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# **North Essex Garden Communities Peer Review**

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**Lord Bob Kerslake**

**Published: January 2017**

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# Background and scope of the peer review

**In October 2016 the Leaders and Chief Executives of Braintree, Colchester, Tendring and Essex Councils asked me to lead a peer review to look at their approach to delivering Garden Communities in North Essex.**

## **The guiding questions were:**

- Are we ambitious enough (place shaping)?
- How do we maintain the pace and quality of build development?
- Are we maximising our position with Government in terms of support and funding?
- Are we positioned to exploit any commercial income streams which could come from the development?
- What is the best vehicle for managing the opportunity?
- Do we have the capacity and capability to oversee the developments effectively?

The members of the review team were selected on the basis of their relevant experience and expertise. In addition to me, they were:

- **Lord Jamie Borwick**, Chairman of Countryside Properties (Bicester) Ltd, developer of the Kinsmere scheme of 2,600 houses in Bicester and an investor in property in the UK.
- **Trudi Elliott CBE**, Chief Executive of the Royal Town Planning Institute
- **Eugene Dreyer**, founder of ystudio ltd, masterplan and design consultancy.
- **Malcolm Sharp MBE**, Planning and Local Government consultant advising on all aspects of delivering planning services
- **Graham Hughes**, Executive Director of Economy, Transport and Environment at Cambridgeshire County Council

The review was not a Local Government Association Peer Challenge as such, although it adopted many of the principles in the approach to the review. A peer review is neither an inspection nor an inquiry. It is normally tailored to the needs of the council subject to the review and is designed to complement the council's own performance and improvement processes. Crucially, it is an opportunity for a council to obtain informed, external feedback on key areas of their work. In this case the four councils wanted a short, focused, independent review of their approach to delivering Garden Communities in North Essex.

The review took place in November 2016. The review team reviewed a range of background documents provided by the Garden Communities project team and visited the three proposed locations. They met with the lead Directors of the four Councils who explained the background and the reasoning behind the approach the Councils are taking towards the proposals. The Directors also submitted a self-assessment against the six questions. The Review Team subsequently spoke with the council planning teams, key advisors, land owners, developers and officials at the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to clarify and explore specific areas of interest in more depth. The review was able to take account of evidence submitted by local groups, including CAUSE, although in the time available it was not possible for the review team to engage directly with local communities.

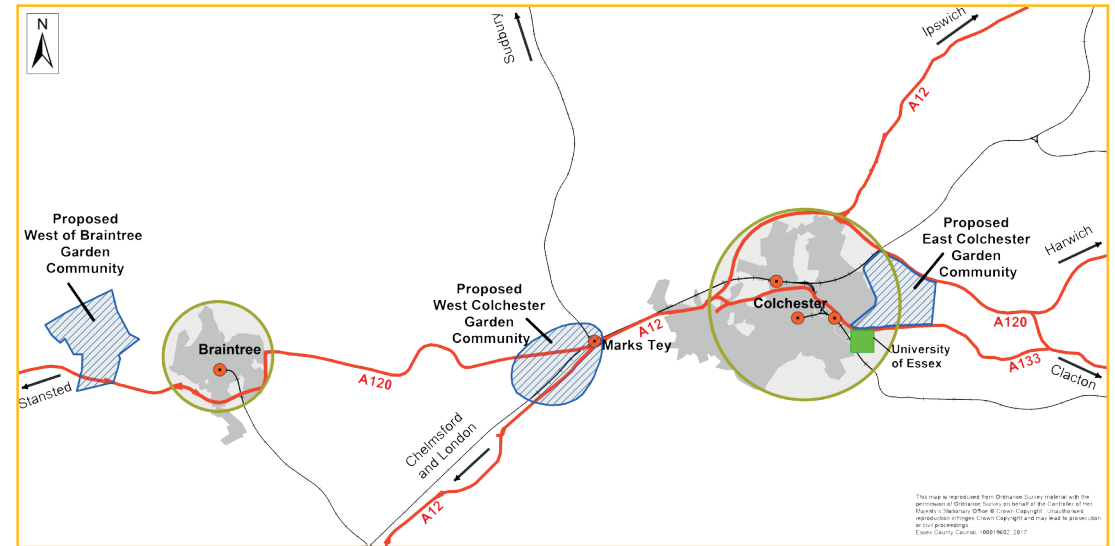
The review team presented its findings to the Leaders and Chief Executives of the four councils in early December 2016. This report sets out those findings

# Context for the review

**Braintree, Colchester and Tendring and Essex Councils have been working together to explore the delivery of Garden Communities across three main locations in North Essex.**

The project has the potential to deliver up to 40,000 homes over a 30 year period in mixed use new communities. Areas of search for three new garden communities were contained within the Local Plan Preferred Options consultations of all three local planning authorities in 2016. Specific sites and boundaries have not yet been determined but will be refined through the Local Plan decision-making process.

