

The Arc: a collision between a strategic plan and local politics

Nigel Moor explains the need to challenge the receding government support for the Oxford – Cambridge Arc. The election of a new Conservative Leader Liz Truss presents an opportunity to gain new momentum.

An uneasy relationship with large scale planning

The editorial in the April edition of PiL (Issue 121) on the Oxford – Cambridge Arc prompted me to reflect on why the Conservative Party has had such a suspicion of large – scale regional planning. This has existed ever since the introduction of the 1947 Town & County Planning Act, whether it was opposition to the enthusiasm for planning evident in the 1951 Festival of Britain, and right up to the regional agencies set up by New Labour. The constant fear has been does it run the risk of alienating its core vote in the shires. The latest manifestation of this as commented on by PiL is the prospect of receding government support for the Oxford- Cambridge Arc.

This has not gone unchallenged by those who have advised government. "It would be an act of self-sabotage not to continue investing in our real assets, including Oxford and Cambridge. Supporting these areas isn't inconsistent with levelling up." Andy Haldane, Chief Executive of The Royal Society of Arts and formerly Chief Economist at The Bank of England, answering a question from Andrew Neil, about the government's decision

to shelve its plans to invest in turning the Oxford-Cambridge Arc into a world-class science cluster. The interview was published in an issue of the Spectator examining the Levelling Up agenda. Haldane for six months had the role of Permanent Secretary for Levelling Up in the new government department. How did we get into this mess? It's a collision between a strategic plan and local politics.

The Arc was launched with much fanfare by the Coalition Government of 2010. Backed by the National Infrastructure Commission, the prospect of a growth corridor between the two university cities gained considerable momentum at the time. But electoral reverses in local government elections last year for the Conservatives in both Oxfordshire and Cambridgeshire, has brought about a loss of nerve. Facing a pro-environment campaign, the Conservatives lost control of both county councils.

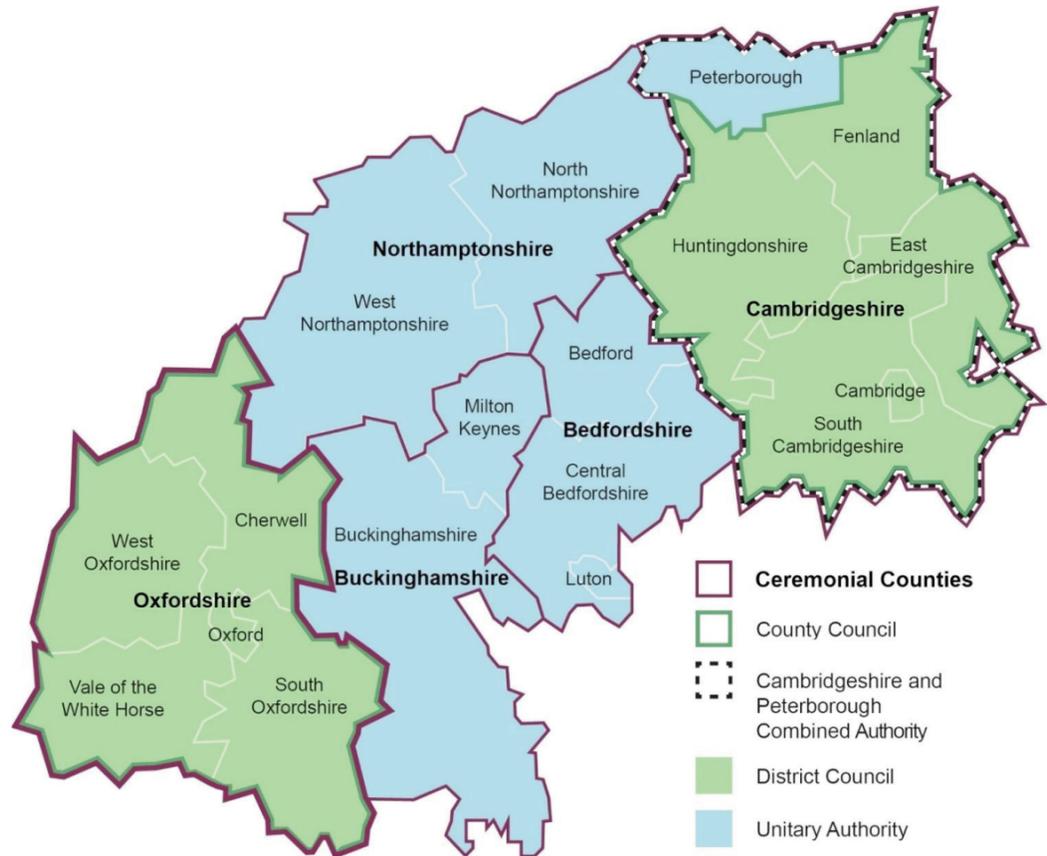
The biggest casualty was the Leader of Oxfordshire County Council Ian Hudspeth who had been a leading member of The Strategic Alliance Leadership, representing the local authorities in the Arc. He had represented the Woodstock division for

