



# Bridging Cambridge: Polycentric Growth and Place-Based Policy

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the views of Cambridge Ahead or its members.

## Executive Summary

This report examines how place-based policy and spatial planning can shape more equitable and sustainable growth, particularly in high-pressure city-regions, using Greater Cambridge<sup>1</sup> as a critical case. It argues that spatial form is a core instrument in public policy since it shapes access to employment, housing, services and infrastructure, and therefore influences how the benefits and costs of growth are distributed.

### Key Recommendations

- A. Embed a multi-node infrastructure backbone in the spatial strategy
- B. Make equity and social infrastructure central to growth
- C. Simplify and strengthen city-regional governance
- D. Align spatial planning more explicitly with Greater Cambridge's innovation dynamics.

Together, these recommendations argue that the challenge is not to invent polycentrism, but to govern it more deliberately and fairly.

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<sup>1</sup> The administrative area of Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire councils

## I Introduction and context

Over the past half century, Greater Cambridge has evolved from a compact university city with a relatively small population of 100,000 to being the core of UK's most dynamic knowledge intensive city-regions, with a rapidly growing population and employment base. Advanced research and exceptional talent in cutting-edge sectors such as life sciences and technology have driven this transformation, with the University of Cambridge playing a key role as an anchor institute (Greater Cambridge Shared Planning, 2025a, UK Government, 2025). Simultaneously, Cambridge's growth must contend with a tightly constrained geographic form: A medieval street pattern, highly valued historical core and a long-standing Green Belt that sharply separates urban development from the surrounding countryside (Greater Cambridge Shared Planning, 2025a).

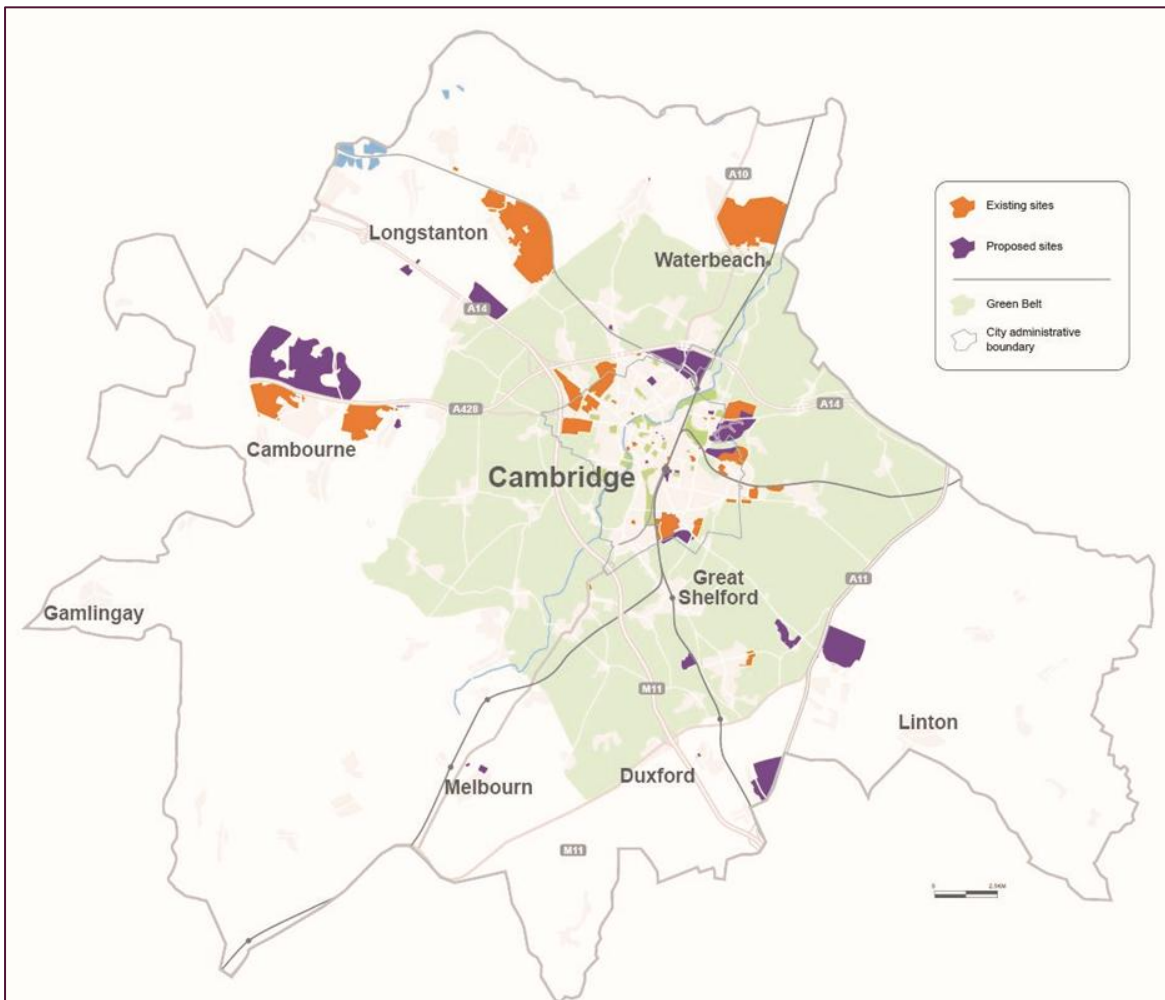
These dynamics have shaped the spatial pattern of Cambridge. The historic core, centered on the university colleges, market square and ancient shopping streets, remains the symbolic and cultural heart of Cambridge and continues to attract millions of tourists each year. Yet, the primary engine of employment now sits in the series of peripheral nodes: Cambridge Science Park and the emerging Northeast Cambridge area in the North; the Cambridge Biomedical Campus in the South, the West Cambridge Campus and Eddington to the west, and Peterhouse Technology Park and the upcoming redevelopment of Cambridge Airport to the east. An outer ring of parks and clusters 5-10 miles outside the city as shown in Figure I, including the Melbourn Science Park, new settlements such as Longstanton, Waterbeach and Cambourne, are reshaping the wider settlement pattern of South Cambridgeshire.

