

Shared regional principles for protecting, restoring and enhancing the environment in the Oxford to Cambridge Arc

In March 2019, Government and local partners set out their ambition for the Arc in a joint declaration¹:

“We want better places to live, which are beautiful and inspiring, to benefit the Arc’s residents today as well as tomorrow. The Government has already set out its intention for the Arc to embody England’s 25 Year Environment Plan, which we will work together to deliver, including through planning for local natural capital. We want new developments to use intelligent and sensitive design to create or enhance habitats and improve habitat connectivity, in situ and in the surrounding area. We also want to improve access to the environment for existing and new communities in order to improve health and wellbeing.”

“Conserving and enhancing the natural environment is at the heart of Government’s ambitions for the Arc. The 25 Year Environment Plan also sets out our comprehensive approach to improving landscapes and habitats, and the aspiration to move to a policy of net environmental gain. We expect the policy for the wider Oxford-Cambridge corridor to embody this approach.”

An Environment Working Group (EWG) has been established to take forward the environmental pillar outlined within the ambition document. The EWG will work with partners in the Arc, including those responsible for the other pillars, to ensure that the protection and enhancement of the environment is at the heart of decision-making and any actions are based on a clear and agreed evidence base.

In October 2020 an economic prospectus for the Arc was published jointly by local authorities and the Local Enterprise Partnerships within the Arc. It outlines the following vision:

“By 2050, the Arc will be a world leading place for high-value growth, innovation and productivity. A global hub where ideas and companies are generated and thrive, home to exemplary models of 21st century development, with a high-quality environment and outstanding quality of life, and with a strong economic focus that drives inclusive clean growth.”

The environmental principles supporting this vision are set out in this document. They are ambitious and will require the collective effort of all partners in the Arc if they are to be delivered.

The regional principles have been written and agreed by the Arc’s local partners and stakeholders. They are informed by Government policy. They are a clear statement of regional intent that will help to clarify that ambition, and the commitment to adopting an approach that results in environmentally sustainable economic growth. This includes the protection, restoration and

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/799993/OxCam_Arc_Ambition.pdf

enhancement of the environment (air, water, land, soil, biodiversity), net biodiversity and net environmental gain, net zero carbon, the sustainable use of resources.

The principles align with the government's 25 Year Environment Plan² and the commitment in the joint declaration to embody the 25 year plans goals and ambitions. We will also take account of other appropriate government strategies, plans and guidance. Our aim is for the principles to inform and become an integral part of developing plans and statements in relation to the Arc, local plans, local council activities and the plans and activities of activities and delivery programs for all bodies operating in the Arc. It is also our ambition to see universities, private sector development and third sector organisations adopt these principles.

The principles address how we will tackle some of the biggest challenges of our time: achieving net zero carbon, climate resilience, biodiversity net gain, environmental net gain, doubling the area of land actively managed for nature, restoring, protecting and enhancing the natural environment and ensuring renewable natural capital (resources derived from living things that if properly managed can be replenished) remains available for future generations.

The principles

The Arc partners will seek to:

1. **Work towards net zero carbon at an Arc level** no later than 2040. This will include:
 - a. Ensuring all **decisions about development and new infrastructure support this goal.**
 - b. Working with Government to **enhance building regulations and planning policy to actively reduce the carbon footprint of, and energy consumption in, new buildings.**
 - c. Pursuing a **major programme of transformation** in existing settlements and infrastructure to reduce energy intensity and carbon emissions.
 - d. Construction, operational and transport activities.
2. **Protect, restore, enhance and create new nature areas and natural capital assets**, including nationally and locally designated wildlife sites and priority habitats, and links between them. We will implement the spatial planning mitigation hierarchy of avoid, minimise, remediate, compensate and gain. This will include:
 - a. Doubling the area of land managed primarily for nature in the Arc (**'Doubling Nature'**). To contribute to Government's commitment to protecting 30% of land for nature conservation by 2030. We will seek to maximise public, private and third sector funding opportunities **to protect, restore and enhance the natural environment** and maintain existing, and increase investment in, natural capital assets, working with partners including major landowners and our important agriculture sector across the Arc.
 - b. Coordinating work on local nature recovery strategies and the Arc's contribution to **the Nature Recovery Network for England** by creating more, bigger, better-

² [A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment](#)

connected places, in the required condition, for nature including landscape scale interventions.

- c. Delivering **biodiversity net gain for Town & Country Planning Act developments of 20%**. This is above the 10% Government mandated minimum to reflect the Arc's world leading environmental ambitions.
 - d. Delivering **biodiversity net gain for all developments of 20% with a minimum requirement of 10%** including Nationally Significant Infrastructure and projects brought forward outside of the Town & Country Planning Act. This is to reflect the Arc's world leading environmental ambitions.
 - e. **Working with Government to develop a suitable net environment gain metric that** incorporates biodiversity net gain and, once available, to set an ambitious target to reflect the Arc's world leading environmental ambitions.
 - f. Establishing **human and nature mobility corridors** across the Arc – using existing or new transport corridors for maximum environmental benefit/gain.
 - g. **Increasing tree and woodland cover across the Arc from 8.3%³ to 19%⁴**. This is in recognition of the ability of trees and woodlands to deliver a wide range of environmental, health, social and economic benefits. We will ensure the right trees are planted in the right places.
 - h. Protecting and enhancing protected landscapes. Enhancing landscape character areas, recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the wider countryside.
3. **Be an exemplar for environmentally sustainable development, in line with the ambitions set out in the government's 25 year plan. This will incorporate a systems-based and integrated assessment and implementation approach and will fully recognise the associated health and wellbeing benefits. We will aim to go beyond the minimum legislated requirements for development. This will include:**
- a. **All new settlements, urban extensions and infrastructure contributing to the achievement of delivering net biodiversity gain, net environmental gain, and net zero carbon** both in site and route selection and in the design of settlements and transport corridors. In addition, areas of tranquillity will be protected and measures taken to avoid light pollution and protect dark sky areas. Making cycling and walking more attractive ways to travel and investing in zero emission public transport of the future.
 - b. **Understanding the impact of development on the natural environment**, including cumulative and indirect impacts (taking into account associated housing and other forms of development), so that these can be addressed in line with the mitigation