In common with many areas of the UK, Essex faces a significant challenge to deliver the required number of homes to sustain both its economic aspirations and the needs of its population. Traditional approaches to housing development have led to problems with delivery and sustainability. The four councils have entered into a collaborative partnership to deliver a significant proportion of the housing required for this part of Essex on Garden Community principles, together with the economic and employment opportunities and the transport and community infrastructure to support these new communities.



**Tendring/Colchester** could deliver 7,000 to 9,000 homes, which makes it the smallest of the three sites. It would require improved transport connections with Colchester and a link road to the A120. The University of Essex, which is one of the UK's fastest growing universities, and the Knowledge Gateway would provide business and employment opportunities for the community.

**West Colchester/Marks Tey** is the largest and most complex development proposed and could deliver up to 20,000 homes, or more depending upon the site option chosen. The existing community of Marks Tey is divided by major roads and the railway and the new community would depend upon a significant upgrade to the A120.

**West Braintree** could deliver up to 13,000 homes. It is predominantly rural and sited on farmland. It benefits from proximity to Stansted Airport. It would need good transport links to the strategic road network and improved rail links.

# Key strengths

**The review team noted some particular strengths in this project.**

**The project could deliver as many as 40,000 homes, housing around 92,000 people.**

## **The councils' ambition for this project is impressive.**

In 2014 the Department for Communities and Local Government issued a prospectus "Locally-led Garden Cities", which invited expressions of interest from councils interested in developing new Garden Settlements. Many councils have talked about developing a garden community but there are few as well advanced as North Essex in actually putting their aspirations into effect. There are even fewer attempting to develop a garden community on this scale. Across the three areas the project could deliver as many as 40,000 homes, which could house around 92,000 people. That is equivalent to a small city the size of Bath.

It is also clear that this is not just a housing project. The project team have the ambition to create the community infrastructure, economic and employment opportunities that a new community will need, and to explore new technologies and approaches to managing community assets. This is place-making in its widest sense.

## **This is an excellent example of cooperation between councils**

The importance of councils working together is rightly a major theme of public policy. This project is a superb example of such co-operation in practice. Braintree, Colchester and Tendring councils have been working with Essex County Council since 2014 to develop plans for Garden Communities across three main locations in North Essex. It is clear that there is very strong collaboration between the four councils regardless of political affiliation. There are good working relationships between those involved and a strong partnership has been established. We were impressed by the degree of unity between the councils and evidence that they are thinking strategically about joint interests.

It is natural that in the early phases of developing this partnership the councils have focused on identifying the goals, objectives and principles that underpin their partnership and building a consistent approach across the three areas of search with shared management arrangements, project structures and programme of activities. In order to move forward to the next phase focused on delivering the communities, the partnership now needs to further invest in their working relationship and develop the distinctive characteristics of each place, which will involve differentiating between them.

There are no winners or losers in this process – all four councils have something to gain from working together on this initiative. Some may be able to move ahead faster than others but all will achieve their individual objectives over time if they continue to work together as well as they have done so far.

### **Considerable progress has been made**

In the space of two years a significant amount of detailed analysis has been done for all three areas. The councils are currently working on the production of Local Plans covering the period 2017 to 2033 and have made good use of DCLG funding to support feasibility work and commission expert advice in relation to the proposed Garden Communities. A detailed feasibility study has identified the opportunities and constraints, capacity, infrastructure requirements and potential viability for each place. Work is also well advanced to develop approaches to delivering the communities including detailed proposals for a delivery model. The potential Garden Communities are being developed in line with the Town and Country Planning Association Garden City principles. The councils have also drawn up their own Garden Communities Charter that adapts these principles to the local context and articulates their ambition for these communities. This represents a powerful statement of principles to guide the proposals.

### **The initiative could be of strategic national importance**

This project represents an opportunity to design a 21st century community that goes beyond the immediate imperative to deliver the number of homes required to support the population of North Essex. There are opportunities to put new thinking to the test about sustainable communities and how new communities are developed.

The project also offers huge potential beyond North Essex. The councils are clear about the links to wider infrastructure and economic development and there is scope to develop this as part of the wider Stansted – Colchester – Harwich corridor in a way that reinforces links between the East and West of the country, strengthening national infrastructure and developing the country's economic capability.

**The importance of councils working together is rightly a major theme of public policy. This project is a superb example of such co-operation in practice.**

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# Key challenges and recommendations for action

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**The review team has drawn on its collective knowledge and experience of housing, planning and local government to highlight the challenges faced by the project, and make recommendations for action.**

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**Plans for the communities have reached a stage where it is now important to establish a distinct identity for each place.**

There are significant differences between the three locations which have implications for the pace of delivery. So the councils should look at the programme for delivering these communities and be prepared to differentiate their strategy for each place.