As a result, Greater Cambridge is pragmatically transitioning into a polycentric city region, with the city centre, surrounded by a constellation of employment and residential centres linked by transport corridors rather than a single dominant core with radial flows of people and activity. This transition is anchored on the current National Planning Policy Framework that identifies plan led growth and the efficient use of land as central objectives while seeking to protect the environment, Green Belt and supporting sustainable transport choices (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2024).

The pressures associated with this rapid population and economic growth are acute:

- House prices and rents in and around Cambridge are among the highest in the UK compared to local incomes, pushing many workers into longer commutes from more affordable settlements in South Cambridgeshire and beyond. Housing affordability in Cambridge (Annual median house price-pay ratio) as of 2024 in Cambridge 11.3 higher than the National average at 7.7(Cambridge city council,2025).
- Congestion on key radial routes and associated transport-related air pollution raise concerns about health and environmental quality.
- The competing needs of historic preservation all raise questions about how many more jobs and visitors the city centre can absorb.

**Figure 1: Map showing the existing spatial strategy for Greater Cambridge**



Source: (Greater Cambridge Shared Planning,2025a)

Local debate about growth has become more contested. The emergence of the Cambridge Doughnut Economics Action Group and the growing visibility of the Green Party in

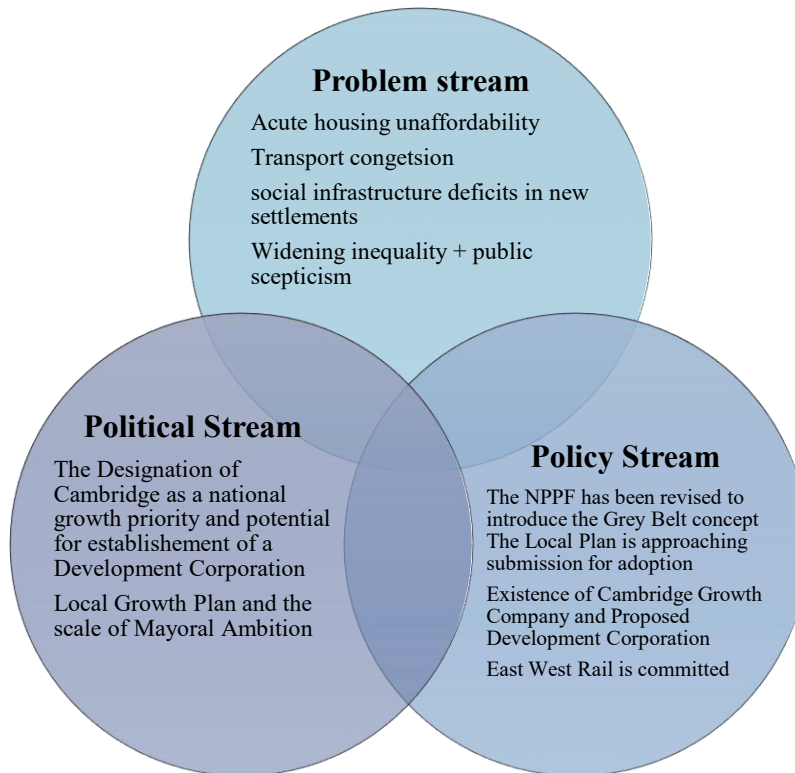
Cambridge City politics highlight concerns about environmental limits, distributional fairness and who benefits from further growth (Cambridge Doughnut Economics Action Group, 2024; Cambridge City Council, 2026).

**Recognising its strategic importance**, the UK government has identified Greater Cambridge as a priority area for sustainable economic growth. In response, Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council are jointly developing a Local Plan for Greater Cambridge. This plan aims at densifying some sites within the urban area whilst also distributing developments in multiple major nodes to reduce the need to travel to the inner core whilst combating air pollution and climate change (Cambridge City Council & South Cambridgeshire District Council, 2024).

