

**Corridor of Uncertainty**

The latest revival of the Oxford to Cambridgeshire arc

**The 1.5m challenge**

The Government's lofty goals will need clarity – and funding

**Recipe for regeneration**

Fareham BC has bold plans for its community, homes, jobs and skills

# ‘Budget for growth vital to delivering on housing’



Keir Starmer and Angela Rayner visited the Nansledan housing project – along with King Charles – in a week where the PM pledged a generation of new towns

By Heather Jameson

Pressure is mounting on the chancellor to bring forward a Budget to help local authorities deliver housing and growth, a finance expert said.

Former chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy, Rob Whiteman, told *The MJ* the Government was making progress on delivering economic growth, with changes to the planning system and moves to create new towns.

But he said: ‘That feels like it is a long way off. For local authorities, things are getting more difficult.’

‘The Budget is now key. What we need is some money put into programmes to help schemes go forward more quickly.’

‘At the moment, housing numbers could go backwards,’ he warned. ‘Now we are looking for a Budget for growth.’

His comments come as proposals were submitted for new towns on more than 100 sites across England as part of what the Prime

Minister called the ‘largest housebuilding programme since the post-war era’.

Each of the new towns have the potential to deliver 10,000 homes, which the Government claimed would be ‘well-designed, beautiful communities with affordable housing’.

The announcement came as part of the interim report of the New Towns Taskforce, headed by former Birmingham City Council chief executive Sir Michael Lyons. The report set out the principles for new towns including affordable housing, infrastructure and access to green space.

Sir Michael Lyons welcomed the submissions received so far and said: ‘New towns present a generational opportunity to think about development – in terms of both homes and wider critical infrastructure – in the long term.’

‘New towns should go beyond basic standards, with a focus on high-quality, affordable homes, environmental sustainability, and a long-term contribution to economic growth.’

Launching the report at a housing development, Sir Keir and deputy prime minister Angela Rayner reiterated the Government’s commitment to building 1.5m new homes.

Starmer said: ‘We’ve already made progress in just seven months, unblocking 20,000 stuck homes. But there’s more to do.’

‘We’re urgently using all levers available to build the homes we need so more families can get on the housing ladder. We’re sweeping aside the blockers to get houses built, no longer accepting no as the default answer, and paving the way for the next generation of new towns.’

Rayner added: ‘For far too long, working people have been let down by a decline in housebuilding. That’s why the Government is rolling up its sleeves and is taking on the blockers with major reforms to planning regulation to get Britain building.’

Starmer has also pledged to resolve regulatory disputes and to support housebuilders and councils to unlock around 700,000 new homes. ■

## IPPR study calls for greater resources for planning teams

Government should beef up planning departments to achieve its 1.5 million new homes target, a think-tank has urged.

With issues such as land banking more to blame for slow housing delivery than planning hold-ups, a new report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) calls for planning departments to be resourced to overcome the blockages.

Maya Singer Hobbs, senior research fellow at IPPR, said: ‘Many of the blockers to housing and infrastructure delivery are not planning related. Reasons include water shortages, private developers slowing delivery to maintain profits, and a lack of strategic oversight of large infrastructure projects.’

The report argues planning departments need greater resources and highlights analysis showing that since 2007 developers have gained planning permission for more than 1.4 million homes they have not built.

It calls on the Government to look into fresh legislation to force developers to build within a certain timeframe after securing planning permission and the creation of a new Cabinet Office team to produce a national spatial strategy.

Adam Hug, housing spokesperson for the Local Government Association, said: ‘In order to deliver the homes we need, Government must work with councils and the housebuilding industry to ensure there is a suitable pipeline of sustainable sites, which once allocated in a local plan and/or given planning permission, are indeed built out.’ ■

# Corridor of Uncertainty

Confirmed during the chancellor's recent announcement on the growth corridor between the two cities, the latest revival of the Oxford to Cambridgeshire arc brings the promise of growth and new homes. But with previous initiatives proving 'deeply unpopular', have the lessons been learned to make this a success? **David Blackman** reports

This time five years ago, the then Sir Patrick Vallance was omnipresent on our television screens as he helped to brief the nation on the unfolding Covid-19 pandemic.

