerging from the individual town reports needs to start now.

The remainder of this paper sets out the analysis underpinning this approach and a section on each of the twelve proposals.

The Core Argument

Market Town Economies

The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Economic Review (CPIER) made reference to the Fens as one of three distinct areas of the Combined Authority area. It is true: the areas covered by Cambridgeshire's market towns have much in common. But there were differences in their pasts and will be in their futures too.

Market towns grew and developed over centuries as vital centres for the local and regional economies of their time. For market towns to thrive and flourish in the future, they will need to adapt. They cannot exist as standalone hubs any more – instead they must find a way of becoming attractive places in which employers want to locate businesses, and people choose to live, also effectively linking in to larger conurbations (Cambridge and Peterborough in this case). Each town needs a distinct 'offer'. This could include a specialised type of good (such as Huntingdon's composites sector) or a residential quality of life for the city's workers.

Market towns can also seize upon new opportunities offered by the rise of flexible working and 'lifestyle entrepreneurs' to offer a location for high value employment. Ensuring that the towns and their residents benefit from the huge increase in decentralised employment – much of it in the digital and creative sectors – is essential to ensuring that the towns' geography is the asset it should be. The global economy is undergoing a major shift towards more decentralised ways of working. It is now possible to learn many in-demand skills online for free, and then to use these skills to work for companies around the world. Many of these opportunities are available remotely. Skills and occupations such as programming, web-design, machine learning / AI, and data science fall into this category. Many of these occupations and skills will seem remote to some segments of the population, but the quality and availability of resources and instruction online mean that they are actually very accessible and offer progression and good salaries. Work is needed to help local people feel confident in accessing and pursuing these opportunities.

Five Themes and a Long-Term Focus

However, in order to take these opportunities, the Fenland market towns need to focus on the fundamentals of a well-functioning economy. Through our work on the development of the market town plans we have arrived at five themes that are generic across all market towns which we believe need to be addressed if the actions proposed in the individual town plans are to be implemented with success. At the heart of these issues is the goal of ensuring that there is more income circulating in the towns so that there is a tangible sense of

forward momentum: more people in work and better salaries feeding through into a greater sense of wellbeing.

Creating forward momentum now is eminently achievable. Creating real and deep change is something that can only be delivered over the long term, starting with building communities where people want to live and bring up children, with jobs and industries playing more variable but often low initial role, and rising as places become successful. Here are a series of propositions on five key themes which we believe are fundamentally important.

Education and Skills

In general, the market towns have a level of educational attainment that is lower than is needed to enable residents to fulfil their potential. While there is some good school performance and some strong recent improvement, the overall offer is mixed and patterns of improvement patchy and inconsistent.

Low educational attainment contributes to lower than average wages and weaker prospects, making it less likely that businesses will choose to locate good quality jobs in the towns. This in turn makes it more likely that well qualified people will opt to move away from the market towns to pursue their careers.

Education is important. But so is lifelong learning. There is also the scope to build more viable vocational pathways linking skills acquisition for local people to growth occupations in the regional economy. And (as mentioned above) we can benefit from the increase in availability of online training in new digital skills. It is increasingly easy for people of all ages to learn programming languages and access freelance or distance work online. Ensuring that residents are able to learn these skills will be important to achieving local improvements.

The barriers to further educational and skills attainment here are often transport-related, with young people in particular unable to attain further skills outside of their home town due public transport services that are expensive, poorly coordinated and irregular.

Health

The market towns have poorer health than other areas, in some ways markedly so and in ways that both reduce levels of economic activity overall and the ability of residents to perform jobs at their maximum potential. This reduces the levels of income circulating in the economy compounding the educational issue above and its consequences. The CPIER comments: “there is clear evidence of links between poor health and lower productivity,

damaging workers' lives and reducing output. Employee health is an area which has been neglected by businesses." More importantly still it constitutes a drag on town communities, limiting life chances: unhealthy (and still more, ill) people are less happy and fulfilled and affecting the communities and places in which they live. Transport factors are again a driver here, with heavy town centre traffic making walking and cycling feel, as one resident put to us, "too difficult and dangerous".

Jobs

The sectors on which Fenland market towns depend for work are, by and large, characterised by low skills and low levels of pay. There are exceptions. The area has some indigenous companies which are strong and profitable offering high levels of skill. But this is not the norm. Too few companies that might locate in the Fens choose not to do so for the reasons above, even if those that are located in the area are doing very well. The Agri-food sector is, in general, characterised by lower wages – though this need not always be the case. If the area can develop and/or grow a better qualified and job ready workforce for the parts of the economy that are growing, it will become more attractive to employers who might locate as well as offering more opportunities for the expansion of existing local firms. Successes can be achieved in the short term and every effort must be made to deliver them. But the goals of creating vibrant market town labour markets is a long term aspiration to achieve.

In doing this, we need to help people reach beyond the boundaries of the immediate area and access new opportunities using new skills. Supporting digital learning and employment will help local people achieve a better standard of living without long commutes or needing to move.

The potential here is significant as the four towns offer many of the other factors that appeal to start-up companies and younger households, including affordable housing, access to the countryside, and access to some good schools.

Housing

The demand for housing in any town is derived from the demand in the economy: the requirement for labour and the skills to meet demand and prevailing rates of pay and the proximity to good schools. Viewed in this way it is hard to argue that housing is a driver of the economy of the market towns. It is much more likely to be a lagging indicator of lower economic success. The exception to this might be the Wisbech Garden Town if it can create such a large intervention, along with high quality schools, that it effectively rebases the housing offer encouraging more residents to remain and more in-comers too (though even then this would need to be accompanied by action on education and health).

In this context, it is important that the towns build high-quality and mixed housing developments (including affordable housing for key workers) but not see this as a “silver bullet”. This is happening in some cases, particularly Whittlesey, but is not the case across Fenland as a whole. We have picked up considerable local discontent about the unpredictability and opacity of the local planning system (though evidence from MHCLG suggests that planning is relatively quick, and applications are generally likely to be successful, compared to other areas).

Transport

The Fenland market towns are geographically isolated with limited road connectivity and public transport which is poor (buses) or non-existent (rail in Wisbech and Chatteris). The presence of rail access in March serves to underline that transport isn’t everything. The rail links between March and both Peterborough and Cambridge seem to have had little impact on the housing market and other outcomes. But it is hard to see how the market towns of Fenland will achieve their potential without better roads and public transport. In the longer term it is to be hoped that the Cambridge Autonomous Metro (CAM) will reach into Fenland – but for now the reality in many places is that buses will remain the only form of public transport for at least the medium term. It is essential that the town masterplans bring forward proposals for the short, medium and long term to create and sustain momentum in the connectivity of market towns to the places in which there are jobs for town residents, to encourage them to stay resident in them, and thereby in the long term to encourage others to move their homes as well as employers to locate in the market towns.

Transport may be poor. But digital connectivity is better in Fenland than in many places. Whilst on its own this will not change the fortunes of the market towns, it is an asset and one, which used with other developments, can start to change perceptions and possibilities.