### **The window of Opportunity- Why Acting Now matters**

Addressing the implications of polycentrism comes at a time when the significant drivers are converging simultaneously, creating what Kingdon (1984) would recognize as an open policy window, a moment when a pressing problem, a viable policy solution and the political will to act align. Taken together as illustrated in Figure 2, these streams create a narrow but important window in which Greater Cambridge's already emerging polycentric form could be more deliberately steered.

Figure 2: Converging streams



## 2 Conceptualizing Polycentrism

### 2.1 The Garden City Concept by Ebenezer Howard

The development of Cambridge reflects the Garden City Concept of Ebenezer Howard, one of the most consequential place-based policies in the British urban history. The model, as shown in Figure 4 establishes a primary Central city, surrounded by a constellation of six Satellite nodes, connected by rail and separated by a greenbelt. (Howard, 2003). This spatial rigidity served two purposes and became a basis of UK Planning policy:

- The containment Function: The Green Belt which prevents settlements from merging into a formless conurbation, preserving the distinct identity of each node.
- The Statutory legacy: Howard's work fuelled the need for land regulation, culminating in the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, which nationalized development rights and codified the Green Belt as a British planning tool.

The Garden City idea was therefore not merely an architectural proposition, it was a public policy revolution, establishing the principle that state has a duty and **a right to shape where, how and under what conditions cities grow**. Urban planning scholarship has

since reinterpreted Howard's constellation model as an early articulation of polycentricity, a spatial concept that has evolved from a normative planning ideal into a widely adopted analytical and policy framework for managing metropolitan growth (Davoudi, 2003; Hall & Pain, 2006).

Although Greater Cambridge has not been planned as a literal Garden City, elements of Howard's thinking remain visible in its contemporary spatial strategy. The use of Green Belt containment, the development of new settlements beyond the urban fringe and the emphasis on corridor-based connectivity all echo aspects of the Garden City idea, while the Local Plan increasingly organises growth around multiple centres rather than a single dominant core (Cambridge City Council & South Cambridgeshire District Council, 2024).

### 3 Understanding the Policy Environment

#### 3.1 Policy Framework

Table I: Policy context

Key policy element	Scale and scope	Relevance to Greater Cambridge
<b>National Planning Policy Framework</b>	Sets out the overarching principles for preparing Local Plans <b>across England</b> , including Greater Cambridge, with an explicit emphasis on sustainable development. Historically, it reinforces strong protection for the Green Belt, whose primary purpose is to restrict urban sprawl (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2024).	The revised NPPF 2024 introduces guidelines for the "Grey Belt", guidance for land previously developed or makes a relatively lower contribution to Green Belt purposes, giving local authorities more flexibility in using land amid acute housing shortages (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2024). For Cambridge, <b>some urban-fringe sites previously ruled out on the Green Belt grounds may now be assessable under the Grey Belt criteria</b> , unlocking new locations for infill growth that complement polycentrism.

Key policy element	Scale and scope	Relevance to Greater Cambridge
<b>Abolition of Regional Spatial Strategies and devolution</b>	<p>The 2011 Localism Act abolished regional spatial strategies, which had coordinated growth, infrastructure and environmental policies across groups of local authorities (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011; Boddy &amp; Hickman, 2016). This created a gap in planning particularly for city-regions like Cambridge where the functional economic area extends beyond a single local authority (Boddy &amp; Hickman, 2016).</p>	<p>The UK government sought to solve this problem in an incremental fashion through the piecemeal creation of combined authorities and mayoral devolution. Greater Manchester’s 2013 devolution deal became the first city region to gaining strategic powers in planning transport and economic development as well as establishing a combined authority model (HM Government, 2014). The Combined Authority of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough followed in 2017 with an elected mayor and (under the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act of 2026) a duty to prepare the Spatial Development Strategy (SDS). The SDS is <b>intended to provide a strategic framework for growth, infrastructure and environmental objectives, which future Local Plans will need to conform with.</b></p>
<b>Greater Cambridge Local Plan</b>	<p>The draft Greater Cambridge Local Plan 2024-2045, <b>prepared jointly by Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council</b>, is the statutory instrument for managing growth at the city-region scale.</p>	<p>The plan seeks to contribute to addressing issues regarding housing delivery, economic development and environmental constraints (Cambridge City Council &amp; South Cambridgeshire District Council, 2024). However, Local Plans do not incorporate delivery tools/ instruments to achieve set ambitions. This policy-outcome gap is intended to be resolved by the proposed Development Corporation and the role of the Combined Authority and other agencies, noting that Greater Cambridge is currently the only area where <b>central government is seeking to establish a centrally led development corporation alongside a combined authority.</b></p>

### 3.2 Institutional Framework

The governance of Greater Cambridge is characterised by a dense web of overlapping institutions with differing statutory powers, delivery responsibilities and spatial footprints. Table 2 summarises the main bodies involved in planning, infrastructure and growth, highlighting the fragmented landscape within which any polycentric strategy must be implemented.

