



## CPRE's POLICY ON THE CAMBRIDGE - MILTON KEYNES - OXFORD ARC

January 2019

1. This policy position statement sets out the background to CPRE's interest in the Cambridge - Milton Keynes - Oxford Arc and the 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

2. Since 2016 in particular, the Government and its agencies have shown an increasing interest in promoting a concentration of economic and housing development in an area between Cambridge, Milton Keynes and Oxford.
3. This area, known as the 'Arc' (or 'Corridor'), refers primarily to a broad swathe of largely undeveloped countryside across Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, and Oxfordshire. For the most part the area is economically buoyant, with levels of job creation, employment and housing growth above the national average. This is in no small part due to the area's proximity to London. The proposed Oxford-Cambridge Expressway (see below) is likely to have a direct negative impact by running directly across the Oxford Green Belt. Since the stated aim of the Expressway is to open up land for development, this will also inevitably further increase pressure on the Green Belts of Cambridge, Central Bedfordshire and Oxford. In addition, there are a number of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty that could be affected including the Chilterns and the North Wessex Downs, as well as other designated nature conservation sites.
4. In November 2017 the Government's National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) recommended that 1 million new homes and 1.1 million new jobs should be created in this area by 2050. The NIC also called for this growth to be serviced by a major new 'Expressway' of near motorway standard, and for the re-opening of a passenger rail line known as 'East West Rail'. The Government responded formally to the NIC in the 2018 Autumn Budget. The Government generally endorsed the NIC recommendations and specifically supported the building of up to 1 million new homes, the completion of East-West Rail and the building of the Expressway. These recommendations may therefore have the same weight as national planning policy in the land use planning process. The Government has also stated that a Joint Vision Statement will be produced with other public bodies by Spring 2019, but has made no commitment to consult the public on this statement.

5. Earlier, in September 2018 the Government also stated that its preferred 'corridor option' or general linear area through which the new Expressway would travel would be to follow the route of East-West Rail between Bicester and Bletchley, the 'Corridor B' in the series of options Highways England had previously recommended. CPRE and a number of other bodies had already registered concern about the environmental damage that a new road in this corridor will cause. It is now public knowledge that in Highways England terminology an 'expressway' is actually just a stepping stone to a fully functional 'motorway', with all the additional structures, lighting, signage and other road furniture that motorways entail.
6. The democratic deficit in the process to date is significant and troubling. There has been no formal, open public consultation. Highways England's stakeholder engagement has to date been limited and inconsistent. For example, the outline corridor maps were only published towards the end of an already very short stakeholder consultation period.

### What CPRE wants to see

7. To read about CPRE's position on the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford Arc in more detail please see our briefing [here](#).
8. We want to see the Government, local authorities and other public bodies follow a series of principles as they formulate a programme of work on the Arc. The principles are that:
  - a. **We should aim to protect and enhance the countryside, landscape and heritage assets so highly valued by local people and the nation as a whole.** The countryside of the Arc area is important for its rural tranquillity, food production, historic buildings and trees and hedgerows. The Arc area is also adjacent to the Chilterns, one of the most water-stressed districts of England. The impact on the countryside, local air and water quality and health and more widely on climate change needs to be fully examined, including through a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) that looks at the impacts of both the proposed housing and transport development in a holistic manner. Such an SEA is currently lacking. This omission needs to be urgently rectified and, to be fit for purpose, must include the selection of transport corridors as well as routes.
  - b. **There are other parts of England, particularly in the Midlands and northern regions, that need regeneration and so merit investment far more than the area of the Arc.** The Government and the National Infrastructure Commission, which has led policy work on the Arc to date, have not properly considered the impact of their emerging proposals for growth, migration, regeneration and infrastructure spending on these other regions. CPRE believes that this should be an essential part of any strategic planning process for the Arc.
  - c. **In housing, the main priority should be providing the affordable housing needed by existing residents supported by sustainable public transport.** The scale of development proposed by the NIC and endorsed by the Government is too great in terms of what the Arc area should be expected to sustain. According to the NIC, around a quarter of the total new house-build across that Arc (200,000 houses) will be to address anticipated levels of buying by London commuters, for which we see no justification, especially as many will be unaffordable if in line with post-2012 figures. We want development on brownfield land in the principal urban areas to be prioritised. Where peripheral development is needed it should

be designed to use land efficiently, be integrated with the public transport network and take account of the landscape. The NIC has [responded](#) to CPRE's concerns by arguing that it has advised the Government to insist on 'careful design'. But again, the Government has avoided making any clear commitment to raising design quality, relative to the often very poor quality of new build schemes since 2012.

- d. **Sustainable transport at all levels, including East West Rail, should be supported and prioritised over new road-building.** We welcome moves to restore passenger rail services between Cambridge, Milton Keynes and Oxford. The re-opening of this line, particularly between Cambridge and Bedford, will involve a major programme of work and this will be hindered or slowed by major spending on new roads in parallel. As CPRE's [policy on transport](#) states, we need to manage our existing road network better, rather than expanding it. New roads cause major damage to open countryside and encouraging more road traffic between Cambridge and Oxford is likely to worsen already serious problems of air pollution in both cities and between them in Bedford and Northampton. Therefore, priority should be given to investment in existing infrastructure - particularly local public transport, walking and cycling, and integrating this local infrastructure with East-West Rail. In general we seek the co-location of jobs and housing as a more sustainable approach, rather than the encouragement and facilitation of commuting. We are concerned that the investment in both rail and road transport that is presently proposed, for example the rail links between East West Rail and Aylesbury, appears to be more about servicing commuting to London.
- e. **There needs to be wide-scale public engagement and consultation both on the overall growth proposals and on the Expressway proposals,** allowing alternative options to be considered before any policy decisions are made. We believe that there should urgently be a full Parliamentary Select Committee Inquiry into the proposals, which should look at the potential impact on both the local environment and on the economies of more deprived areas of England (see above). Once such an inquiry has made recommendations, any programme of development should be taken forward through locally agreed strategic plans.

CPRE

January 2019 (Version 2, updating the position of September 2018)