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**Cambridge Futures:  
a referendum on  
sustainability**

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In 1996 an independent association, made up of business people, politicians, local government administrators, professionals and academics, established a study group called Cambridge futures. Its object was to understand what kind of environment the people of Cambridge would like to live in over the following 50 years. Cambridge is a sub-regional centre, which, for reasons of employment, shopping or tourism, attracts a large number of people from a very extensive reservoir of potential users. The city's economy is based on knowledge, the rapidly expanding nature of which necessitates continual adjustment to constant transformations. Over the last fifty years Cambridge has been strictly administered in accordance with a policy aimed at preserving its character as a university town situated in a rural context. This has taken the form of the strictest possible limitation of urban growth and the preservation of a green belt within which no form of development has been permitted. As a consequence, a large number of the working people have been obliged to reside outside the green belt in isolated settlements necessitating the use of a car to access the city. Moreover, the isolation of Cambridge has been reinforced by the presence of a network of motorways designed to keep traffic out of the city, a solution that has led to a considerable amount of traffic congestion, a growth in property prices, pollution and various forms of social segregation. Cambridge futures focused on the area called CambsTec, an area that

includes south and east Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire as well as the city of Cambridge itself. The group produced 7 planning proposals, that were identified as follows:

- Minimum Growth, the objective of which was to preserve the existing state of affairs, preventing any substantial change to the city and its surrounding areas;
- Densification, the objective of which was to concentrate development where demand was highest (the city centre);
- Necklace development, the objective of which was to preserve the city and the surrounding areas, though permitting a limited amount of development in the form of small settlements outside the city;
- Green swap, the objective of which was to allow the development of a certain number of settlements within the green belt in exchange for the recovery of certain agricultural areas in the surrounding region;
- Transport links, the objective of which was to preserve the existing state of affairs in the city and surrounding areas, preventing any substantial change by way of improving the transport network;
- Virtual highway, the objective of which was to realise an effective network of electronic communication capable of minimising the effects of commuting;
- New town, the objective of which was to concentrate all new settlement in a single, new urban development situated outside the green belt.

**The methodology**

In general terms, the common objective of the proposals was to integrate a sustainable development of the city with its traditional functions. In any case, the solutions reflected the theory of the 'garden city' and the Abercrombie plan for Greater London. The seven alternatives were

evaluated dynamically, with reference to a set of future planning prospects fixed at intervals of 5 years (from 2001 to 2050) and making use of two models called Mentor and Saturn. The examination of the results provided by the models, compared in terms of economic efficiency, social equity and environmental quality, made it possible to evaluate each proposal. So far as economic efficiency is concerned, the results included an index of the cost of living, in respect of the type of family, and an index of the cost of production, in respect of the type of industry. In this way it was possible to classify the proposals in terms of the level of the production costs of the activities that constituted the economic base of Cambridge. So far as social equity is concerned, the model identified the location of settlement in terms of socioeconomic group, thereby furnishing an index that measured social segregation. Preference was accorded to policies that produced less segregation, with special attention being paid to those that increased the quality of the settlements. Finally, in regard to environmental quality, some simulations were effected evaluating the energy consumption and the pollution produced by transport. To these were added more subjective evaluations of the results in terms of the availability of open space, security and bio-diversity. On the basis of these major criteria each proposal was assigned a numerical score which summed up its sustainability.

**The involvement of the residents**

As indicated above, the inhabitants were involved in the evaluation of the proposals. To this end Cambridge futures produced a pamphlet, a travelling exhibition and a

video which, in accordance with the various planning hypotheses, showed simulations of the possible future transformations of Cambridge. Visitors to the exhibition were able to express their own preferences, completing a questionnaire. A total of 650 people responded. The results of this initiative made it possible to identify certain constants, bringing to light the overall attitude, or the inclinations, of the majority of the population. In general, the public expressed an unexpected orientation in favour of the hypotheses proposing growth as well as a marked preference for public transport. At the same time it rejected the idea of indiscriminate growth. The opinions expressed can be summarised as follows: minimal desire to maintain things as they stood. The Minimum growth and Necklace development proposals met with very little support. Widespread agreement on principles. There was a very high level of agreement in relation to the planning of the region. Improve public transport. The transport links proposal won more support than any other. Reduce traffic to the minimum. The most sorely felt problem was traffic congestion. The proposals that envisaged reducing it were preferred over those that would not have any impact in this respect. On the other hand, there was also a moderate degree of support for the two proposals that offered alternative solutions to the problem. Quality of life. A clear preference was expressed for those proposals that privileged the quality of life: the people that lived in the city preferred the proposal to develop the green belt while those that lived outside the city preferred the proposal to promote higher density living in the city. The New Towns

proposal met with much less support from people living in the areas where the new residential settlements were to be placed. Support for competitiveness and economic growth. Although not being perceived as a priority as important as the reduction of traffic, the respondents were in agreement that prosperity and economic growth should be encouraged. The proposals that could result in a reduction in competitiveness did not receive support.