Table 2: Institutional framework in Greater Cambridge<sup>2</sup>

S/No.	Institution	Role/Mandate
1.	Cambridge City Council	Local planning authority for Cambridge City; joint Local Plan authority
2.	South Cambridgeshire District Council	Local planning authority for South Cambridgeshire; joint Local Plan authority
3.	Cambridgeshire County Council	Oversees the delivery of public services such as transport, education and social care
4.	Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority <sup>3</sup>	Mayoral strategic functions; preparing the Spatial Development Strategy and Transport Strategy
5.	Greater Cambridge Partnership	Delivery of transport and infrastructure improvements in Greater Cambridge
6.	Cambridge Growth Company	Evidence-based growth strategy; as a subsidiary body of the Homes England, tasked in investing in infrastructure to unlock housing and commercial development
7.	Parish and Town Councils	Neighbourhood-scale planning and community engagement
8.	Proposed Greater Cambridge Development Corporation	Long-term planning, land assembly, delivery and infrastructure coordination

## 4 Methodology

The study combines primary and secondary research. It draws on 16 semi-structured interviews with experts (See Appendix 1) working in diverse fields in relation to the development of Greater Cambridge, supported by secondary evidence from planning

<sup>2</sup> The process of Local Government Reorganisation is currently underway, it is expected to lead to the abolition of district and county councils in Cambridgeshire and their replacement with unitary councils in 2028 (Cambridge City Council, 2026; East Cambridgeshire District Council, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority have a statutory duty to prepare as Spatial Development Strategy, intended to provide a strategic framework for growth, infrastructure and the environment across the wider city region.

documents, government reports and academic literature. Given the breadth of issues raised in interviews, from housing and equity to governance, infrastructure, environmental limits and Artificial intelligence, this report focuses on three interlocking themes where polycentrism is most clearly at stake: infrastructure, governance and inequality, while acknowledging that they fit within the wider set of debates identified by stakeholders. A limitation is that the evidence reflects expert perspectives more strongly than everyday resident experience.

Figure 3, in Appendix 2, illustrates the map of Greater Cambridge area (Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council administrative boundaries) and neighbouring district councils.

## 5 Findings- How Polycentrism is Unfolding

### 5.1 The spatial structure of Greater Cambridge

**Key Finding:** Greater Cambridge already operates as a polycentric city-region, the current Local Plan represents a progression and more explicit articulation of this spatial pattern rather than an entirely new departure (Greater Cambridge Shared Planning, 2025a).

Historically, the commercial heart of the city (“Central Business District”) began around the medieval river crossing at the modern-day Bridge Street. and has gradually expanded and shifted east and south towards the Market Square, the contemporary retail core around Lion Yard-Grand Arcade, St Andrew’s street, stretching towards Grafton Centre and Newmarket Road and Mill Road retail corridors, and (in the last ten years) to the new CBD around the rail station. The key drivers of these shifts included physical constraints of the medieval street grid, railway-led expansion, growth of knowledge intensive and tech sectors. Interview evidence indicates that Cambridge’s shift towards a polycentric structure has been driven as much by economic necessity as by explicit planning doctrine.

*‘An enormous explosion of life science and deep-tech innovation around a constrained medieval core has, over several decades, produced a pattern of hubs at Cambridge Science Park and Cambridge North, the Cambridge Biomedical Campus and West Cambridge, with Eddington and future expansion land providing adjacent housing and research space.’*

The draft Greater Cambridge Local Plan distributes growth across Cambridge East, Northeast Cambridge, the southern cluster, Cambourne, Waterbeach and Northstowe, and a proposed new settlement at Grange Farm, redirecting growth from concentrating within the historic core (Greater Cambridge Shared Planning, 2025a). With the urban fringes, polycentrism in Greater Cambridge is operating on two interconnected scales.

- i. The urban-fringe nodes have emerged around the historic core: West Cambridge and Eddington, the Cambridge Biomedical Campus, Campus Science Park each hosting substantial employment and services.
- ii. A set of larger new settlements such as Cambourne, Northstowe, Longstanton and Waterbeach is developing further out as additional residential and service centres (Greater Cambridge Shared Planning, 2025a).

This creates a two-tier polycentric structure: Historic core- fringe relationships; Historic core- new towns relationships and increasingly direct relationships between fringe nodes and new towns themselves.

In this configuration, residents might live in Cambourne, work at the Biomedical Campus, or live in Waterbeach and work at Cambridge Science Park, without having to pass through the CBD. With Cambridge Biomedical Campus already employing over 20,000 people and formally planning for a substantial increase in its workforce, these cross city movements are a significant consideration (Cambridge Biomedical Campus, 2025). As this pattern is becoming more common, the transport flows shift from the traditional radial trips into the centre towards more orbital, cross-city movements and the polycentric effects become explicitly multi-scalar operating both at the inner urban edge and at the wider city-region scale.

