

“An end to the Oxford-Cambridge Arc while supporting fair, democratic, local development”

The Oxford-Cambridge Arc consists of the five rural counties of Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire.

The Stop the Arc’s campaign aims are:

- **To challenge the concept of the Arc as an economic entity or as a basis for planning**
- **To scrap the target of up to one million new houses by 2050**
- **To promote a fully electrified East West Rail for both passengers and freight**
- **To preserve and enhance the natural environment, and**
- **To involve local people in deciding their future through genuine consultation**

Economic Justification

The **Government** supported the 2018 **National Infrastructure Commission’s** (NIC’s) recommendations for transformational development of the Ox-Cam Arc area by 2050, involving one million new houses, 1.1 million new jobs, an East West Railway and a new Oxford-Cambridge Expressway, all with the aim of increasing economic output by £163 billion per annum through a ‘Silicon Valley’ effect (technically, ‘agglomeration’)¹. Development in the South and East of the country, it was claimed, would result in ‘levelling up’ across the entire nation, and would be associated with a minimum of ‘doubling nature’, improving wildlife and the quality of life of all present and future Arc residents.

STOP THE ARC’s research shows that most (90%) of the claimed economic benefits for the Arc arise from assuming a larger and more productive work-force (something that could be developed anywhere in the country), and less than 10% arises from an ‘agglomeration effect’² which analysis has shown doesn’t work on the scale of a single county, let alone five³. Investing in the Midlands and North would produce greater benefits (£183 billion p.a.)⁴ than in the Ox-Cam Arc (£163 billion p.a.)⁵ and would not involve the movement of hundreds of thousands of people from other parts of the country into the already over-heated Arc, with its expensive housing. Many studies have identified alternative growth corridors, arcs or hubs for such development⁶ and the UK2070 Commission Report⁷ has shown that investing yet more in the South and East of the country results in a lose-lose situation, and increasing inequality across the nation: spreading investment country-wide results in a win-win situation for both the North and South of the country, and decreasing inequality. A 2016 survey of the real Silicon Valley revealed that 46% of residents wanted to leave the Valley because of impossibly high house prices⁸, and the low wages for many non hi-tech workers.

Housing

The **Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government’s** Arc plans involve building houses at twice the current rate for at least the next 30 years in order to achieve the National Infrastructure Commission’s (NIC’s) ambition of one million new houses across the Arc by 2050, almost one quarter of which (23%⁵) are earmarked for London commuters who will contribute nothing at all to the economic output of the Arc.

STOP THE ARC calculates that the one million houses total is equivalent to more than eight new towns the size of Milton Keynes, or more than 17 new Oxfords or 18 new Cambridges⁹. Delivering these ambitious housing targets would increase the total housing stock of Oxon by 105%; of affected parts of Bucks and Beds by 66%; Northants by 74% and Cambs by 81%, whilst the Office of National Statistics predicts an increase in the total number of UK households of only 16% in the same period to 2050. Even the recently revised Government’s housing targets (the new algorithm) estimates a housing ‘need’ across the Arc of only c. 20,000 p.a.¹⁰ not the 30,000 p.a. of Arc plans. The scale of Arc ambitions must be reduced to a level that local economies, communities and their natural environments can support. There is no evidence that building more houses significantly reduces house prices (if anything, the reverse¹¹). Virtually nothing is said in all the Arc documents about building social houses on publicly owned land, a method that has been shown capable of providing inexpensive, better than zero-carbon houses at low cost to Local Authorities¹².

Transport

The **Department for Transport’s Highways England** spent at least three years developing plans for the Ox-Cam Expressway, at a cost of £28 million¹³. England’s Economic Heartland now has alternative road and rail plans to increase connectivity across the region but ‘only to meet existing needs’¹⁴. These ‘needs’ do not include all the cars arising from the additional houses of Arc plans. If increasing congestion is to be avoided, a significant modal shift from private to public transport must occur. East-West Rail is only one ingredient here; private bus companies will also have to increase their service frequency and geographical coverage.