Cause and Effect

Implicit in the analysis above, on occasions explicit is the view that some of these issues matter more than others. Everything considered in this note is important for Fenland. There are causal links between all of these issues which are interconnected in a circular way: think chickens and eggs. But we need to arrive at a settled view as to which factors are more fundamental than others as opposed to those that are more the effect of causation elsewhere. In our view, neither the inadequate transport system nor housing are in essence causal when compared with jobs, whilst education and health are more causal still. That is why we think health and education need to be addressed most seriously. Clearly the benefits of better education and health won’t be felt in the market towns without more and better jobs which in turn require better transport etc.

But too often the education, skills, and health issues faced by communities such as are found in the Fenland market towns are deemed out of scope for this kind of project. They can't be. All the housing capital spend and transport will not fundamentally change the market towns unless the populations are better educated, have higher skills and improved health. More prosaically, it is likely that the business cases for transport and housing investment will fail to reach the reasonable Benefit Cost Ratios without a wider programme of change which includes real momentum on health and education as well as on the kinds of programmes proposed by the interim reports.

The focus on health and education is further reinforced by our view on **what market towns will be for in future**. Given the radical changes to consumer shopping of the last decade or so, the old rationale for *market* towns is fast losing force; hence the national debate about the future of the high street.

To succeed in future, **market towns in the UK will need to offer three things:**

- **The highest quality of life to residents** – including great schools, healthy environments, excellent health services, low crime and high-quality affordable environment.
- **Unique and exciting experiences to visitors** – such as cultural events and venues, a special food or drink offer, or historical / architectural attractions.
- **The infrastructure, education and networks required to help people fully access the opportunities of the new digital economy.**

The proposals in the town team reports can help deliver the second and third of these objectives.

The delivery of the first of these objectives is made very difficult by the current health and education infrastructure in Fenland. Hence the need for system-wide changes to address under-performance in parts of the system; better connect the disparate parts of the system; and overall improve capacity.

Using this analysis, the work of the town teams and consultation, we have arrived at the projects which make up the remainder of this report which, we believe, go to the heart of addressing the most important issues facing the Fenland market towns.

Proposal 1 - Nene River Barrage

Many of the proposals considered here are on issues that clearly emerged from analysis and were always likely to form part of the output of the project in one form or another. The Nene River Barrage is an important exception.

The project was started by Anglian Water as a response to water scarcity (to capture more of the water flowing into the sea from the River Nene) as well as a flood defence. Anglian Water commissioned a study from Dutch experts Royal HaskoningDHV which was completed in May 2019.

Though the discussion we have undertaken in the Growing Fenland project we believe this is a project of catalytic importance to the whole Fenland area but with particular importance for Wisbech.

Royal HaskoningDHV was commissioned by Anglian Water to undertake a high-level review of the potential for a winter storage reservoir within the River Nene catchment, linked to the possible construction of a tidal barrage on the River Nene downstream of Wisbech.

As the Royal HaskoningDHV report stated:

The concept of a Wisbech Garden Town is being investigated as a vehicle to deliver the aspirations for regeneration of Wisbech. The aspiration for growth and economic development in Wisbech and across the East of England increase demand for water in an area where water resources are already under pressure. In addition, flood risk is a key issue to be resolved to enable the Wisbech Garden Town proposals to be progressed.

The Wisbech Garden Town Flood Study investigated the potential for a tidal barrier or barrage located downstream of Wisbech on the River Nene. A tidal barrier or barrage would help to manage long-term flood risk to the proposed Garden Town and deliver additional benefits, including flood risk management for the wider area, amenity and navigation enhancements, and the potential for integrated water resources management.

In our view the benefits of a storage reservoir and associated barrage are considerably wider than this, catalysing other possibilities. We set these out below.

Amenity. The possibility of a storage reservoir, properly planned and integrated into the landscape could offer a new and much needed leisure opportunity for Fenland. As the town team reports note, despite the presence of water throughout the area, there is a real lack of

amenity, leisure and tourism benefit from it. An attractively planned and delivered reservoir could be part of the way of changing that.

Perhaps as significantly, the effect of reducing flood risk and stabilising water levels in Wisbech town centre would have a profound effect on the quality of both the built and natural environment. Some of the town's finest Georgian buildings and vistas have been significantly devalued by necessary but intrusive flood defences. If, as would be intended, the barrier led to the removal of these defences as well as stabilisation of the river level, the river could become a bigger asset to the town than ever, driving the potential for development, increasing property values and footfall, driving business into the town centre.

Flood Risk. By reducing the flood risk in the area around Wisbech, it seems highly likely that the barrage would increase land values in the Wisbech area, thereby playing a significant role in overcoming the single biggest impediment to the development of the area, including the Garden Town.

Road Cost. Elsewhere in this paper we underline the central importance of improving journey times and reliability through dualling the A47. Our understanding is that the emerging plans for this project require a very significant investment in raising the level of the road to meet flood risk concerns. The presence of the barrage seems likely to obviate the need for such cost (and bring attendant environmental benefits) partly offsetting the cost of the barrage.

Next Steps

The realisation of these benefits would require the Environment Agency and others to come behind these emerging proposals. This in turn will require the proposals to be more developed. To this end Anglian Water have proposed a further study into the development of the barrage to identify both the strategic opportunity it presents and the next steps towards its development. This should also make sure to consider the impacts of the barrage on port access, recognising the benefits which having an operational port brings to Wisbech – as well as any other impacts on other parts of Fenland which should be considered.

We believe this study is of critical importance and its funding and execution should, alongside the implementation of its recommendations, come under the aegis of the proposed Mayoral Taskforce.

Proposal 2 - Opportunity for full bus franchising

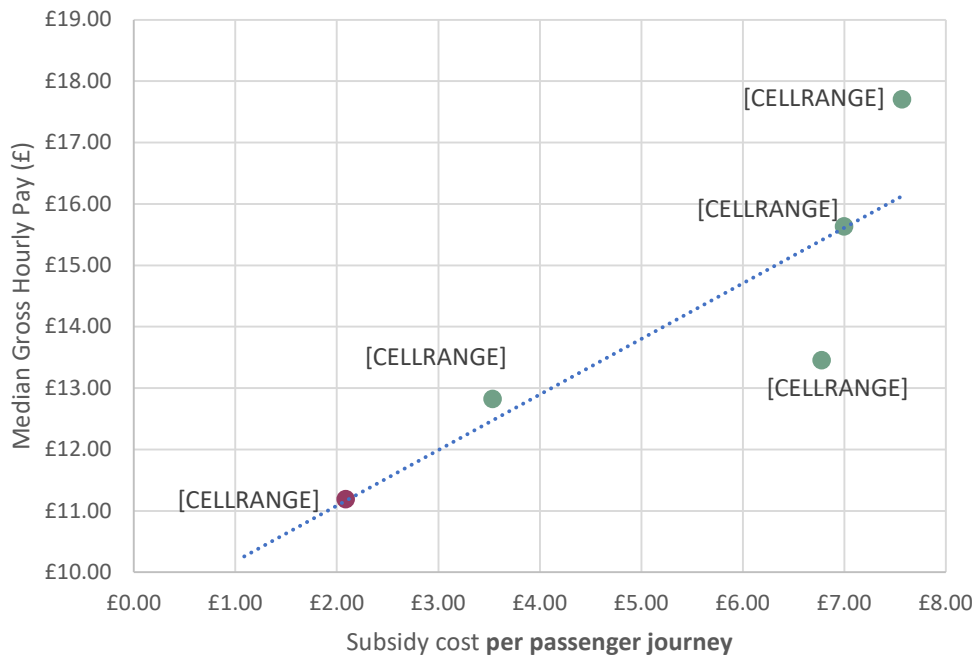
The situation now: in decline, unequal, and in need of fresh thinking

Bus services in Fenland are in serious decline. Routes have been scaled back. With the buyout of Norfolk Green by Stagecoach in 2013, there is now only one serious commercial operator. A big part of the challenge is that buses are, in general, not a feasible mode of transport for working across Fenland, due to the time-consuming nature, and generally poor connections to local cities.

