

A Market Town Plan for



Soham

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About this document

This document has been commissioned by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) working in partnership with East Cambridgeshire District Council.

The devolution deal which created the Combined Authority recognises the important role of market town economies in growing the wider Cambridgeshire and Peterborough economy. A masterplan for each of the eleven market towns across the region provides the opportunity to look at the unique features of each town, and offers deliverables which will benefit the immediate and wider economy.

We don't expect everything in this document to be funded immediately. There are some quick wins where an injection of funding can get things moving. For other projects, we will need to spend time developing detailed plans and compelling investment cases before we can begin to leverage in funding. While the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) has funded this report, and is keen to invest in our town, we know we will need to build a coalition of supporters, including central government, to get some of the schemes detailed here delivered.

As part of this dialogue with central government, this document integrates a recovery plan from the economic consequences of Covid-19. We have identified positive responses to the global economic shock, which, with government support, will ensure a relaunch of our local economy, ensuring that our town comes out of the current crisis stronger than it was before.

Introduction

Market towns are vital to the society and economy of Cambridgeshire. They grew up as hubs for commerce, serving a wide rural hinterland. Over time they have taken on an increasingly important residential function, and now constitute almost a quarter of the population of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough¹. However, all our market towns are having to adapt to a reality in which cities have become more pre-eminent. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Economic Review (CPIER) notes that “market towns are in some ways in more of a need of a strategy than cities, as cities can be flexible and specialise in multiple areas, whereas market towns need a more focused approach if they are to thrive”.

This is our strategy for Soham. It seeks to respond to many of the challenges identified by CPIER and others: an increasing proportion of retail transactions taking place online, a preference for urban living among young professionals, and difficulties in maintaining regular public transport.

However, more than any of these, this strategy responds to the immediate challenge of the Coronavirus pandemic. This has taken a toll on our population and resulted in the forced closure of many high street businesses. Our aspirations to grow the active usage of the town centre through gatherings in cafés, bars, and pubs have had to be put on hold. At the moment, doing everything we can to halt the spread of the disease is the top priority.

But we intend to bounce back from this in a stronger position than we were before. Investment in our town can get us back on our feet. And rather than trying to go back to the old normal, we will embrace some of the changes brought about by the pandemic – increased homeworking, the importance of pedestrian space, and the importance of resilience over efficiency – to grow our town.

The Combined Authority’s ambition is to double economic output (GVA) over 25 years. With the right combination of interventions, Soham can develop the high quality jobs in the industries of the future to contribute towards this target.

¹ Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Economic Review (CPIER)

A vision for Soham

Soham seeks to be a Green Town and will explore ways to deliver this ambition, both in terms of bringing more green space into the town and carbon reduction schemes. This will link with District Council's Climate Change work and be the catalyst for more green projects within the town.

Soham will be a highly desirable place to live and work, with an improved cultural and leisure offer and good employment opportunities to enable people to live and work locally. The repurposed town centre and reopened station will make our town much more attractive to live in and visit.

Our vision for Soham centres on four major themes:

A repurposed, resilient town centre

Soham will reopen after the lockdown, with real-time data being used to inform a safe approach. Our town centre will move from being overly reliant on shopping, to a more holistic space, with social interaction and green space built in. We will adapt to the "digital by default" era by building in on-street Wifi and preparing for the 5G revolution. And we will use housing growth and transport improvements to bring more footfall to our high street, allowing businesses to open and the town centre to be renewed.

Opening up our town through better connectivity

The biggest "game changer" for Soham over the next few years will be the opening of the new station. Over fifty years since the closure of the previous station, this will make our town much more attractive to live in and visit, particularly for those who don't drive. We will use this as an opportunity to attract businesses to base themselves here and develop the area around the station to make the station a real gateway into Soham. And we will work to integrate various other forms of transport – cycling, walking, and the bus network – to make this a true transport hub. Finally, we know that as a town in the fens, networks of waterways are central to our history and environment. We will look to explore improving the connectivity by water, by looking at the idea of a marina to integrate with the rail development.

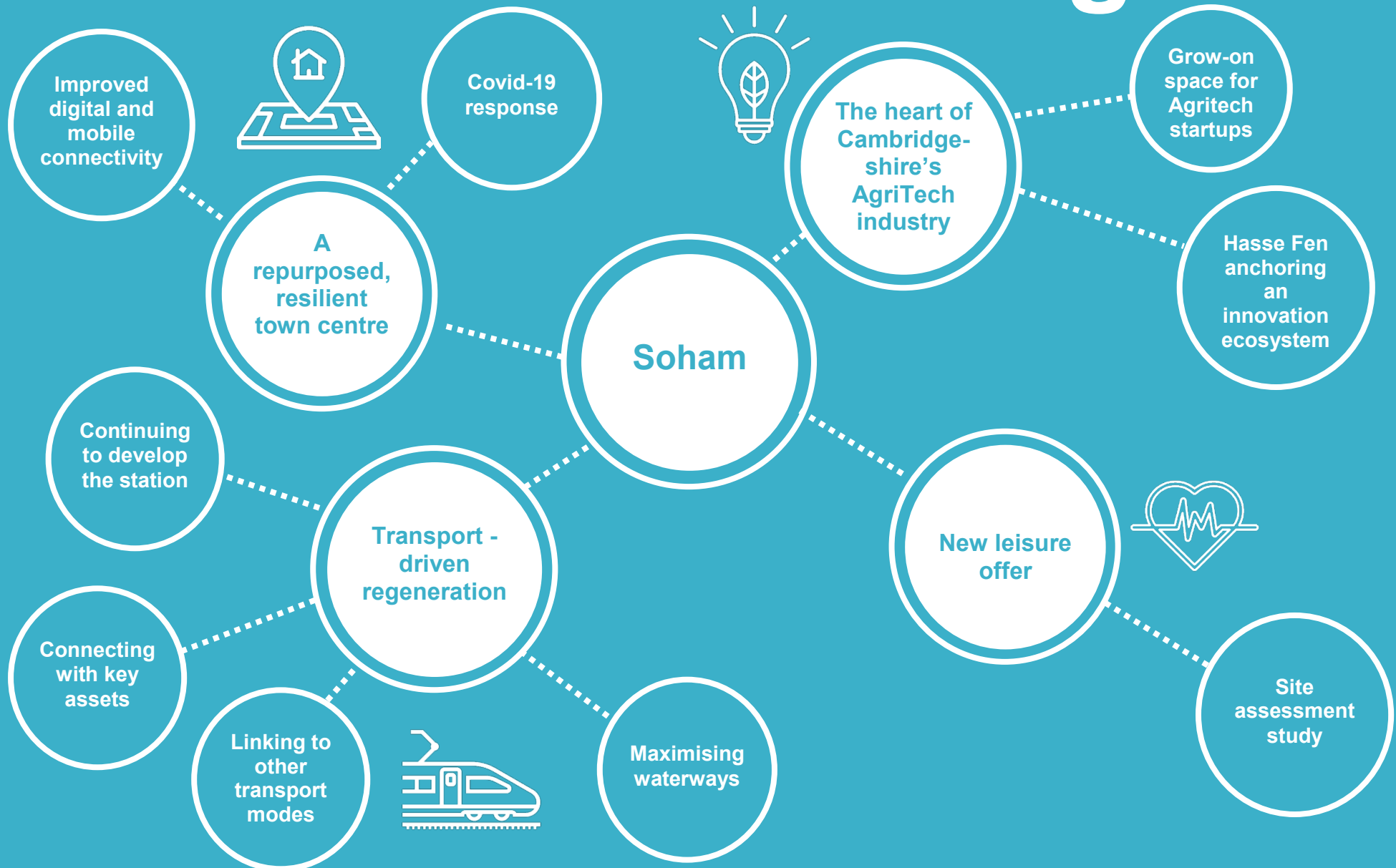
The heart of Cambridgeshire's AgriTech industry