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RIGHT:
The Oxford – Cambridge Arc
Source: Policy Paper published 18 February 2022
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Dr Nigel Moor is a retired chartered town planner and a former town, district and county councillor



>>> more than a decade but was targeted for his support of the growth agenda.

The response by the government has been panic. The warning signs came when the Arc was omitted from the Levelling Up White Paper published in February 2022. More than 300 pages but no mention of the Arc. A report by Liz Watts, Chief Executive of South Cambridgeshire District Council, in February 2022 alerted her members to this loss of support. She concluded that discussions with civil servants had indicated the government did not wish to see the Arc as a project driven by central government. "Ministers believe that while they support the continuation of the project, it should be locally led, focussing on things local leaders believe are priorities." The Leader of the council stated afterwards. "The implications from Gove is that they want us local council leaders to take it forward – but we have no money or power."

Challenges for a spatial framework

In an era of localism, a Government led spatial framework for the region was going to be challenging but research commissioned in 2016 by the National Infrastructure Commission, demonstrated that local councils lack the resources and some of the powers necessary to address strategic matters. The consultants SQW and Cambridge Econometrics looked at case studies of other economic clusters in the UK and around the world, and concluded:

- 1 Scale and connectivity are important in developing specialist labour markets which support the growth of knowledge – intensive companies.
- 2 The scale and quality of research and business activity in the OxCam Arc is "huge" but the area is currently very disjointed compared with international comparators.
- 3 Governance is critical in relation to the scale and pattern of growth; and
- 4 It would be folly to assume that long term economic growth can only be incremental (and therefore reasonably predictable), in both geography and composition.

Two questions to answer

Two questions I would put to the government and Conservative Party.

- The first is why the continuing suspicion of regional planning and particularly the New Towns movement? A worker in Blackburn takes five days to produce what it takes someone in Milton Keynes just three. The new town is ranked third by gross value added per worker for its contribution to the national economy. This and the other new towns have been an undoubted economic success for this country.
- The second is can a political party whose core support is amongst home owners deny that ambition to a new genera-

tion? That is presently the likely outcome of its refusal to press on with radical planning and housing reform. It is the political equivalent of regicide and on current performance not an exaggeration. As The Times recently questioned " No country for young people " What is to be done?

