



Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Metro Mayor

Three Policy Priorities for 2021

In May, voters will elect a metro mayor for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough for the second time. After a four-year term extended by the pandemic, the mayor will be elected for a three-year term before the cycle returns to once every four years from 2024. Recent polling by Savanta ComRes for Centre for Cities found that 77 per cent of residents were aware that it has an elected mayor, and 16 per cent could name the incumbent James Palmer.

Figure 1: Cambridgeshire and Peterborough



As shown in Figure 1, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough covers the cities of Cambridge and Peterborough, and the districts within Cambridgeshire of South Cambridgeshire, East Cambridgeshire, Fenland, and Huntingdonshire. More data on the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough economy and how it ranks compared to other mayoral areas can be found in the [factsheet](#), and for Cambridge and Peterborough in [City Monitor](#), the [High Street Tracker](#), and the [UK Unemployment Tracker](#).

For the mayor to support the prosperity of the entire combined authority, they will likely require different approaches in the two distinct cities, and a third in the Fens that recognises its characteristics, such as with the Fens for the Future Partnership.¹ These will need to be combined with a coherent approach for the common aspects of the area, as set out combined authority’s Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Economic Review (CPIER).²

Beyond the immediate priority of recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, which saw unemployment-related benefits claims rise by 15,000 locally, this briefing sets out three priorities (and an issue for government) for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough that tackle problems which pre-date the pandemic and will persist beyond it.

These include **improving housing affordability; reducing congestion, air pollution, and increasing public transport usage; and improving skills for young people**, alongside a recommendation for Government that **the unique ‘triple-tier’ institutional situation in the combined authority be reformed**.

Policy priority 1: Make Cambridge more affordable for local residents.

- **Support strategic reviews of the green belt land.** In particular, land around railway stations should be released for climate-friendly new homes.
- **Advocate for the abolition of minimum space standards.** Cambridge’s new flats are too big for single people to rent or buy by themselves because of space standards, which should be removed to help young residents in house-shares.
- **Co-operate with the new planning reforms.** Cambridge is one of the cities with the most to gain from planning reform, and a permanent increase in supply will make Cambridge permanently more affordable.

Cambridge is the UK’s star performer on housing in recent years, seeing housing supply increase by over 7 per cent from 2015 to 2019.³ But it remains one of the most unaffordable cities in the UK.⁴ Homes are nearly 15 times the average salary in Cambridge, the third most unaffordable in the country. Peterborough is in contrast the most affordable city in the Greater South East (including the South East, East of England, and London), with the average homes costing eight times average wages, more affordable than the UK city average of 9.9.⁵

To ease housing pressure in Cambridge, the mayor should advocate for the release of more green belt land near railway stations. The origins of Cambridge’s recent housing success lie in its releases of green belt land for development and repeated reviews since the 2000s.⁶ However, despite these breakthroughs, Cambridge’s green belt continues to impose serious restrictions on growth and to reduce local housing affordability.

1 <https://www.fensforthefuture.org.uk/challenges/>

2 <https://www.cpier.org.uk/media/1671/cpier-report-151118-download.pdf>

3 <https://www.centreforcities.org/city-monitor/?path=city/cambridge&themes=housing>

4 ONS from Centre for Cities Data Tool <https://www.centreforcities.org/data-tool/su/1fec8a61>

5 <https://www.centreforcities.org/city-monitor/?path=city/cambridge&compare=peterborough>

6 e.g. Marrs, C., (2012) ‘How we did it: Deallocating green belt land’ Planning, 2 November 2012 <http://www.planningresource.co.uk/article/1157415/it-deallocating-greenbeltland>

Existing railway stations offer perfect opportunities for new homes, as they provide access to jobs for new residents with minimal need for cars. The progress towards building 6,500 homes around Waterbeach station shows this potential that could be further rolled out, as does the recent opening of Cambridge North station and the commercial and housing development it has unlocked. The reopening of stations such as Soham brings further opportunities for this type of climate-friendly development.

The mayor should also push to reduce or abolish minimum space standards for new properties within local plans.⁷ Although these currently sit at 37m² for one-person one-bed flats, this is actually larger than the average space per person residents of Cambridge and Peterborough currently have.⁸ Abolishing these arbitrary space restrictions would let developers offer a new kind of unit for single people to live, if they choose, in smaller and more affordable new flats, as opposed to being forced into sharing. A boost in the supply of small flats would also release family homes currently used for house sharing back onto the market for families.