### Policy Implications

**If** Greater Cambridge's spatial structure is already multi-scalar and partly path-dependent, **then** solutions in transport, housing and governance must also be designed and coordinated at multiple scales, rather than relying solely on inner-city interventions or distant new-town strategies (Greater Cambridge Shared Planning, 2025a; Greater Cambridge Partnership, 2014). The task is less to invent a polycentric model than to stabilise and steer an emergent one so that it supports more equitable and sustainable

## 5.2 The Infrastructure Precondition

**Key finding:** The polycentric growth in Greater Cambridge will only work if it's underpinned by a coordinated infrastructure backbone. While the spatial pattern of employment and housing has diversified into multiple nodes and new settlements, the supporting infrastructure networks are lagging. This creates a mismatch between Greater Cambridge's emerging polycentric urban structure and infrastructure networks that still largely reflects a radial "into and out" of the historic core pattern, and in many cases transport services have just not been added to routes where significant residential and employment growth has occurred.

Residents in new settlements such as Cambourne, Northstowe and Waterbeach who work in edge-of-city hubs like the Biomedical Campus or West Cambridge are often required to route via the city, even when both origin and destination lie outside it, reinforcing car dependency, traffic congestion and longer commuting times (particularly if reliant on radial public transport routes). One interviewee described this as a 'vicious cycle' in which unreliable buses encourage car use, while car congestion further slows bus services.

This pattern aligns with wider evidence that polycentric urban regions do not automatically reduce car dependency; where infrastructure investment lags behind spatial diversification, multi-node growth can entrench rather than resolve car dependency (Burger & Meijers, 2012). The draft Greater Cambridge Joint Local Plan recognizes this infrastructure gap and highlights the need to move beyond the radial pattern of commuting towards a higher-capacity public transport and active travel network linking major nodes (Greater Cambridge Shared Planning, 2025b).

From the interviews, several schemes were repeatedly described as "make or break" for polycentrism: East West Rail's ability to connect Cambourne directly to Cambridge South; the Cambourne–Cambridge (C2C) corridor and Cambridge South East Transit (CSET) as high-frequency public transport links to major employment clusters; and, in the longer term, a mass rapid transit concept capable of supporting a much larger, more dispersed population.

Infrastructure concerns extend beyond transport. Local officials pointed to severe water stress, the vulnerability of chalk streams and capacity limits in drainage and wastewater

systems. Tighter water efficiency standards and biodiversity net gain requirements are already shaping where and how quickly growth can occur. Several interviewees argued that without a coordinated approach to water, energy and digital networks at the city-regional scale, new nodes risk being approved on paper but constrained in practice, exacerbating uncertainty for communities and investors alike. *'You can write as many clever spatial diagrams as you like, but if you don't solve the buses, the rail and the water, the polycentric plan will stay in the document, not on the ground.'*

### Policy Implications

- Major infrastructure schemes (East West Rail, C2C, mass rapid transit, strategic water and drainage investments) should be treated as core components of the spatial strategy, not add-ons – pre-conditions, not options.
- Governance reforms (Combined Authority SDS, Development Corporation) need explicit mandates and tools to plan, co-ordinate, fund and phase infrastructure across multiple nodes and local authority boundaries.

## 5.3 Polycentrism, inequality and the risk of replication

**Key findings:** Without deliberate action on affordability, access and social infrastructure, Cambridge's emerging polycentric form risks reproducing existing inequalities in new locations rather than reducing them.

Polycentrism is not inherently egalitarian. Recent analysis for the City Council establishes Cambridge has the second-highest level of income inequality of any city in England and Wales, with stark gaps in educational attainment, health and life expectancy between its richest and poorest neighbourhoods (Cambridge City Council, 2024). Interviewees described everyday geographies in which those on higher incomes can choose to live close to central or fringe employment nodes, while lower-paid workers face longer, more expensive commutes, often by car. In this context, polycentric growth is not automatically egalitarian: simply adding more nodes does not guarantee that the benefits of the Cambridge economy become more widely shared.

The Local Plan's shift towards a network of urban-fringe clusters and new settlements has the potential to bring jobs, services and social infrastructure closer to where people live.

However, stakeholders repeatedly warned that, in practice, new nodes can easily become “dormitory” settlements if housing delivery outpaces employment, community facilities and public transport. Several interviewees pointed to early phases of places like Northstowe as cautionary examples, where homes were occupied before a full range of services and facilities was in place. Others contrasted this with Eddington, where mixed tenures, staff housing, a school, supermarket and community centre were delivered from the outset, giving the area a stronger foundation as a complete community. For them, the key test is whether new and expanding nodes enable residents on ordinary incomes to live locally, work locally or travel cheaply to work, and access everyday services without long, car-based trips.

