

Edge Debate 87 - The Oxford – Milton Keynes – Cambridge Growth Corridor: Can we plan for sustainable growth and make places that work for people?

21st November 2018 – Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge

Host: **Madeleine Atkins**, President of Lucy Cavendish College (co-sponsors of the symposium)

Chair: **Dr Ann Limb, CBE DL**, Chair SE Midlands LEP

Speakers: **Peter Tyler**, Professor in urban and regional economics in the Department of Land Economy, University of Cambridge
Patsy Dell, Assistant Director Strategic Planning, Infrastructure and the Economy, Hertfordshire County Council and former Head of Planning at both Cambridge and Oxford City Councils
Gemma Burgess, Senior Research Associate, Cambridge Centre for Housing and Planning Research (CCHPR)
Dr Tom Holbrook, Director, 5th Studio, Lead author of NIC Cambridge, Milton Keynes and Oxford – Future Planning Options Project Final report
Christian Wolmar, writer and broadcaster and leading commentator on transport
Jenny Raggett, Transport Campaigner, Transport for New Homes
Professor Rebecca Tunstall, Professor Emerita of Housing Policy, University of York
Charles Crawford, Board Director, LDA Design

Introductions:

Madeleine Atkins welcomed the delegates to the day's discussion and introduced the chair.

Ann Limb (AL) thanked the organisers and noted that the debate would be held under the Chatham House rule. She noted that the Corridor was now, officially, the Oxford Cambridge Arc and she anticipated a government champion for the Arc would be appointed.

A series of themed presentations started the debate:

Planning and Economic Infrastructure

Peter Tyler (PT) - see presentation [here](#)

Interested in how Arc will grow in the future and the implications for UK plc. All aspects of planning would, though, be better served by spatial planning and a better, coherent idea of 'economic growth'.

The objectives of the, then, corridor were set out by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, in March 2016 as a means of generating economic growth.

Two issues of interest arise: the potential for growth and the impact on the geography of growth in the UK.

City economic performance is the outcome of many different determinants (innovation/creativity, investment/, human capital/ skills, economic diversity/specialisation, tradable base, connectivity & accessibility and decision making). PT's work on how infrastructure enhances economic growth for the EPSRC shows a correlation between output growth and employment growth, but also a powerful north-south divide.

There are currently high levels of innovation and dynamism in both Oxford and Cambridge especially in bioscience. This is taking the UK into a new era.

In summary: The UK is the most unequal place in Europe in terms of spatial geometry. The scale of social imbalance **in the country** is opening up a ferocious north-south divide and the Arc is situated in the middle of it.

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Patsy Dell (PD) - see presentation [here](#)

The assets we already have and the economic prospects for the area are amazing. There are 20 unicorns (businesses scaled to market values over \$1bn each) roaming across it – it is the most innovative region in the UK. There is a symbiosis of economic life, opportunities and place.

The area has a complex democratic picture – there are over 29 Councils, 4 LEPs, 4 Counties and 1 Mayoral Combined Authority. There is every form of local authority structure. How can they work together collaboratively? In particular Oxford and Cambridge very competitive.

There is an understanding of the potential benefits for future generations and the NIC investigation is a real catalyst. But there are questions, including:

- Do we have the skills and capacity (much of this is now in the private sector, the LAs need to step up)?
- Can governance be kept coherent?
- Is planning reform able to focus on doing the job and delivering an ambitious jump in output?
- Is the proposed growth in jobs deliverable?

Achieving these politically and locally is a hard sell. It needs to be about creating good jobs for local children and protecting the natural environment.

Infrastructure funding (new money and greater freedoms) will be required.

In summary: Can we step up to create the growth in jobs and the GDP figure that the NIC has set as its ambition. It will require work. Oxford/Oxfordshire has started on this and is taking a long-term growth approach that goes well beyond individual electoral cycles, but achieving delivery on the deal will be challenging in terms of capacity, pace and skills.

