Two years ago, a study was carried out for Inspire East to evaluate lessons from the new settlement of Cambourne, located nine miles west of Cambridge. The research method involved interviewing and surveying 50 key policy-makers and service providers. Two questions underpinned the study. First, does Cambourne meet the objectives of the original masterplan? And secondly, can we learn lessons that can guide future large-scale development? The study findings have relevance for any new settlements that we might yet undertake, including eco-towns and carbon-neutral settlements.

The Cambourne masterplan and design guide by Terry Farrell and Partners were approved in 1996, and work started on site in June 1998. The total area of the Cambourne site is 417 hectares (1,030 acres), only 131 hectares of which are for housing. Cambourne’s current projected size is 4,200 homes. At the time the study was carried out (in May 2007), just over half the projected total of homes had been built. Over half the residents previously lived locally, and people gave three key reasons for moving to Cambourne – the appearance of the house, the idea of living in a village, and lower house prices. But the population is very mobile, and 40 per cent of households intended to stay for less than three years.

Cambourne has a younger population than the rest of the region – many of the residents are families with young children. The homes are comparatively large: 70 per cent have three or more bedrooms. And house prices are typically 15-20 per cent lower than in Cambridge, giving you more for your money.

The study found that the majority of people travelled less than 12 miles to work, which is not surprising since many work in Cambridge. Only 6 per cent travelled to work in London. This pattern is similar to that in the rest of the South Cambridgeshire district. Car ownership was particularly high, the proportion of people using their car to travel to work being twice that in Cambridge. Only 8 per cent of

**Stephen Platt** looks for lessons for new development – and particularly carbon-neutral development – from the new settlement of Cambourne, near Cambridge.
people walked or cycled to work, compared with 40 per cent in Cambridge. In contrast, over 90 per cent of nursery-and primary-age children walked to school, compared with only 30 per cent in the Cambridge/South Cambridge district area as a whole.

The marketing for Cambourne painted an idyllic future in which families could get the best of both worlds – a place in the country with urban amenities, a vision harking back to the Garden City movement. The masterplan also set out a number of very clear objectives, all related to sustainability. There is a lack of connection to surrounding villages, and Cambourne is poorly integrated into the surrounding countryside – which is a pity, since the countryside around it is the nicest part of the county for walking. Given the attention paid to footpaths within the settlement, this poor connection is surprising, but the reason is, in part, political – the opposition of people in surrounding villages and farms. New settlements need good pedestrian and cycle links to local footpaths and bridleways, and these rights of way need to be established well in advance of construction.

The design of the houses tries to reflect that in local villages. But the size of the settlement is much larger and the form and density of the housing and civic buildings are quite different. Compared with other new housing in the region, the design and layout of the housing is good, and there are many parts of Cambourne that are very attractive. The houses are popular with new residents and have sold well. The majority are family homes with gardens and room to extend and, in this respect, they may prove more adaptable in the long term than denser developments in Cambridge.

A key objective in the masterplan was to create three physically separate communities divided by green space. People very much appreciate the areas of woodland that have been retained and the green spaces that have been created. Without this green space Cambourne would feel much less rural and more like any other housing estate. Something that strikes you as you walk around is the lack of litter and graffiti and how well the gardens are kept. Clearly people take pride in the place.

Although Cambourne was planned ten years ago, sustainability was the central aim of the masterplan. However, apart from some of the social housing developed by Circle Anglia, the environmental design of the buildings is unexceptional. The housing was built to 10 per cent above current Building Regulations conservation of fuel and power standards, so it might achieve Code for Sustainable Homes level 1. Private developers and social landlords have applied different environmental design standards, the social housing being built to a greener agenda than the private housing. This means that the required proportion of affordable housing (typically 30-40 per cent) has to be provided separately, thus losing economies of scale and risking demarcating the social housing.