But council chiefs will now have more chance of spotting the recently ennobled Lord Vallance than *News at Six* viewers following the science minister's appointment as the Government's 'champion' for the Oxford-Cambridge growth corridor, which runs between the two cities via Milton Keynes and Bedfordshire.

Rachel Reeves used a landmark speech on growth last month at the corridor's western end in Oxford to announce that the former chief scientific adviser will work with local leaders and housing minister Matthew Pennycook to deliver what she touted as Europe's answer to Silicon Valley.

However, as the chancellor acknowledged in her speech, what she termed the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor was 'initially launched' more than 20 years ago.

Then it was part of the more prosaically titled South Midlands and Milton Keynes growth area before being resuscitated and rebadged by her predecessor George Osborne as the Ox-Cams arc.

Apart from the fact that so many senior Westminster figures are Oxbridge graduates, ministers keep being drawn back to the area by the prospect of building on what a report by consultancy Public First described as its 'unrivalled per capita performance'.

Despite two decades of policy-making focus though, Lord Vallance would be advised to ensure his driving license is up to date as he prepares to shuttle up and down the growth corridor. It still takes two and a half hours to travel by rail from Oxford to Cambridge, including a detour via London, even though the two Varsity cities are only 66 miles apart. So what greater chance does the Ox-Cams arc-turned-corridor have of achieving lift off under this latest initiative?

Details are scant so far beyond Lord Vallance's appointment and Reeves' announcement of a new Growth Commission for Oxford and the surrounding area.

The chancellor also flagged up the delivery of a mainline station at Tempsford, one of a number of potential sites for new towns in the corridor (*see box right*).

Cllr Pete Marland, leader of Labour-controlled Milton Keynes council that sits midway along the corridor, says Lord Vallance's office has already been in touch to set up a meeting (*see p26*).

But Cllr Liz Leffman, the Liberal Democrat leader of Oxfordshire CC, says officials have yet to be in contact: 'The one thing we know for certain is that the money is going to be there for East West Rail.'

The greatest activity within the Ox-Cams corridor over the last couple of years has been at its Cambridge end, the centrepiece of recent growth plans for both the Conservative government and its Labour successor.

Housing minister Matthew Pennycook has appointed Peter Freeman, who helped play key role in overseeing the

regeneration of London's King's Cross before going on to chair the Government's Homes England housing agency, to head the embryonic Cambridge Growth Company (CGC).

The company, set up last year in shadow form to spearhead the city's growth, was mooted by Pennycook as a potential 'template' for growth initiatives elsewhere.

Local government leaders across the Ox-Cams corridor certainly though don't want a revival of the elaborate arrangements, which were set up to implement the then arc.

The centrepiece of this was a strategic framework, which would dictate the quantum of development in specific locations to local authorities within the area. However the framework was never actually published.

Talk about the growth corridor delivering a million new homes in some of England's leafier and better-heeled corners fuelled a grassroots backlash against the initiative, as did proposals, subsequently abandoned, to build a new expressway road between Oxford and Cambridge.

Then once Boris Johnson became prime minister in 2019 on the back of a pledge to 'level up' England's regions, the days of the arc were numbered.

'It didn't fit with the political agenda. Saying that the government's going to fund x and y across Oxford to Cambridge didn't suit that narrative,' says David Bainbridge, a partner in property consultancy Savill's Oxford office.

As central government backing for the arc ran into the sand, the initiative was rebadged within Whitehall as a 'locally led' initiative.

## The latest revival of the arc has a head start in that preparatory work has already been done on issues like major development sites and transport

Some of the cross-arc partnership working developed under the initiative, notably the Super Cluster group that brings together local leaders and universities among other key stakeholders, has survived.

However Bainbridge says the previous Government's approach to producing the framework was 'unwieldy' and 'unworkable'.

Up to 35 local authorities across the Ox-Cams arc had an input into the production of a spatial framework. Given the differences in size and political control of authorities across such a far-flung geographic area finding common ground was always going to be a challenge.

Marland says: 'It was too disparate: it stretched all the way from the edge of the Cotswolds to the edge of East Anglia.'

'One of the failures of the arc last time and the subsequent pan-regional partnership is there's been a little bit too much bottom-up focus, particularly in terms of the governance.'



Chancellor Rachel Reeves delivers her economic growth speech at Siemens Healthineers in Oxford

'In no circumstances' should there be a return to such a wide-ranging regional partnership, he says: 'There are too many voices.'