This situation becomes self-fulfilling, and leads to a vicious cycle in local transport. Because people feel they can't rely on the buses, they don't use them. Because they don't use them, the bus services become harder to sustain, and therefore to reduce losses services are cut back. This, in turn, reduces the reliability of the service, and so on.

Buses in Fenland also receive less subsidy than those elsewhere in Cambridgeshire. Analysis of data provided by Cambridgeshire County Council reveals that Fenland services are significantly less well funded than other districts – at £2.09 *per passenger journey*, compared to £7.57 in Cambridgeshire.

Figure 1. Bus Passenger Subsidy and Median Gross Hourly Pay in Cambridgeshire



Source: Metro Dynamics analysis of Cambridgeshire County Council data and ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings Data

Setting this alongside the wages of residents reveals that in fact, bus subsidy in Cambridgeshire is *geographically regressive* – areas with lower income per head also receive lower transport subsidy per head. The correlation between pay and subsidy is a very strong, positive one (0.87).

Conclusions of the bus review

In order to inject fresh thinking into local buses the Combined Authority commissioned an independent bus review. We focus here on the comments made specifically with regard to rural buses. A few important conclusions are put forward:

- Firstly, that there is an obvious need to make public transport work in areas like Fenland for reasons of social justice. The report notes that: “Getting [rural bus services] right matters for the most vulnerable in our community”¹. As well as those who are unable to travel due to age or impediment, there is also the central concern to widen access to economic opportunity. Bringing better access to centres of well-paying employment will

¹ CAMBRIDGESHIRE AND PETERBOROUGH STRATEGIC BUS REVIEW: OPTIONS REPORT p45

improve standards of living, and deliver economic dividends in areas which are struggling to recruit staff.

- Secondly, that even with extra support, on the current model, decline in bus patronage in rural areas is inevitable. The review notes that “circuitous routes and infrequent timetables coupled with the lack of early morning and evening provision”² have caused many to abandon buses altogether.
- Thirdly, that in light of this, a new approach needs to be taken. The review argues that: “A consistent and long-term response is needed, taking account of current needs, but also with a view to the future, to avoid catering only for a declining market”³. It will not be enough to continue topping up bus services with subsidy. Instead, a new vision is needed for the bus network.
- Fourthly, that “an effective network is unlikely to emerge if left to multiple agencies with different funding streams”.⁴ The review goes on to argue that a centrally planned approach is required. This is in fact likely to *increase* rather than decrease efficiency, as it will deliver network efficiency from a joined-up network. And ambitions to develop new technologies, such as Mobility as a Service (MaaS) and integrated transport offerings, will require this kind of approach.
- **However, the report stops short of recommending full franchising.** It comments that: “the CPCA would need to invest considerable time and budget in justifying this intervention [franchising]. We therefore do not recommend it is treated as the first choice for delivering the recommendations of this report”.

Proposal – a more radical rethink required

However, this approach does not give due consideration to the importance of these issues in rural areas, particularly more remote areas such as Fenland. While enhanced partnerships may work in areas where bus companies already have strong incentives to vie for the market (such as around Cambridge), there will be little that binds in a much less competitive area, such as Fenland. Indeed, the bus review notes that: “Franchising may be most easily applied to... rural initiatives, and *would probably be critical* to the holistic approach identified as it gives greater control to the CPCA to integrate bus services with wider rural transport initiatives in areas where there are few (if any) commercial bus operators to partner with.”⁵ Similarly, a Department for Transport paper notes a key benefit

² Ibid. p38

³ Ibid. p46

⁴ Ibid. p46

⁵ Ibid. p65, emphasis added

of franchising to be: “Creating effective competition to run bus services in areas where there is little on-road competition today.”⁶

It will also be easier to prove the superiority of franchising over an enhanced partnership in the case of more rural areas. For the most part, Stagecoach holds a monopoly over the delivery of bus services in Fenland. Clear evidence can be given of the decline in services and the very dominant market power of one firm is ample evidence of a market failure. It will be seen that Stagecoach has little incentive to collaborate in an enhanced partnership scheme with regard to this part of the Combined Authority.

“[Franchising can create] effective competition to run bus services in areas where there is little on-road competition today.”

– Department for Transport

In addition, this will allow the Combined Authority to dovetail transport with other developments. For a “Cambridgeshire Compact” with employers to develop and flourish, having franchising powers will ensure provision can be made to connect employees to employers.

Therefore, the Combined Authority should embrace franchising by beginning with the easiest wins – connecting parts of rural Cambridgeshire to the cities of Cambridge and Peterborough. We also recommend that, in partnership with the County Council, **levels of subsidy per head are brought to equivalent levels** so that more disadvantaged areas aren’t discriminated against in the provision of transport.

⁶ The Bus Services Act 2017: New powers and opportunities

Proposal 3 - A47 Dualling

Achieving an East-West economic corridor by full dualling of the A47

Why this matters

The A47 is a vital connecting road between Peterborough, Fenland, Norwich, and the Norfolk Coast. The majority of Fenland businesses in manufacturing, food processing, and logistics businesses are dependent on the A47 to bring in exports and move their product around. Particularly in the far north of Fenland, where rail connectivity is non-existent, the A47 plays a vital role.

However, at the moment, the potential from this road is unrealised. Like much of the country, the A47 is an example of poor East-West connectivity. For much of its journey through Fenland the road is single carriageway. This presents serious challenges:

- **It makes commuting challenging**, if not impossible in some cases. We know that cities and their associated travel to work areas generate over 80% of UK output⁷. But many of our residents are denied the opportunities available in our nearest cities due to poor road connectivity.
- **It discourages investment**. Firms want to know that they can reliably move goods and people around. The A47 regularly experiences long tail backs that add to business costs, and make business processes inefficient.
- **It limits the growth potential of our area**. Without improvements to connectivity, construction of substantial numbers of new homes will not be viable.
- **It is unsafe**. According to Highways England, the stretch of A47 between Guyhirn and King's Lynn is one of the most dangerous piece of East Anglia's strategic road network⁸. This is bad for our people, adding further deterrent to using the road at busy times for commuting.