**Tendring/Colchester** would be the most straightforward of the three communities to deliver and would lend itself to alternative delivery approaches such as a partnership with another developer, finance or business partner, for example. It is capable of being delivered on a shorter timescale than the other two. **West Braintree** is quite different in character, but presents an opportunity to establish a distinct character for the Garden Community. There are infrastructure requirements but these are relatively achievable. **West Colchester/Marks Tey** would be a large and complex project to deliver on its own, quite apart from the other two. It is absolutely dependent on upgrading the A120, and has complex land ownership. As a result it may take longer for the councils to deliver this development than the other two sites.

Plans for the communities have reached a stage where it is now important to establish a distinct identity for each place – and choose a name for each of these new communities. Up to this stage it is understandable that the councils have needed to use objective criteria to analyse the potential capacity and the viability of the three areas of search but from here on they need to develop each site as an individual community.

**The timetable for the Local Plan is ambitious given the scale and complexity of the garden communities. The councils should take action to ensure local plans can have the best chance of being found ‘sound’ in an appropriate timescale.**

The complexity of the evidence base required to underpin a local plan is substantial, and there are detailed interdependencies between the delivery of different infrastructure and homes on sites. There is also the assessment of reasonable alternatives, sustainability assessment and viability issues, to list a few of the necessary elements. As a result the current local plan timetable is ambitious.

It is particularly important to look at the infrastructure dependencies and clearly identify their impact on the Local Plan. The councils should also review their own timetables to make sure that they can deliver a sound Local Plan. We strongly recommend that they complete the Planning Advisory Service Toolkit to evaluate their readiness. Then it is important to ensure that the planning teams have sufficient capacity and resources to deliver the Local Plans to that timetable. The planning teams should strengthen their connections with DCLG to make sure that the Department understands the scale of what the councils are trying to do and explore the implications in respect of their preferred timetable in the context of Ministerial pronouncements concerning intervention in local plan preparation.

**The delivery team needs to build capacity and increase its development expertise in order to deliver the councils' ambitions.**

The existing team working on the project is highly committed with a wide range of relevant experience and expertise for the work completed to date. However, the current team is too small to deliver the next stage of the project; all but two staff deliver this project alongside other work. The next delivery stage of the project will require greater experience of housing development than exists within the dedicated team.

As a result, the formation of a dedicated, full time delivery team should be a priority led by a full time Director with appropriate authority to take operational decisions. For settlements of this scale, significant development resource will be needed over a long period. Comparisons with other developments suggest that for a community of a scale comparable to these proposals, the resourcing from start to planning approval might typically take 7 years, and would cost in the region of £5m for the team, consultants and consultations. The team can be kept quite small in number but would require people with specific development expertise, including programme management, financial modelling, legal, planning, quantity surveying and community engagement led by an experienced, dedicated management team in addition to specialist consultants. Attracting people with the right skills and experience will need to reflect the market for these roles.

There is also a need to act quickly and whilst transparency remains important normal local authority procurement procedures may prove to be restrictive. The recruitment of an experienced leader, or the creation of a collaborative partnership with others, is absolutely vital for the successful delivery of this project.

**The councils are potentially committing to a significant level of exposure and should explore ways to spread their risk that do not sacrifice their ambitions for these communities.**

On current plans, which involve delivering all three communities to the same timescale, it is estimated that peak debt could reach £481m with build starting in 2022 and no net positive position until 2053. In part this is a consequence of the delivery model in which the councils take on the lead developer role. These are illustrative figures and the councils recognise the scale of the commitment and the need to explore options to mitigate this. We recommend that the councils explore alternative models and funding options. One or more of the communities could be delivered as a collaborative venture with a strategic partner who supports the principles that the councils want to promote. A partnership with a developer or strategic finance partner would reduce the councils' exposure and increase the capacity and resource available to the project.

**The councils should maintain some flexibility on the delivery model for each community.**

The overarching body for the North Essex Garden settlements helps bind the councils together in a joint endeavour. The rationale for the model that the councils are proposing to adopt for the three separate locations is based upon their desire to maintain some control over the developments and to provide mechanisms to manage issues that cross local authority boundaries. The current model also aims to give landowners confidence and support conversations with government and infrastructure bodies.

However, given the differences between the land ownership, viability, deliverability and location of the three communities, it could make sense to adapt the site-based delivery model for one or more of the communities. The councils should ensure that they maintain the flexibility to do this and consider the opportunities and risks of alternative models.

**The formation of a dedicated, full time delivery team should be a priority.**



**The project has scope to contribute to a range of other national agendas, including infrastructure, economic growth, employment, technology and sustainability.**

**The three locations proposed for these communities are dependent on some major infrastructure commitments. It is important to be very clear about these dependencies.**

Major investment is required to deliver the new communities in full, including substantial improvements to parts of the A120 and A12. The councils need to be clear on the phasing of the delivery of each piece of infrastructure that will unlock aspects of sites for housing in each of three major new settlements. The project team should map these dependencies in order to develop a detailed understanding of what they need to deliver this development and in what order. This includes being very clear about who is responsible for funding or delivery of each element, in particular of infrastructure.

