

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group

Response to Government Consultation

‘Creating a Vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc’.



September 2021

This is our submission to the consultation on the Vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc.

We are specifically not responding to your template, because we believe it is structured in such a way to generate bias in responses. We endorse the Stop the Arc (STARC) and Oxfordshire’s ‘Poets’ Alternative Questionnaire and we believe that its responses will be very much more representative of local opinion.

Introduction

- 1) This submission covers the following points:
 - a) Information about the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group
 - b) Our feedback on the subjects raised in the Consultation:
 - i) Summary
 - ii) Climate and Health Emergencies
 - iii) Environment
 - iv) Democratic Accountability
 - v) Regional Policy and ‘Levelling-up’

Information about the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group

- 2) We are the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group, a non-party-political group of over 1000 individuals who live in and around Wantage and Grove (mainly in the OX12 postcode area) in Oxfordshire. We are not against any development in Wantage and Grove but:
 - a) Developments should be proportionate and sustainable; and
 - b) The infrastructure should enhance and improve quality of life for its residents.

i) Summary

- 3) We believe that there has been no structured assessment of the idea of Arc as a sub-region. For any scheme of this scale and ambition, objectives should be set and alternative ways of meeting them assessed. Any objectives should include meeting our international obligations on climate change and biodiversity, supporting democracy through locally-determined planning, and

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national political commitments on levelling-up society and the economy. All of which seem to be being ignored.

- 4) 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
- 5) Many of the really significant events and changes over the last 20 years have had a significant impact on the growth potential in the UK. Particularly the banking crisis, Brexit, the COVID pandemic and dramatic changes in weather patterns. The only certainty is uncertainty.
- 6) The Arc proposals for 1,000,000 dwellings is a recipe for negative impacts on the climate emergency unless ALL of these new homes are, as a minimum, zero carbon homes – both in construction and ongoing occupation. All power, heat and water used by these homes should be captured on site and all employment must fit the 20 minute code. Without this the carbon reduction targets of the ARC region cannot be met.
- 7) The proposals threaten to increase the democratic deficit and further undermine the ability of local authorities to shape their areas. As can be seen from the recent election results at council and parliamentary levels, the constituents of the Arc are very unhappy with these plans and the way they are being imposed on the electorate.
- 8) There is a lack of economic justification for the Arc proposals. For any investment of this potential scale, there should be a full appraisal of the proposals including a comparative assessment of the costs and benefits of investment (financial, social and environmental) in the Arc compared with other areas of the country.

ii) Climate and Health Emergencies

- 9) The speed of the climate change and the associated impacts were not foreseen and the government response is very slow (particularly in the way that the construction industry is being allowed to continue building vast numbers of carbon hungry homes.
- 10) In addition, the Covid pandemic has revealed very significant underlying health and other social problems for which high levels of investment of government time and money will be required to find satisfactory solutions unless the two tier society (those who can pay and those who can't) is to become much stronger.
- 11) Long term planning needs therefore to be much more contingent, and risk-mitigating, allowing for much more future uncertainty. In these regards, the Arc proposals with their undue emphasis on growth through excessively high house-building rates and limited infrastructure provision, fail at the first hurdle.
- 12) In Oxfordshire, the draft infrastructure strategy suggests a shortfall of many millions of pounds even before most of the requirements have been specified, so we would expect all other parts

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of the Arc to have similar shortfalls. Without the infrastructure the chances of building happy and healthy communities is very limited.

iii) Environment

- 13) Existing demands on the natural environment are well in excess of capacity to supply, and biological diversity is declining at an increasing and alarming rate.
- 14) Although the Energy White Paper: Powering our Net Zero Future (2020) builds on the Ten Point Plan for a Green Industrial Revolution (2020) to identify measures to decarbonise the energy supply network, this will require minimising energy demand and moving away from fossil fuels. The current gas crisis is a small indication of the difficulties which will be faced in this process. Targets for electric vehicle use and decarbonisation of heat raise specific concerns over the requirements for large scale investment in the electrical grid and network infrastructure which these proposals will exacerbate.
- 15) 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 2065; water transfers would be needed into the Oxford-Cambridge Arc from the Severn to the Thames, and from the Trent (via Rutland Water). The inability of water companies to manage leak reduction and the reluctance of the construction industry to make use of grey water technology is a further part of the problem.
The environmental impacts of the South East Strategic Reservoir Option are very significant and must place doubt on its place in future plans for water supply even if the investment could be justified (which we doubt).
- 16) Recent reports produced by Committee on Climate Change have highlighted the amount of work still needed to achieve the UK's stated ambition of a net zero carbon economy by 2050.
- 17) The lack of co-ordination between different government departments and related organisations in planning for the Arc when there are so many environmental challenges which must be overcome is illustrated by the fact that Government will not even commit to electrification of East-West Rail despite spending £100 billion on HS2.

iv) Democratic Accountability ...

- 18) The Oxford-Cambridge Arc is a top-down project initiated through the National Infrastructure Commission. It is expected to have the status of national planning policy. Yet this example of public consultation demonstrates the way in which questions are written to eliminate the

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possibly of negative response – even though we know that little if any notice will be taken of responses submitted.

19) Government has already required the unelected Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership and Oxfordshire authorities to prepare a draft joint plan that reflects Government's very high growth aspirations. This may be one of the reasons for the recent election results at Oxfordshire County Council and district councils demonstrating the constituents are very unhappy with these plans and the way they are being imposed on the electorate.

v) Regional Policy and 'Levelling-up'

20) London and the wider South East already have the highest total GDP and GDP per capita in the UK and receive more than half of gross domestic expenditure on R&D and the 2070 Commission into City and Regional Inequalities report of 2020 suggests that this, and other regional inequalities, which are expected to deepen, are unfair and weaken the whole of the UK.

21) A 2019 study by Smart Growth UK 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. Yet this is being ignored.

22) Although Government claims that the Arc would help to 'level up' growth and opportunity within the Arc area, no evidence has been put forward to support why this area is more in need than other parts of the South East and given the vast gap between the South East and the rest of the Country we would submit that this is simply playing with figures.

23) Forcing yet more growth and public expenditure into an already overheated area has been described by the Prime Minister as follows;

"...so you end up investing in areas where house prices are already sky high and where transport is already congested and by turbo-charging these areas, especially in London and the south-east, you drive prices higher and force more and more people to move to the same expensive areas..."
(15 July 2021).

We therefore object to the Oxford-Cambridge Arc proposals as we believe that there are profound problems with these Government's plans: for the environment, for democracy, and for other regions of the country.