*‘If we get this wrong, we won’t fix inequality – we’ll just move it outwards. You end up with new places that look shiny on the brochure, but the people who keep the city running still face long, expensive journeys just to reach their jobs.’*

### Policy Implications

- Affordable housing requirements and tenure mix need to be treated as non-negotiable elements of growth in fringe nodes and new settlements.
- Transport investment priorities should explicitly consider who benefits, ensuring that lower-paid workers in outer settlements have cheap, reliable access to major employment clusters.
- Social and community infrastructure should be front-loaded in new nodes to support social cohesion and everyday life, reducing dependence on the historic core and avoiding “dormitory” outcomes.

## 5.4 Governance and Delivery

**Key Finding:** The governance framework, spanning multiple local authorities and subsidiary agencies as illustrated in Section 3.4, is already a binding constraint for the delivery of services in the polycentric model, and forthcoming Local Government Reorganisation adds both uncertainty and opportunity to that picture.

Interviewees argued that this fragmentation undermines coherent planning, infrastructure coordination and service delivery and that the transfer of functions from national to the

devolved Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) adds a layer of system complexity given the responsibilities of growth and development also spread across the institutional landscape. The New Towns Taskforce report advocates for a ‘strong single delivery vehicle’, typically a development corporation that collaborates with existing institutions rather than replacing them (New Towns Taskforce, 2024).

Crucially, the spatial footprint of polycentric Cambridge already extends beyond the administrative boundaries of Cambridge City and South Cambridgeshire, through commuting patterns, housing markets and infrastructure corridors that run across the CPCA area, including towards Peterborough. Hence, the administrative governance by local authorities may struggle to deliver given both positive and negative geographical spillovers may happen. The proposed Greater Cambridge Development Corporation, in collaboration with different local authorities, by aligning with the city-region orientation, could be a transformational intervention to ensure interventions in Cambridge are not siloed and broaden the economies of scale.

Several interviewees therefore viewed the proposed Greater Cambridge Development Corporation as a potential solution, while others viewed it as “another organisation” layered on top that could add more complexity unless its powers are carefully scoped and designed to integrate with the local policy making processes.

More coherent governance and delivery arrangements may also strengthen Cambridge’s position within national growth initiatives, including AI-related investment programmes, by demonstrating that innovation capacity is matched by implementable spatial and infrastructure governance (UK Government, 2025).

### **Policy Implications**

- Institutional reforms are preconditions of translating polycentrism to unlocking the long-term infrastructure investment.
- With its spatial model, Greater Cambridge requires a clear city-region institutional architecture to operate effectively.
- From the primary research, a development corporation may be part of the solution, only if it is designed and empowered to simplify responsibilities and retain democratic legitimacy.

## 6 Policy Options and Analysis

### 6.1 Policy Option 1: Status Quo

Under the status quo, Greater Cambridge continues broadly along its current trajectory. The Joint Local Plan distributes growth across a ring of urban-fringe clusters and new or expanded settlements, but infrastructure provision, housing mix and governance arrangements change only incrementally. Decisions remain fragmented across existing councils, the County Council, the Combined Authority, the Greater Cambridge Partnership and other agencies, and major transport and utilities investments proceed scheme by scheme.

This approach builds on existing plans and institutions, avoids the short-term disruption of more radical governance change, and does not require large up-front commitments beyond current proposals. However, the evidence in this report indicates significant risks. Without stronger coordination and investment, a continuation of the status quo is likely to entrench car dependency along congested corridors, allow new settlements to function as dormitories rather than complete places, and perpetuate existing inequalities in access to jobs and services. It also risks locking in a dispersed spatial pattern that may be costly or politically difficult to retrofit later.

### 6.2 Policy Option 2: Deliberate, infrastructure-led polycentrism

In this option, polycentrism is treated as an explicit city-regional strategy rather than as a pattern emerging from constraint and incremental decisions. Spatial planning, infrastructure and governance are aligned around the idea of a multi-node urban region in which the historic core, fringe clusters and new settlements are each expected to function as complete, well-connected places. The Joint Local Plan, the CPCA's Spatial Development Strategy and transport strategies would prioritise early investment in high-capacity public and active transport between key nodes, strategic water and utilities infrastructure, and stronger requirements for affordable housing and social infrastructure in new and expanding settlements.

This option is consistent with much of the interview evidence, particularly around the need to move from dormitories to places, and from commuters to communities. It offers the

greatest potential to align economic growth with environmental limits and social equity by shortening everyday journeys, bringing jobs and services closer to where people live, and providing a clearer framework for coordinating public and private investment (Moreno et al., 2021). Its drawbacks are that it is demanding to deliver it requires sustained capital investment, politically difficult decisions on issues such as bus franchising and road space reallocation, and institutional reforms to reduce fragmentation without undermining democratic accountability.

### 6.3 Policy Option 3: Contained monocentric intensification

This option seeks to accommodate a greater share of growth within or immediately adjacent to the existing Cambridge urban area through higher densities, brownfield redevelopment and selective use of “Grey Belt” sites, while limiting reliance on more distant new settlements. In principle, this could reduce the need for dispersed infrastructure and support shorter trips for some households, particularly if accompanied by strong investment in walking, cycling and public transport in and around the core.