**The councils will need to raise the profile of North Essex Garden Communities with government – and be clear what they need from government – to deliver development on this scale. Councils acknowledge the project has not been sufficiently on the radar of senior government officials and ministers.**

The councils need to be clear about what infrastructure they can deliver themselves and what investment they need from government. Delivering the Garden Communities will require significant investment from government in major infrastructure to underpin the housing elements. Senior officials and ministers in Whitehall will need to champion the communities when making investment decisions. In our conversations we found that DCLG were

interested and positive but need a clearer understanding about what is needed to unlock delivery of these proposals. We found there was limited knowledge of the project outside the immediate team in DCLG responsible for providing exploratory funding.

The need to deliver houses at pace is one major reason for undertaking this project, and against the background of the current housing agenda, Government's main interest will be in the pace of the delivery. This means it is important that the councils are clear about what it is possible to deliver within the first five years, then each subsequent phase, and crucially, what they need to unlock each phase. Further, the opportunity should be seized to accelerate delivery of the houses in these schemes, which may take further government investment, innovative structures or ideas.

The project has scope to contribute to a range of other national agendas, including infrastructure, economic growth, employment, technology and sustainability. The councils need to raise their profile with ministers and senior officials in Whitehall and government agencies, and to broaden their links with departments other than DCLG and public bodies responsible for delivering infrastructure, which may have an interest in the opportunities presented by these developments. Having built a strong local partnership, the four councils now need to build and consolidate their partnerships with government and its agencies, including bodies such as Highways England and Network Rail.

**The councils need to be able to articulate a strong strategic narrative for these developments.**

The councils have done a great deal of detailed, technical work to identify the scope, capacity, requirements and viability of each area of search and drawn up a Charter articulating a clear set of principles to guide delivery of the communities. However, the project lacks a narrative that puts the three communities into a regional and national context. It is vital that they now develop an overarching narrative that communicates the aims of the project, the unique contribution that the communities can make to the region as a whole and beyond and the individual identity of each place. They will need this strategic narrative in order to articulate what they are trying to do to government, potential partners and the wider community and to establish a clear vision to guide the work of the delivery team.

A strategic narrative should articulate what is proposed, including what a garden community is in this context and how the proposals will contribute to North Essex and beyond this to the Eastern region and the country as a whole. The settlements need to be positioned within the context of a wider growth story about Essex in relation to both Cambridge and London and how the underlying infrastructure will build upon the wider transport network across the South East. Eugene Dreyer produced an outline of what a strategic narrative for the North Essex Garden Communities should cover and a summary of this is provided in the Appendix to this report.

# Summary of Recommendations

**To summarise, we believe that the following seven actions will enable the councils to strengthen their approach and make progress on this development:**

- 1 Develop a clear, differentiated strategy for each place
- 2 Resource up accordingly. You need a full time Director and a dedicated delivery team
- 3 Explore development partners and finance partners
- 4 Build a much stronger, high level conversation with government
- 5 Revisit the delivery timetable
- 6 Revisit the timetables of the Local Plans with the aid of the “PAS toolkit” to ensure the Plans are likely to be found ‘sound’ and discuss implications with The Planning Inspectorate and Highways England.
- 7 Clarify the position on local plan timetabling with DCLG.

The four councils will want to reflect on these findings and recommendations and draw up an implementation plan. In the Review Panel's view forming a dedicated delivery team with a full time Director should be an immediate priority. This will create the capacity for the partnership to take a more individualised approach to each community. Individual members of the review team would be happy to provide further information and advice to support your thinking and build upon this review.

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# Appendix A:

## The need for a strategic narrative

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**The Peer Review team believes that the North Essex Garden Communities initiative needs a powerful strategic narrative. This will allow all partners to communicate ambitions clearly to Government and to all stakeholders. A strategic narrative is needed for North Essex as a whole, and a unique narrative is needed for each place.**

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**Eugene Dreyer** of **ystudio ltd** prepared the presentation below for the Councils to show what a strategic narrative for the North Essex Garden Communities should involve.