Ambitions for the Arc

In February 2021 the government published a policy paper setting out its ambition for the Arc. This is to build a better economic, social and environmental future for the area. High quality, well – connected and sustainable communities would make the Arc an even more beautiful place to live, work and visit. To achieve this ambition, the government alongside local partners undertook to:

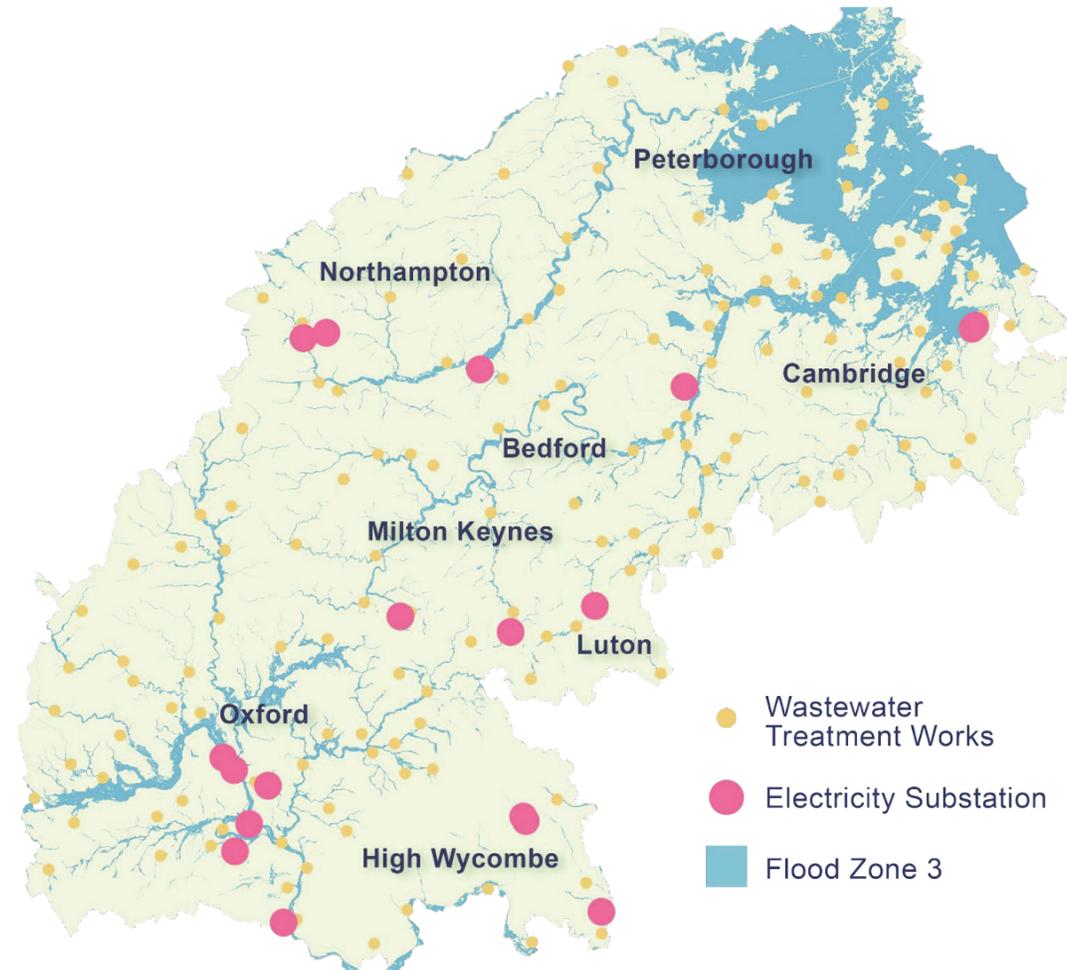
- Develop a Spatial Framework for the Arc.
- Explore the creation of an Arc Growth Board.
- Examine the case for new and/or expanded settlements.

A Spatial Framework for the Arc

Subsequently in July 2021 a consultation document Creating a Vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc was published. Consultation closed the following October. The document expanded on the ambition and was specific about the economy. A priority was sustainable economic growth. The area already has a booming and varied economy that contributes to national prosperity. The Spatial Framework would be an opportunity to make future development much more sustainable and respond to doubts as to whether high environmental ambitions can be delivered. A time line was included which showed publication of the draft Spatial Framework by Autumn 2022.

