

Oxford-Cambridge Arc Spatial Framework Consultation

Oxford-Cambridge Arc Unit
Fry Building,
2 Marham Street
London,
SW1P 4DF

To whom it may concern

29 September 2021

I am writing to you in my capacity as Chairman of South East Councils (SEC), in response to the then Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's consultation on the Oxford-Cambridge Arc Spatial Framework, for which we welcome the opportunity to reply on behalf of our members.

As a brief introduction, SEC was established in 2009 to represent the interests of local authorities across the South East region and is proud to have the majority of local authorities throughout the region as members.

This letter is informed by feedback received from our member councils – a number of which form part of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (formally the Oxfordshire Growth Board) – coupled with the views of SEC more broadly, as it seeks to represent the region as a whole.

Member councils which form part of the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOP) argue that the vision for the Arc must reflect the ambitions of the peoples of Oxfordshire. With the Arc needing to place enhanced wellbeing at its heart, while helping create an environment in which the peoples of Oxfordshire can thrive, by harnessing, and building on the region's many prized assets.

Environmental considerations must also be factored into the Arc's future strategy, notably through recognising the importance of planning for sustainable future. Furthermore, the Arc must help tackle the economic, health and social inequalities across Oxfordshire, which are both significant and persistent – this too will help with the Government's Levelling-Up agenda.

As SEC has stressed on numerous occasions during the coronavirus pandemic, councils the length and breadth of the region have proven time and time again, that if you place faith in them, they can and will deliver. This is evidence by polling conducted by SavantaComRes on our behalf, which revealed over two-thirds (67%) of all respondents were confident their local council would make the right decision for their area¹.

Therefore, while we welcome this public consultation, central Government and Whitehall must continue to work collaboratively with local authorities through the lifespan of the Arc's "engagement

¹ South East Councils South East 1,000 Biannual Monitor (Spring 2021): Polling of 1,017 people between 9 and 29 March 2021, including 514 members of the public, 266 business decision makers, and 237 councillors.
<https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/media/2021/05/South-East-1000-Monitor-Spring-21-circulation.pdf>

roadmap”². First and foremost, the final Spatial Framework will need to ensure it delivers for the resident based with its immediate geographic boundaries.

The Arc’s Spatial Framework must also work in concert with local authorities across this defined region, in addition to operating within existing local and national planning direction.

One council leader raised concern surrounding both safety and congestion specifically on the A34 between Newbury and Oxford, which the council is currently working to address. This particular council leader emphasised that this a dangerous stretch of road, and that Highways England are looking at long-term improvements, while stressing that the Arc’s strategy must seek to tackle this on-going issue, specific to this A-road.

As SEC has highlighted in its agenda³, there is a desire to create a smarter place for people to connect and communicate, however, a poll carried out on SEC behalf found that over a third (37%)⁴ of respondents experienced digital connectivity issues at least once a month. Therefore, while we recognise that physical connectivity, be that by road, rail, cycleways and others are all vital to economic growth and job creation, there must also be a focus on enhancing the region’s digital connectivity.

Though as SEC set out in its agenda, enabling more efficient east-west journeys and swifter links to and from regional ports of entry will unlock potential and create opportunities across the South East. Given increasingly frequent extreme weather events, 42% of businesses, 40% of the public and 28% of councillors want better resilience in the regional transport network against incidents, extreme weather, and climate change impacts⁵.

We welcome the fact that in the introduction to the “**Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc**” consultation document it recognises the Arc’s ability to “*make a major contribution to national economic recovery as we (sic) seek to build back better from the impact of COVID-19*”,

Each of Oxfordshire’s councils has declared or acknowledged a climate emergency and have set out targets to reduce emissions within their councils and respective areas. Therefore, we welcome the Government’s consultation document identifying that “*environmental sustainability is a priority*”, thus there is a desire to see that reflected in the Arc’s vision.

Members of the FOP – many of whom are also members of SEC – have made it clear that their ambition is to create healthy resilient communities where their respective residents can live happier lives and enjoy better physical and mental health. However, there is concern that the Arc’s Vision currently does not identify the importance of creating healthy communities, which in turn would support the people’s health and wellbeing and would also help reduce health inequalities present across the area. This needs to be addressed, especially in light of the government’s aim to build back better from the pandemic.

It will be essential that a robust framework, based on evidence and data gathering is put in place to accurately monitor the overall success of the Arc’s Vision, and to ensure it is delivering on its

² pp. 49 “Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc”

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1003974/Creating_a_vision_for_the_Oxford-Cambridge_Arc.pdf

³ South East Council Agenda: <https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/about-us/sec-agenda>

⁴ South East Councils South East 1,000 Biannual Monitor (Autumn 2020): Polling of 1,043 people between 4 and 17 September 2020, including 504 members of the public, 278 business decision makers, and 261 councillors. <https://www.secouncils.gov.uk/media/2021/05/South-East-1000-Autumn-2020.pdf>

⁵ Ibid

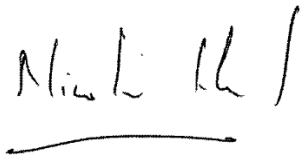
ambitions. Subsequently, coordination between local authorities and Government so that data can be shared effectively is needed.

In summary, SEC applauds the Government in setting out this ambitious Vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, though we strongly urge them to continue to work alongside councils throughout the Arc's "engagement roadmap" process.

Finally, in order to help ensure the Vision is realised, local authorities must be further empowered. This includes retaining more regional revenues and transferring more powers to local areas.

Please do not hesitate to contact our chair, Cllr Nicolas Heslop at Nicolas.Heslop@tmbc.gov.uk to discuss any of the points raised above.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicolas Heslop", with a horizontal line underneath.

Cllr Nicolas Heslop
Chairman, South East Councils