Leffman agrees: 'The previous structure was very cumbersome. We need a new approach.'

Stephen Kelly, joint director of planning at the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service that straddles the city and its surrounding district of South Cambridgeshire, expects instead to see a greater focus on 'more locally focused solutions', like the fledgling CGC and the Oxford Growth Commission.

'It feels more tailored, which is probably right. If you're thinking about delivery vehicles, you really need tailored responses based upon local circumstances, which isn't really suitable for very large geographies.'

'We're not likely to see something of that scale. It will be a series of targeted area-specific interventions, some of which will have overlapping challenges, probably dealt with closer to the delivery point, less strategic and more focused on real, deliverable solutions.'

Each of these places are different and they've got slightly different issues to be resolved.'

Henry Cleary, the civil servant who oversaw the eco-town programme under the last Labour government, says: 'You need a light touch top level and then let the authorities get on with their projects.'

In the current constrained fiscal environment, a poorly resourced top-down approach would 'simply slow things down', he adds.

Any overarching governance arrangements established for the rebadged corridor should be more tightly focused geographically than they were before, says Marland: 'There is a core to the corridor. Beyond that, there are the areas that will benefit and need to be brought in as and when necessary but those peripheral areas should not be dominating the core conversation. That's what happened in the past and it wasn't successful or helpful.'

The Government's broader drive to reorganise local government, which could result in a much smaller number of authorities across the Ox-Cams corridor, could help efforts to co-ordinate growth, he says: 'Three mayoral combined authorities that link together with a smaller number of unitary authorities would probably be the best short-term answer and would probably be in a much better position to guide and co-produce something than the 30-odd authorities across the arc at the moment.'

It will be crucial to ensure the elected leaders of the larger councils are involved in any oversight, like already happens on the England's Economic Heartland transport partnership that she chairs, says Leffman: 'The universities (Super Cluster) group can talk about what they want to do in terms of developing their research facilities and spin outs, but in order

to be able to provide the infrastructure and the housing that go along with that, there has to be a conversation with local government.'

The latest revival of the arc has a head start in that much preparatory work has already been done on issues like major development sites and transport, she says: 'There's been a lot of work done and it would be a shame if we lost some of that.'

Marland agrees: 'Obviously, it needs updating but that work has got to be reused.'

The most tangible legacy of that preparatory work is the East West rail line, which has been slowly inching east from Oxford and is due to start running trains to Bletchley next year.

However given that only earthworks remain of the long defunct rail route between Bedford and Cambridge, the full connection from Oxford is unlikely to be open until 2035, cautions Savill's Bainbridge.

And Leffman says 'any revival' of the idea of building a million homes across the arc or the previously touted expressway would be 'deeply unpopular'.

'It needs to be much more moderate than that,' she says. The focus of growth efforts should be on 'low hanging fruit' projects, says Cleary.

'Something like a new station seems a realistic, credible project,' he says, but not larger ones like new railways or major motorway junction upgrades.

And Cleary says, one of the most important lessons

### Proposed growth corridor new towns

More than 100 sites have been submitted for potential new towns, according to the Government's latest update on its programme to revive the post-war mass settlement building programme.

Of these, 18 are located along the proposed East West rail line that is intended to form the spine of the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor, Rachel Reeves revealed in her speech resurrecting the initiative.

The one that particularly caught the chancellor of the exchequer's eye is Tempsford on the border between Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire.

A think-tank called UK Day One last year published a report identifying the small village as the site for a new city housing up to 350,000 people.

The reason why this unsung village is attracting so much attention is that it sits at the crossroads between the East Coast Mainline, the A1 and the proposed route of East West Rail.

Savill's David Bainbridge says the planning arrangements for a new town at Tempsford are likely to be complicated though. Under the area's current local government boundaries, the bulk of the new settlement's site is likely to be in the existing Central Bedfordshire Council.

However it would also cut into the neighbouring authorities of Bedford and Huntingdonshire districts as well being on the Cambridgeshire CC border.

In addition, a new town on the site is likely to require a further upgrade to the Black Cat roundabout, which sits at the crossroads between the A1 and the A428, he says: 'It (Tempsford) would need separate funding and is probably a different consent regime.'



emerging from the last Labour government's growth area initiative is the need to offer local residents some kind of improvement early in the process: 'It's no good promising people a new health centre in 10 or 12 years' time – you need to come up with things that will help them now with their pressures and problems.'