Transport Infrastructure

Christian Wolmar (CW)

Looking with a national perspective, the UK has no transport strategy – it is important to know where you are going to start from. The implications of not thinking about transport are serious. The Ministry of Transport is 100 years old and it has always been a roads ministry – other modes of transport have always been a much smaller issue. Post-war planning has had a total emphasis on cars.

London once had over 20 tram routes. Beeching's cuts are one example of this policy bias. The Oxford-Cambridge line was closed and is only now gradually being opened up again. There has been a growing realisation, starting in the 1960s & 70s, that cars are not the full answer. The London Motorway Box plan would now be inconceivable. Since then there has been a split between those who want roads and those who want rail and other forms of transport.

In consequence planners have opted out and said let's have more of everything; roads, buses (including guided buses), trams; never understanding that hard choices need to be made. You can't have bits of everything.

Technology is not the solution. There is great talk at conferences at the moment about tech solutions, e.g. the hyperloop. They don't work. We are just getting offered endless iterations of Smart Cities. We get movement being offered as a service. AVs will be nothing like the nirvana being presented. We won't be turfing over suburbia anytime soon and driverless cars won't become ubiquitous.

In summary: We need to map out a transport strategy. We need both the right policies and the right politics – a plan, a champion and a transport guru (so the strategy doesn't get forgotten). Transport is central - but it will still get forgotten. Sustainable transport is an imperative, but investment and a sustained drive is essential to achieve it.

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Jenny Raggett (JR) - see presentation [here](#)

There are so many fine words around at the moment about integrating transport and new homes, but what is being built in real life? Transport for New Homes went to look – in places across the country and also in the Netherlands. The predominant thing it found¹ was car-based living, with expanses of tarmac (30-40% is not-uncommon), but deserted until 5.30 pm when the cars came back.

A lot of places are not really connected to the rest of the world. Places are being built without pavements – something that happens if you don't have clear policies. The NPPF tends to revert to the lowest quality achievable.


In Europe there is an expectation of public transport. It is normal. If you want to attract people then you need to build in modern, integrated public transport.

There are advantages to urban quarters, as people like to have a pub, but they tend to be quite expensive.

In summary: There are many lessons to be learnt from the Netherlands, maybe call in the Dutch to help on the Ox-Cam Arc. Car based suburban sprawl is what happens if you don't pay attention, and it is really horrible. We need spatial planning with public transport at its heart

¹ <http://www.transportfornewhomes.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/transport-for-new-homes-summary-web.pdf>

Housing and Landscape Infrastructure

Gemma Burgess  – see presentation [here](#)

Current work includes research into the value of planning obligations and the provision of affordable housing as well as alternative models of housing solutions.

Housing sits at the heart of the development of the Digital Built Britain (DBB) database emerging from government. This is not just about providing more efficiency, but also about quality and interactions with wider social issues.

The housing numbers envisaged in the NIC/5th Studio report² are very high, a population increase of 1.4 million people by 2050. But a lack of suitable housing should be seen as a fundamental risk to the success of the area.

Within the national context there is a lack of supply, only a small number of volume house builders (who have no plan to expand their operations) and a lack of innovation.

The growth areas are a victim of their own success and, with typically low-density development, have resulted in extremely high house prices and rents and a shortage of sites. Demand continues to grow much faster than supply. How are we going to build if the private sector isn't going to build more – and who will build it? Are new public/private partnerships (PPPs) possible, new joint ventures or land assembly vehicles?

² <http://www.5thstudio.co.uk/projects/oxford-milton-keynes-cambridge-corridor/>

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Gemma Burgess ^[1]_[SEP] – continued ...

How can we capture land value? 70% of affordable housing comes from Section 106 contributions. The Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is not delivering the values prospected. Since 2014 negotiations have been allowed around viability; leading, as a result of asymmetric negotiation skills between housing providers and Local Authorities, to reductions in housing obligations. Just because housing is high value it can't be assumed that the value will be captured.