Soham already has a significant cluster of business in "AgriTech" – a fast-growing sector which focuses on applying modern technologies, including Artificial Intelligence and geospatial data science, to agriculture. Soham is perfectly placed to be at the centre of this sector in the East of England, being surrounded by high grade farmland, and sitting between the research engine of Cambridge, and the food processing factories of North Cambridgeshire. The Hasse Fen facility will be the basis for an innovation ecosystem, with companies based increasingly within the town in grow on space.

A new leisure and culture offer

As a growing town, Soham has an opportunity to become more self-sustaining, providing residents with services closer to home. A key gap in the town's offer at the moment is leisure and culture provision. Soham will have new facilities, allowing residents to keep active and enjoy an improved cultural offer.

The Plan on a Page



An overview of Soham

Soham has an attractive historic town centre and a vibrant and active local community. It has a unique landscape setting, being surrounded by Commons to the south, east and west. St. Andrews Church is of great architectural and historical significance and is a prominent local landmark. Soham also has an excellent network of public footpaths and attractive green lanes, which provide good links into the surrounding countryside.

A rapidly growing town

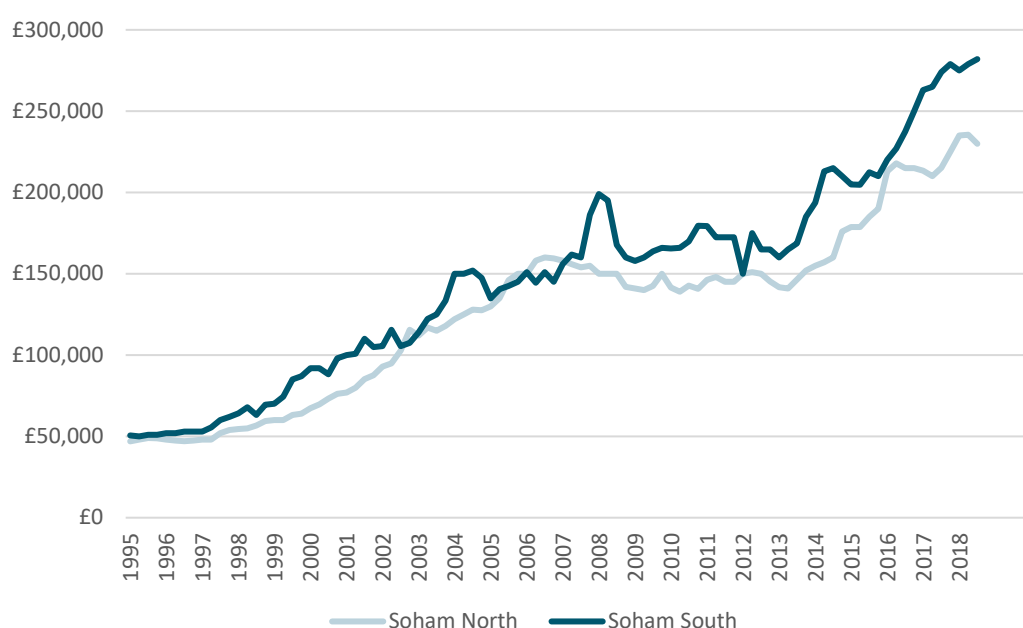
Soham is the fastest growing town in East Cambridgeshire – in the five years since 2013, the size of the population has grown by almost 10%, compared to 4% in Ely and 7% in Littleport. This has been mainly accounted for by a growth in the 5-14 age group (+30%) and the over-65 group (+19.1%).

Like many towns, Soham's population is projected to age, with Cambridgeshire County Council forecasting continued growth of the over-65 population. This means we need to think about how we cater for this population, as well as ensuring the town continues to attract a young, dynamic demographic.

Housing price growth, but with further supply in train

After remaining fairly steady in the aftermath of the financial crisis, house prices have grown quickly recently. In Soham North ward, median prices have climbed from £160,000 at the end of 2013 to £282,000 in 2019 (see fig.1)

Figure 1. Median House Prices in Soham, 1995 - 2018

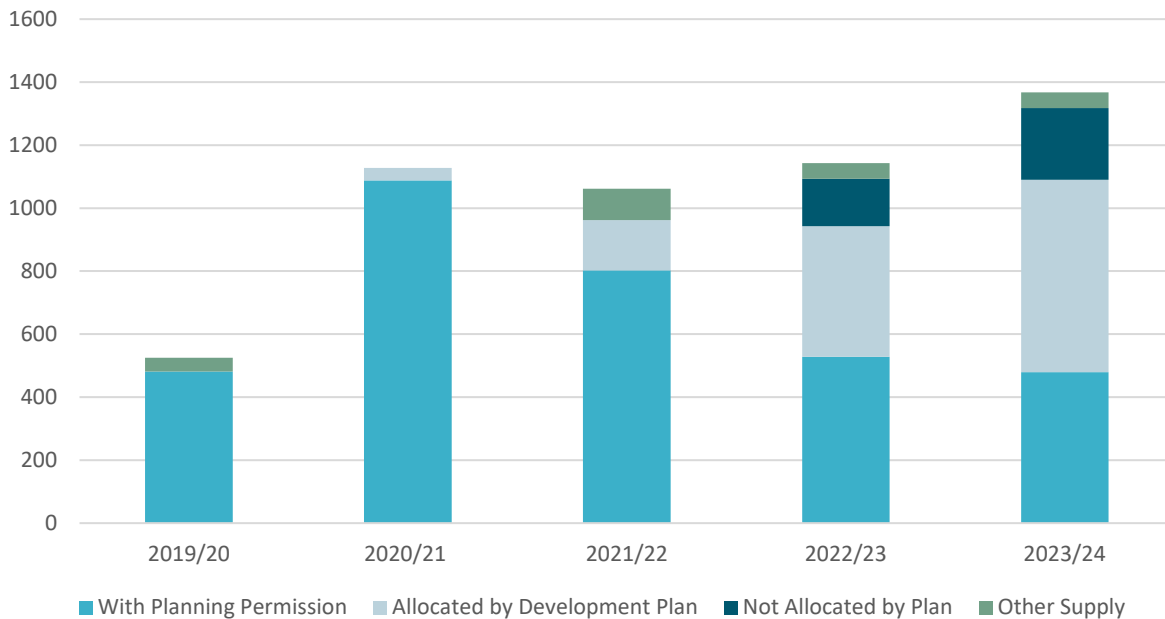


Source: ONS House Prices for Small Statistical Areas (HPSSA)

What has been behind this rapid increase? Firstly, supply of new housing has been fairly limited. Only 45 dwellings were completed in Soham in 2016-17, down from 261 ten years before². But at the same time, demand to live in Soham has increased, as it has started to become part of the wider Cambridge economy, with increasing numbers of commuters to the city.

