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## **CPRE's Policy on the Oxford to Cambridge Arc**

**December 2024**

### **A summary of our approach**

CPRE wants to see a balanced, transparent and environmentally ambitious strategy for the future development of England. In recent years there has been a disproportionate and damaging focus on growth in the corridor of land between Oxford and Cambridge known as 'the Arc'. We recognise that there are stresses in the Oxford Cambridge Arc area that strategic planning across multiple local authority areas can play a vital role in addressing. We call on government and local authorities to work within the area's land and water system capacity and deliver improved rail transport and affordable housing provision in the most suitable locations.

This policy position statement sets out CPRE's interest in 'the Arc' and the guiding principles by which we think the area should be planned over the coming decades. It represents the combined views of CPRE groups in Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire (including Milton Keynes), Cambridgeshire & Peterborough, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire and national CPRE.

### **The Issues**

1. Since 2016, the government has sought to promote a concentration of economic and housing development in the 'Arc', a broad swath of largely undeveloped countryside across Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Oxfordshire, and part of Northamptonshire. For the most part the area is economically buoyant with levels of job creation, employment and housing growth well above the national average; although there are significant socio-economic inequalities within several localities. It is a particularly attractive proposition for further development due to the presence of world-leading universities as well as significant spin-off economic clusters and institutions, particularly in the hi-tech and biotechnology sectors.
2. The government's National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) in 2017 recommended that one million new homes and 1.1 million new jobs should be created in this area by 2050 based on a major new 'Expressway', and the re-opening of a passenger rail line known as 'East West Rail'. For context, the entire county of Oxfordshire contains less than 400,000 homes. In 2021 the government published an Arc Spatial Framework scoping document and then consulted on a Vision for the Arc. No further progress has been reported since the consultation closed.
3. Successful campaigning by CPRE and others ensured environmental concerns and constraints, especially the challenge of the climate crisis, missing from the NIC's report, were addressed. The Expressway project was cancelled in March 2021.

## Regional development

- 1. CPRE wants the government to produce a transparent overall strategy for regenerating the regions of England, and the Oxford Cambridge Arc to be given a fair and proportionate level of resources within that. The strategy must be scrutinised by parliament. Within the Arc we want meeting of affordable, and particularly social housing needs to be the priority.**

CPRE wants to see a balanced and transparent strategy for planning the country's development, including housing need. We do not believe that the NIC's growth recommendations are sustainable in any understanding of the term – economic, environmental or social. The Oxford Cambridge Arc has already benefitted from a greater share of public sector investment in regeneration, public transport, environmental improvement and social infrastructure than might have been expected given its share of the national population and relative affluence. CPRE believes that, if recent patterns of government regional support continue<sup>1</sup>, the north/south divide will be compounded by channelling an even larger share of national public investment into the south and east. This needs to be urgently rectified by government. A full Parliamentary Select Committee Inquiry into the strategy, which examines the potential impact on local environments and on the economies of more deprived areas of England is required. Following such an inquiry, any programme of development should be taken forward through locally agreed strategic plans (see also 5 below).

CPRE believes that urban regeneration should be prioritised over new settlements or urban extensions. Official statistics and CPRE data continue to show substantial amounts of both brownfield land and empty homes are available and suitable for reuse as housing. The north of England has comparatively large amounts of untapped brownfield resources, and there are opportunities to support growth clusters such as science and advanced manufacturing around the many excellent universities in those areas.

The Ox-Cam Arc area has growth levels and development land values that are already high. CPRE doubts that affordability problems will be resolved by simply allowing more open market housing, because it will not reduce house prices. In fact, attracting significant inward migration from Greater London and other areas, could push house prices even higher. Building affordable, especially social rent, homes should be prioritised across the Arc and in other areas.

## Climate and nature

- 2. CPRE wants a land use framework for the Ox-Cam Arc with policies that will contribute fully to wider national goals for net zero and ecological restoration, and for all commercial roofspace to have solar PV installed.**

The Arc scoping document (February 2021) stated: *“The Arc is ...constrained by inadequate infrastructure, a stressed and fragmented natural environment, escalating housing costs, and complex local governance. It is at risk of worsening outcomes for the environment if we do not overcome constraints and meet future demands in the right way”*. This shows a recognition that the pressures of development and economic growth that are happening pose a serious threat to quality of life and to natural capital, and an indication that the Arc aspires to address this threat.

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<sup>1</sup> CPRE written evidence (2019), published at <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/104220/pdf/>

The government's legally binding commitment is to achieve net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. All developments and investments arising from the Arc must prove their measurable contribution to meeting the zero-carbon target. The potential to capitalise fully on rooftop solar on both residential and commercial development must be realised.

