

The Oxford-Cambridge Arc:

A critical assessment by POETS

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POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment & Transport Sustainably) is a group of senior planning, environment and transport professionals and academics focused primarily on planning and transport in Oxfordshire. For more information go to (www.poetsplanningoxon.uk)

Introduction

Government has just launched its much delayed consultation on a vision for a spatial framework for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc¹. It is promoting the framework as a “generational plan to unlock the long-term potential of the region as a global innovation powerhouse”², through a combination of very high house building rates and infrastructure provision. POETS believe that there are profound problems with the Government’s plans: for the environment, for democracy, and for other regions.

Summary

- The Arc proposals, rather than addressing the pressing issues of the climate emergency, health and economic inequalities, and the loss of biodiversity, will exacerbate these problems
- The proposals threaten to increase the democratic deficit and further undermine the ability of local authorities to shape their areas
- There is a lack of justification for the Arc proposals, and no coherent definition of the area
- For investment of this potential scale, there should be a full appraisal of the proposals
- In particular, given the Government’s commitment to “levelling up”, there should be a comparative assessment of the costs and benefits of investment in the Arc compared with other areas of the country. Such an assessment should take full account of wider issues such as biodiversity and cover a timescale similar to that of the UK2070 Commission.

¹ HMG, 2021, *Creating a Vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc: consultation* (<https://cdn.placebuilder.io/prod/2021/07/19/87/87a82cf2.pdf>)

² HMG, 2021, *Planning for Sustainable Growth in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc: an Introduction to the Spatial Framework*

(https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/962455/Spatial_framework_policy_paper.pdf)

Environment

1. The South East is the most water-stressed part of the UK. Under some climate change scenarios, the whole of the south of England could be at risk of water shortage by 2065³; water transfers would be needed into the Oxford-Cambridge Arc from the Severn to the Thames, and from the Trent (via Rutland Water)⁴; and even then serious risks remain of drought by 2050s without major demand management measures.
2. While there is commendable innovation in *carbon* reduction in some parts of the Arc, such as Oxfordshire's Low Carbon Oxford, and Project LEO (Local Energy Oxford), recent reports⁵ have highlighted the amount of work still needed to achieve the UK's stated ambition of a net zero carbon economy by 2050.
3. *Biodiversity* in the South East is already severely affected by development, human demands on nature already grossly exceed its capacity to supply the goods and services on which we rely, and biological diversity is declining at an increasing rate⁶. The UK, already the most nature-depleted of all G7 countries, has failed to meet 14 of its 19 Convention on Biological Diversity (Aichi) commitments by the target date of 2020⁷.
4. POETS consider that "transformative change" is needed environmentally, not just economically, and the Oxford-Cambridge Arc notion should be re-appraised against global and local environmental and climate change commitments.

Democracy and representation⁸

5. The Oxford-Cambridge Arc is a top-down project promoted initially through the National Infrastructure Commission. It is expected to have the status of national planning policy. Government has already required the Oxfordshire authorities to prepare a joint plan that reflects Government's very high growth aspirations; it has required South Oxfordshire's councillors, who were elected on a platform of reviewing the emerging high-growth Local Plan, to adopt that plan⁹; and it is proposing major reforms of the planning system which will put the role and status of future local planning at risk. In this context, POETS are not reassured by the current proposals for engagement, particularly in view of how past promises of consultation have not been met.

³ Water UK, 2016, Water Resources Long Term Planning (2015-2065), https://www.water.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/WaterUK-WRLTPF_Final-Report_FINAL-PUBLISHED-min.pdf

⁴ ITRC-Mistral, 2019, *A Sustainable Oxford- Cambridge Corridor? Spatial Analysis of Options and Futures for the Arc*, <https://www.itrc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/arc-report-2019-V4.pdf>

⁵ Committee on Climate Change, 2021, *2021 Progress Report to Parliament*

<https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/2021-progress-report-to-parliament/>; ECI, Bioregional and OxLEP, 2021, *Pathways to a Zero Carbon Oxfordshire*, <https://www.eci.ox.ac.uk/publications/downloads/PazCo-final.pdf>

⁶ *The Economics of Biodiversity: the Dasgupta Review* (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/final-report-the-economics-of-biodiversity-the-dasgupta-review>)

⁷ Environmental Audit Committee, 2021, *First Report: Biodiversity in the UK: Bloom or Bust?*

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/6498/documents/70656/default/>

⁸ POETS 2020 and 2021 *Democratic Deficit* <https://www.poetsplanningoxon.uk/poets-democratic-deficit-2021update-paper-150221.pdf>

⁹ Valler D. (2020) The Death of Local Democracy, Oxfordshire Style, (<https://www.regionalstudies.org/news/the-death-of-local-democracy-oxfordshire-style/>)

'Levelling up'

6. London and the wider South East already have the highest total GDP and GDP per capita in the UK¹⁰, and receive more than half of gross domestic expenditure on R&D¹¹. The Covid-19 epidemic has reinforced these socio-economic inequalities: for instance, the Manchester City Region had a 25% greater Covid-19 death rate 2020-21 than England as a whole, which has contributed to a significant decline in life expectancy across the North West region¹². The 2070 Commission into City and Regional Inequalities report of 2020¹³ suggests that these regional inequalities, which are expected to deepen, are unfair and weaken the whole of the UK.
7. Although Government claims that the Arc would help to 'level up' growth and opportunity *within* the Arc area, the Arc would clearly exacerbate the UK's *regional* inequalities, channelling still more government funding to the overheated South East.
8. To our knowledge, no government study has been carried out on whether the Oxford-Cambridge Arc is the best way to promote economic growth and 'levelling up'. A 2019 study by Smart Growth UK¹⁴ examined alternative geographical Arcs (Wolverhampton-Birmingham-Coventry, Newcastle-Sunderland-Teesside, Derby-Nottingham, Manchester-Salford-Bolton, Leeds-Bradford-Huddersfield), and found that these were generally more environmentally sustainable, and more in need of investment and resources, than the Oxford-Cambridge Arc.

Rethinking is needed

9. POETS have many other concerns about the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, but would challenge its very conception. There has been no systematic assessment of the logic of the Arc as a sub-region. For any scheme of this scale and ambition, Government should set out its objectives, and assess alternative ways of meeting them. These objectives should include meeting our international obligations on climate change and biodiversity, supporting democracy through locally-determined planning, and national political commitments on levelling-up society and the economy.

¹⁰ Office of National Statistics (2021) Regional gross domestic product: all ITL regions, (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/datasets/regionalgrossdomesticproductallnutslevelregions>)

¹¹ UK 2070 Commission, 2020, *Make No Little Plans: Acting at Scale for a Fairer and Stronger Future* (<http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UK2070-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>)

¹² IHE, June 2021, *Build Back Fairer in Greater Manchester: Health Equity and Dignified Lives* (<https://www.instituteoftheequity.org/resources-reports/build-back-fairer-in-greater-manchester-health-equity-and-dignified-lives>)

¹³ UK 2070 Commission, 2020, *Make No Little Plans: Acting at Scale for a Fairer and Stronger Future* (<http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UK2070-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>)

¹⁴ Smart Growth 2019: *The Overheated Arc: Part 2: Sustainable Alternatives*. This followed *Part 1: A Critical Analysis of the Cambridge-Milton Keynes- Oxford- Newbury "Growth Corridor"*, Feb. 2019 (https://smartgrowthuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Arc_Report_2.pdf)