We can see (fig. 2) that far higher numbers of dwellings have been approved for the next five years – it will be vital that these are delivered to maintain affordability of housing in the town.

Figure 2. Estimated five-year housing supply for East Cambridgeshire, 2019-20 – 2023-24



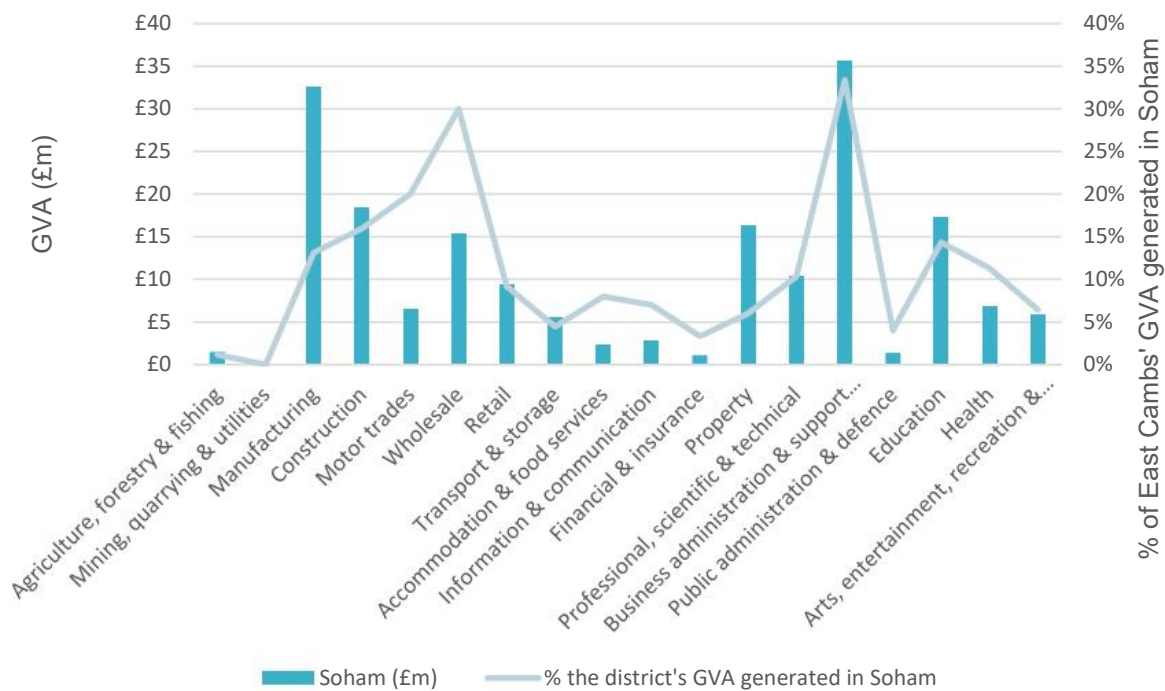
Source: East Cambridgeshire District Council

Employment based in business services, agriculture, and high-tech manufacturing

The largest sector in Soham, both by employment and output (measured by Gross Value Added, or GVA) is Business Administration and support services. This provides a third (33.4%) of all of Soham's economic output. (see fig. 3). Soham also has a very significant agricultural sector, with many of the G's Group businesses based in the town, and there are some mid to high-tech manufacturing firms, including SWP Ltd. and Ivor Searle, which rank among the town's biggest employers.

² Cambridgeshire Insights: Cambridgeshire Housing Completions 2002-2017

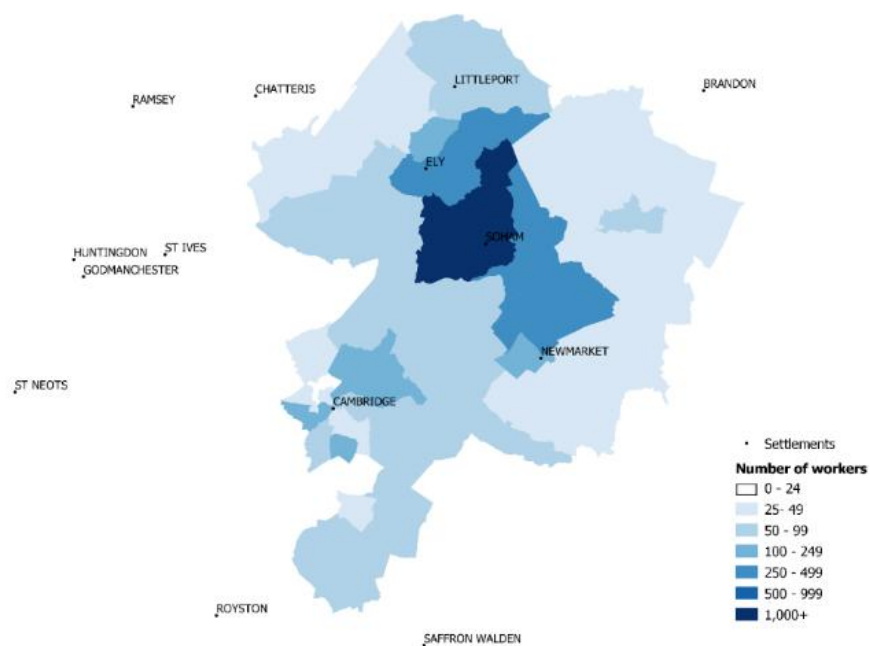
Figure 3. GVA generated by sector in Soham



Source: East Cambridgeshire District Council

We also know that many of Soham's residents out-commute for work. Analysis from the last census shows that residents of Soham head to Newmarket, Ely, and Cambridge for work. As the house price analysis above shows, it seems likely that in recent years this has become increasingly skewed towards Cambridge.

Figure 4. Where Soham residents work

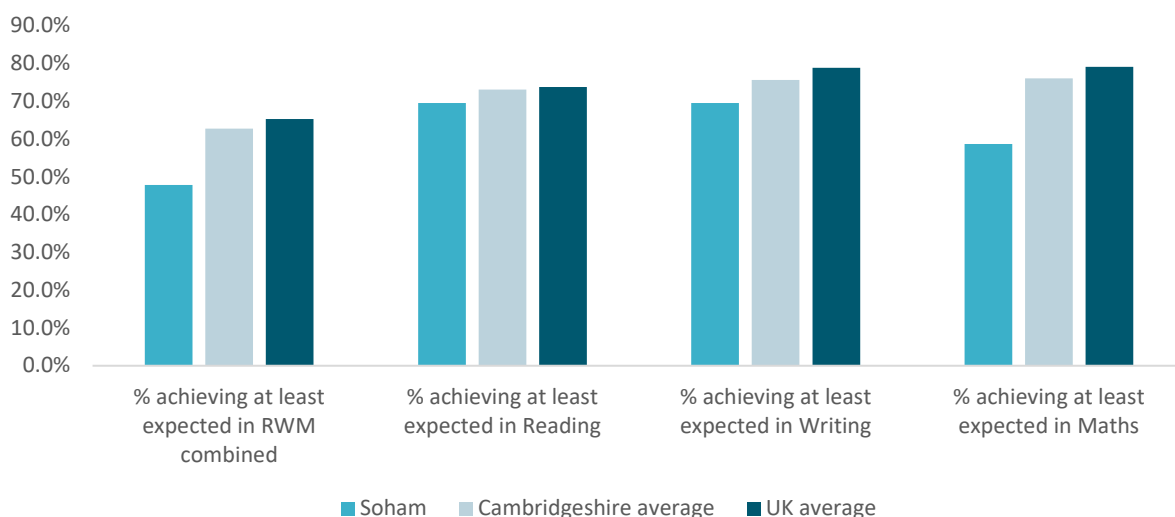


Source: Census 2011

Some shortcomings in the performance of primary education

The future of Soham is its youngest generation, and good schools are a key part of developing a town's "offer". Particularly at Key Stage 2, Soham performs badly. On some early years' metrics, like phonics, the town is also significantly behind Cambridgeshire and National Averages.