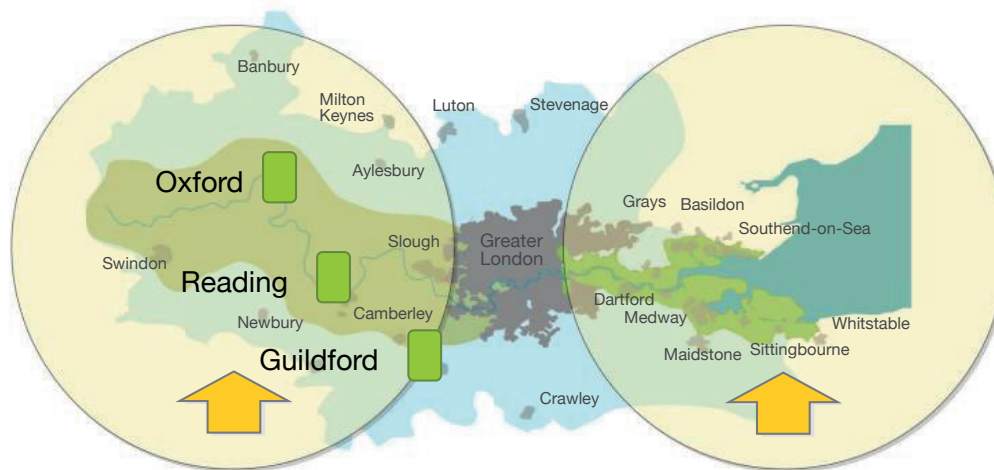
The presentation began by referring Councils to the example of the Thames Gateway, for which a strategic narrative was developed by Eugene Dreyer on behalf of Lord Kerslake, then Chief Executive of the Homes and Communities Agency.

# At recent peer review meeting it was agreed that the North Essex Garden Communities initiative needs a **powerful strategic narrative**.

The strategic narrative needs to communicate the project ambitions to a range of audiences. A five stage outline of what should be included in a narrative was presented. This is summarised on the slide below. It was pointed out that a narrative should set out an ambitious and compelling vision but that it should also describe the practicalities of overcoming challenges to bring the initiative successfully to fruition.

A narrative is needed for **North Essex as a whole...**

...and a narrative is needed for **each place**.

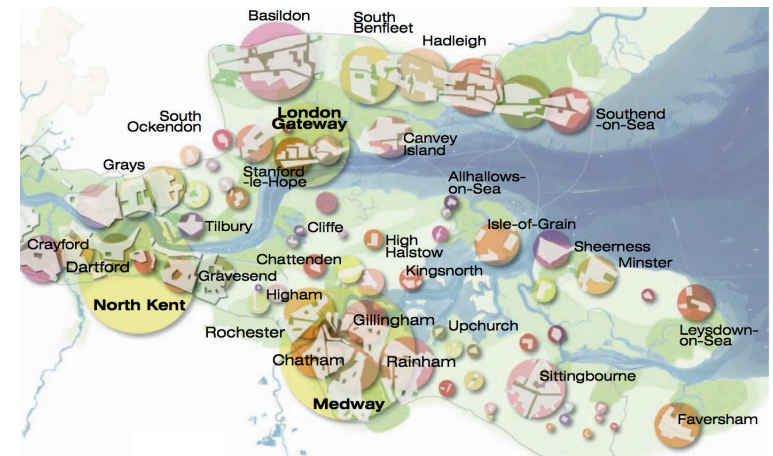


Success in the Thames Valley was planned for in 1971 based on high tech industry

**Thames Valley**

Plan for success in the Thames Estuary in the **based on a high quality environment**

**Thames Estuary**



**FARRELLS** with ystudio ltd

## The strategic narrative needs to describe the initiative to a **range of audiences** – it should:

- 1 Describe **project aims** – explain why the initiative is needed.
- 2 Outline the main **issues and challenges** that need to be addressed.
- 3 Paint a **portrait of place** describing its potential as a major growth area.
- 4 Communicate the **vision** for North Essex as a whole and each new garden community.
- 5 Describe **the way forward** and provide a timeline for the short, medium and long term.

The North Essex Garden Communities initiative is a very ambitious proposal for a large area of the county. In addition to providing headlines describing the initiative, the narrative should also provide a strong rationale for the choice of the three sites. It should provide answers about key details, such as the proposed densities put forward for each place and the number of jobs being proposed.

# 1 PROJECT AIMS

The strategic narrative should explain **why** the initiative is necessary and **what is proposed**.