New Town legislation allowed land to be purchased at near to use-value. Can we develop PPPs building on New Town legislation and the 2007 Neighbourhood Planning Act to acquire land? Is there an appetite for this together with compulsory acquisition? To build sustainably, at scale and at speed will require different build and delivery model/s, but with building still a cottage industry and factories hugely expensive this is very challenging. Is the Arc an opportunity to grasp this and do innovation at scale?

In summary: Will housing in the Arc be [solely] market-led and if so how can diversity in the offer be achieved. How can land value be captured and be used to provide infrastructure and resolve the affordability issue? How can best use be made of public land and is it possible to come up with new models and housing mixes across the Arc? The number of homes that we need requires more than a tweak, it needs a transformation.

Tom Holbrook, Director - 5th Studio ^[1]_[SEP] – see presentation [here](#)

How do you look at growth and not end up killing the golden goose?

How do you think at a 100 mile scale? By looking at the rivers leading out to the Wash?

New planning is required at a large scale to get the development in the right areas, while avoiding green belt and SSSIs.

What the market is currently delivering is underwhelming, it is highly generic and there is no other choice on transport than the car. Another 1 million-plus people with their car outside their garage is a real problem - one that has to be sorted out if people are going to be attracted to new developments. The scale of the proposed 1 million new homes is 1 Glasgow, 2 Bristols, 6 Readings, 50 Newburys or 200 garden villages.

A key lesson to be learnt from the New Towns is to integrate development with an economic idea. Is it possible to include economic life in these new places? We used to have pride in including industry in development, now we build dull mono-cultural cities, towns and villages. The spatial consequences of decisions need to be rooted in places as they are.

Transit is the missing infrastructure...after trunk roads and east-west rail, you need the fine grain metropolitan scale transport


The study developed 9 typologies and superimposed these across the Arc, but it is their connections along with their relationship to the landscape that will underpin success.

In summary: The study is proposing landscape at scale with super-impositions and looking beyond towns to a new landscape. It is 100 mile, 1 million home thinking.

Social infrastructure

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Rebecca Tunstall  – see presentation [here](#)

Two ideas and some facts!

Who gets what in housing growth (15% growth in population, 32% growth in households, 44% growth in rooms)? We've been under-building at a housing level for a long time, but not in terms of the numbers of rooms. There has been growth in the number of rooms per person from 1.5 to 2.0. But who got this extra space?

Inclusive growth “allows people to contribute to and benefit from economic growth”. (Ianchovichina & Lundstrom, World Bank, 2009). We need housing growth and growth here is defined as mean space per person. But this needs to be achieved without increasing inequality. Housing growth in the last 3 decades has not been inclusive.

There is a problem with the current supply system. We want to do something different with growth, but we haven't achieved inclusive growth since the early part of the 20th century. In London for the last two decades we've had non-inclusive, non-growth, but in recent time Cambridge has just about achieved inclusive growth, while in Oxford it has been partly inclusive and in Milton Keynes non-inclusive, even though the numbers are better than in the rest of the UK

In summary: We've got to think housing tenure and size of homes. We've got to think about spreading benefits fairly.

Charles Crawford, Director, LDA Design – see presentation [here](#)

There are huge opportunities in the staggering scale of the growth envisaged in the NIC projections.

We need to focus on the people who are going to fill the new jobs being envisaged. What is the economic vision for the growth corridor/arc assuming that growth is going to happen. The quality of life has to attract and retain people and provide somewhere people will want to live and uproot their families for.

The Arc is aiming to compete at a global scale. What will it take to make it attractive to work and invest in?

There are many factors that attract people to a place (connection, sense of belonging, a feeling you could put down roots, identity, time-depth, nature). How do you create places that provide these factors, particularly for people who are not going to be able to afford to live in historic cities?

What have we already got in the Arc to help us? Answer: Some of England's finest landscapes between the Cotswolds, Berkshire Downs, Northamptonshire uplands and Chilterns.

In summary: What is required is a landscape-led masterplan bringing that from out there into here, the heart of the development.