As is customary now the document bordered on the verbose in declaring a wealth of laudable ambitions, but was strangely silent on any specific spatial advice. A plan showing flooding and selected utility infrastructure in the Arc today was included. This shows particularly the Flood Zone 3 areas, which are the areas most likely to flood. As the Arc is the catchment area for a large number of rivers draining in all directions, this plan is a good indicator as to where new development might be encouraged. So far, only the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) in its report published in 2017, has been specific about development opportunities. It advised that any programme should consider opportunities that may exist to:

- Enable new settlements and major urban expansions- for example, between Oxford and Milton Keynes, and between Bedford and Cambridge- some of which may have the potential to grow to city – scale; and
- Support the ongoing growth of existing towns and cities- for example, re-establishing Milton Keynes as a growth location



LEFT:
Source: Flood map for planning, data summarised from published Water Cycle Studies and Water Quality Assessments for Local Planning Authorities across the Arc, National Grid Flooding and selected utilities infrastructure in the Arc today. Source HM Government Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc Consultation July 2021. Crown Copyright 2021 Open Government Licence v3.0

of national significance; unlocking growth in and around Bedford, and focusing development on a small number of key nodes in the Marston Vale.

Loss of impetus

Since the NIC report was published in 2017, there appears to have been a loss of impetus. There is a real danger that the opportunity posed by the Arc will be lost in a fog of obfuscation and buck passing. We need to rediscover the confidence and conviction that delivered Milton Keynes and the other new towns of that generation. Writing to the Milton Keynes Development Corporation in May 1971, on behalf of the Secretary of State for the Environment, the senior civil servant concluded "The criticisms which have been made of the Master Plan are minor in relation to the overall conception of a New Town of a quarter of a million people. The decision to build the New Town was taken four years ago in 1967 when the Designation Order was made. The needs which led to this decision clearly remain." Would we had such determination now.

Locally - Led New Town Development Corporations

More than 50 years after that iconic era, how to square the circle when central government declines to take the lead and local government complains of a lack of authority and resource. Let`s take stock. The New Towns programme delivered 32 New Towns that today provide homes for 2.5 million

people. The legislation that enabled this remarkable performance is still on the statute books. The Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017 introduced a significant modification to this legislation allowing local authorities to create locally – led New Town Development Corporations. Subsequently government published the New Towns Act 1981 (Local Authorities Oversight) Regulations in 2018. This sets out how government expects the process of setting up a locally - led new town development corporation (LLNTDC) to work. Nine stages are identified. The first is that the local authority (or authorities) explore options, build the evidence base, conduct consultation and encourage public participation, and develop the new town proposals. Then an application to the Secretary of State, which will allow government to assess the application, pursue further consultation and come to a decision. If that is favourable, there would follow the parliamentary process, where approval would be needed by both Houses, leading to the establishment of the locally led New Town Development Corporation and the appointment of an Oversight Authority.

There remain many questions. The Local Government Association has raised concerns about the size of the borrowing cap for local authorities, (some £100 million), the compulsory purchase order powers and ease of use, as well as the need for government capacity support. The new regulations represents a huge step forward and deal with one of the persistent criticisms of the original New Towns programme. This was that it was centrally directed from Whitehall with minimal local gover-

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nance. When Planning Minister Lewis Silkin first arrived in Stevenage New Town in 1946, the railway station sign had been altered to read "Silkingrad", such was the initial resistance, and the perception that this was the work of a totalitarian state. The publication of the draft Spatial Framework for the Oxford- Cambridge Arc, presents the local authorities an opportunity, utilising the new regulations, to at last realise the potential evident for so long.

