

FOREST CITY: THE NEW BIRMINGHAM?

Can we really accommodate a city the size of Birmingham on our doorstep? That's the question being posed by countryside campaigners in response to proposals for the so-called "Forest City" development between Haverhill and Newmarket.

While the plans at present have no formal Government support or funding, the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) Cambridgeshire & Peterborough and the Suffolk Preservation Society are monitoring proposals and remain concerned such ambitious schemes are not considering the full implications on rural communities and infrastructure. "Whilst we recognise the urgent need to address the housing crisis and support sustainable economic growth, we do not believe this unprecedented proposal represents an appropriate or sustainable solution," said CPRE Cambridgeshire

"We support considered development and innovation in how housing needs are met. However, rural needs and the impacts on infrastructure are critical concerns. It is vital that if any such grand concepts do progress into more formal planning, community consultation is an integral element" said Director of the Suffolk Preservation Society, Tom Foakes.

The scale of the development being promoted is extraordinary. Outside London, only Birmingham has a population of around one million. Public statements by the scheme's promoters suggest up to 400,000 homes and a population approaching one million people on approximately 45,000 acres of predominantly rural land.

The countryside between Haverhill and Newmarket is not empty land awaiting development. It consists of hugely productive farmland, historic landscapes, established communities, valued wildlife habitats, and an important rural setting for existing villages and market towns. Development on this scale would fundamentally transform the character of West Suffolk, East Cambridgeshire and the wider region forever.

The countryside campaigners are particularly concerned about the proposal's implications for water resources. East Anglia in general and Cambridgeshire in particular, are already among the most water-stressed regions in England. "The proposal also has significant implications for transport and infrastructure" Mr Foakes continued. "Existing road, rail, healthcare, education and utility networks across the area are already under pressure. The scale of investment required to support a settlement of this size would be immense and must not be underestimated."

CPRE believes that new development should be located where it can be integrated with existing communities, supported by sustainable transport and delivered in a way that protects the countryside and enhances nature. At present, they say they are not convinced a privately promoted mega-city on greenfield land represents the most effective or sustainable means of achieving these objectives.

To date, no detailed planning application, environmental assessment, transport strategy, or infrastructure delivery plan has been published. Campaigners in Cambridgeshire and Suffolk say if such a plan becomes an actual proposal, the government, local authorities and decision-makers must ensure it is subject to

rigorous scrutiny. Also, they must ensure that any future consideration is based on robust evidence, meaningful public consultation and full environmental assessment.

The Housing Minister, Matthew Pennycock has confirmed the Forest City project will not be included in Labour's flagship new towns programme, because of concerns over deliverability. However, he told MPs developers could still pursue the plans through the local planning system. His comments came in response to the Conservative MP for West Suffolk, Nick Timothy, who warned that among other concerns, the plan assumed large-scale water self-sufficiency.

"If Birmingham, the birthplace of the industrial revolution, remains the industrial heartland of England, this historic tract of England's countryside is the beating heart of agriculture," said CPRE Cambs & Peterborough. "The countryside is not an obstacle to progress. It is a vital national asset that must be protected and enhanced for future generations".

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