Figure 5. Key stage two outcomes for Soham children



Source: Cambridgeshire County Council

Soham is part of the East Cambridgeshire and Fenland Opportunity Area, which recognises the poor social mobility outcomes in much of the fens and the role of education in tackling them.

There are also some significant skills gaps at a later stage – 39% of working age adults have only basic or no qualifications, compared to 34% in the district as a whole. There is a comparable shortfall in degree level qualifications – 21% vs 29%.

Public transport gradually improving

Public transport in Soham, like many of Cambridgeshire's market towns, is currently inadequate. Buses are irregular, slow, and unreliable – it takes over an hour and half to get to Cambridge and forty minutes to Newmarket – in both cases about twice as slow as driving. Consequently, the town is currently very car dependent. 81.7% drive to get to work, which compares to 62.0% in England³.

The soon to arrive new station in Soham will make a big difference here if we make the most of it. If take up is high (which would seem likely, as shown by the example of testing more regular trains at Manea) there will be a strong case to increase the regularity of services and introduce a second platform.

³ Census 2011

A repurposed, resilient town centre

Soham will reopen after the lockdown, with real-time data being used to inform a safe approach. Our town centre will move from being overly reliant on shopping, to a more holistic space, with social interaction and green space built in. We will adapt to the “digital by default” era by building in on-street Wifi and preparing for the 5G revolution. And we will use housing growth and transport improvements to bring more footfall to our high street, allowing businesses to open and the town centre to be renewed.

Introduction

We know that high streets across the UK are facing significant challenges. Online retail as a proportion of all shopping has grown to over 20%⁴, with Coronavirus likely to cause higher rates still in the short term. This only compounds damage done by edge of town and out-of-town shopping centres, and the recent collapse of some of the UK’s major retailers, which have prompted some to talk of the “death of the high street”. And that was all before the lockdown prompted by Covid-19, which has led to the shutdown of all but essential retail.

While the challenges are severe, we have good reason to be optimistic. Before the lockdown there were many towns across the UK where the high street had been successfully reinvented, with characterful shops, cafés and pubs doing good business. We also know that nearby towns like Ely and St Ives have managed to keep vacancy rates low and attract tourists to come and spend money there to support businesses. High street decline is not inevitable, but in an era where people can travel easily wherever they want, we need to offer something unique. **When people no longer need to use the local high street, we have to give them a reason to want to.**

Responding effectively to Covid-19 through a town centre study

Understanding the local economy plays a crucial role in directing local authorities’ response to the Coronavirus pandemic. **An immediate action is for ECDC, CPCA, and local partners to monitor Soham’s economy**, looking at universal credit data, redundancy figures, and property vacancy rates. These findings will work into a short-term action plan – a district wide Covid-19 economic recovery strategy, which will include recommendations for individual market town economies including a sectoral response.

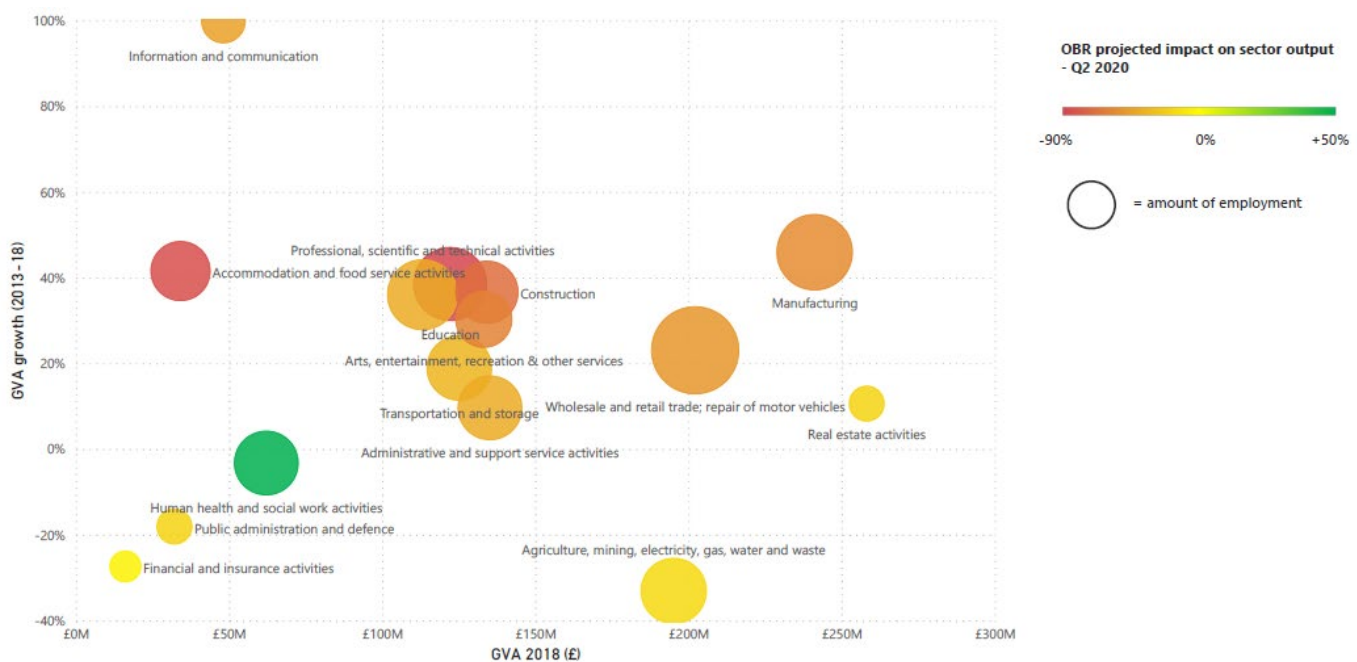
The following charts show that the most at-risk sectors in East Cambridgeshire according to OBR estimates are in tourism and professional, scientific and technical services. These are important

⁴ See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/timeseries/j4mc/drsl>

sectors in terms of local employment levels. This reflects immediate economic impact risk from the government's response to mitigate the current public health risks.