A new Government and a new Agenda

The news that local authorities in Oxfordshire have ended their work on creating a joint plan for the county to 2050, because they could not agree on an approach for planning for future housing needs, demonstrates the need for a centrally

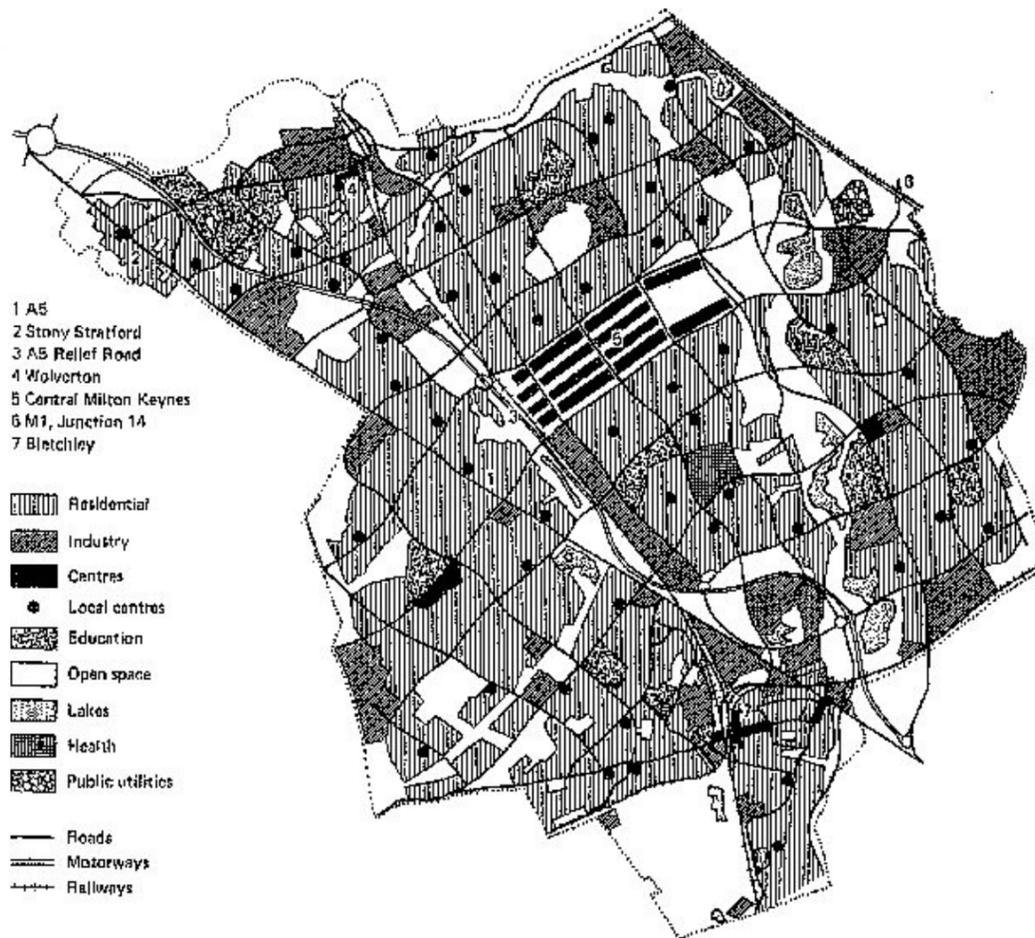
driven strategy. Relying on local plans and a vague commitment to co-operate is no substitute for strategic planning that will address housing needs and infrastructure shortfalls.

Pledges made during last summer's leadership campaign to kick-start a failing British economy will amount to nothing more than empty rhetoric if this opportunity is lost. The Truss Government needs a new agenda. Support for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc would show that it is serious about a change of direction.

BELOW:

Milton Keynes: One of a host of New Towns announced by the Labour Government in the 1960's. Copyright (1977) Osborn,F.J. & Whittick,A. London Leonard Hill.

Milton Keynes



Milton Keynes Outline Plan.

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Dr Nigel Moor began his career in London with the Covent Garden Planning Team and since been active in local politics. His new book *England's Future - the impact of politics on shaping the environment* - is to be published by The Book Guild on October 28th. You can read extracts at <https://nmpanning.blog>