Adam Zerny, independent leader of Central Bedfordshire council – of which the Ox-Cams corridor runs through – says these are the kind of improvements that will be required if growth plans are going to fly.

'Development must have infrastructure. Such housebuilding requires better access to health care in the local community. Improved surgeries and, in the bigger towns, health hubs. It needs more community facilities, public transport, leisure and, of course, education. Services must come first. Most people in rural areas are not anti-development, they are anti-development without infrastructure.'

'Health facilities are the number one ask for many households. Too often in the past, housing developments have made little or no financial contribution to GPs surgeries. A gradual creep occurs where a town or village sees more and more development with very little benefit for health. This needs to change.' ■



# Climate adaptation planning isn't optional – it's essential

By Ben Simcock and Karl Limbert

The impacts of climate change are no longer hypothetical. We can declare climate emergencies, set net zero carbon targets and work at scale and pace to retrofit the built environment across the UK (and we absolutely should); but the very real fact is that we are already witnessing the effects of global warming.

The five main climate risks are overheating, flash flooding, storms, droughts and wildfires. These have all become commonplace in recent years and extreme weather, has become so frequent and severe, local authorities must act decisively to safeguard communities, infrastructure, and economic stability now.

For local authorities, the challenge is multifaceted:

- **Infrastructure damage:** Extreme weather accelerates wear and tear on roads, railways, and public buildings. High temperatures soften road surfaces and buckle rail tracks, while floods erode foundations and overwhelm drainage systems.
- **Service pressures:** Emergency response teams, healthcare services, and social care systems face growing demands. Vulnerable populations – such as the elderly, disabled, and low-income households – are disproportionately affected.
- **Rising costs and inequality:** Without proactive adaptation, local authorities face escalating costs, reputational risks, and worsening social inequality. The message is clear: adaptation

planning is not optional – it is essential. Climate change adaptation is not just about infrastructure, it touches every aspect of governance and community life, including:

- **Health and social care:** Heatwaves increase hospital admissions due to heatstroke and respiratory issues, while floods lead to mental health challenges and displacement.
- **Education:** Rising temperatures can render classrooms uninhabitable, disrupting education and requiring costly retrofits.
- **Transport and connectivity:** Flooded roads and damaged rail networks isolate communities and hinder economic activity.
- **Economic stability:** Businesses are vulnerable to climate disruptions, with

cascading impacts on local revenue and employment.

Without adaptation planning, councils risk facing cascading failures across systems, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities.

Housing represents a particularly critical area of vulnerability. Poorly insulated buildings become heat traps during summer and struggle to retain warmth in winter. Meanwhile, homes in flood-prone areas remain at constant risk. Local authorities, as stewards of social housing and community well-being, are uniquely positioned to lead the charge. Proactive measures can ensure resilience, minimise displacement, and protect public health.

At Equans, as part of our climate adaption services, we use AI and

advanced technology to apply climate data to our existing building engineering expertise to deliver bespoke solutions for clients that turn potentially catastrophic situations into manageable issues.

We work with our customers, across both the private and public sectors, to not only analyse their buildings physical vulnerabilities but to study and track meteorological events to alert them to when they might be most at risk, and from what.

A robust climate risk adaptation framework includes:

- **Heat vulnerability analysis:** Identifying areas most susceptible to heat stress based on building materials, ventilation, and urban heat island effects.
- **Flood risk mapping:** Using high-resolution data to pinpoint surface water, river, and coastal flooding threats, allowing for targeted defences and drainage upgrades.
- **Asset risk profiles:** Evaluating individual buildings and infrastructure to prioritize investments and allocate resources effectively.
- **Scenario planning tools:** Modelling future climate scenarios to inform long-term strategies and build resilience through 2050 and beyond.

By leveraging such tools, local authorities can proactively secure funding, update policies, and implement measures that protect communities from escalating risks.

We recently undertook a climate risk assessment for a major NHS Hospitals Trust, which illustrated how data-driven adaptation can drive meaningful change. The assessment identified critical risks, including heat stress and flooding,

affecting eight buildings across two hospital campuses.