The local papers report problems with youths and loneliness. But the crime figures are lower than in other parts of the region, and parents think it is much safer than normal for children and allow them greater independence in walking to school and playing out. Cambourne attracts young people from surrounding villages and they do tend to ‘hang around’. But the young people are out in the open air, socialising with their peers, and as long as they don’t commit a crime why should we be so worried?

But some people do find Cambourne a lonely place, and on weekdays it does seem deserted. Key services must be in place from the beginning before residents arrive, and the various agencies need to meet regularly to co-ordinate their efforts in providing help. On the other hand, people are more ready to make friends in a new place, and for ‘joiners’ there is plenty going on. A new settlement needs a place like...
a community hall for people to meet from very early on. It also needs more informal meeting places like pubs and a café. There is a high turnover of people in a new settlement, and we need to be realistic about time scales and perhaps wait 20 years or so to judge Cambourne in terms of community well-being.

It is most important to avoid creating ghettos of affordable housing. During the course of the study some residents expressed doubts about the large block of 71 houses north of the shopping centre at Smithy Way. Clearly this is a big issue in settlements with over 30 per cent social housing and it is not clear that it has been resolved satisfactorily here. The social housing, for various reasons, arrived later than the private housing and this caused resentment. Wherever possible, it would be sensible to phase the development of the private and social housing in tandem and to inform prospective residents of the scale and disposition of the social rented housing before they arrive.

Facilities such as shops, places to meet and sports facilities were built later than the houses – this too can cause frustration and resentment. The very good reputations of the schools have been strong selling points, but the demand for primary school places was much higher than expected and three schools will be needed. Cambourne is at present too small to justify a secondary school, so older children go to Comberton Village College, over seven miles away. Unfortunately Comberton is full so the children of new incomers will have to travel into Cambridge.

Clearly there are fewer social activities in Cambourne than in Cambridge, but there are more facilities and social activities than in most villages. Cambourne has many clubs and societies, and is a good place for young children to play and for young families to settle.

The lack of local employment opportunities and the need to travel to work by car are the key issues in Cambourne’s ‘sustainability’ failings. But the business park and shopping centre are as yet less than half finished, and local employment opportunities will increase with time as the settlement grows. There is a regular bus service to Cambridge and a train service from St Neots for people commuting to London. But people in Cambourne are still very car dependent.

At first sight it would seem sensible to locate all new settlements near main-line railway stations. But only a small proportion of people travel to work in London. Live-work and business starter units may need subsidising to woo new businesses from cheaper accommodation in neighbouring villages. The units also lack scope for adaptation and expansion.

As mentioned earlier, cycle routes and footpaths out of Cambourne are not well provided. However, once work on the new A428 is finished the old road may provide a safe cycle way and fast bus lane to Cambridge.

When compared with the New Town Development Corporations the current process of procuring new settlements using section 106 agreements seems cumbersome. But it has been made to work in Cambourne. There is a case for retaining architects to oversee the design and procurement process and to try to ensure higher-quality design of civic buildings. However, the landscape planners delivered a very high-quality green environment that many appreciate.

**Evaluation and assessment**

Two quantitative methods were used to evaluate Cambourne: one based on the objectives outlined in the masterplan, the other on Inspire East’s ‘Excellence Framework’, which is similar to Egan’s sustainability wheel and tries to take a holistic view of sustainability.

Some of the vision of the original masterplan has been achieved. In particular, Cambourne is rated highly in terms of the plan’s ecological objectives and rural character. But it does badly in terms of energy and renewables and, because facilities were late in arriving, it scores badly on community. Nor is it a village as was originally conceived. And it isn’t big enough to be a town. It is in fact a new hybrid – an ‘exurb’.

Measured against the Inspire East Excellence Framework, Cambourne does best in terms of three criteria: equity; housing; and environment. It does badly in terms of economic criteria. The lack of local jobs and a thriving local economy are currently perceived by residents as Cambourne’s main shortcomings. However, there is pressure for Cambourne to grow, possibly to double its present size. This would allow a secondary school to be built, would provide more local jobs, and would make facilities like shops and services more viable.