The mayor should also work with the Government’s planning reform process to secure the new homes that the area needs. The Planning White Paper proposals (to divide land into ‘Growth’, ‘Renewal’, or ‘Protected’ areas) would remove much of the planning system’s discretionary decision-making on proposals after local plans have been agreed, and that still creates bottlenecks in Cambridge’s housing pipeline, even for projects that comply with democratically agreed plans.⁹ Removing these bottlenecks both in Cambridge and other expensive cities is essential for improving housing affordability for Cambridge’s residents, and will help turn Cambridge’s housing market from a seller’s market into a buyer’s market.

After the Planning White Paper is implemented, the mayor should provide certainty for the delivery of more homes, more quickly and more affordably by supporting the creation of Growth areas 800m around any commuter stations (excepting any designations for national parks, outstanding natural beauty or flooding). Within these, any proposals that meet democratically set design and sustainability codes should receive automatic planning permission.

⁷ <https://www.centreforcities.org/blog/minimum-space-standards-housing-crisis/>

⁸ Sells, T and Breach A (2019) Making Room How and why living space varies between cities, Centre for Cities

⁹ <https://www.centreforcities.org/blog/centre-for-cities-responds-to-the-planning-white-paper/>

Policy priority 2: Cut congestion, clean up the air, and fix the local bus network

- **Introduce a congestion charge in Cambridge.** The mayor should aim to bring traffic in Cambridge 15 per cent under 2011 levels, improving the speed and reliability of bus journeys and create a revenue source for bus improvements. The funds raised should be used to help deliver transport enhancements.
- **Introduce a toxic air quality charge for the most polluting vehicles in Cambridge and Peterborough.** This would improve the air quality of people living and working in them both, replicating one smaller silver lining of the lockdown.
- **Take full control of local bus services for all of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.** Franchising would enable greater investment especially if combined with congestion charging, bring in regulated competition between operators to serve bus users, and provide certainty about public transport accessibility. Doubling bus use within 10 years is feasible if this is done.

Cambridge has a serious congestion problem, and this has been previously acknowledged in CPIER and other work by the Greater Cambridge Partnership. In the decade up to the pandemic, traffic levels had grown by 10 per cent, and the morning and evening peaks have grown from 1.5 to 2.5 hours, trapping cars, commercial vehicles and buses and making life more expensive and frustrating for residents.¹⁰ Unfortunately, this is going backwards compared to targets in the 2014 Greater Cambridge Partnership deal to reduce traffic by 10-15 per cent from 2011 levels.

The mayor should introduce congestion charging within Cambridge city centre. Congestion charges work, and reduce congestion and raise revenues to support more and better public transport, including buses and transport enhancements such as the proposed Cambridgeshire Metro.¹¹ In London, the congestion charge reduced traffic into the city centre by 21 per cent, and in Milan it reduced it by 28 per cent.¹² The mayor should support the city's local council and the introduction of one for the city of Cambridge. There are many ways this could be done, and local decision-makers could either decide to pursue a London-style congestion charge, or more modern road pricing schemes that use smarter infrastructure to calculate more accurate charges based on congestion caused.

The mayor should propose the most polluting vehicles pay a toxic air charge supplement in Peterborough and on top of the congestion element in Cambridge to get air quality back up to the levels during lockdown.

Cambridge benefited from the sixth highest drop of any city in harmful oxides of nitrogen (NOx) emissions during the first lockdown, falling by half as traffic fell.¹³ But

10 Greater Cambridge Partnership (2020) Public Transport Improvements and City Access Strategy: Update on Technical Work and Next Steps

11 Clayton N, Jeffrey S, Breach A, (2017) [Funding and financing inclusive growth in cities](#), Centre for Cities

12 Bailly A. (2018) 'How can UK cities clean up the air we breathe?', London: Centre for Cities

13 Quinio, V. and Enenkel, K. (2020) How have the Covid pandemic and lockdown affected air quality in cities, Centre for Cities

this has already returned to previous levels even with the economy under Covid-19 restrictions. Air pollution is an urban problem as it becomes dangerous when there are local concentrations of pollution and people. Other cities such as Birmingham and Bristol are introducing clean air zones to clear up their dirty air, and both Cambridge and Peterborough should follow suit.