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Facilitated discussions were held on the separate themes:

Rapporteurs reported back on the headlines of the discussions as follows:

Planning and Economic Infrastructure

Context: The project is well underway already. In 5 years the OxLEP has created 16,000 homes. Growth is being managed while also trying to plan strategically. A cross-leaders group is already running with workstreams on productivity, place-making and connectivity.

The Arc aggregates and increases potential for Oxfordshire

It is based on two pieces of linear infrastructure – but are linear solutions the ones required?

Should we be asking what infrastructure is needed to drive growth?

Other questions:

1. Natural resources – how will agriculture work, or water conservation?
2. How much of the infrastructure will be green infrastructure?
3. No Net Loss (NNL) is a formal government target. Is this possible with this level of development?
4. Democratic legitimacy - will the Arc be imposed, socialised or politically socialised?
5. Industrial Strategy – where does the Arc fit in? (Answer? - Ties together areas of the Industrial Strategy that need wider co-operation)
6. Value - is there anywhere that ties together these separate visions of how the Arc will add value? – Disparate understanding.

Notes:

- Don't bother with agricultural land planning – it leads to inefficiency
- Not clear who benefits [from Arc]. Will main users of Ox-Cam roads be from within the Arc?
- Inequality is definitely a major issue in both Cambridge and Oxford

- There is a need to go through all relevant central government policy to understand how they all fit and their relevance to the Arc.

Water

- The water required for the plan is not there and is already under huge pressure
- Government is promoting national and regional approaches to manage this.
- These actors need to be included in the Arc discussions
- Existing plans are based on Local Authority plans. It is difficult to take additional growth into account.
- Main strategy in SE is to reduce water use, not increase supply.

Such approaches need to be integrated into Arc planning.

Transport

- Objective should be to reduce car use. The growth plan should be constrained by this. Sequencing last mile is key – major infrastructure doesn't address this.
- Is there a need for a new form of regional planning?
 - Yes – but politically infeasible
 - Can existing structures be used for this?

Final points (roughly aligned with 3 work streams of Cross-corridor Leaders

Group):

1. Place-based decision-making.
2. Don't do infrastructure-led growth
3. There is need for a new form of regional spatial planning (ideally built on existing structures e.g. Cross-corridor leadership group)
4. Environmental piece is missing. To what extent can/should it be carbon neutral / no net Loss / net environmental? It should be built from an environmental base, e.g. water has to be integrated from the start.

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Transport Infrastructure

Recommendations:

1. Agreeing in advance the transport mode shift to be achieved and rigorously planning for it.
2. Working with what we've got and putting in place a hierarchy of provision around it.
3. Considering transport as an essential service in the same way as the NHS.
4. Starting with the installation of a 4-track rail system and developing around its nodes (although it's recognised that as the investment model is broken we may need to build up to it).

Housing and Landscape Infrastructure

Recommendations for new models:

1. Leadership – Case studies show that this has been delivered, but not always. There is a need for focused housing delivery units within public/private partnerships; ideally linked with planmaking - more resources are needed to support this. Must include partnerships beyond LPA boundaries and around functional economic areas.
2. Quality – Clear principles are required to deliver landscape-led planning, ecosystems/natural capital planning and net zero carbon planning.
3. Innovation – New financial models are required to leverage land value capture. Clarity on infrastructure planning and costs is needed, most of all to deliver diversity of supply (& affordability) where there is currently market failure.

Social Infrastructure

Recommendations:

1. Re-incentivise the commercial model using existing and new Treasury tools
2. Long-term regional government
3. Community involvement in vision/planning and delivery

Government response

- The current investment model probably isn't working. It will be necessary to take a transformational approach in the area. A case for it will have to be made – can government champion the change in outlook required?
- A proper structure will be needed for where development is to go and how to pay for it. We need regional spatial planning.
- New ways of working – can maximum impact be achieved from these really interesting ideas
- Can a joint vision be developed with local partners?