In practice, however, the evidence suggests this option is heavily constrained in Greater Cambridge. Heritage and townscape sensitivities, the small physical scale of the historic core, Green Belt protection, severe water stress and political resistance to building height all limit the scope for substantial further densification in central areas. Interviewees also noted that key employment clusters such as the Biomedical Campus and West Cambridge already lie at or beyond the edge of the historic core, making a purely monocentric strategy increasingly misaligned with the functional geography of jobs and research space.

### 6.4 Assessment of Options

Table 3: Comparative assessment of growth options for Greater Cambridge

Criteria	Status Quo	Deliberate Polycentrism	Monocentric Intensification
Deliverability	High in the short term because it preserves existing plans and institutions but weakens overtime as infrastructure pressure accumulates.	Medium. It is capital intensive, sequencing and institutional coordination.	Low to medium. Physical, political and environmental and heritage constraints limit its growth capacity.

Criteria	Status Quo	Deliberate Polycentrism	Monocentric Intensification
Equity	Low. Risks entrenching car dependency and dormitory settlements; lower-income workers continue to bear highest costs.	High. It can distribute opportunity, services and infrastructure more evenly across the city-region.	Medium. Compact growth can improve accessibility for some but may worsen affordability pressures in the central areas.
Infrastructure efficiency	Low. Dispersed growth without coordinated networks locks in car dependency and radial congestion	High. Infrastructure can be planned strategically around priority nodes and corridors.	Medium. It may use existing networks more efficiently which are already under pressure.
Institutional feasibility	High. Short term, no governance reform needed but inadequate in addressing institutional fragmentation	Medium. Requires rationalised governance clear Development Corporation mandate and alignment with future unitary councils.	Low. Would requires reversal of current Local Plan strategy.
Overall assessment	<b>Insufficient.</b> Administratively convenient but strategically weak.	<b>Preferred,</b> with conditions. Best aligned with Greater Cambridge's spatial reality and long-term growth pressures.	<b>Not feasible</b> at scale. Useful as a complementary measure, but inadequate as the primary strategy.

## 7 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In conclusion, Greater Cambridge is already functioning as a polycentric city-region, shaped by the interaction of innovation-led growth, spatial constraint and evolving planning policy. However, the report also recognises that polycentrism is not self-delivering. Without major investment in transport, water and utilities, stronger affordable housing and social infrastructure provision, and a more coherent governance architecture, Cambridge's emerging form risks deepening existing inequalities and producing a fragmented pattern of growth that is difficult to serve and govern. Greater Cambridge matters beyond its local boundaries because it concentrates many of the tensions now confronting British urban policy: high growth and high inequality, global innovation capacity and local infrastructure constraint, strong environmental protections and mounting development pressure. Some of the key recommendations to ensure 'good growth' include;

**Recommendation 1: Embed a multi-node infrastructure backbone in the spatial strategy.**

National and local policymakers should treat major transport and utilities schemes – including East West Rail, the Cambourne–Cambridge and Cambridge Southeast Transit corridors, potential mass rapid transit, and strategic water and drainage investments as integral components of the spatial strategy, rather than discretionary add-ons, to support a genuinely polycentric movement network.

**Recommendation 2: Make equity a core design principle of polycentric growth.**

Planning and housing policies should require significant affordable housing and tenure mix in fringe nodes and new settlements, alongside early delivery of social and community infrastructure (schools, healthcare, childcare, libraries, green and civic space) and affordable, reliable public transport links to major employment hubs, so that polycentric development narrows, rather than displaces, existing inequalities.

**Recommendation 3: Simplify and strengthen city-regional governance for delivery.**

Government should rationalise fragmented responsibilities across district councils, Cambridgeshire County Council, the CPCA, the Greater Cambridge Partnership and other agencies, and establish a development corporation or comparable vehicle with a clear 20–25-year mandate to coordinate land use, infrastructure and delivery, aligned with the CPCA’s statutory spatial framework and with local plan-making remaining a democratic function. The new unitary council being created for the area through the Local Government Reorganisation process should be set up and empowered to provide strong, streamlined governance and place-making for the area on an ongoing basis beyond the life of the proposed Development Corporation.

**Recommendation 4: Align spatial planning with Greater Cambridge’s innovation dynamics.**

The spatial development strategy should leave room for successive waves of innovation by concentrating new housing and mixed-use development around existing and emerging employment clusters (such as science parks and campuses), ensuring these nodes are conceived as complete, walkable places with green space and local services, rather than single-use business parks or dormitory estates.