Buses should be franchised across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Taking buses under the control of the mayor would allow the mayor to better connect people to jobs, education and leisure activities. It would also unlock funding from the Government's National Bus Strategy, and local revenues from congestion charging could be used to create a world-class service in the combined authority.

Franchising will allow revenues from busier profitable routes into Cambridge and Peterborough to subsidise crucial but loss-making services in more rural areas and market towns. Combined with a congestion charge, improving bus services to double ridership over the next decade, as London did from 2000 to 2010, should be the goal for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

Policy priority 3: Improve young people's skills across the combined authority

- **Address poor school performance in Peterborough.** The mayor should use their powers and profile to convene and support local stakeholders to work towards hitting the national average for pupils getting good grades in English and Maths.
- **Create a UCAS for Apprenticeships to support those leaving schools find career opportunities.** The mayor should make life as easy for employers and young people choosing the apprenticeship path as UCAS makes it to find and apply for university courses.

Labour market outcomes are sadly not equal across the combined authority. The youth claimant count was 10.5 per cent in Peterborough compared to 2.5 per cent in Cambridge in February 2021.¹⁴ This is partly due to differences in skills provision, as schools in Peterborough have room for improvement. The city is fourth lowest nationally in the share of pupils getting good grades in English and Maths at GCSE, 10 points below the national average.¹⁵ Cambridge, by contrast, is the second-best city in the country by this measure, nearly 10 points above the national average.

The mayor should use their soft power and position to convene and campaign for schools in Peterborough to reach the national average. Although the mayor does not have formal powers over schools, other mayors have focused on extracurricular activities as they address their education gaps. In Greater Manchester for example, the mayor has stepped beyond formal powers to use convening power to work on improving school readiness in Early Years, and the Our Pass scheme to support extracurricular activities and free and discounted travel for younger people.¹⁶ The mayor could work to expand the pilot My Cambridge culture card into a broader offer for young people.

¹⁴ ONS, Centre for Cities Data Tool <https://www.centreforcities.org/data-tool/su/df6e1a5e>

¹⁵ <https://www.centreforcities.org/city-monitor/?path=city/peterborough>

¹⁶ <https://ourpass.co.uk/>

The combined authority should also create a local UCAS-style portal for local apprenticeships.

Impressive progress has been made on bringing a university to Peterborough.¹⁷ But better skills provision is also needed for young people who do not take the university route. The mayor should introduce a scheme similar to Liverpool City Region’s ‘Be More’ apprenticeship portal, which makes local apprenticeships visible to local applicants and apprentices visible to employers.¹⁸ Combining this with an Our Pass-style card would help to push awareness of and access to career ‘tasters’ and open days that demonstrate the opportunities that apprenticeships offer.

Policy priority for central government: End the unique ‘triple tier’

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough is in the unique situation of a having a metro mayor operating across a two-tier county area. All other metro mayors sit above unitary authorities. Voters in Cambridgeshire therefore have three sets of elections, for three bodies, with overlapping economic powers, each with their own plans.

This institutional framework creates bottlenecks and problems through duplication of responsibilities, and makes it harder to establish a local consensus around policy initiatives. Transport policy is a good example. Cambridgeshire County Council has disagreed with districts over plans for congestion charging in Cambridge city centre despite the support of the districts. Districts can meanwhile close streets and increase parking charges. The mayor and the combined authority add another element in transport policy, particularly around the proposed Cambridgeshire Metro. Progress is still made, but more slowly and expensively.

The mayor should work with councils and the Government to solve this problem. Resources from eight separate authorities of four kinds with conflicting powers, mandates and incentives should be reorganised, and this would bring greater focus, unlock more public resources and improve coordination, as Centre for Cities has argued.¹⁹

¹⁷ <https://aru.ac.uk/peterborough>

¹⁸ <https://be-more.info/>

¹⁹ Jeffrey, S. (2020) Levelling Up Local Government, Centre for Cities <https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Levelling-up-local-government-in-England.pdf>

Contact

Anthony Breach, Senior Analyst

a.breach@centreforcities.org

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Centre for Cities Second Floor, 9 Holyrood Street, London SE1 2EL

www.centreforcities.org

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