Detailed analysis pinpointed vulnerabilities, such as internal temperatures exceeding safe thresholds during heatwaves. By acting early, the trust implemented preventative measures to safeguard patients, staff, and operations, while developing innovative tools to predict and mitigate future risks.

We are wholly committed to pushing this adaptation agenda in tandem with our decarbonisation efforts, so that businesses, hospitals, schools and other critical services can remain open. But if we are to truly combat this, we can't do it alone. There needs to be a shift in mindset among both business and government to recognise that climate change is not only a problem that can be solved down the road by cutting emissions today.

For local authorities, the path to resilience begins with acknowledging the risks and taking proactive steps. Adaptation planning can unlock opportunities for sustainable regeneration, community well-being, and economic growth. Collaboration with trusted partners, data-driven insights, and community engagement will be key to success.

The cost of inaction will far outweigh the investments needed to adapt. By prioritising resilience today, local authorities can protect their communities, assets, and economies for generations to come. ■

**Ben Simcock is Strategic Development Director and Karl Limbert is UK Strategy Director at Equans UK & Ireland**



If the Government is going to meet its lofty goal of providing 1.5 million new homes, it needs to give clarity – and some funding – quickly. **Michael Palin** explains

The Government has set itself an ambitious target of delivering 1.5 million new homes within this Parliament.

It has a stated intention to increase affordable and social housing supply, to empower local authorities to do more direct delivery, and the intention to be more interventionist through the use of new powers, development corporations and creation of new towns. It wants to do this through leveraging private capital but suffers itself from a constrained public purse. And it has begun a programme of planning system reforms that is aimed at increasing the supply of land to meet the housing need.

However, the delivery of housing, regeneration and any other form of development only occurs through the right combination of land, development funding from primarily the private sector, and technical capability.

Failure to see this as a triangle – where all three elements need combining as one – could undermine the Government's approach.

### Challenges ahead

First, the Government risks having parallel policy objectives that are not joined up. I am a huge advocate of devolution and firmly believe there can be benefits from local government reform. However, these changes risk being disruptive to the parallel aim of creating a new strategic planning map of the country and delivering more homes.

Too much change all at once creates uncertainty, especially for the private sector, as to who has a responsibility for what. The system needs clarity, quickly, as to how new planning regimes will be applied, who is responsible, and where the capacity and funds will come from to implement the new approach.

Second is the risk of seeing planning reform and, with that, an assumed increase in land supply, as a magic bullet. It is too easy for policy makers to think the housing problem is one of simple supply and demand – land markets do not work in that way and even when planning is consented, it doesn't automatically make the scheme commercially stack up. Land is just one part of the triangle for delivery and in much of the country land supply (and indeed, the planning system as a whole) has not been the issue. What has been the problem is making schemes stack-up financially in markets where costs are greater than end-value.

Third, and linked to the above, is that the scale of the Government's ambition needs to be matched with the right type and levels of funding to make it occur. Public lending and equity scores differently within the Treasury than grant and is more likely to be made readily available. Yet a project that is financially unviable cannot be magically enabled by returnable public money – the 'gap' between costs and value will remain.

The risk is that policy makers – at multiple levels – snatch at a big number of available public sector lending and equity but end up with an entirely inappropriate tool for the task at hand. In a very large proportion of places, if the wider policy goals are to be met, you need grant money too.

Fourth, there is the challenge of where the technical capability required will come from. This is not just a question of planners in local planning authorities but also development surveyors, development managers, and other specialists. These are already in short supply – often too expensive to have in-house in a constrained public sector – but will face increased demand. There simply are not enough development professionals out there and a growing tendency to believe policy professionals can act is this space simply adds to the problem.

Fifth is the political challenge that is set to emerge. Government wants lots of new homes – and has released



local targets directing delivery to places with considerable challenges of capacity and viability. This results in difficult decisions ahead about where limited public funds might be applied. Does it build simply where schemes can be made viable? If it does it will inevitably ignore many areas – including many traditional Labour voting areas – where viability continues to be the greatest barrier to new supply.

And does it force potentially unpopular responsibilities for planning numbers on the new strategic authorities and with that, many Labour mayors – only to see those targets missed because the system was not stood-up to make the targets achievable? It's great wanting new responsibility but it could also be a blame shunt when ambitions are not met.