### **The point of view of the residents**

The respondents to the questionnaire expressed the desire for a balanced growth in Cambridge and in the region. The consultative process brought to light a preference for a planning strategy that aimed at the growth of Cambridge as well as growth outside the city, to be based on networks of public transport and capable of satisfying the future needs of the inhabitants. In particular, so far as the seven proposals are concerned, the consultative process produced the following results:

Minimum growth. Only 16% of the respondents expressed support for this proposal, advanced in terms of providing protection for the city from congestion on the access roads and from stagnation in the region. Densification. Like the green swap proposal, the proposal for higher density living in the city involved a stabilisation in the cost of living and the promotion of prosperity in the region. The growth in house prices, then, was of great importance and the respondents showed that they viewed favourably a development in which demand was higher but in which, at the same time, there was a guarantee of a higher quality of life. Necklace development. This strategy, which was the one

in place at the time, was the least popular. This leads to the conclusion that the respondents agreed that things could not continue as they stood and that new policies were necessary to reduce traffic congestion without renouncing increasing prosperity in the region.

Green swap. The component of the respondents that expressed itself in favour of this proposal was slightly smaller than the component that expressed itself against it. It is interesting to note that these differences were independent of the location in which the respondents lived. In spite of the fact that this proposal involved an increase in traffic congestion, 42% of respondents expressed a preference for it in that it also involved a diminution in the cost of living.

Transport links. This was the most popular proposal (preferred by 78% of the respondents). This proposal would lead to a reduction in the use of cars, thereby reducing traffic congestion and pollution. It would also result in an improvement in the quality of life within the city as well as in the surrounding areas.

Virtual highway. The component of the respondents that expressed itself in favour of this proposal was slightly larger than the component that expressed itself against it. The majority of the respondents showed itself to be undecided about it. This leads to the conclusion that the respondents did not fully understand the proposal. It was supported because of the fact that it would contribute to reducing traffic congestion.

New Town. This proposal was favoured by 28% of the respondents. It was received very unfavourably by those people who lived in the area where the proposed new settlements were to be placed.

Evidently, the substantial

increase in the amount of traffic that such a solution would imply had the effect of inducing a large number of the respondents to reject it. Nonetheless, a certain number of people favoured it because it would make available lower cost housing in the new settlements.

Finally, in regard to the objectives, the consultative process produced the following results: Public transport. 86% of the respondents agreed that it would be better to invest in public transport rather than in the road network.

Social equilibrium. 81% of the respondents expressed the opinion that it was not desirable that only high-income earners were able to live in the city. This group was concerned about the growing cost of houses and its consequences on social equilibrium.

The growth of high-tech industry. 78% of the respondents agreed that high-tech industry should be encouraged.

Tolls. 59% of the respondents agreed that commuters should pay a toll to enter the city. By the same token, they expressed the view that, if the objective was to reduce traffic congestion, such a measure should be accompanied by efficient alternatives in the form of public transport.

Widening the motorway. 52% of the respondents agreed that the A14 should be widened. Here too it is evident that the key concern was traffic congestion, with some people believing that new roads could reduce the problem.

The growth of Cambridge. 47% of the respondents expressed the view that an increase in the number of inhabitants would be advantageous. On the other hand, more than half was either un-decided or thought that Cambridge should incorporate new inhabitants by way of both higher density living and territorial expansion.

Renunciation of part of the green belt. 41% of the respondents expressed the opinion that part of the green belt could be used for further development. Some people expressing strong disapproval and others favouring the Green swap option.

Preserve Cambridge in its existing state. Only 18% of the respondents expressed the view that Cambridge and its surrounding areas should be left in their existing state. The bulk of the respondents did not accept this position.

### **Conclusions**

On the basis of these considerations the County council produced a preliminary plan. This took into consideration a certain number of the options laid out in the study, drawing out from them a further set of carefully developed options, including higher density living, an environmentally sustainable, an incursion into the green belt, a new settlement and the promotion of the development of commercial "corridors" well-served by public transport. The preliminary plan, which was under-pinned by a planning process in favour of sustainability, constituted an initiative that was highly innovative, thanks, in particular, to the nature of the followed procedure. In fact, the work groups applied a methodology which, unfolded in the following way: they put forward a range of planning alternatives, 'playing' with creativity and programming, evaluated, in respect of each alternative, the overall costs, analysed the costs in relation to needs, and, finally, adopted solutions with the highest added-value, fixing the objective of maximising performance and reducing 'unnecessary costs'.