

Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc

West Oxfordshire District Council consultation response – key messages

I. Introduction – creating a vision

In March 2021 the Oxfordshire Growth Board endorsed a Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire <https://www.oxfordshiregrowthboard.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Strategic-Vision-full-document.pdf>. The focus is on ‘good growth’ and this is guided by a set of principles. The Vision, the definition of ‘good growth’ and the guiding principles form the foundation for an overarching approach to long-term sustainable development for Oxfordshire and for developing plans, strategies and programmes for the county. The Oxfordshire Strategic Vision document is an important consideration in establishing the vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc.

The Oxfordshire Growth Board comprises the six councils of Oxfordshire and key strategic partners: Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership, Oxfordshire Skills Board, Oxford Universities, Homes England, DEFRA, Oxfordshire Clinical Commissioning Group, Network Rail and Highways England. It facilitates collaborative efforts to manage economic, housing and infrastructure development in a way that is inclusive and maximises local social and environmental benefits.

The Vision for Oxfordshire is one that recognises the county’s unique location: ‘*what we do here matters, not just for the benefit of our residents and communities, but also for the wellbeing of the UK and communities across the globe.*

We are at the frontier in addressing and solving the most pressing challenges facing humanity. We want Oxfordshire to thrive so that the lives of current and future generations are improved.

To achieve this will require bold, collaborative and inclusive thinking to deliver real and lasting change in ways that build resilience and enhance environmental, social and economic wellbeing. We will draw on our world class economy, our spirit of discovery and Oxfordshire’s global reputation to power this change through the adoption of clean and sustainable technology.’

The aim is to ‘*utilise the unique opportunities and assets in Oxfordshire to realise sustainable growth and shape healthy, resilient communities in which it is possible for all residents to thrive and which can be an exemplar for the rest of the UK and other locations internationally.*

Sustainable economic growth in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc is emphasised by the government and reflected in the visioning document which also identifies how this will make ‘a major contribution to national economic recovery as we seek to build back better...’. However, there needs to be far more emphasis on ‘Good Growth’, especially on building back better and greener, on the need to address the climate and ecological emergencies (e.g. making a significant contribution towards climate adaptation and mitigation, biodiversity net gain and nature’s recovery), on addressing health, wellbeing and inequalities and on

'embracing social, economic and environmental wellbeing to achieve a happier, healthier and greener future' (One Planet Oxfordshire: Our Shared Vision, Bioregional, 2019).

While accepting that the vision is high-level, there does need to be recognition of the Arc as a place and of the character of the different areas of that place, reflecting both the challenges and opportunities of the local circumstances.

2. The Environment

Green spaces, nature and biodiversity

Section 2 deals with 'the environment'. Although not explicitly stated, the focus is specifically on the natural environment, excluding the historic environment. The questions on the environment are split into topics. While this helps to tease out different issues and priorities, it does miss the opportunity to address the interconnectivity of the issues within the natural environment and the implications of, and measures to tackle, the climate and ecological emergencies.

Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development identifies the importance of adopting a natural capital approach to development, recognising the significant contribution natural capital makes to quality of place, the health and wellbeing of communities, and their value in building resilience to climate change, reducing flood risk, increasing biodiversity and boosting economic productivity.

The OxCAM Arc provides an opportunity for the area to be a leader in achieving exemplar green infrastructure, biodiversity net gain and nature based solutions. These need to be considered holistically, with an emphasis on multi-functional networks, allowing habitat connectivity and wildlife corridors, and on long term management.

The Enabling a Natural Capital Approach (ENCA) toolkit and the Environmental Benefits from Nature (EBN) should be important considerations.

It should be recognised that not all areas of green space are compatible with maximising biodiversity gain and nature's recovery. Green spaces should be considered as slightly separate from nature and biodiversity. While green spaces should certainly be biodiverse and contain natural habitats and natural play areas (which allows people to experience wildlife/nature and interact with birds, bees, hedgehogs, etc.), the vision for nature's recovery should be about habitats and ecosystems and the Lawton principles of more, bigger, better and joined-up.