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Discussion

Landscape:

- The importance of landscape: Use principles of Biophilic cities and building in the landscape
- Look at the landscape of Milton Keynes
- The lack of trees [in current planning proposition] very depressing. There is no money in Local Authorities to look after trees and the landscape. Unless developers are controlled that will also revert to the minimum landscape provision
- Landscape can be transformational
- A Natural Environment Commissioner on the NIC would send out a very clear message.

Response: it would make sense for a member of the advisory group to be someone with an environmental background.

Planning principles:

- Hasn't the problem been approached the wrong way round starting with growth first, then infrastructure?
- Place making is where we want to get to, but the process [of planning for the Arc] has not been ideal
- There has been a lot about living but not much about work. Transport is still needed, even if workplaces are relatively near residential areas.
- The elephant in the room is what the expressway might have been if it was properly planned over a period of time. What about a long boulevard?
- Is the motorway needed?
- There is some evidence of success of development on radial routes (e.g. M11 or M1), but orbital routes are far more problematic.
- Is the road for connecting from port to port? Is the purpose of the housing to finance the road, housing that will then jam up the road?

Response: it is a strategic need.

Response: Highways England is consulting on the road³ and information is available from them.

Collaboration:

- There hasn't been enough cross-departmental budgeting. Can we do anything about it?
- 4 out of 5 departments have come to Milton Keynes for exploratory site visits. Government has to learn how to innovate better.
- Co-ordinated planning is required at every level – at the moment it is just not happening. It would mean relinquishing power by central government, but ...
- Can different departments come together to offer the joined up approach necessary to create the world's first zero-carbon arc?
- Response: Government is thinking about how the arc comes together as a portfolio of interests in order to make it more than the sum of its parts. It is trying to draw these together but it is hard to deliver when each department has its own separate set of objectives – but the principle is the right one.

Response: Aim of MHCLG's portfolio approach is to tackle sheer breadth of issues being talked about. It will take several Milton Keynes to deliver this, plus the motorway, plus the train track!

Response: If you are going to invest in infrastructure, the question then becomes how to get the greatest advantage out of it, how to develop [real] communities

³https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/739893/strategic-outline-business-case.pdf

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Environmental impact:

- There is a problem with traffic impact from the Expressway on the peace of the canal
- Climate change has been missing from the discussion
- If this was an ark rather than an arc we would be thinking very hard about ecosystems, the natural environment and biomass. See the example of the Thames Gateway studies, including Terry Farrell's plan. Kim Wilkie's Thames Landscape Plan also still going strong after 25 years. We need a strategy for the rivers.
- Air pollution issues already exist in the area (e.g. in Oxford). How will the expressway help make Oxford a zero emission city?

Services:

- Regional power generation and self-sufficiency are absolutely critical

People:

- People and making people-friendly environments have been missing from the discussion. Highway design should be overturned to create children-focused infrastructure provision. Is it [legally] negligent not to provide safe environments for 12-year olds to use?
- No local authority is near meeting targets for affordable housing needs

National Infrastructure Commission (NIC):

- What is the remit of the NIC on this project? Is it to maximise the economic power of the arc or is it (for example) to meet the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

Response – The NIC is an advisory body. It is the role of Government to make the strategic choices. The goals for the arc haven't been set yet. Both the opportunities and the demand are huge and it offers the jobs and growth the country needs. In due course the goals will (probably) be set.

Vision:

- Is the arc going to deliver in a different way? It could be visionary. It is an opportunity to challenge the existing economic model. It could use co-ownership, co-ops, CLTs and bring forward new businesses and benefit for the community.
- Corridor must not just be about housebuilding. We should first develop a good environment for the locality and increase welfare benefits for the region. The level of impact that the region can achieve will be limited/liberated by this.

Conclusion:

- The symposium has been a rich source of ideas, intelligence and commitment. The lesson might be that you've got to be bold, innovative and inclusive of all interests. Thank you.

The Edge, January 2019, v3b

Note: A 'further reading' list is available on the Edge's website at <http://www.edgedebate.com/?p=3378>, along with a list of attendees, images of the discussion and the rapporteurs' notes.