

Campaigning for the River Cam

Susan Buckingham, River Rights Festival, 2026

Friends of the Cam is part of a vibrant campaigning ecology in Cambridge. In our previous five festivals we've hosted speakers from various campaigns, especially those which impact our rivers. We have some great speakers today, but I thought that it would be useful to start with a recap on campaigns which we've featured in previous years.

Save Honey Hill, who have spoken and sung to us here a few times, won the moral and technical argument against relocating an already updated and properly functioning sewage works into the Green Belt. The Planning Inspector agreed with them, but the Government overruled the decision of the Inspector last year. However, spiralling costs which Anglian Water didn't appear prepared to cover led to the Government refusing to contribute any more funding. The project is therefore currently on hold waiting for Anglian Water to raise the extra funds, which could be between £100m -400 million - not an ideal situation, though the upside is that this misconceived project might not progress (given the finances of the water industry).

The Public Inquiry for the **Cambridge2Cambourne busway** closed last November, and a decision is still awaited. Anna Gazeley from Coton Orchard spoke to us last year about the destruction this would mean for the traditional orchard that she manages, and its wildlife. Even though a formal decision isn't expected until December 2026, the County Council has issued a tender for building the busway. Bids are due by early July and the successful bidder would be able to start work in January 2027. Does the County have advance knowledge of the outcome of the Public Inquiry...or is this a reckless spend of our money on a project which may come to nothing? Is the County Council trying to avoid inevitable protests by starting work as soon as an announcement is made to proceed?

St Matthews Piece, about which Val Neal has spoken to the festival, has again been spared the destruction of three majestic Plane trees. This was down to the power of collective campaigning. But the protests to protect Paradise Nature Reserve from Queens College's development for luxury student apartments at **Newnham Croft** sadly failed.

As Tony has pointed out, the Cam remains in poor condition, as rated by the Environment Agency - this despite being in the second year of a **Designated Bathing Area**, a move that Friends of the Cam objected to, not because we don't want clean water, but that we want the whole river to be clean, not just selected spots in more privileged parts of the city.

We - and the Cam - face threats from a Government, water industry, investment companies and developers who appear to be oblivious to global heating, sea level rise, and threats to food security. Their growth plans for the Cambridge region - the driest, most drought-prone, hottest and most vulnerable region to inundation, as Rob Larter explained last year - dwarf anything so far proposed: the unelected Cambridge Growth Company and the Greater Cambridge Development Corporation which is now before Parliament and likely to be approved, have been set up to fast track new dwellings for 150,000 people (effectively a doubling of the population of Cambridge), and more job spaces (especially labs) in an area with very low unemployment, but conspicuous empty offices. The projected data and AI centres will be even more of a draw on our currently depleted water resources, and this is an issue that Friends of the Cam will be exposing more in the coming year.

And now another layer of madness is being proposed by a consortium of business interests: a Forest City for 1 million people between Cambridge and Newmarket. On prime agricultural land; built of wood (where will that come from?), and relying on another new reservoir. Anglian Water can't even guarantee that the proposed Chatteris reservoir to service existing development has sufficiently sustainable water supplies - a problem currently delaying its progress.

We need to build on our campaigning networks to resist these existential threats to our river system, and the damage they wreak on all of nature: our city, ourselves, and the river.