⁷ <http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/76-MARTIN-British-Cities-Economic-Performance.pdf>
see p3

⁸ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/814204/Highways_England_SRN_star_rating_document_v9_digital.pdf?_ga=2.235007169.1367820300.1566503608-1640730906.1551430283 – see p6

How this will transform the Fenland District

A fully dualled A47 will allow communities in Fenland to enjoy the benefits of significantly improved access to Peterborough and Norwich. But the A47 will go further than this creating an East-West economic corridor, bringing new housing, jobs, and higher economic output. It will also help to tackle the economic isolation experienced by Fenland, which is connected to deprivation and a sense that there is a lack of aspiration among some of the district's young people. And finally it may relieve pressure on some of our other congested roads, such as the A605.

Progress so far

A Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) was produced for the dualling of the A47 in June 2018. This argued that “Without the A47 improvements, much of the [area's] potential economic growth, new homes sites and job creation cannot be unlocked.”⁹ It goes on to say that: “Dualling the A47 will improve the economic wellbeing of those communities along the A47 and enable them to enjoy some of the Cambridge centric economic prosperity.”¹⁰ The SOBC presented various possible routes to dual the A47. These have now been presented to Highways England, in a bid to get funding for the full design of the route in Road Investment Strategy period 2 (RIS2 – 2020-2025), followed by construction beginning in RIS3 (2025-2030).

What is needed to take this forward

At the current time, we are awaiting an update from Highways England, but need to **continue lobbying for acceptance of the route** into the Highways England programme. This will involve bringing together key political figures – including the local MP and Mayor of the Combined Authority plus wider interested parties along the entire A47 corridor – to continue to vocally support the case for the dualling.

This project can also become much more viable following the successful construction of a **tidal barrage in the River Nene**. Current flood conditions, combined with the fact that the road comprises part of the Strategic Road Network (SRN) means it is necessary to suspend the road by up to six metres. This adds massively to the costs of the construction. The

⁹ <https://cambridgeshirepeterborough-ca.gov.uk/assets/Combined-Authority/A47-Strategic-Outline-Business-Case-Final-V0.3-002.pdf> see p22

¹⁰ *Ibid.* see p25

barrage would remove this problem, enabling the road to be built much more affordably (which, in turn, would support a better benefit-cost ratio (BCR) for the project).

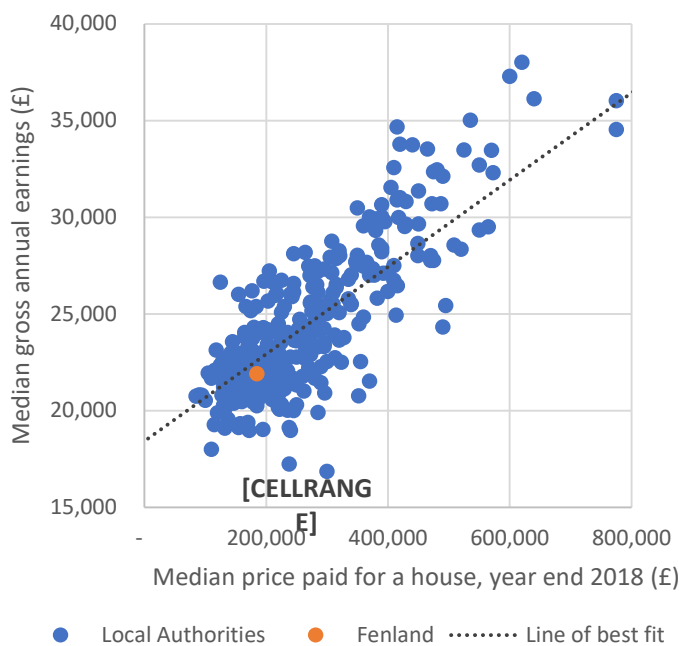
There may also be a need for **commitment of funding** to support the plans, as it is unlikely (though not impossible) that Highways England will meet the full funding requirement. The Mayor has committed £200m of Combined Authority money towards the scheme – the District and other partners should also stand ready to give support.

Proposal 4 - Wisbech Garden Town

A new approach to housing, developed as part of the Wisbech Garden Town

As we have already argued, housing in and of itself is often just as much *reflective* of wider economic conditions as it is *directive* of them. Figure 2 below shows that, looking at local authorities across England and Wales, there is a very strong, positive, correlation (0.8) between wages and house prices. Fenland is almost on the trendline – if anything the price of houses is slightly *higher* than would be expected, given the median wage. In the long run, to improve the viability of developing houses therefore requires improving wages and the jobs on offer in the local economy (topics picked up elsewhere).

Figure 2. Median earnings, and median price paid per house for Local Authorities in Great Britain



Source: Analysis of Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings Table 8, and HPSSA dataset 9. Two LAs excluded for the sake of perspective

However, the Wisbech Garden Town project is a proposal to deliver housing alongside significant improvements in amenity and school provision. With the right combination of support, therefore, housing here *could* become an enabler – by catalysing a transformation of the town that goes far beyond simply increasing the number of dwellings. The plans involve a few key elements:

- A **Country Park** to serve the community and increase green space provision to all Wisbech residents
- New **schooling provision** in a high-quality facility
- **Improved transport connectivity** – which can only be delivered in conjunction with the A47 proposals (and in future, rail links).

Encouragingly, support is building around the idea of the Garden Town, with commitments from local politicians and businesses, as well as interest from Government – the Garden Town featuring in a Department of International Trade (DIT) international investment brochure recently.

The Garden Town need not be only an opportunity for Wisbech, however. The plans involve two potentially game-changing interventions in the delivery of housing which will have implications across Fenland:

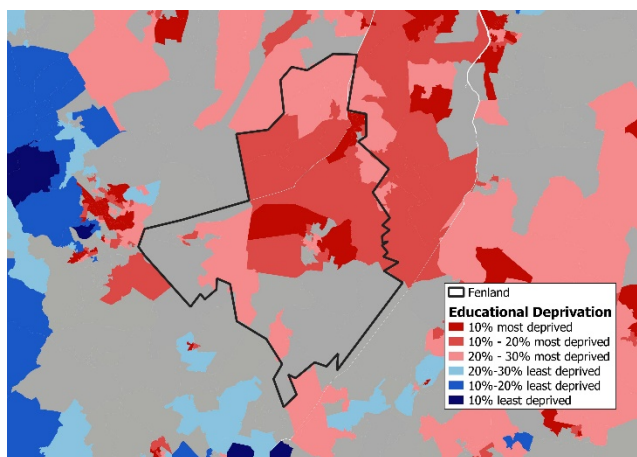
- 1) **A more sophisticated approach to flood-risk modelling**, drawing on techniques currently used in the Netherlands. This looks to persuade the Environment Agency (EA) to move away from a simplistic “zones-based” model, which only looks at probability of flooding, without considering both the flood infrastructure in place, and the implications of flooding were it to happen (e.g. the depth at which the water would reach, which in the case of the Fens, is very low). If this methodology can be accepted and implemented (which is necessary for the Garden Town to move forward) then it will have major implications for all of our Fenland towns, which are each surrounded by flood zone 3 land, restricting development.
- 2) **Modern methods of construction** are a key part of plans for the Garden Town. These methods involve off-site construction (modular build) and moving buildings into place. This method of construction, while facing some delivery challenges, is generally more affordable than traditional methods of housebuilding. As an Urbed report on the Garden Town proposal argues, this therefore “has particular relevance for marginally viable areas such as Wisbech.” We could add that it is also relevant for much of the rest of Fenland. Many of the partners we have spoken to in different towns have complained of permissions which are given and then remain outstanding for a long amount of time, or of developers who refuse to provide support for the infrastructure required around new housing on viability grounds. By using the Wisbech Garden Town to kickstart the construction of modular homes in the Fens, we can start to increase rates of development in our towns.