### Not too late

The ambition of the Government is to be commended especially given the instability of housing and regeneration

policy of recent years. The willingness to tackle a thorny topic such as planning and make very public statements about being pro-development is new and has undoubtedly provoked investor interest. The fact we have a housing minister who wants the job and understands the brief is also hugely positive – an environment where the relevant minister changed every six months was never conducive to tackling such a deep-rooted issue.

But what is needed now – by both the public and private sector – is clarity on how the triangle of land, plus the right funding (including grant), and technical capacity is to be met, and how parallel policy goals – such as a 1.5 million target and devolution – get joined up. The longer that remains uncertain, the more difficult the target will become. ■

**Michael Palin is a former executive director at Homes England**

# At the heart of the Ox-Cams arc

I am now just as likely to have people talk to me about ‘Milton Keynes robots’, as I am to be told that ours is the city of Concrete Cows and roundabouts.

Milton Keynes is famous for our grid roads, roundabouts and Liz Leyh’s 1978 sculptures. For many years those things hung around the neck of the city and its reputation, pigeonholing a place once regarded as ahead of its time and as a novel experiment that was now outdated. Somewhere an Eastenders character or distant uncle might move to.

During the early 2000s the city wanted to move away from all that. The cows were put into storage and the roundabouts and grid roads abandoned for more enlightened planning.

However, in recent years the city has regained its confidence. The Concrete Cows have been given pride of place in the city, the roundabouts and grid roads appreciated. The principle that the city is unique and better by design is now regarded as something to celebrate. Residents, who are fiercely proud of our city, are now more likely to respond ‘so, tell me what your town is famous for?’ to a slightly contemptuous reference to our heritage, rather than to ask forgiveness for being distinctive.

The constant throughout has been growth, and by any measure Milton Keynes is a success. The city now has a population of more than 300,000. We have the 10th biggest economy in the UK. One in three jobs are in tech. We have one of the highest

Milton Keynes is more than just a commuter town for the Ox-Cams arc, says Cllr Pete Marland, it is an economic growth powerhouse in its own right

business start-up rates and one of the largest new economy sectors in Britain. We have consistently delivered the highest number of new homes each year for over half a century. Our draft local plan contains an ambition to deliver more than 63,000 more homes by 2050. We want to go further.

However, Milton Keynes still has an image problem. A bigger opportunity not quite being fulfilled.

The chancellor’s announcement in her recent speech to revive the Oxford to Cambridge corridor is hugely welcome. Make no mistake, Oxford and Cambridge are global brands and the potential of the corridor to rival any economic cluster in the world is not the stuff of dreams.

While previous governments have attempted to create ‘Europe’s Silicon Valley’ they failed for two main reasons.

The Oxford to Cambridge Arc was viewed as an exercise in simply putting some transport infrastructure between the two cities and taking advantage of the land in-between to provide much needed housing. It didn’t consider that Milton Keynes, Bedford, Central Bedfordshire and Luton are places of opportunity in their own right and have an equal part to play in creating a truly world-class supercluster.

Milton Keynes is not simply a city that can provide commuters with a cheaper house a quick train ride away from Oxford or Cambridge.

Look at the facts. Milton Keynes almost has the population of Oxford and Cambridge put together. Our economy is larger than both cities combined. The potential to grow our economy or provide housing is not constrained by a shortage of land or greenbelt.

We share the Government’s ambition to supercharge economic growth and play our part in generating the revenues the Treasury needs to rebuild our public services, but a true Super Cluster must be about the economic potential of the whole area, not just joining up two cities with some housing in-between.

The previous Ox-Cam arc concept was also devoid of real direction nationally. This resulted in its collapse under the weight of too many disparate voices failing to prioritise, show leadership, and make difficult choices at a local level. There was always a local election coming up somewhere.

Working alongside our neighbours in Bedfordshire and Luton, we applied for the Devolution Priority Programme before the

Oxford to Cambridge announcement was made because we already felt it was the best way to help deliver change and improve the lives of our local residents.

Now, devolution is an opportunity for a directly elected mayor to strongly champion Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes (BLMK) and help deliver in our part of the corridor.

Sadly, it was not to be. Tight timeframes, competing priorities, civil service capacity and a tight fiscal envelope all no doubt played their part. However, I can’t help feeling that it is a missed opportunity towards making the Ox-Cam Super Cluster a reality.