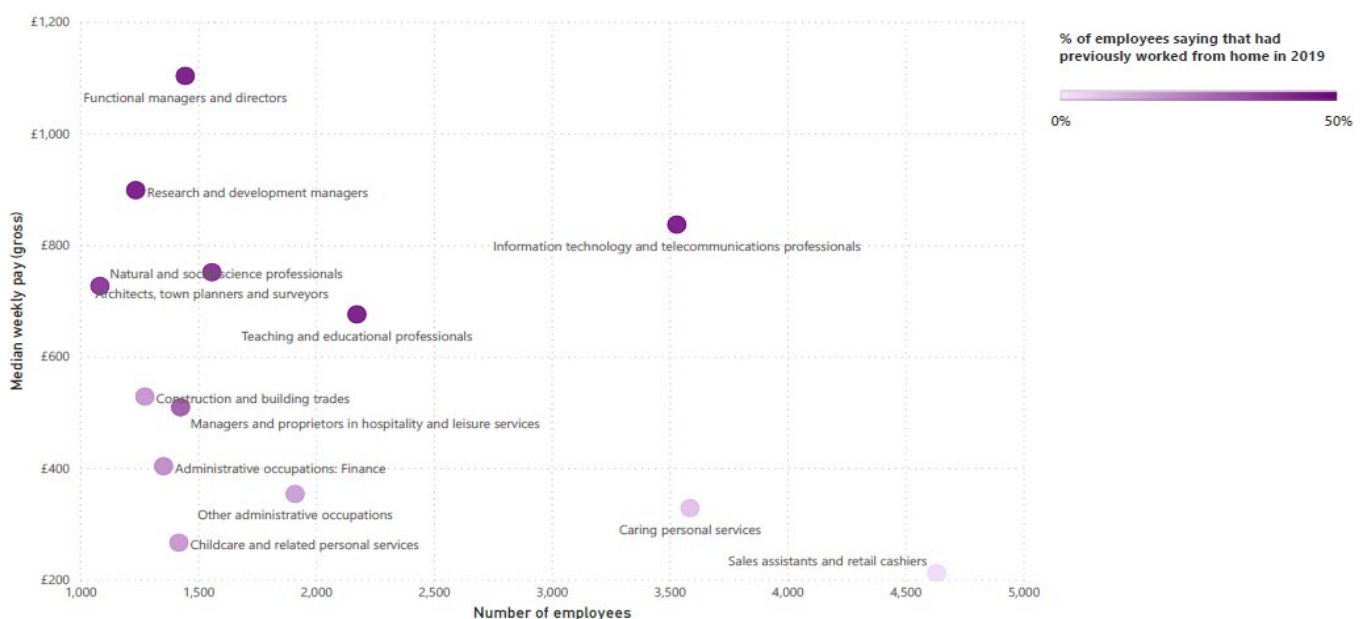
Looking further into recovery, and the possibility of prolonged social distancing measures impacting the economy, we can see a clear positive correlation in East Cambridgeshire between employees' past experience of working from home and higher median earnings. The larger employing occupations, however, are less likely to be able to work from home, and earn less (note many professions not represented as ONS suppress lower values).

Figure 6. OBR sector impact by local GVA, GVA growth, and employment



Sources: Office for Budget Responsibility, ONS Regional Accounts, ONS Business Register and Employment Survey

Figure 7. Occupations by employees, weekly pay, and ability to work from home



Sources: ONS dataset Coronavirus and homeworking in the UK labour market: 2019, ONS Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings table 14.1a, ONS Social Survey (ad hoc request)

As economic activity begins to return, we know it will do so under certain conditions. Businesses may have to fill out risk assessments and have to implement new distancing measures. **In the immediate term, there will need to be small-scale financial support and advice to help businesses adapt to these measures.** It will also be important to stand ready to support **reskilling of individuals**, in line with the Combined Authority's Skills Strategy, working with businesses and local training and education providers.

Longer-term, the outbreak may accelerate certain trends which could be beneficial for Soham. For example, it seems likely that *home working* will become a more common practise. This means that those who live in Soham but work in Cambridge might be in the town during the day more often, growing the market for cafés. *Co-working space*, an increasingly popular form of workspace, could be developed within the town, allowing workers to connect, share ideas, and potentially develop new ventures. **A more detailed town centre study, informed by the data, will be needed to help Soham bounce back strongly from the lockdown.** Schemes to encourage tourism and boost the evening and weekend economy should be explored.

This study should look at the town centre in its broadest sense, and draw out actions to achieve the following key objectives:

Making the town centre greener and pedestrian friendly

One measure being tested in towns and cities in response to the pandemic is *increased pedestrian space*. This is necessary to allow distancing, and due to lower levels of car traffic is giving people the opportunity to experience their urban spaces car-free. Within Soham, there are opportunities now to test new pedestrian-friendly interventions, and see what works well and is popular in the town. Pedestrianisation has been successfully applied across many towns and cities in the UK, often leading to greater footfall as public spaces are "activated". This helps create a more social environment, without parked cars clogging the streets, and encourages more environmentally friendly modes of travel.

There is also an exciting opportunity to bring more *green space* into the town, which creates a relaxing and attractive environment. Barcham's, a local business, grows a wide range of tree types, and would be able to work constructively to introduce trees to the town centre. These would create numerous benefits, including cleaner air and added interest throughout the year, from spring blossom to autumn colours.

In addition, there are a few "quick wins" where immediate action can improve the town centre. These include installing attractive *bike racks*, *high quality signage* and a *small fund for owners of properties to improve the look of their buildings*. These will all quickly lift the feel of the town, make it more visitor friendly, and encourage active travel.

Increased and improved civic space

For Soham to thrive as a town centre it needs this **quality civic space**. Different options should be explored to create this. One might be to acquire the old market square, and repurpose it for the present day. It will be important to start small, work with local entrepreneurs who want to do something different. Small amounts of funding should be given for ideas which genuinely align with the future of the high street and aren't trying the same things again.

Housing to grow the town centre catchment

Town centres do well when they have a large catchment to draw upon. The viability of high street businesses is an economic question, where more people using the town centre more regularly will lead to higher receipts, and a growing number of businesses, bringing variety and interest. Therefore, we need to see **future housing growth in Soham as a vital ingredient in building a strong high street**. This means planned developments must be designed to allow easy and quick access to the high street, particularly by foot or on bicycle.

This also means we need to make sure we are making the most of space in the town centre as well. Some towns (see case study from Great Yarmouth, below) are looking to work with Homes England to increase the amount of residential space within the town centre. These types of densification policies, including retrofitting existing properties, will provide affordable housing, and “design in” high street usage.

These are all topics which need to be considered by the future town centre study.

Developing a plan for improved digital and mobile connectivity

The current coronavirus shock has driven home how important it is for businesses to have an online presence for resilience. Increasingly, life is “digital by default” and for our town centre to thrive it needs to take the same approach. As a first step, this means improving free Wi-Fi in the town to make it widely available, and working with local businesses who have not yet managed to take their offering online to do so. The idea of creating a “virtual high street” has been trialled before, and is of particular relevance during the lockdown period.

However, the future of digital connectivity is likely to be less focused on Wi-Fi and more on mobile data, which gives the freedom for processes to continue while devices are moving between places. The real gamechanger here is 5G, which is fast enough to allow large quantities of data transfer, enabling “Internet of Things” type technologies. This means that real-time data on transport, air quality, electricity usage, and use of public services such as GPs and schools can be integrated (while, of course, always protecting the privacy of users). This information can improve the public’s access to services through apps, such as transport apps which tell users in real-time what combination of buses and trains they should use to get to a final destination.