Having access to every area of the natural environment is not necessarily compatible with protecting and improving it. Some habitats and species just do not do well in urban environments, for example, skylarks, brown hares and adders - these will not use new habitats that are regularly disturbed by dog walkers and children. Off-site habitat creation (via biodiversity net gain mechanism) can have an important role to play, with the potential to deliver real benefits for nature.

Biodiversity net gain is a new way of assessing and measuring the biodiversity impact (e.g. on site), encouraging developers to do MORE on site than before (as well as factoring in the value of all habitats rather than just priority habitats) as well as providing new habitat off-site

where it will be less disturbed (and making real gains in terms of the nature recovery network).

Climate change resilience and net zero

Guiding Principle 1 of the Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development relates to reversing the impacts of climate change by making climate action a top priority in decision-making.

The aim is that Oxfordshire will be carbon neutral by 2040, or earlier, and by 2050 will be moving towards a carbon negative future. Opportunities will be maximised to reverse the impacts of climate change, demonstrate leadership in carbon reduction, develop nature-based solutions to help mitigate the impacts of climate change, champion more sustainable ways to improve connectivity and support transformative technologies and sectors.

In terms of the OxCAM Arc, while overall the consideration of biodiversity and greenspace generally provides a cohesive set of principles which largely aligning with national ambition, there is far less emphasis on net-zero goals, or the existing energy landscape.

There currently appears to be a disconnect between research underway for the Oxford Cambridge Arc's Energy Sector Working Group to help them understand the breadth of the Energy Sector landscape across the region (including current operations and developing projects) and the implications for the spatial framework.

It is essential that the spatial framework seeks to provide clarity of definition for net zero carbon which will adequately meet our obligations under the Climate Change Act.

The emphasis should be on 'ultra-low energy' design, with energy demand reduction as the first and most important step to ensuring climate change impact is mitigated in design for growth. With temperatures increasing, mitigating overheating risk in new development is of an increasing concern and needs to be considered in design terms.

There also needs to be consideration to whole life carbon impact, cradle to grave emissions, which includes not only the operational energy use and associated emissions but also the embodied carbon impact of materials and products required through development of infrastructure and growth.

Links with a circular economy are particularly relevant and should be reflected within a definition a net zero carbon (refer to UKGBC and LETI definitions of net zero carbon development and associated KPIs)

There should be a focus on the need to remove any new carbon emissions first and foremost (both operational emissions and embodied), supplying all predicted and future energy demand through equivalent renewable energy within the region. AECB standards for water efficiency should be endorsed.

The Spatial Framework offers a huge opportunity for climate action, through e.g. actively lowering emissions, mitigating climate change, advocating fossil fuel free development and use of renewables and adapting to future climate change. An ecocentric, integrated approach

is advocated, whereby sustainability features are combined to maximise co-benefits. An ambitious approach is required.

Air quality and waste

Guiding Principle 2 of the Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development relates to creating an economy that is 'clean ... and sustainable' and Guiding Principle 3 relates to placing the overall health and physical and mental wellbeing at the forefront of decision-making, including providing better access to sustainable, inclusive and resilient active and low-carbon transport and improvements in air quality.

There are clear overlaps with issues identified for the Arc.

In terms of pollution, the focus is largely on air pollution and quality. Consideration should also be given to other potential forms of pollution, such as light pollution (and the issue of dark skies), noise pollution and potential contamination, especially of brownfield sites.

In terms of the sustainable use of natural resources and waste management further consideration needs to be given to construction and operational waste management, recycling targets, innovative or advanced waste collection systems, the use of sustainably sourced materials and the circular economy.

Water

Guiding Principle 4 of the Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development which relates to enhancing our natural environment, specifically identifies the value of the water environment: the River Thames and other rivers, canals, reservoirs, lakes, ponds, wetlands and aquifers. The need to improve the quality of waterways and water bodies and reduce levels of water stress are identified.

Adoption of a natural capital approach would help to ensure an integrated approach to water management and flood risk (as well as clean air, sustainable land management, nature recovery, etc.), making sure issues are looked at and addressed in a coherent way and developments are more holistic in their design process. For example, consideration should be given to the interlinkages between SuDs and other sustainable features, such as water recycling, and water source heat pumps, biodiversity and healthy place shaping.

