



The planned growth agenda is one of the biggest challenges and opportunities facing the East of England. With 508,000 new homes to be built by 2021¹ and an estimated one million more people living in the region by 2031, this housing-led growth will have a huge effect on local communities.

Renaissance East of England developed the Growing Communities project in response to this important issue. For the past year we have run a successful pilot project exploring the potential of museums' contribution to building sustainable communities. Led by Ancient House Museum, Thetford, a partnership of museums located within Growth Areas and Points in the region has been formed, including Peterborough, Bedford and Bury St Edmunds. They shared their experiences at a well-received national conference in 2008 which opened up debate between the heritage and local government sectors.

Museums officers based in Thetford developed a partnership with the planning team for Moving Thetford Forward and helped to involve communities in place shaping by presenting a temporary exhibition called *Our Thetford: Yesterday and Tomorrow*, with a related events programme, to support the public consultation for the Preferred Options stage of Thetford's Area Action Plan. The partners from Moving Thetford Forward helped write the graphic panels in order to give a clear message to local people about the past and future development of the town.

The displays illustrate the period of rapid expansion and change in Thetford during the 1960s and aim to gauge public opinion about the Growth Point plans. It features photographs of the town, artefacts from the 1960s and opportunities to vote for town improvement projects and comment on how development should be managed. The exhibition has provoked a lively debate in the local press, in particular around the need to preserve historic buildings.

Richard Kay the Chief Planning Officer for Moving Thetford Forward was very impressed with the achievements of the partnership. "The Ancient House Museum in Thetford has been a key element of the consultation process on our future growth and regeneration plans for Thetford. The current interactive displays showing how Thetford has grown in the past has been an excellent way to raise awareness of how Thetford might grow in the future, and seek peoples views on them. This means we are reaching audiences on our plans for Thetford that we would normally never have been able to." (Richard Kay)

The Growing Communities Project has received a further 2 years funding from the MLA to continue and expand this partnership work.

¹ *East of England Plan: Revision of the Regional Spatial Strategy for the East of England*, Government Office for the East of England, May 2008, p. 28.

We aim to make partnerships with Local Delivery Vehicles in Norwich and King's Lynn to help to implement their Local Delivery Frameworks for growth. We will also run community engagement projects to encourage community cohesion and help build sustainable communities in these areas.

We will continue to advocate the importance of museums and heritage to the growth agenda in this region and aim to expand our museums partnership to include other growth points and areas. A follow up Museums, Sustainability and Growth conference is planned for June 2010 to look at how the issues have moved forward. Overall we believe constructive partnerships between local government and museums in the East of England can help deliver "strong, self confident communities shaping their destinies and making choices for themselves."²

² Sir Michael Lyons, Lyons Inquiry into Local Government, March 2007, pp19-35