Proposal 5 - A New Deal for Education

Where we are now

The UK has a deep and systemic problem with educational inequality. According to a report by Unicef, the UK’s “achievement gap” in education outcomes is among the largest in the EU, and significantly worse than the United States¹¹. And a recent study by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) found that, within the UK, poorer students fall behind their wealthier peers by almost three years in terms of educational attainment. Commenting on these findings, the OECD’s Director of Education and Skills, Andreas Schleicher noted that the UK has “regressive teacher allocation where the schools in greater disadvantage face greater shortage of qualified teachers”¹².

Figure 3. Education deprivation in Fenland District



Source: Analysis of Home Office data. Areas in grey are neither in the top or bottom 30% on this measure.

Fenland District is at the sharp edge of this inequality. As the map, right, shows, much of Fenland is among the most educationally deprived parts of the country – particularly in March and Wisbech. Numerous schools throughout the district – such as the Thomas Clarkson Academy, the Westwood Community Primary School, and Kingsfield Primary school – have been identified by Ofsted as requiring improvement (though note, this is not universally the case). And results in some schools have recently been disappointing – for example, in 2018 only 20% of pupils at the Neale-Wade Academy achieved a Grade 5 or above in English and Maths GCSE compared to a national average of 43.3%.

Many of Fenland’s schools are doing the best they can to improve the educational offer. But the environment often further adds to the challenges. Some schools have large migrant populations,

¹¹ https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC13_eng.pdf

¹² <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/school-students-uk-social-mobility-oecd-andreas-schleicher-study-gcse-a8597951.html>

which mean additional resource needs to be directed to supporting those with English as an Additional Language. Among some Eastern European Communities, the expectation of when a child would begin education is significantly later in life – meaning there can be a lack of engagement of school-readiness. Teachers report that in some schools, children arrive without having basics skills in personal hygiene and attire.

The geographic nature of the district can cause problems as well. Because the District is dominated by a few key market towns at a good distance from one another, there is little competition between schools pushing up standards. The perception of remoteness can be a factor in recruiting teachers – schools report challenges in attracting graduate students who have just been at University in a major city and struggle to adapt to life in a market town. Unlike some other rural places, the distance of much of Fenland from a major city means that some are unwilling to commute (or indeed unable – with rates of car ownership in sharp decline among young people).

Fenland also struggles with a lack of teacher training facilities, and we have heard reports that the University of Cambridge has historically been unwilling to send PGCE students to the district due to concerns about the quality of training they will receive.

The result of all of the foregoing is that **life chances are in general more limited for young people from Fenland**. A study by the Department for Education (DfE) in 2015 found that achieving 5 A*s – Cs at GCSE (equivalent to a level 4 or above under the new system) added £80,000 to a student's lifetime earnings. Going on to achieve two A-levels added a further £60,000. Many doors, into further/higher education and certain careers remain firmly closed to those who underperformed at critical moments of their teenage years. Therefore, while the relationship between education and social mobility is not completely linear, some of the challenges which Fenland faces around social mobility would seem to be found in its poor educational offer.

The Response so far: The Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area

In recognition of these challenges, the Department for Education has established the Fenland and East Cambridgeshire Opportunity Area, one of twelve areas launched in 2017 across England. The Opportunity Area is a three year programme, which has four key focuses:

- Accelerate the progress of disadvantaged children and young people in the acquisition and development of communication, language and reading
- Strengthen the effectiveness of support for children and young people with mental health concerns and those with Special Educational Needs
- Raise aspiration and increase access for young people to a wide range of career choices and post-16 routes
- Recruit, develop and retain the best leaders and teachers in Fenland and East Cambridgeshire

(In addition to these, there are other key programmes of activity, including the careers hub, the parent ambassador, and the return to learn programme).

The Opportunity Area is now over halfway through its delivery. It is too early to assess thoroughly, but feedback from headteachers has been generally positive, particularly with regard to extra support in recruiting teachers. But what discussions have revealed is that, in and of itself, it falls a long way short of what is required to truly address the issues of long-term social mobility. What is needed is a change in culture: in schools – to set higher expectations of pupil performance; in families – to demand high-quality education from the local schools, and encourage their children to seize their opportunities; and in children themselves – to aspire to a bright future, and therefore work hard to achieve their potential.

But all of this takes time. A three-year programme could never hope to make a serious dent in these issues, many of which have been festering for a long time. There is also a big risk that with political change at the national level will come a dimming of commitment to this area, undoing some of the benefits which have been achieved. What is needed is a comprehensive programme, with support from government over the long-term, to invest in local communities and educational facilities.

What the new deal needs to look like

At the most basic level, the programme needs to be extended. To withdraw resources at just the point they are starting to make an impact on the district would be to waste the initial investment. But beyond that, the programme should be expanded. It should now include:

- **Support for teaching apprenticeships.** Cambridgeshire is already taking the lead nationally in developing new approaches to teacher development. The Combined Authority is already developing plans to support new apprenticeships, bringing in unused funds from the apprenticeship levy. It should be recognised that teaching apprenticeships can both offer a route into professional employment for local people *and* increase the stock of quality teachers in the district. Meanwhile DfE should actively support Fenland as a trial area for this new type of training. Relatedly, there needs to be new teacher training provision in Fenland schools so that PGCE students can gain experience here – naturally leading to greater job take up.
- To attract new teachers, a “Fenland premium” to the teacher wage, or golden handshake to encourage more teachers to relocate to the District. Alongside this, **finance for promoting the area to trainee teachers** – Fenland offers a combination of a rewarding career teaching some students from disadvantaged backgrounds with a rural lifestyle, and ambitious and effective teachers are likely to progress quickly.
- **Funding for a Fenland-wide careers service**, bringing in employers, schools, and local universities (including the University of Cambridge, UEA, and the new technical university at Peterborough).

Proposal 6 – A New Partnership for Skills

A common complaint in each of the Fenland towns we have worked on in this project is apathy. This arises from a concern on the part of many residents that it is too difficult if not inconceivable to believe that some of the most important things affecting their lives can change for the better. The public purse has been under acute pressure too.

The proposals in this report seek to act on these issues: improving transport, access to employment, education etc.

But in our view, more will be needed across the towns to create links between communities, education providers both inside and outside the district as well as employees and others who can help.