3. The Economy

Education and training

Guiding Principle 2 of the Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development sets out to create conditions to support a world-leading and innovation-rich economy. As part of this approach, inequalities in employment opportunity and access to education, skills and training will be addressed, and life-long learning will be a priority. The aim is to build a skilled population which has a stake in the future prosperity of Oxfordshire, ensuring that growth is inclusive and supports the health and wellbeing of local communities, whether current or future generations.

The recognition of the importance of education and training for the Arc's economy is fully supported. It is essential that educational excellence is embedded throughout the education system, not just at universities and colleges. Skills need to be developed for all ages of children/young adults and from all backgrounds. There are some deprived areas within Oxford and other areas of the Arc where school attendance and educational achievement remain extremely low. There needs to be stronger links between schools and businesses and greater efforts to interest and inspire young people in the key and growing sectors. This is central to ensuring that all communities benefit from the Arc.

Jobs and businesses

Guiding Principle 7 of the Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development relates to embracing technological changes to create better opportunities and outcomes for people, including increasing economic productivity. Guiding Principle 5 again emphasises the importance of embracing innovation but within the context of also reflecting and enhancing the area's valuable assets and recognising the diversity of the city, towns, villages and environment.

Guiding Principle 2 relates to creating the conditions to support a world-leading and innovation-rich economy which is clean, prosperous, diverse, inclusive, successful and sustainable – delivering outcomes for the environment, communities and public services.

These three principles highlight the interlinkages between the different topics and issues affecting Oxfordshire. These interlinkages are equally applicable to the Arc.

There is a tendency for there to be a focus on new jobs/sectors, with an emphasis on innovation, science and technology. That is understandable and clearly these are important growth sectors to be supported and encouraged. However, existing employment and business sectors also need to be considered and so too the need for an understanding and appreciation of the geography of the Arc. For example, much of the region is rural and of high environmental quality, a quality that both contributes to the local economy (e.g. through influencing locational decision-making by entrepreneurs and employees) and is dependent upon it (e.g. through viable and sustainable land management of farms, estates and open space).

The rural and green economy should form part of the vision for jobs and businesses in the Arc. For example, consideration should be given to the role of tourism, the diversity of the rural economy, including landed estates and farming (and their wider environmental and social role), plus the availability of local resources and raw materials (e.g. sand and gravel).

As part of the interconnectivity of issues, an important focus for the vision should be on sustainable and greener growth, including the circular economy and how jobs, businesses and innovation can tackle climate change and support the move to a zero carbon future.

4. Connectivity and Infrastructure

Infrastructure

The importance of infrastructure is a common theme running through the guiding principles of Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development. There is an emphasis on ensuring that the spatial, infrastructure and economic priorities are strategically aligned.

Infrastructure should be addressed in its widest definition, including education, health, movement, green space, communications and water and energy supply.

Keeping resources in use longer and minimising waste links with the use of a circular economy approach, for example, refurbishing buildings rather than demolition. Focusing on the use of local resources is also an important consideration.

New development

It is essential that supporting infrastructure is planned and delivered in conjunction with new development.

Local policies to require and deliver infrastructure as part of development proposals need to be supported by strong national policies.

Guiding Principle 8 of the Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development expects all new development to be of the highest sustainable design and construction, one that improves the overall built environment and embeds healthy place-shaping principles, connecting communities and improving the local environment.

Green and active travel has an important role to play in addressing climate change and achieving net zero emissions and, at the same time, improving connectivity and enhancing the environment. Investment in new and improved infrastructure could provide attractive alternatives to the car, resulting in a shift in how people move around the Arc. The use of electric vehicles should be encouraged.

While focusing growth around areas with better transport links is supported in principle, it must be remembered that there may be localised constraints, such as AONB, SSSIs and limited nearby services and facilities, that makes growth in such a location unsustainable and inappropriate.

The importance of providing digital infrastructure needs to be highlighted, not least to help reduce the need to travel and provide the opportunity for home-working.

Infrastructure associated with energy provision needs particular attention in light of the climate emergency and the move towards zero carbon. A renewable energy strategy for the Arc, based on a detailed understanding of the energy sector, should be an important input into the spatial framework.