We also know that businesses will increasingly look for 5G as a precondition of any location they would base themselves in, and that already poor connectivity hinders our ability to attract hi-tech businesses. The Combined Authority and Connecting Cambridgeshire must now develop a **5G strategy**, which will set out the infrastructure which is needed across the district to make 5G a reality. This can be used as a basis for engagement with mobile providers and central government to co-ordinate activity.

Transport-driven regeneration

The biggest “game changer” for Soham over the next few years will be the opening of the new station. Over fifty years since the closure of the previous station, this will make our town much more attractive to live in and visit, particularly for those who don’t drive. We will use this as an opportunity to attract businesses to base themselves here and develop the area around the station to make the station a real gateway into Soham. And we will work to integrate various other forms of transport – cycling, walking, and the bus network – to make this a true transport hub. Finally, we know that as a town in the fens, networks of waterways are central to our history and environment. We will look to explore improving the connectivity by water, by looking at the idea of a marina to integrate with the rail development.

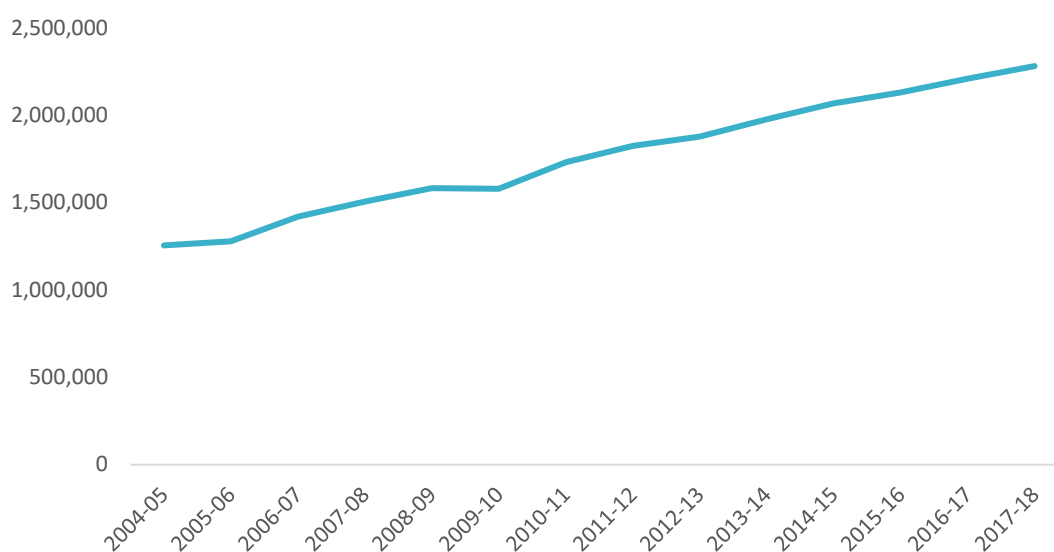
Introduction

When the new station opens in 2022 it will signify that our town is an outward-looking, connected place. It will put our town on the map for those who use the rail network, and make work and leisure travel easier for residents. But on its own it will not be enough. We cannot sit back and assume this will transform the town. Rather, we must leverage it for the utmost value we can get from it.

Continuing to develop the station

Once the station opens, we anticipate there being high demand. Rail usage across the area has grown strongly for many years, as figures from Ely show:

Figure 8. Annual estimates of Station entries and exits from Ely 2004 – 2018



Source: Office for Rail and Road

As usage grows, we will continue to develop the case for further upgrades. Network Rail has already committed to move from services every two hours to services every hour. In future,

changes are needed to allow direct services from Soham to Cambridge without the need to change at Ely, and double tracking, which will allow more frequent services, as well as allowing more freight paths through the area.

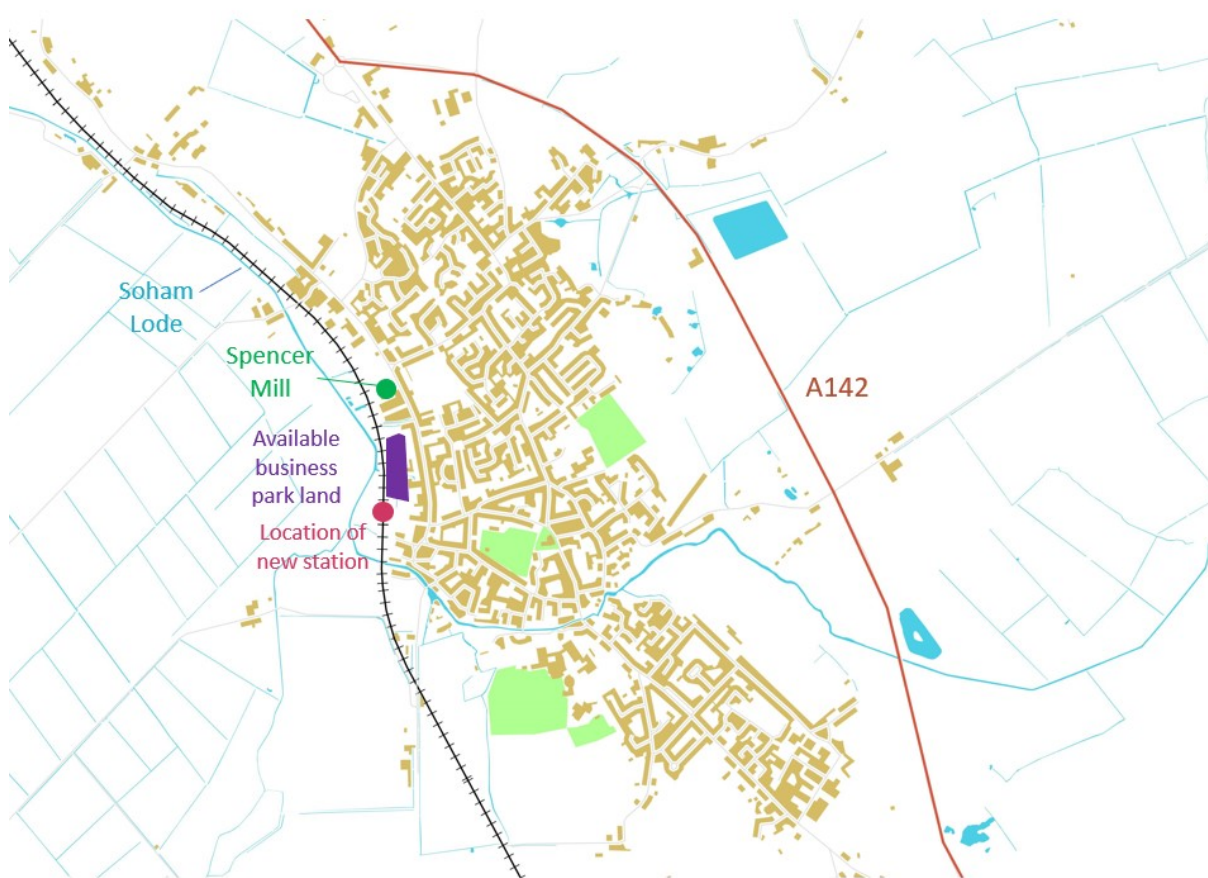
Connecting the new station with key assets

There are many key assets close to the station – see map. The station needs to link effectively to nearby cultural assets (Spencer Mill) and environmental assets (Soham Lode, heritage path, local fen land). **Bringing these different elements together will create a true sense of arrival and demonstrate Soham's best assets to those who visit.**

There is also land set aside for a business park close to the station. For companies looking for affordable office space with good connectivity this type of site will be ideal. Already Soham has a strong business administration sector (see Overview section) meaning it **is well placed to attract back office functions of larger companies, as well as smaller, innovative, start-ups** who may not be able to afford space in cities like Cambridge.