The Oxford to Cambridge corridor is a massive opportunity. Its success will depend on both recognition of the contribution BLMK can make and the leadership a Mayoral Combined Authority can bring.

It has taken time for Milton Keynes to be acknowledged as much for our robots as our unique history. Sometimes it has felt like pushing a boulder up a hill only to have the door closed in our face when on the verge of a breakthrough. Our country can’t afford that this time, so I am committed to working with the Government to make sure Milton Keynes plays a leading role in national renewal, show BLMK sits at the heart of the corridor and highlight that devolution is needed to make it work. ■

Pete Marland is leader of Milton Keynes City Council



Milton Keynes city centre



Coal Drop's Yard – part of the recent King's Cross redevelopment

# The true role of regeneration

Regeneration has an active part to play in putting more money into people’s pockets and hitting the Government’s growth priorities, says Paul Swinney

If the ultimate point of regeneration is to make people in a place better off, then it has got its work cut out.

Cities Outlook 2025, Centre for Cities’ latest annual snapshot of the UK’s urban economies and the contribution they make to the national economy, found the average worker in London earns by August what it takes a year for the average worker in Burnley or Middlesbrough to earn.

There is a total gap difference of almost £20,000 a year between the highest and lowest paid places in the UK. And this is before taking account of more than a decade of wage stagnation that all parts of the country have experienced.

This difference is driven by a particular part of a place’s economy. While the struggles of the high street understandably gets attention, this is an outcome of the stuttering of another part of the economy – the export base.

These exporting companies are important because they tend to be more productive than jobs in local-facing industries like cafés, bars and restaurants, and so on average pay higher wages. And because they sell their goods and services elsewhere in the world they bring money into the local economy, putting money in people’s pockets which they can subsequently spend on the high street.

This explains why Swindon is more productive than Swansea, and Brighton is more prosperous than Burnley. They have much stronger export bases, which generate much more prosperity for those who live in and around them.

If a struggling place is to become more prosperous then it needs to focus on reducing the barriers that currently prevent exporting, and especially high-skilled, exporting companies from investing in them.

What does this mean for regeneration?

The UK’s exporting activities, and the cutting edge of this in particular (think AI, FinTech and Life Sciences) disproportionately locates within city centres. The centres of the UK’s 63 largest cities and towns cover just 0.1% of land in the UK but are home to 61% of these cutting-edge businesses. This is because of the inherent benefits that such locations offer, namely access: access to a large number of workers and access to a network of other, similar businesses.

The problem many struggling places face is that their centres aren’t attractive to such activities. And so the challenge is to change this.

Any regeneration attempt should start by asking ‘why isn’t this centre an attractive place to do business for export-focused companies?’ and focus on addressing the answers to this question. Answers are likely to be found in addressing the commercial space offer in a town or city centre, the public realm around it and the transport links into it.

Exporter companies won’t exclusively look for a central location, and so making sure that appropriate commercial

space is available elsewhere in a place will also be important. But plans do need to understand what roles different parts of a city play. In most places a new out of town business park is unlikely to offset the downward pull that a struggling city centre has on a city and wider regional economy.

There is a role for regeneration to improve the retail and amenity offer of a high street too. But these efforts at the very least need to be done in conjunction with efforts to change the wider offer of the city centre. If ultimately people don’t have enough money in their pockets to support a vibrant high street, then improving shop fronts of building new units isn’t going to make a great deal of difference.

In many of these places, low land values will mean that they will require public subsidy to bring projects forward. Even Kings Cross, a site on the fringe of one of the most successful central business districts in the world, required public support. This means that not only should the Government’s forthcoming Industrial Strategy single out city centres as a key national economic asset, but back this up with public investment to increase the contribution that they make to the national economy.

Regeneration will have a role to play in the Government’s goal of putting more money in people’s pockets across the country. But for it to work it will need to help tackle the causes of an underperforming economy – its export base – rather than its outcomes – its struggling high street. ■

Paul Swinney is director of policy and research at the Centre for Cities

# The recipe for regeneration

Fareham BC has cooked up plans for its community, providing homes, jobs, skills and a great place to live, chief executive Andrew Wannell and leader Simon Martin tell **Heather Jameson**



Fareham's Daedalus statue, the centrepiece of the Queen Elizabeth II Platinum Jubilee Park and part of the council's regeneration plans

When it comes to building strong, successful communities, there are plenty of ingredients that go into the mix. But for Fareham BC, they believe they have the perfect recipe: Good jobs, with the training needed to secure them, housing, and a lifestyle and leisure offer to attract people to want to live there.