STOP THE ARC began life as the **No Expressway Group** and showed that the economic case for the expressway was even worse than the Government’s own calculations suggested. The Expressway was formally cancelled in March 2021.

The modal shift from private to public transport will be easier to achieve if new housing developments are at high density around multi-modal transport hubs, accessible by active travel (the ‘15 minute city’). East-West Rail should be fully electrified, and more freight should be shifted from road to rail. Rural bus services should be on an hourly frequency serving all villages above a minimum size¹⁵. Cycling and greenways should be encouraged for first-mile/last-mile connectivity within towns, and for connecting urban centres.

Countryside and Wildlife

The **Arc Environment Group** is responsible for developing plans to 'double nature' across the Arc¹⁶. This involves the principle, during housing and other developments, of net environmental gain as required by the new Environment Bill¹⁷, or the use of the presently untested natural capital approach, putting a monetary value on environmental goods and services¹⁸. Arc supporters have made it very clear that if there is no development, there will be no funds for protecting or improving Nature.

STOP THE ARC emphasises that net environmental gain involves the certain loss of habitat in one area (for houses etc) with the uncertain aim of replacing that loss elsewhere, on 'offset sites'. A recent survey of the global experience of offsetting shows that only one third of projects aimed at no net loss achieve that objective, and two thirds fail¹⁹. DEFRA's biodiversity metric, used in offsetting attempts, estimates biodiversity from habitat type, a crude and unreliable measure of real biodiversity²⁰. An imprecise metric applied to net gain ideas that often fail in practice is likely to result in green-washing of a business-as-usual agenda by developers, resulting in yet further declines in nature.

Democracy

Whitehall and **Ox-Cam Arc planners** are deciding all our futures behind a wall of almost total secrecy. No Arc plans have ever been put before Parliament for approval and not a single meeting has been held by any Ministry, Local Authority, Government quango or Local Enterprise Partnership with any one of the 3.7 million people who live in the Arc at present. Meanwhile, the Department for International Trade reports that international investors "*are queueing up to put money behind this*".

STOP THE ARC asks '*Why do overseas developers know more about Arc plans than the Arc residents themselves?*' Very few of the Arc planners and key decision-takers have been democratically elected for this task. There is a yawning democratic deficit in all Arc plans to date. The present Arc Spatial Framework consultation exercise is totally lacking in any details.

Climate Change

Climate change is the greatest existential threat to the future of the entire world. In the UK, transport accounts for the largest output (33% of the total) of greenhouse gases of all the energy sectors, and has shown the least decline since the 1990s²¹. Yet England's Economic Heartland's plans for the Arc will vastly increase the number of car journeys across the region (a recipe for future congestion²²), mitigated, it is claimed, by a decarbonisation strategy that will achieve a net zero carbon transport system by 2040²³. But decarbonisation plans at present are very sketchy.

STOP THE ARC says that a series of 5-year intermediate carbon reduction targets should be set, for both houses and transport systems, and further development should be conditional on meeting those targets.

Other planning considerations

The Covid pandemic will affect all future work practices in presently unpredictable ways. More home-working is likely to reduce the overall use of all transport systems, both public and private, but will increase demands on other parts of the infrastructure network (e.g. telecomms). The effects on all Arc plans are presently uncertain.

STOP THE ARC says that a correct response to these challenges is a flexible development program that can be adjusted as conditions change. With a decrease in movement (to and from work) and resulting greater localism, individuals and communities are likely to want to become more involved in deciding the future of the areas in which they live and work, and in the quality of the natural environment in which they spend most of their time.

Why should you listen to us? because we are already having an impact!