Getting around

Guiding Principle 1 of the Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development sets out to reverse the impacts of climate change, including championing more sustainable ways to improve connectivity. Principle 3 on improving health and wellbeing includes providing better access to sustainable, inclusive and resilient active and low-carbon transport. These are important components of achieving high quality development (Guiding Principle 8) through healthy place shaping and should be a fundamental element of the Arc's vision.

In addressing transport, movement and connectivity there are a number of issues that need to be considered, including:

- Assessing a wide range of solutions such as public transport improvements, first and last mile improvements, transport hubs (and connections to these) and technological advances which will develop cleaner and smarter options in the future;
- Measures to access public transport services such as flexible ticketing between the various types of public transport and what facilities should be made available (bike storage etc.);
- Taking into account the transport wider networks, such as the North Cotswolds Line and the planned upgrades;
- Making use of existing public rights of way, enhancing and extending them to increase connectivity within the built up area and into the countryside;
- Encouraging walking and cycling, informed by cycling strategies, to ensure connections are comprehensive and to identify current gaps/ safety issues etc.;
- Promoting electric vehicles and bikes, designing new developments with e.g. charging and safe storage for such vehicles/bikes, and minimising travel through the provision of home or communal office space; and
- Designing movement networks to be multifunctional, with multiple benefits.

5. Place-making

Location of growth

The Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development focuses on achieving 'good growth'. Part of this approach makes a commitment to development being sustainable, focusing on ways that enhance quality of place and at locations which enable people to live and work nearby, improving digital connectivity and avoiding unnecessary travel in the first place, but using opportunities to increase movement by sustainable and active modes of travel when needed.

'Good growth' forms the basis for the set of Guiding Principles, each of which contribute to the overall approach to Oxfordshire's development over the next 30 years, seeking to drive improvements to environmental, social and economic wellbeing in ways which build resilience.

'Making sure new developments are built in the most sustainable locations' is clearly very important and an approach that has underpinned much town and country planning. A focus on brownfield sites is also supported. However, is there a large supply of such sites within the Arc and are they in sustainable locations (or capable of being made sustainable)? On the assumption that most of the development will take place in greenfield locations, careful consideration will need to be given as to the criteria that makes it 'sustainable', particularly taking into consideration the climate and ecological emergencies and the emerging implications of the proposed planning reforms.

Homes in your area

Guiding Principle 6 of Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development sets out to deliver homes that met the needs of current and future generations, tackling the significant challenge of housing affordability by delivering more truly affordable homes both for rent and home ownership. The emphasis of this principle and that of Guiding Principle 3 is on healthy place shaping, including delivering homes that allow people to live healthily, happily and independently in their old age.

An important consideration needs to be on how the right homes* can be provided at speed in the right places, supported by the necessary infrastructure, and built to a high quality, meeting the best sustainable standards. (*including meeting the needs of Gypsies and Travellers.)

Design of new developments and streets

The Guiding Principles of Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development form an inter-related set of equally important ground rules – the foundation of an overarching approach to long-term sustainable development, with a new emphasis on place-shaping.

Like Oxfordshire's approach, the Arc should be adopting a place shaping approach that embraces a more ambitious, radical, innovative and creative approach to designing new developments, streets, neighbourhood and communities.

6. Our commitment to engaging communities

Oxfordshire's Strategic Vision for Sustainable Development has three guiding principles that are particularly relevant in giving feedback on the issues of community engagement.

Guiding Principle 9 relates to helping people to help each other by supporting communities and individuals to achieve positive change for themselves.

Guiding Principle 10 sets out the importance of maximising the benefits of strong collaboration, creating the conditions where people feel involved and empowered, embedding a culture of meaningful involvement and enabling communities to inform and shape local decisions.

Guiding Principle 11 relates to proactive and positive engagement by fostering links with neighbouring areas to facilitate the delivery of good growth through beneficial relationships. For Oxfordshire this relates to ensuring that the strategic priorities inform regional and sub-regional priorities, including the emerging Oxford-Cambridge Arc. For the Arc itself, this engagement and collaboration should extend to those areas beyond the Arc boundaries. For example, here in West Oxfordshire on the western edge of the Arc, there are interconnections with surrounding districts, counties and regions, including Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Worcestershire, Swindon and the rest of the Cotswolds AONB.