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## 9 Appendix

### 9.1 Appendix I: List of people interviewed

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization</b>
1. Dan Thorp	Cambridge Ahead
2. Richard Maung	Stantec
3. Robert Evans	Wellcome Genome Campus
4. Stephen Kelly	Greater Cambridge Shared Planning
5. Cameron Holloway	Cambridge City Council
6. Niamh Matthews	Greater Cambridge Partnership
7. Isobel Wade	Greater Cambridge Partnership
8. Lawrence Morris	University of Cambridge
9. Diane Coyle	University of Cambridge
10. Natalie Morningstar	Fitzwilliam College, University of Cambridge
11. Rebecca Britton	Urban&Civic
12. Sam Hyde	TTP Group
13. Anthony Hollingsworth	Cambridge Growth Company
14. Peter Maxwell	Cambridge Growth Company
15. Hannah Hickman	Cambridge Ahead Planning and Housing Group
16. Will Gaby	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

## 9.2 Appendix 2: Scope of Study

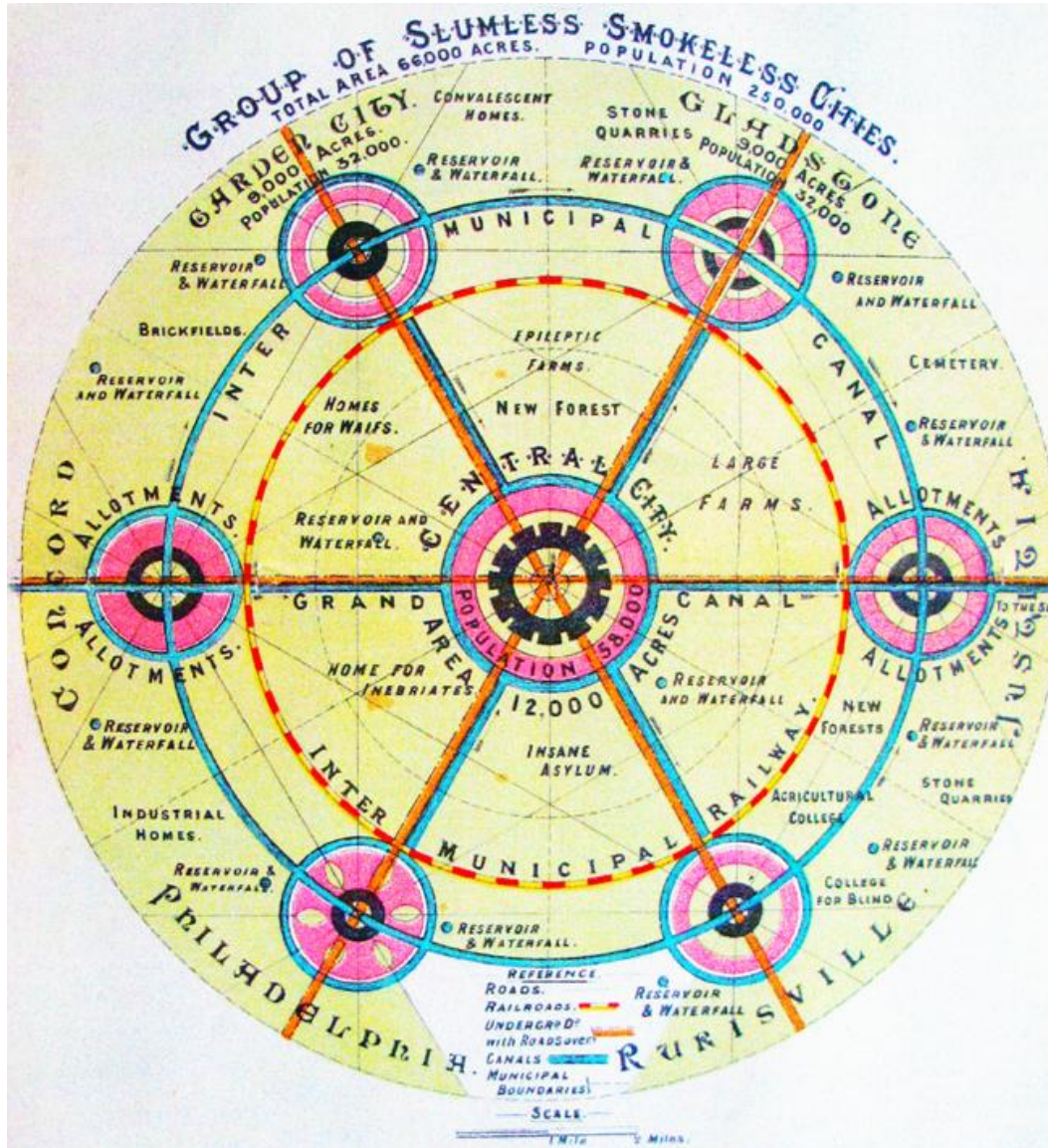
Figure 3: Scope of the study



Source: (Greater Cambridge Shared Planning,2025a)

### 9.3 Appendix 3: Howard's Garden City model as an early polycentric planning framework

Figure 4: Garden City Concept Illustration



Source: Howard, 2003