- As a small community group we raised awareness of the threat of the Ox-Cam expressway across all the affected areas, from Oxford to Milton-Keynes. One year after we presented our No Expressway Group petition (with over 15,000 signatures) to 10 Downing St, the expressway was officially cancelled.
- In the May 2021 Local elections we campaigned against members of the Arc Leadership Group (ALG) who were up for re-election. Two key members were voted out, and two more lost their place at the ALG table because their parties lost overall control of their Local Authorities. The electorate showed quite clearly that it refuses to have very high levels of development imposed on it without any consultation, as part of a Whitehall Plan that totally ignores its wishes.
- We spoke at 40 village meetings, involving c. 4,000 people about the Ox-Cam Arc plans before the expressway was cancelled.
- Post Covid we are giving a series of webinars to interested communities, showing how the economic case for the Arc is unfounded, the housing targets were never based on the needs of local businesses or even local communities, and how the proposals for greening the Arc through doubling nature are founded on the myth of net gain which hides a real loss of habitat stock to development.
- People enjoy living in the Arc because the major cities are surrounded by green belts and countryside that offer beautiful views and walks. Ox-Cam Arc over-development will destroy all this.
- No group other than **STOP THE ARC** is taking the campaign to the people affected by Arc plans, removing the veil of Whitehall secrecy to show what is being planned for their futures, but without any meaningful consultation to date.
- We will apply both top-down (at the political level) and bottom-up (at the grass roots, community level) approaches to make our views well known. We will explain Arc plans to communities, and we will speak truth to power.

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- ¹ <https://nic.org.uk/app/uploads//Partnering-for-Prosperty.pdf>
- ² See economic analysis in <https://www.noexpressway.org/news-updates/2021/5/6/neg-talk-to-the-oxford-extinction-rebellion-group>
- ³ <https://www.cpier.org.uk/media/1671/cpier-report-151118-download.pdf>
- ⁴ <https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Cities-Outlook-2020.pdf>
- ⁵ <https://nic.org.uk/app/uploads//Partnering-for-Prosperty.pdf>
- ⁶ <https://www.grantthornton.co.uk/globalassets/1.-member-firms/united-kingdom/pdf/publication/2014/where-growth-happens-the-high-growth-index-of-places.pdf>
http://www.smartgrowthuk.org/resources/downloads/Arc_Report_2.pdf
<https://cp.catapult.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Identifying-potential-growth-centres-across-Great-Britain.pdf>
- ⁷ <http://uk2070.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/UK2070-FINAL-REPORT.pdf>
- ⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silicon_Valley
- ⁹ 2017 Housing Stock figures from ONS
- ¹⁰ Lichfields calculated the housing targets for each local authority following the December 2020 revise algorithm <https://lichfields.uk/grow-renew-protect-planning-for-the-future/how-many-homes-the-new-standard-method/#contents>
- ¹¹ See Fig. 2 in http://www.smartgrowthuk.org/resources/downloads/Smart_Growth_UK_Response_to_Changes_to_the_Current_Planning_System_Consultation.pdf
- ¹² <https://corporate.jctltd.co.uk/goldsmith-street/>
- ¹³ <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/19195434.oxford-cambridge-expressway-cost-taxpayer-28m-scrapped/>
- ¹⁴ The quote 'only to meet existing needs' was made by Naomi Green EEH Head of Technical Program following the release of this document in February 2021:
http://www.englandseconomicheartland.com/documents/405/EEH_Transport_Strategy_Connecting_People_Transforming_Journeys_AV.pdf
- ¹⁵ https://www.cpre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CPRE_Every-village-every-hour_executive-summary.pdf
- ¹⁶ https://www.semlep.com/modules/downloads/download.php?file_name=2306
- ¹⁷ <https://bills.parliament.uk/publications/41652/documents/310>
- ¹⁸ This paper gives a worked example of natural capital accounting and the use of a biodiversity metric: <https://www.forest-trends.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/BNG-in-CNCA-Resource-Paper-14-9-18-FINAL.pdf>
- ¹⁹ <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/conl.12664>
- ²⁰ This site has a number of downloadable files including and Excel spreadsheet that calculates the DEFRA metric:
<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/5850908674228224>
- ²¹ <https://www.itsrc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/arc-main-report.pdf>
- ²² <https://www.itrc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/arc-main-report.pdf>
- ²³ http://www.englandseconomicheartland.com/documents/93/Pathways_to_Decarbonisation.pdf