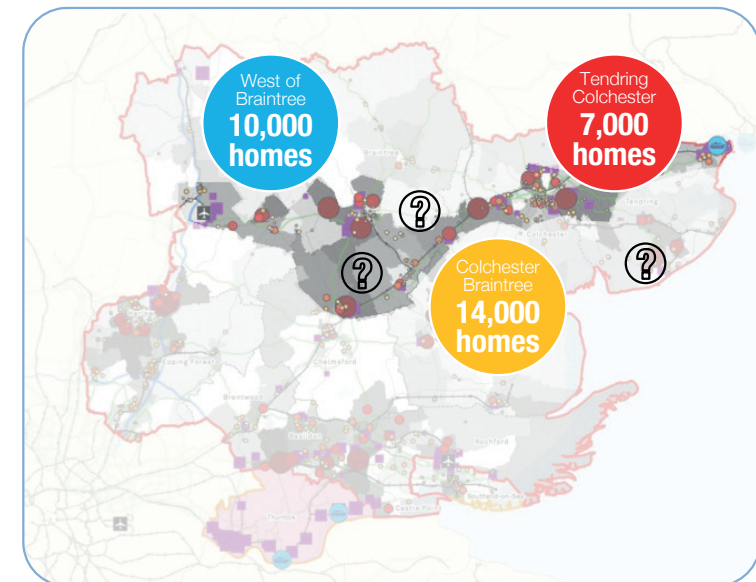


FARRELLS with ystudio ltd

The proposed garden communities in North Essex will add over **80,000** to the **existing population** – that is equivalent to the City of Bath. The narrative should explain how this increase will be successfully integrated with existing places.

- Why is **major housing growth** being considered in North Essex?
- What is a **garden community**?
- **Why have the three sites been chosen?**
- How do the new garden communities relate to other allocated sites?
- What are the **appropriate densities** in each case?
- How does growth **strengthen the network of existing places** in North Essex?
- Can growth help tackle the area's challenges such as **coastal deprivation**?

The strategic narrative should clearly set out the challenges and explain what is needed to overcome these. It should explain the infrastructure investment required – specifically investment in rail infrastructure, the A12 and the A120 - as well as investment in education, health, social and cultural facilities.



Population  
**80,000**

Homes  
**32,000**

No. of Jobs  
**9,200**

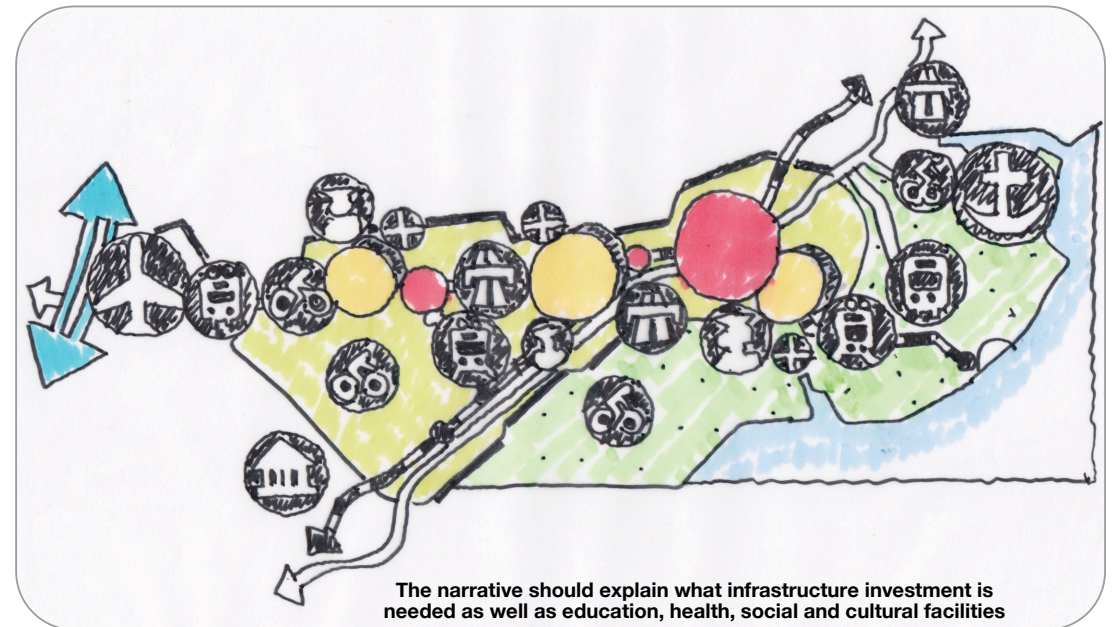


## 2 THE CHALLENGES

The strategic narrative should clearly set out the **challenges** and explain what is needed to overcome these.

- How will growth affect **existing** places?
- What is the **strategic approach to employment, education, health provision?**
- What **new infrastructure** is needed to meet this growth need?
- **How will it all be paid** for and **when** does the money need to be spent?

The strategic narrative should provide a portrait of place that describes North Essex's unique potential. This should include how it contributes to the region and how it relates to London, Cambridge and the M11 growth corridor. It was pointed out that the North Essex Garden Communities initiative is potentially of national significance. The strategic narrative will help to communicate its importance more effectively to key audiences.