This task falls to no one agency: responsibility is unclear. For this reason we are proposing the creation of a Fenland Life Long Learning Partnership. With continued budgetary pressures, it is often challenging for schools to invest in improving standards. One possible solution is to bring in other educational organisations within Cambridgeshire to form a compact for education in Fenland. These partners could work together on shared educational experiences, joint training of staff, and other initiatives. Possible partners for inclusion in such a scheme could include:

- The University of Cambridge (which already partners with one of our employers, Stainless Metalcraft, to deliver some training in schools)
- The University of East Anglia (UEA)

Case Study: The Tutor Trust

The Tutor Trust brings together university students and pupils who could benefit most from tuition. This creates a model where students can gain useful experience, while educational disadvantage can be tackled, even against a background of educational funding cuts. The programme has been independently evaluated by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), who declared it to have a “gold standard evidence of impact”, with pupils in the treatment group advancing three months’ worth of progress beyond the control group.



- The Wisbech Grammar School
- The College of West Anglia
- The iMET College in Alconbury

In particular, by partnering with a University, Fenland could establish a tutoring provision model, where university students could earn money to tutor local children, gaining valuable experience at the same time. Such a scheme could be modelled upon the successful Tutor Trust, which now operates in several Northern cities

This should be a modest initiative preferably funded with private and philanthropic support to enable it to be independent of government and to create a new source of institutional strength in the towns. It could be part of the Manufacturing Launchpad described elsewhere in this paper and would need either expert voluntary support or a very modest budget for a member of staff to fulfil the core roles described below:

These roles might be as follows:

- Providing a cheerleader and support function helping employers to engage with the schools, community facilities and voluntary groups of the area helping people to understand the jobs and training on offer.
- Providing non-governmental support for the towns: countering negative perceptions and emphasising the positive nature of the towns and of the activity underway to improve them.

In addition, this partnership should be able to bid for resources from public authorities. The aim should be to help with specific needs in the community such as:

- support for parents and students in key transitions between schools (primary and secondary) as well as with access to training provision
- helping local people to access enterprise programmes including for community groups wishing to set up businesses including social enterprises.

In addition, we are aware that **for some residents, English is a second or even third language, which fundamentally inhibits them from using their skills.** Many workers in this category have advanced skills in services sectors – yet are currently carrying out manual work. Support for programmes to teach adults English can release extra human potential here.

Proposal 7 - Early Years Support

Fenland also struggles with early years metrics. The district has been identified as having **low proportions of reception pupils achieving the expected level in all but one of the Early Learning Goals**. Much of the district falls into the bottom quintile of rates of Good Levels of Development. Phonics skills among the young, vital for making progress in reading and comprehension, are amongst the very worst in the country.

This all points to a serious issue for pupils in the very earliest stages of their education. It will be near impossible to move the prospects of individuals on, raise wages, and move into a higher value economy long term without taking action at this fundamental stage.

One of the key recommendations of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Economic Review (CPIER) was as follows:

»» KEY RECOMMENDATION #10:

Further research should be undertaken on the potential impact that increased Surestart-style provision could have, particularly in more deprived communities and with hard-to-reach groups. Similarly, further research on the nature and availability of preschool education is important and we would recommend that a further Commission be undertaken in this area. This Commission should be given a wide brief, and work with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the region to look at:

- **the steps needed from early years through school to close, and eventually to eliminate educational disadvantage**
- **not just at individual and school performance but at the wider set of conditions and institutions serving the more deprived parts of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.**

The evidence strongly suggests that in Fenland, this type of provision would be invaluable. Particularly among families where parents are both working, sometimes in long shift patterns, children will struggle to develop emotionally and intellectually. Parents in these households are generally unable to fund their children to attend pre-school, so support is needed.

Therefore, we propose that, possibly in conjunction with the education opportunity area, **the government commits to putting serious funding behind early years provision here, targeted especially at those from low income families, or with other characteristics which are likely to lead to educational disadvantage** (such as having English as a second language).

How this would work

In practise, this would look like something along the lines of previous early intervention programmes which have had to be scaled back. This programme was initially focused solely on more deprived families and areas and then expanded. Multiple studies show that the key benefits accrued to those from poorer backgrounds. The initial government review found that it particularly helped lower income families as the supplement allowing parents to work – finding that “most families moving into work have an income gain of around 20 per cent.”¹³ A recent study of this programme by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) finds that the programme had significant health benefits, concluding that: “At least when it comes to health outcomes, our research provides strong evidence that the... model has worked better in poorer neighbourhoods, reducing health inequalities.”¹⁴ The Education and Training Inspectorate find it had significant benefits for speak and language skills¹⁵ – a particular problem in Fenland.

One of the challenges with the government’s previous programme from a fiscal point of view came as it was rolled out across the country, including to less challenged areas. The new programme should focus exclusively on those disadvantaged areas where it can make the biggest difference.

This approach would include aligning work with other public service providers, particularly health. Through Cambridgeshire’s Think Communities programme, approaches are being developed to listen to communities and ensure that service delivery works at the community level. One of the big themes being taken forward is “best start in life” – focusing on the pre-birth to primary school life phase.

Increasingly, policy focus is turning towards areas considered “left behind”, often with a focus on towns. We qualify for this description. But the principle response from central government thus far has been to focus on capital investments, particularly around high streets.

While extra high street funding is welcome, on its own it is not good enough for our towns. The fundamental socioeconomic character of our place will not change by landscaping high streets. It *will* change by giving our young people the opportunities to progress in life. **It is the human capital of our towns, rather than the physical capital, which needs the most attention.** The evidence shows that those who are held back in the early phase of life do not tend to catch up. Therefore, if the government is serious in helping us address our challenges, it needs to put serious investment into early years services.

¹³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/182194/DFE-RR073.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14160>

¹⁵ <https://www.etini.gov.uk/sites/etini.gov.uk/files/publications/surestart-evaluation-report-may-2018.pdf>

Proposal 8 - A Health Action Area

“Fenland is a district with clear health inequalities when compared to the rest of Cambridgeshire. Health issues such as smoking prevalence, excess weight, coronary heart disease and alcohol related issues are worse than the Cambridgeshire average in some of Fenland’s wards.”

Fenland Health and Wellbeing Strategy, 2018 – 2021

“The health and well-being of individuals, along with their education and skills, are central to a flourishing economy.”

CPIER

What is the problem now?

People living in Fenland develop more illnesses over their lives and die at a younger age than people living in other parts of the Combined Authority area and many other parts of England. Fenland residents are more likely to¹⁶ experience mental health problems, suffer from a range of chronic conditions caused by smoking, require hospital treatment as a result of alcohol-specific and related conditions, develop diabetes, with 7.8 per cent of people aged 17 and over in Fenland living with the condition compared to 3.3 per cent of people in Cambridge and be obese, with 72.9% of people in Fenland being obese compared to 46.7% per cent in Cambridge.