What is clear is that Cambourne is similar in terms of lifestyles and transport to the rest of the South Cambridgeshire district. And the homes, which are
all built to current Building Regulations standards or better, are much more energy efficient than most homes in established villages. If we compare Cambourne with Bar Hill, the other new settlement in the region, built in the late 1960s, the first thing that strikes you is that the design of the houses, the architecture of the business park, the road layout and green areas are much better in Cambourne than in Bar Hill. Bar Hill has, however, got time on its side, and there is a strong sense of community. In time, Cambourne will settle in a similar way, and it is likely to be a popular place in which to live.

Accordia – the new high-density housing development on a brownfield site in Cambridge designed by Fielden Clegg – is, in contrast to Cambourne, architectural. There has been a lot of new development in Cambridge. The main difference is that new housing in Cambridge will be nearer jobs and services than housing in Cambourne can ever be. But Cambourne has significantly enhanced the ecology and biodiversity of the site. A key to the success of the green space is that the local wildlife trust is responsible for maintenance and is based in Cambourne. There is local food production in the two allotments and, being an exposed and windy site, there is the potential for local power generation.

Cambourne is in some ways a unique type of settlement for its size, being neither a village nor a suburb. The spine road is narrow and winds through the settlement, which encourages people to use pedestrian short cuts. For example, there is a path to the shops on the edge of the woods. Although the gardens are small, there is enough room to expand the houses. Perhaps most significantly, the volume housebuilders have adapted their standard catalogue to create something more interesting than the standard spec-built vernacular.

The vision of the masterplanners was to create a village environment with the facilities of a small town. In many ways Cambourne delivers this promise. You can get to the city fairly easily and you have nice countryside within walking distance. You are relatively close to main-line railway stations. It is less congested than Cambridge, and there is less pollution and better air quality than in the city. It is quieter and there is a better sense of community. Despite the bad press, there is less crime and less anti-social behaviour. It is perceived as a safe place in which to bring up a family, and young children seem to be given more freedom and independence than in Cambridge or established villages. Houses are cheaper, there is more choice, and the houses are new. Above all, people really appreciate the green space and lakes that have been incorporated into the built form.

But Cambourne can feel isolated, especially for those without children, who have less opportunity to make friends, or for those who find mixing more difficult. There is an obvious lack of history, continuity of generations and sense of belonging. There is less choice of shops and fewer public transport options, and facilities were late in arriving.

The key issue in new settlements is the lack of local employment opportunities. In today’s highly mobile labour market, many people choose to work a long way away from where they live. But more local job opportunities in new settlements would reduce travel distance to work.

In Cambourne, the masterplanners imagined sustainability as the “big idea” that would provide a sense of purpose. And the traditional character of the English village, it was imagined, would give the settlement its image and identity. But Cambourne is no more sustainable, in any real sense, than other parts of the region, and Cambourne is an urban community divorced from its surrounding countryside.

This key finding casts doubt on plans for the carbon-neutrality of free-standing new settlements, including stand-alone eco-towns. Although it would certainly be possible to make the housing more energy efficient and to generate power locally, much of the carbon emitted by a community depends on lifestyle choices and behaviour. And it is unrealistic to suppose that the majority of new residents will either work locally or give up wanting to use their cars.

Dr Stephen Platt is Chairman of Cambridge Architectural Research Limited and Associate Professor at the School of the Built Environment, University of Nottingham. The author wishes to acknowledge all those who provide information for the study on which this article is based, with special thanks due to Mark Deas of Inspire East, who commissioned the study, and to Terry Farrell & Partners for permission to make use of the masterplan.

Notes
2 The Excellence Framework is an online toolkit created by Inspire East, the regional centre of excellence for sustainable communities in the East of England – see www.inspire-east.org.uk/welcome.aspx