Finally, we need to do everything we can to improve the experience of arriving, with attractive and clear signage which highlights the best of the town. Developing green space around the station entrance, in a manner similar to that proposed for the high street, will also enhance this.

Figure 9. Location of Soham station, and surrounding assets



Linking into other transport modes

For the station to be successful, it needs to offer more than rail connectivity, and become the transport hub of the town. To do this means we need to build in seamless connectivity and switching between:

- **Walking** – with accessible and safe paths through from the town centre
- **Cycling** – with designated bike routes and storage facilities at the station
- **Buses** – this means working with Stagecoach, the primary provider to ensure that bus times link into train times, so that people can quickly and easily catch a bus to the station and continue their onward journey. Through the Strategic Bus Review, the Combined Authority is looking at provision of buses; linking between different transport modes needs to be a central consideration.

This needs to be brought forward in line with the results from East Cambridgeshire's Bus Services and Cycling and Walking Routes Consultation.

Maximising the value of local waterways

Water is an essential part of the history of the fens, and the criss-crossing networks of drains and dykes characterise the landscape. Water is also, of course, a means of travel and many towns in the fens, most notably March and Ely, benefit from boat users who stop and bring custom to the town in the summer months. We also know that “blue space” in town centres brings huge benefits, from improved mental health to higher property values.

Within Soham, the Soham Lode is fairly hidden from view. This is a wasted opportunity. Through the work at the station we should be looking to highlight the Lode. And we need to **work with the Middle Level Commission and Environment Agency to see if we can do more**, such as possibly developing a marina to allow boats to moor outside the town. This would be a big project and is a long-term ambition, but is exactly the sort of bold approach we need to be taking to transform our town.

The heart of Cambridgeshire's AgriTech industry

Soham already has a significant cluster of business in “AgriTech” – a fast-growing sector which focuses on applying modern technologies, including Artificial Intelligence and geospatial data science, to agriculture. Soham is perfectly placed to be at the centre of this sector in the East of England, being surrounded by high grade farmland, and sitting between the research engine of Cambridge, and the food processing factories of North Cambridgeshire. The Hasse Fen facility will be the basis for an innovation ecosystem, with companies based increasingly within the town in grow on space.

Introduction

The CPIER sets out that within Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, there are three different sub-economies:

- 1) Greater Cambridge
- 2) Greater Peterborough
- 3) The Fens

Soham is at the confluence of 1) and 3). It is in many ways a traditional fen town, with an agricultural landscape and strong local community. Like the rest of the fens, which contain around half of the UK's Grade 1 agricultural land, it has some of the best growing conditions for crops (see fig. 10). But it is also, increasingly, part of Cambridge's economic orbit.

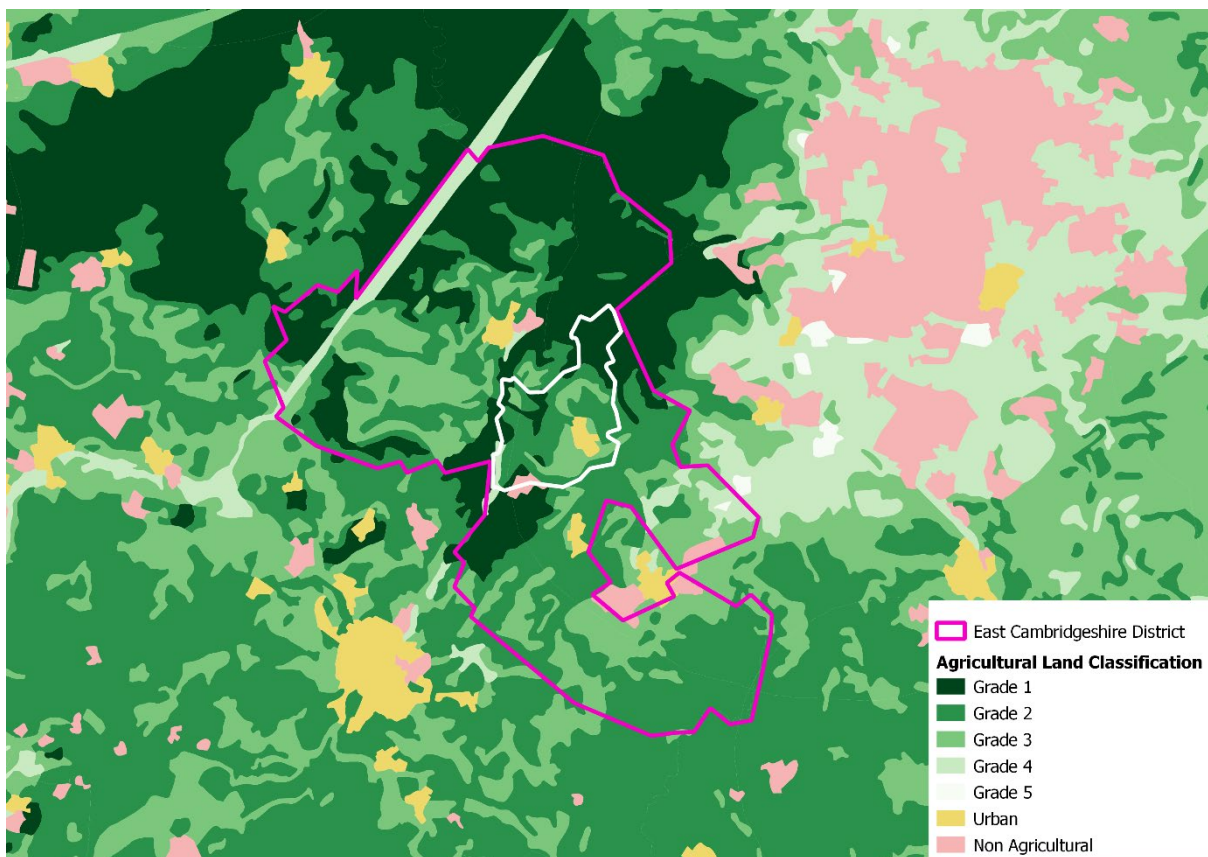
These links to Cambridge are reflected in some commuting patterns, but not yet fully visible in the business make-up of the town. One area we do start to see this happening is within AgriTech, through the NIAB Hasse Fen facility. AgriTech is the broad name for a sector which focuses on applying latest research and methods to agricultural production. The CPIER highlights this as a key sector, noting that: “These industries are growing in importance as the prominence of food security on the international agenda increases. To match rising international demand, more innovative means of food production are being called for, which are less space intensive and carry lower risk... there is a real opportunity for the area to become an international leader in this sphere, both in innovation and application. The global market for agriculture is estimated to be a hundred times that of the UK's – it is a strong export proposition, where this area can and should be leading.”⁵

The report highlights the example of Wageningen University in the Netherlands, which is the world's biggest AgriTech hub. This supports entrepreneurs and spinoff companies developing agritech products which are used across the Netherlands, including B-mex, a company developing

⁵ Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Independent Economic Review

model-based decision support tools for the greenhouse industry, and Chaincraft, which produces sustainable, bio-based fermentation technologies.