On average, men from Fenland die nearly three years younger than counterparts living in Cambridge.¹⁷ Poor health is an economic as well as a social problem. If people are unable to work due to illness, and people in work are taking time off due to sickness, the local economy is less productive. As the CPIER points out:

“There is clear evidence of links between poor health and lower productivity, damaging workers’ lives and reducing output.” Fenland has the greatest gap, in the CA area, in the employment rate between those with long-term health condition and the overall employment rate.¹⁸ We don’t know the local impact but nationally, the impact of health inequalities is estimated to account for productivity losses of £31-33 billion per year, lost

¹⁶ <https://cambridgeshireinsight.org.uk/jsna/published-joint-strategic-needs-assessments/>

¹⁷ <https://cambridgeshireinsight.org.uk/jsna/published-joint-strategic-needs-assessments/>

¹⁸ ONS Annual Population Summary

taxes and higher welfare payments in the range of £20-32 billion per year, as well as additional NHS healthcare costs in excess of £5.5 billion per year.”¹⁹

Why is this the case?

The principal reasons for poor health outcomes in Fenland arise from factors such as childhood deprivation, low incomes and isolation as well as environmental factors. There are a range of proposals in the town team reports and elsewhere in this document to tackle these factors.

But part of the challenge arises in the health area, in services, and in particular in Public Health. Public Health resources are limited and messages are not being heard or acted upon.

What is happening already?

The Cambridgeshire Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy already identifies Fenland as a priority. The District Council’s current Health and Wellbeing Strategy is based on a ‘Wider Determinants of Health’ model and seeks to promote prevention of illness rather than the treatment of disease.

In this context, the strategy sets out three priorities: collaborative working; focussing resources on vulnerable groups and wards in deprivation to tackle lifestyle factors; and mental health - including building community resilience, aspirations and general wellbeing.

The approach is right. But while local partners can point to some positive impacts, existing efforts will not impact sufficiently the fundamental factors that are driving such poor health.

Strategy Proposal

¹⁹ Frontier Economics (2009) Overall costs of health inequalities. Submission to the Marmot Review. www.ucl.ac.uk/ghg/marmotreview/Documents

The overarching strategy proposal is for an **Opportunity Area for Health** as recommended by the CPIER. This should be championed by the Mayor, the local health system and Public Health England, and linked to the proposals for the devolution of health and social care. In the long run it should have three goals:

- Growing the size of the health sector in Fenland including its role as an employer;
- Reviewing existing services, integrating services and bringing them closer to people; and
- Educating and supporting people to access those services and make better lifestyle choices.

The first of these is a long term objective that requires dialogue with Cambridge health partners and would be facilitated by progress on the other objectives in the shorter term. The second is central to the work that Andy Wood is undertaking on behalf of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority.

In our view, the priority for Growing Fenland therefore, should be on public health and the prevention of illness and disease. In fact along with the work that Andy Wood is doing, this could form the basis of a proposal for health devolution for the whole Combined Authority area in due course with Fenland serving as a pilot.

In November 2018, the Health Secretary set out the government’s proposals for Public Health in the Green Paper “Prevention is Better than Cure”. In July 2019, the government then consulted further via “Advancing our health: prevention in the 2020s” and in doing so, agreed to back proposals from the West Midlands Combined Authority for a Radical Prevention agenda. Central to this was the notion of a fund which will “involve a programme of work to explore, test and learn from new opportunities to prevent ill-health using the latest technology – stimulating innovation in ways that can support both health and wealth²⁰”.

We believe that this is a model Fenland can and should follow as a pilot for the whole of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. The convening power of the Mayor alongside what we understand to be the willingness of Public Health England to support Combined Authorities and local areas with this kind of health challenge should be used to craft a new approach. Our proposal, in the first instance, is that a conference should be jointly

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/819766/advancing-our-health-prevention-in-the-2020s-accessible.pdf

hosted by the District Council, County Council, Combined Authority and Public Health England as soon as possible to bring together all interested parties with the aim of crafting a Fenland Radical Prevention agenda and an appropriate funding model.

Proposal 9 - The Manufacturing and Agritech Launchpad

Building on Strengths

One of the objectives of the Growing Fenland project has been to identify the assets and strengths of the market towns and to build on them. Among the most remarkable examples of a Fenland company the project has encountered is Stainless Metalcraft based in Chatteris.

Metalcraft has been in Chatteris since at least 1864, on the high street and latterly to the West of the town. Its early origins include manufacturing agricultural equipment, before diversifying into mining equipment, the manufacture of cranes, eventually manufacturing parts for hospital Scanners (MRI) and today makes parts for a diverse range of sectors including for the oil, gas and petrochemical sectors. Metalcraft makes vacuum vessels for research projects including for the Large Hadron Collider at CERN.

The existence and transformation of a specialised and successful company such as Metalcraft is important enough. But the development of the company over recent years and above all its plans for the future are the reason for the focus here.

Perhaps unusually for a Fenland business, the company entered into a project with the Institute for Manufacturing at Cambridge University. The project was a success and the results of the project were implemented. This, it is thought, is an important contributory factor in Metalcraft's outward facing approach and led to the current plans.

Today, Metalcraft is working on proposals for a Chatteris Business Growth Zone: an Advanced Manufacturing & Agri-Tech business park in Chatteris. This park could consist of the following features:-

- Provision of industrial units of varying sizes designed and built to service the needs of the Advanced Manufacturing and Agri-Tech sectors.
- Provision of an 'incubator' to support start-up businesses in the Advanced Manufacturing and Agri-Tech sectors along with other office space provisions.
- Provision of industrial units specifically designed and built for manufacturing research organisations such as NAMRC, TWI, MTC, IfM, etc.

- Provision of vocational training specifically aimed at the Advanced Manufacturing & Agri-Tech sectors which would include appropriate conference and meeting space provision.

The intriguing part of the proposals drawn up for Metalcraft concern the linking of the manufacturing and agritech sectors.

The agriculture sector is central to the Fenland economy. The area has some of the highest quality agricultural land in the country and characterised by a range of excellent producers. But as the recent Food, Farming and Countryside Commission report showed, all is far from well:

Meanwhile, farmers pay high prices for inputs – seeds, fertiliser, pesticides, herbicides, medicines and machinery – whilst getting paid less for their produce at the farm gate. More intensive farming practices are not necessarily more productive or more profitable. UK farm productivity is falling behind international competitors, at 0.9 percent growth compared to the Netherlands 3.5 percent or the US 3.2 percent. With the further uncertainties caused by Brexit, farmer confidence in the future is shaky. Many small-scale and family farmers have been pushed out of business; local supply chains are struggling, with the loss of small abattoirs, processing facilities, and routes to market²¹.

The problems described by the Commission are by no means unique to smaller family producers. Larger farming businesses including those that have experienced growth and benefitted from consolidation alongside rising mechanisation and productivity have found themselves squeezed too. Rising costs and aggressive pricing and contractual behaviour by supermarkets has reduced both their ability to innovate or improve wages. Consolidation, rather than diversification or a move up value chains seems to have been the norm for many agriculture businesses in the area.

There would appear to be a clear case for reducing the cost and risk of innovation as well as for working with other companies to secure the skills needed to move to higher value. But there is little evidence of the kinds of collaboration seen in some other areas either on a geographical basis (such as Cambridge or Manchester) or on a sectoral basis (such as the West Sussex Growers Association).