Fareham is nestled between Portsmouth and Southampton in Hampshire. The borough council's chief executive, Andrew Wannell, proudly points out it came second in a Halifax Quality of Life Survey as one of the best places to live in the country.

Fareham has, he says, low unemployment figures and high demand for housing, but house prices are relatively affordable.

But that has not stopped the council pushing forward with more homes – including building its own council housing. And almost two decades on from its originally conception, Welborne Garden

Village – a 6,000-home development to the north of Fareham – is under construction and the first houses will go up for sale later this year.

'There were a lot of bumps along the way,' Wannell tells *The MJ*, not least parcelling up the land and creating a motorway junction – junction 10 on the M27. Increased cost pressures did create problems for the motorway junction, but the council has now secured the cash and construction is underway.

Council leader Simon Martin agrees: 'It has taken the best part of 20 years to get Welborne off the ground...We wouldn't have got it over the line if we weren't pushing it from the get-go.'

He suggests the Government's house-building targets for Fareham, of 794 homes a year, are extremely optimistic and more than they have ever managed before – despite the council having ambitions of its own. 'Developers will not build unless they

have the staff, and unless the finances make sense,' he says.

His chief executive agrees, adding: 'Powers to intervene would be really powerful to move that conversation on.'

One of the key landowners for the site – Welborne Land Ltd – acquired 90% of the land, with a master developer – Buckland Development – working alongside them. The landowners were reluctant to work with 'volume builders', Wannell says, but instead have focused on a series of smaller, joint venture builders to provide high-quality, bespoke homes.

The site became one of 14 new developments granted Garden Community status by the Government in 2017, opening opportunities to apply for extra funding.

When it comes to employment, the council has focused on Daedalus, a decommissioned naval base crossing the Fareham and Gosport borders. The council acquired the 369 acre site from Homes

England for £1, which is now part of the Solent Enterprise Zone.

The site is now home to Solent Airport, a skills and innovation cluster, two business parks, a National Grid Interconnector and a 40-acre park.

Two college campuses – Fareham College Centre of Excellence in Engineering, Manufacturing and Advanced Skills Training and the Civil Engineering Training Centre – sit alongside Fareham Innovation Centre and the business parks, providing some of the skilled staff needed.

Part of the council's investment in the enterprise zone created the innovation centre which opened in 2015 and it is now a hub of small businesses – with 57 now onsite, some as small as a single person.

## 'We wouldn't have got Welborne over the line if we weren't pushing it from the get-go'

The adjoining Faraday Business Park initially saw the council initially invest £6.81m in six business hangers, and five general aviation hangers all of which are now occupied. A further investment of £5.59m created extra business units which are also fully occupied, while construction is now underway on a search and rescue training facility.

A second business park – Swordfish – is now at master planning stage.

And when it comes to the lifestyle offer, the council is working to rejuvenate its town centre. It bought the local shopping centre in 2018 and published its Town Centre Regeneration Strategy this month.

Central to the plans was to refurbish the 40-year-old theatre into a new and expanded venue – Fareham Live – which is big enough to attract touring shows. Owing the shopping centre has allowed the council to open it up in the evening to provide a walkway between the town's pubs and restaurants and the new theatre.

Wannell says: 'We have seen a level of engagement [on the town centre regeneration plan] that we have never seen before.'

It is key to the council's concerns about local government reorganisation in Hampshire. They fear the new boundaries will be too remote and will fail to recognise existing communities.

Both the borough council and Hampshire CC are keen to go slowly on reorganisation. Wannell explains: 'If you are going to redesign the system, let's do it right and get it right for the long term. It might mean it takes a bit longer.'

Cllr Martin adds: 'I think a large unitary of 450,000 will not deliver for the people of Fareham.'

'They [government] need to accept people are not saying we don't want reorganisation... but this is a good opportunity to take our foot off the accelerator.'

If it is innovation, delivering for communities and cost savings the Government is looking for, Fareham believes it has the right recipe. ■