Figure 10. Land classifications around Soham



Source: Analysis of DEFRA data

Hasse Fen anchoring an innovation ecosystem

Soham is not starting from nowhere – the National Institute of Agricultural Botany (NIAB) facility at Hasse Fen already contains exciting, innovative, agritech startups. The site is at the forefront of NIAB’s work to support innovation within agriculture, with NIAB working as an active partner in research collaborations and facilitating transfer of knowledge between researchers and farmers. The site is of such importance that it was visited by Michael Gove when he was Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. It has grown rapidly since it was established a few years ago, expanding premises to meet demand. The Combined Authority has now provided a grant for the development of a Combined Heat and Power (CHP) solution, to enable the sustainable provision of energy input for the processes being run by companies there. Many of these businesses are involved in creating useful products from waste – including Cambond, a Cambridge-based startup which is looking to move its manufacturing facilities from China to Soham. The significance of these companies is often underappreciated in the town – the site is slightly away from the town centre, meaning that many in the town do not realise what a significant asset it is.

In addition to research capacity, G’s Group, one of the largest agricultural companies in the country, is based in Soham, and owns the freehold for the Hasse Fen site, creating easy links between

research and application on the land. Barcham's, a company in the adjacent forestry sector is also based in Soham.

Now, Soham needs to develop an "innovation ecosystem" based on the activity at Hasse Fen, and the large agricultural businesses. The goal is for many companies, in a dense business network, to be situated in and around the town, sharing knowledge and collaborating to create new products. This has already started to happen through the "Hub Club" initiative, which allows companies to make some use of the facility without being licensees. This will create high-quality jobs in Soham, providing career paths for the town's young.

Grow-on space and skilled labour for Agritech startups

To make this innovation ecosystem a reality, the main action needs to be **creating grow-on space for AgriTech start-ups**. As successful ideas are tested and developed, companies will need extra space.

Already, plans are coming forward for an expansion of the Hasse Fen site which will allow this. At the same time, we want to explore opportunities to bring these companies closer to the centre of Soham, to make the sector visible, and maximise the benefits of improved transport connectivity. We need to look at business land close to the station as one option here for AgriTech companies. A first step will be **convening NIAB and the businesses based at Hasse Fen to discuss what they would need from premises within the town**. This should also involve looking at the transport and housing provision within the town, and how well suited it is. At the same time, we need to consider the wider commercial space offer for companies in Soham, and in neighbouring villages such as Fordham as well.

Case study: Entomics

Entomics was spun out of the Judge Business School at Cambridge University. The company focuses on creating value from agricultural waste



entomics

by using insects to process agricultural waste. Entomics was the first company on the Hasse Fen site, where it was able to grow and develop its operation. The company has also attracted finance from Innovate UK and the European Institute of Technology.

Two years on from arriving at Hasse Fen, Entomics moved back to Cambridge where it is spread across two sites. This highlights the opportunity available in Soham. Those companies based at the site are often not likely to be there for more than a year or two. But there are indications from businesses that, should the premises be available, they would be enthusiastic to remain within the town as part of the same network.

Another important part of developing the ecosystem is creating a pipeline of labour to work at the facility. We want young people in Soham to see that they can have a stimulating and rewarding career working in AgriTech. Therefore, we will bring these businesses together with local educational organisations to arrange taster days and school visits to show students what the opportunities are.

A new leisure and culture offer

As a growing town, Soham has an opportunity to become more self-sustaining, providing residents with services closer to home. A key gap in the town's offer at the moment is leisure and culture provision. Soham will have new facilities, allowing residents to keep active and enjoy an improved cultural offer.

The town has grown considerably over the last 10 years and this has placed pressure on local infrastructure and facilities.

The current leisure offer in Soham is outdated and needs investment and expansion to ensure it meets the needs of the growing community.

To tackle this problem requires a **site assessment study** of possible options for increasing leisure provision in Soham, looking at possible locations, and what such a leisure facility would incorporate. This needs to complement the **existing study on outdoor sporting facilities** being taken forward by the District Council.

The network of green open spaces in Soham, including the Commons, provides opportunities for informal leisure activities. They also present an opportunity to develop the town into a hub for walkers, cyclists and bird watchers.

A plan to manage and secure investment to protect and enhance these spaces is needed. This would bring economic benefits to Soham through visitor spend in and around the town.

We will also explore options to increase the cultural offer in Soham. The Spencer Mill project will be the catalyst for this and will result in new job opportunities and increased tourism and footfall in Soham, which ultimately would increase the GVA of Soham.

Bringing all these together will help to highlight a way forward for the town. Feedback from residents will also help to shape the offer.

Implementation plan

Vision section	Intervention	Key Actions	Additional partners
A repurposed, resilient town centre	Responding effectively to Covid-19 through a town centre study	Work with partners to understand and monitor the experience and plans of local businesses and workers across sectors.	Business networks, Chamber of Commerce, Jobcentre Plus
		Convene businesses and education and training providers to support people to upskill/reskill and into employment.	Jobcentre Plus, business networks, Chamber of Commerce, education and training providers
		Develop a town centre plan to respond to the pandemic	CPCA, local businesses, resident consultation
	Developing a plan for improved digital and mobile connectivity	Produce a 5G strategy, to set out a plan for East Cambridgeshire to harness and maximise the use of this technology	Connecting Cambridgeshire, CPCA

Vision section	Intervention	Key Actions	Additional partners
Transport-driven regeneration	Continuing to develop the station	Monitor usage once station reopens. Begin building the case for further facilities, double tracking and more regular trains.	CPCA, Network Rail
	Connecting the new station with key assets	Proactively engage with businesses looking for new premises, looking to transact deals for business park land near the station	CPCA
	Linking into other transport modes	Continue work focused on integrating other modes of transport, such as walking, cycling and bus (through the Strategic Bus Review)	
		Dualling of local road infrastructure (A142) to improve access to the station	CPCA
	Maximising the value of local waterways	Explore options around making more of Soham Lode, including the potential for a marina	Environment Agency, Middle Level Commission
The heart of Cambridgeshire's AgriTech industry	Grow-on space and skilled labour for Agritech startups	Work with NIAB to identify businesses looking to scale up and explore possible options within Soham	NIAB, G's Group, local AgriTech businesses

Vision section	Intervention	Key Actions	Additional partners
		Support AgriTech business engagement with local schools to show young people the career opportunities within Soham.	Soham Village College, NIAB, local AgriTech business
A new leisure and culture offer		A site assessment study of options for leisure and culture provision, brought together with existing study on outdoor facilities.	