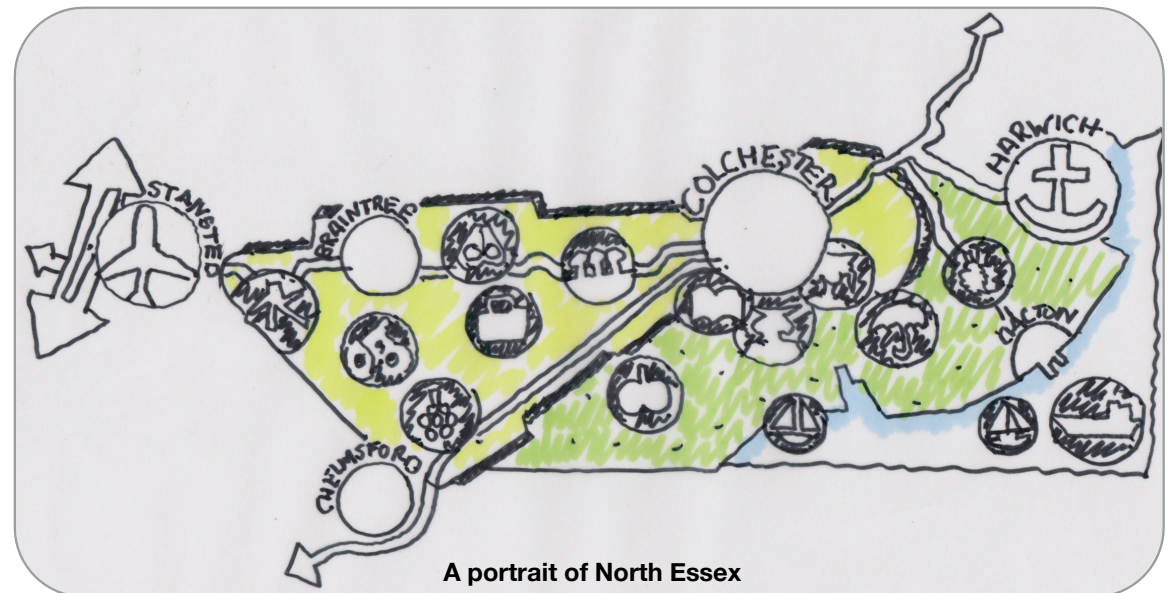
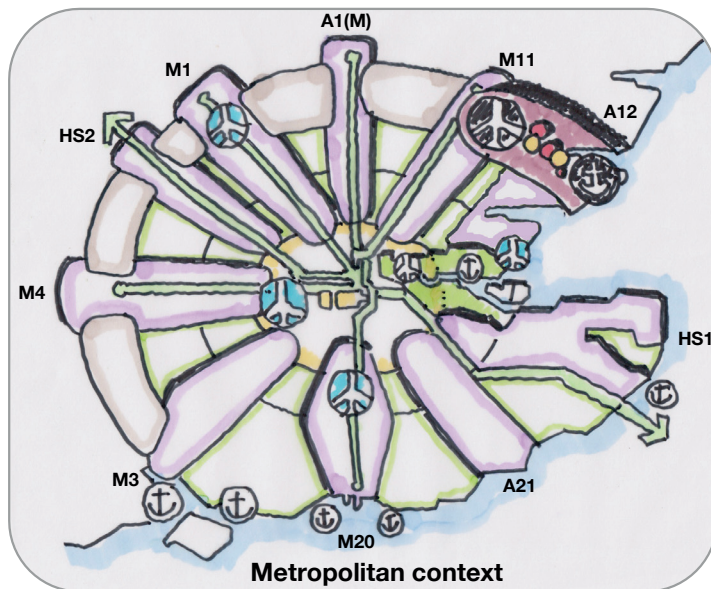
**FARRELLS** with ystudio ltd

### 3 A PORTRAIT OF PLACE

The strategic narrative should provide a **portrait of place** that describes North Essex's **unique** potential.

- What does North Essex contribute to the **metropolitan region**?
- How does it relate to London, Cambridge, and the M11 growth corridor?
- What is its **unique role** – What is the area's **unique growth potential**?

The strategic narrative should put forward a compelling vision for the North Essex Garden Communities initiative. This provides the context for the three new garden communities. It should clearly show how the three new places complement and enhance the network of existing places. It should also show how infrastructure investment contributes to future success.