There is already ample public sector activity devoted to improving the productivity of the agricultural economy, not least Eastern Agri-tech Growth Initiative, NIAB and the University of Cambridge. Firms in the economy have expertise in sensors, robotics, genomics and

²¹ <https://www.thersa.org/discover/publications-and-articles/reports/future-land> P10.

communications and are at the forefront of ideas and commercial applications that are shaping the food production in the UK and globally.

The Local Industrial Strategy commits the Combined Authority to develop and fund an innovation Launchpad facility, or facilities, which offer new locations for businesses, research institutes, incubators and other key players to co-locate to support the development of innovation ecosystems. Agri-tech is one of the area's strategic growth sectors which does not yet have central agglomerations which will be a key ingredient in its future success. Fenland is the obvious place to rectify this. The facilities need to be in Fenland and co-developed between the private sector, the District Council and Combined Authority.

Proposal 10 - Cambridgeshire Jobs Compact

Why is this needed?

Several of the initiatives in this paper essentially have the aim of getting more people to locate business activity in Fenland and/or to improve the output and productivity of Fenland-based businesses. This is an important objective. But it is one that is likely to have a long term pay-off with limited gains in the short to medium term. In the meanwhile therefore, it is likely that the levels of income in the Fenland markets towns are lower than needed to create more vibrant and successful places. This has a human cost. The skills of Fenland people are being under-deployed in the existing business base, young people and others may feel that Fenland can't fulfil their ambitions and may be more likely to leave as a result while potentially highly skilled inward movers may be put off.

So there is a real need to look at the steps that can be taken in the short to medium term to enable the people of the Fenland towns of Chatteris, March, Whittlesey and Wisbech to fulfil their potential, bringing income jobs, inclusion and a sustainable future to the towns.

The Strategy Proposal

Many residents of Fenland already work in neighbouring areas. We believe there is the scope to increase this number. Work is needed to identify who currently makes the journey on a regular basis, how they travel and who pays. Separately we need to have an analysis of the jobs that people are doing, the kinds of roles available and the opportunities that might exist for skills training to better align Fenland people's skills with demand.

It is very much to be hoped that the opening of Cambridge South Station, resolution of the capacity constraints at Ely North Junction and above all the opening of a direct route from Wisbech will all provide longer term rail connectivity. The effects of the bus review and the A47 upgrade are also important. But they all lie in the future. A solution is needed now.

To this end the Growing Fenland project working with CPCA and partners on the Cambridge Biomedical Campus and others would like to commission two pieces of work to scope the

issue and provide fundable options to improve transport links over the coming months. This is because the Cambridge Biomedical Campus has already prioritised the development of a more localised labour pool and is in the process of growing, with employment expected to double over the coming years.

Project One: Patterns of Commuting and Provision

This study aims to establish:

- The current levels of commuting
- The potential future commuting needs to fill the potential job opportunities
- The means by which people travel
- The extent of employer and public subsidy into general and bespoke travel
- The possible market for further development of provision
- The barriers currently in place: price, provision quality, times, speed, marketing etc
- The options open in the short to medium term within different funding envelopes

Project Two: Jobs and Skills

This project will look at current job availability and at the likely changes in demand in the future with a particular focus on the jobs likely to be available to Fenland residents (Band 5 nurses and more senior and technical jobs across the employers on the Biomedical Campus).

The study will focus on the education and skills needs of these roles, the qualifications profile and education and training offer to residents of the Fenland market towns and a series of proposals (within different possible funding envelopes) for gearing providers in the area to secure a greater number of suitably qualified people over the short to medium term.

The outcome of these studies should be used to establish a business case for private and public sector funding for new transport provision. Without prejudice to the outcomes of these studies the options should include bus and minibus services to Cambridge and Peterborough, shuttle buses to transport interchanges and access to existing rail services as well as heavily discounted or free travel.

Proposal 11 - A Mayoral Implementation Taskforce

The proposals set out in this report are at an early stage of development. Even if they are intended to have an impact over the long term (with some of the proposals in the town reports providing shorter term momentum), their development and implementation needs to start as quickly as possible once the proposals here have been considered and agreed or amended.

The ambition of the proposals here is high. The kinds of initiative described here are characteristic of the most developed Mayoral Combined Authorities in the country. Indeed some of the proposals here draw on the work Metro Dynamics has been undertaking in other parts of the country. We therefore know that what is proposed here is capable of being delivered. But the context in Cambridgeshire is different to metropolitan areas. The Combined Authority is relatively new and Fenland District Council is a relatively small authority. Implementing the ideas set out here is beyond the ability of any one organisation. It will require an effective partnership between both, alongside the town councils, County Council and others.

Taking forward the proposals set out here requires effective partnership. But it also needs strong leadership. In our view this needs to come from the most senior and public figure in the area – the Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, working with the leader of Fenland District Council. For this reason we propose that following the adoption of this report, a Growing Fenland Mayoral Taskforce is established. Its objective should be to secure the implementation of the proposals set out in this paper.

Our consultation on this proposal has raised concerns that the Taskforce would be a talking shop. This must not be allowed to happen. The ideas here will need a great deal of working up and brokering within Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Several of the proposals here might be suitable candidates for submission by the Combined Authority to the Government for consideration in the Budget or Comprehensive Spending Review. They require the support of central Government and need to be developed before being submitted. The purpose of the Taskforce will be to hold partners to account for doing so, taking the steps needed to clear bureaucratic and other obstacles, offering a conduit and clearing point for decisions needed by Councils whose services and budgets are at issue in developing proposals.

The Government, at both Ministerial and officer level, has shown real interest in Fenland and the issues faced by the market towns. There is a case for capitalising on this by seeking formal Government involvement in the Taskforce, perhaps through joint chairing arrangements with a suitably senior Minister, or via official involvement in the work of the Taskforce.

It follows from the foregoing that developing and implementing these ideas will take resource. Some of that is available in the staff of the District Council, Combined Authority and others. But it is unrealistic to assume that the work needed to take forward this report can be provided from within the existing staff and financial capacity. Additional capacity needs to be identified.

An important principle in a project like Growing Fenland, as it reaches the implementation phase, is that the partners are aligned in commitment as well as purpose. The proposal is therefore that a dedicated capacity is funded and created jointly between (at a minimum) the Combined Authority and Fenland District Council. The purpose of this would be to provide additional officer or advisory support as well as to commission any technical studies needed to bring forward proposals. The scope of this capacity should be the subject of further discussion as part of the consultation on this report, but it might be wise to consider the scale of the challenge as being the equivalent of creating the need for a new Project Director supported by a Project Officer.

The Taskforce should have a time limited existence. A period of two years should enable the proposals considered in this report to be taken to the point of implementation and as a consequence be the responsibility of a Council or Government Department. It is therefore proposed that the terms of reference of the Taskforce include a sunset clause to this effect.



Metro — Dynamics

3 Waterhouse Square
138 Holborn
London
EC1N 2SW

020 3868 3085

Elliot House
151 Deansgate
Manchester
M3 3WD

0161 393 4364