Within the Arc are two of the most water-stressed districts of England, the chalk streams of the Chilterns and Cambridgeshire. They are amongst the UK's few globally significant ecological assets, and over-abstraction and pollution present existential threats to them. A future strategy for the Arc therefore needs to actively improve the integrity of these assets, not just limit further impacts. Furthermore, the water industry's ability to provide clean water and responsibly manage wastewater has been severely tested in recent times, with little public confidence that such a large volume of development can be responsibly accommodated.

Conversely, parts of the Arc, including the Fens, the rivers Nene, Great Ouse and Cam catchments, large parts of Cambridgeshire and parts of central Cambridge, are increasingly prone to flooding due to the climate change impacts of sea level rise, and the increased frequency and intensity of rain.

Most countryside in the Arc is farmed, and includes the Cambridgeshire Fens, a fragile mix of wet, lowland habitats and the most productive agricultural land in the country. In 2019, the Environmental Audit Committee advised government that climate impacts will put further demands on food security with more domestic fresh food production required in the future.

### **Landscape Capacity and Character**

#### **3. CPRE wants the character of the rural landscapes in the Ox-Cam Arc to be safeguarded and enhanced.**

The landscape scale extends beyond local authority boundaries, and the countryside across the Arc area is important for its views, tranquillity, heritage, trees and hedgerows. It is adjacent to the Chilterns National Landscape and includes other designated and non-designated valued landscapes. Protecting and enhancing these characteristics is vital to the future of the Arc area, and strategic planning must be designed with a strategic landscape character and capacity assessment as a key part of its evidence base. Cross border nature recovery projects are already underway, such as the mitigation for existing development projects like HS2.

In open countryside between settlements, a proliferation of logistics and warehousing development in corridors along major roads has occurred which has rapidly urbanised our rural landscapes. Most of the countryside across the Arc is not currently protected by Green Belt or by national or international protected landscape designations.

### **Sustainable Transport**

#### **4. CPRE wants a more sustainable route found for the Bedford to Cambridge section of East West Rail, along with better transport links to existing communities, and reliance on electric trains.**

CPRE is supportive in principle of re-opening a railway line between Oxford, Milton Keynes, Bedford, and Cambridge. East West Rail (EWR) would close a gap in the national rail network and offer the potential to remove some car and freight traffic from the Arc road network and reduce pressure for new road construction. Construction of the Bicester to Milton Keynes section has now commenced.

However, CPRE's support for East West Rail is contingent on a more acceptable route being found for Bedford to Cambridge than EWR's current preferred corridor, with less harm to the countryside.

Furthermore, in order not to bake in high carbon futures for younger generations we should improve sustainable public transport links to existing growing communities, rather than relying on polluting diesel trains, and additional car traffic, which are contrary to the government's net zero mission. Electric trains should be used, railway stations, track layout and signalling should be designed to serve the maximum number of local communities.

CPRE calls on local authorities in the Arc to commit to reducing car use through investing in local infrastructure, particularly local public transport, and routes to increase walking and cycling. We want this local infrastructure to be integrated with East West Rail. Co-location of jobs, homes and amenities, higher development densities, walkable neighbourhoods, and high-quality public transport for both urban and rural communities are all essential for a healthy, sustainable, low-carbon future.

New road-building is generally incompatible with the imperatives of tackling the climate emergency. New roads also cause major damage to open countryside, encourage more road traffic and would be likely to worsen the problems of air pollution in Cambridge, Bedford, Northampton and Oxford. In this light, CPRE is delighted that the Expressway project has been cancelled. Other 'road enhancement options', which could be a means of achieving the same road-building objective, remain on the table. CPRE will scrutinise these carefully and in accordance with this policy.

## **Process and evidence base**

### **5. CPRE wants strategic plans for the Ox-Cam Arc to embed environmental assessment, public engagement and for clear joint governance arrangements for future scrutiny and accountability.**

Any new strategic plan and land use framework that government produces for the Arc must:

- include a Strategic Environment Assessment (SEA). Any negative impacts arising in one area need to be balanced with mitigations in the same area and not many miles away or some communities and landscapes will experience only harmful outcomes. In CPRE's view, any such differential outcomes would directly undermine the acceptability of the Arc Framework if spatial inequalities were the consequences.
- be consulted on in the same way as already takes place for strategic plans in Greater London and Greater Manchester. Currently, there are different approaches to public engagement across the Ox-Cam Arc and these are complicated by excessive central government pressures and detailed interference. CPRE considers that it is not acceptable for emerging local arrangements to lack transparency or fail to be open to local public scrutiny.

CPRE

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