**FARRELLS** with **ystudio** ltd



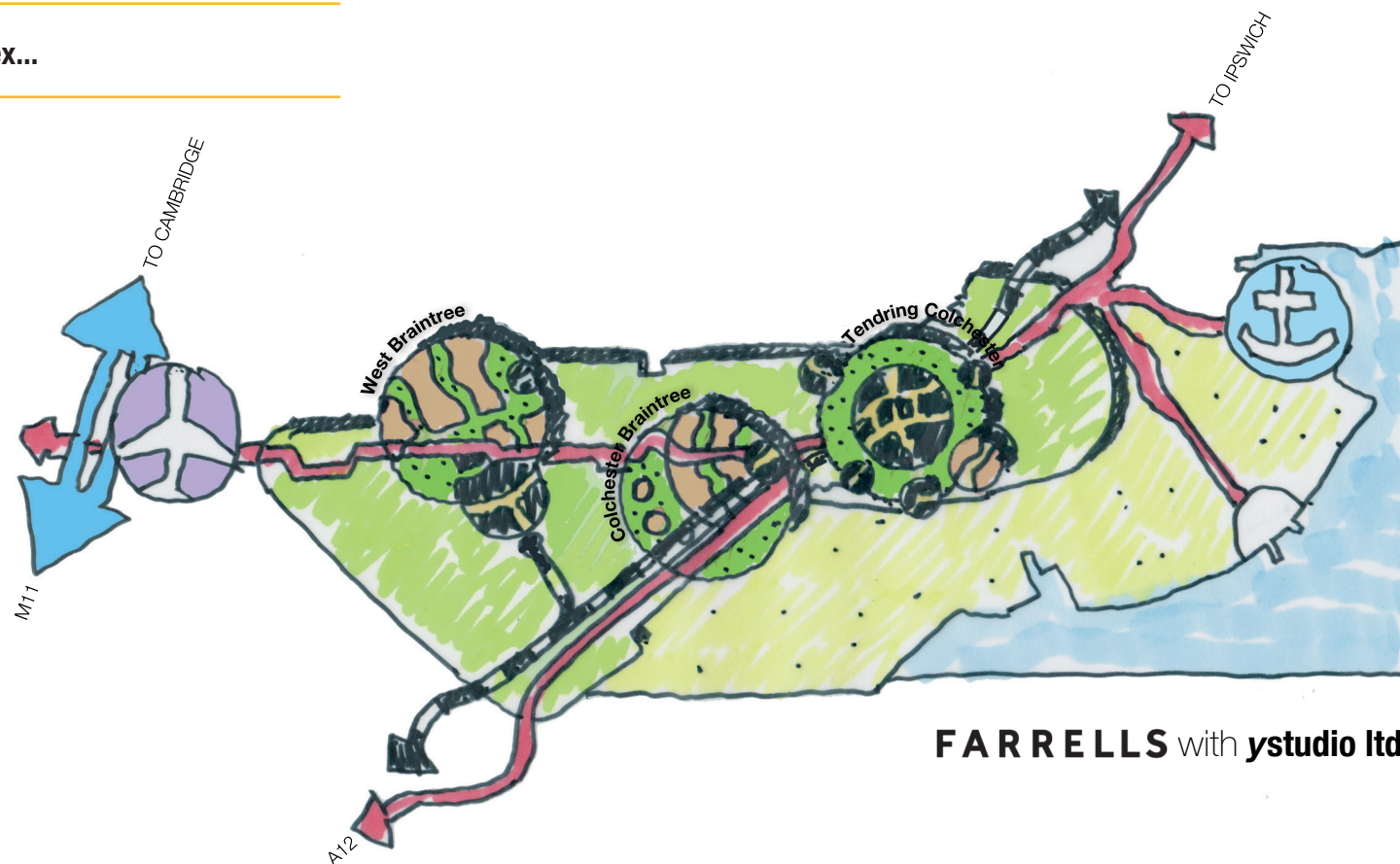
## 4 THE VISION

The vision should provide an **illustration of project ambition** – and indicate how individual sites fit in within the big picture.

- An **illustrated vision** for North Essex which provides the ‘picture on the box’.
- An **integrated approach** to growth which talks about housing delivery and employment need – but also the **needs of each place**.
- A **vision for North Essex** within the metropolitan region which builds on North Essex’s **distinctiveness** – and the **uniqueness of each place**.
- A **vision for each place**.

The strategic narrative should also show how each of the three places is unique. It should provide a high level overview of each new place’s character, its function or functions, the development densities that are being proposed, and other key metrics.

A ‘picture on the box’ for North Essex...



## 4 THE VISION

The vision should provide an **illustration of project ambition** – and indicate how individual sites fit in within the big picture.

...and a vision for each place

- An **illustrated vision** for North Essex which provides the 'picture on the box'.
- An **integrated approach** to growth which talks about housing delivery and employment need – but also the **needs of each place**.
- A **vision for North Essex** within the metropolitan region which builds on North Essex's **distinctiveness** – and the **uniqueness of each place**.
- A **vision for each place**.



**FARRELLS** with **ystudio ltd**

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## 5 THE WAY FORWARD

### The strategic narrative should describe the way forward.

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Finally, the strategic narrative should describe the way forward and how growth unfolds in the short, medium and long term.

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This includes an institutional framework that explains how the public and private sectors will work together. It also requires a development framework that outlines how the process will be managed and how the growth process will unfold in the short, medium and long term. This will involve addressing the issue of whether the different places are treated the same or using different models.

- A **development framework**
  - explain how **public and private** sectors will work together.
- Do different sites need **different models**?
- A **development framework**
  - how will the process be managed?
- Describe the growth process in the **short, medium, and long term**.