³ Data relates to woodland cover as taken from the Forestry Commission's National Forest Inventory

⁴ Based on recommendations of the Committee on Climate Change advice to Government on how to achieve net zero emissions by 2050

hierarchy, and carrying out environmental and strategic assessments as appropriate for the type and scale of development programmes including options and proper community consultation.

- c. Understanding the Arc's environmental capacity to accommodate different levels of growth and development in different locations and **ensuring that planned growth and development remains well within environmental capacity limits.**
 - d. Working with Government to **enhance the building regulations and the role of planning policy so that they align with sustainability principles, and actively reduce the carbon footprint, water and energy consumption** in new and existing buildings. We will encourage Arc local partners to exceed the minimum standards required by building regulations.
 - e. Promoting the switch to renewable and other sustainable energy supplies, improving travel choices, and supporting changing working practices. This will enable **improvements to the design and development of sustainable communities and the protection and enhancement of the natural environment.**
4. **Ensure that existing and new communities see real benefits from living in the Arc** including through:
- a. **Maximising the health and wellbeing benefits of nature** by providing sector-leading areas of accessible nature-rich greenspace in, and accessible to, new settlements, urban extensions and commercial zones and increasing and enhancing greenspace, and access to it, for existing settlements in the Arc.
 - b. **Promoting and increasing equality of sustainable access to nature and its benefits** by investing in, increasing and enhancing nature-rich greenspace in the places and communities where it is most lacking. We will improve access to greenspace and nature, ensuring Natural England's Access to Natural Greenspace standards, and (once available) Green Infrastructure Standards, are maximised for existing housing and delivered for future developments.
5. **Use natural resources wisely by:**
- a. Working to address existing **water resource, water quality and flood management issues** and through an integrated approach across the water agenda ensure future issues and risks are managed, including in the context of climate change, with a focus on nature-based interventions.
 - b. Ensuring that soil quality is properly protected and improved including within development, infrastructure and agricultural activities.
 - c. Making **more efficient use and management of waste and resources**, working towards a circular economy with no net waste and promoting the use of sustainable building materials and construction guidelines.

- d. Working with local authorities to share best practice and coordinate action being taken on local **air quality management plans** including addressing emissions from agriculture and from installations regulated by the Environment Agency.
- e. Supporting the development of interventions that reduce the **impact of agriculture on the environment** and support productivity.
- f. Helping to build collaboration between farmers to generate catchment and landscape scale environmental improvement under the **Environmental Land Management Scheme**.
- g. Ensuring that the required mineral resources for the Arc are sourced in an environmentally sensitive manner and that mineral sites are restored in a coordinated manner to after-uses that benefit nature and people, as well as helping to provide ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and water management.

We will continue to work with the other Arc pillars to develop appropriate environmental principles for incorporation within these workstreams.

We will review and update the environmental principles in the light of developing policies, practices, evidence, experience, knowledge and governance arrangements.

6. Resourcing our ambitions

To achieve delivery of these principles we will need to work collaboratively across the public, private and third sectors. Some resources are already in place and there are many more that we will need. As a starting point we will:

- Build on the work of the Arc Local Natural Capital Plan and the associated work in the 5 counties to **make publicly available, agreed baseline maps for natural capital and ecosystem services across the Arc**. Resources will be required to maintain the data and make it accessible.
- Work with the statutory agencies and with local councils to ensure ready **access to the wide range of environmental data** currently collected by them.
- **Work with government to agree methodologies** for both net biodiversity gain and net environment gain for use within the Arc. We will establish a technical group(s) to

assess net gain propositions on behalf of local planning authorities and provide planning committees with independent advice.

- **Support and promote a 5 yearly environmental census** across the Arc including promoting public engagement through citizen science approaches.
- Use **evidence on health, deprivation and ecosystem services demand** (e.g. for air quality improvement) to inform planning for greenspace, habitats and **natural capital assets**.
- Work with all those that fund nature improvement work across the Arc including the Defra Group, water companies, environmental Non-Governmental Organisations, local councils, catchment partnerships, housing and commercial property developers and infrastructure providers, together with those allocating Environment Land Management System funding, and private investors to **take a more efficient and effective systems based approach to natural capital and ecosystem systems based interventions**. We will seek to ensure that funding is used strategically and not in a piecemeal way.
- **Invest in projects that deliver natural capital and environmental benefits**, such as carbon sequestration, pollinator habitats, soil improvement, flood alleviation and water resource resilience, and establish Arc-wide and more local Natural Capital Investment Plans to inform and support the emerging Arc Spatial Framework.

Monitoring

We will pursue our commitment as outlined within these principles and will work with government and local partners on the development of associated metrics and targets in line with the 25 Year Environment Plan, carbon reduction commitments and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Engagement

We will engage and consult with communities, residents and people working in the Arc, as well as businesses, other organisations and NGOs, on the vision and ambitions for sustainable environmental growth in the Arc.

This document is supported by the Arc Leadership Group, Arc Universities Environment Group, Arc Local Enterprise Partnerships, England's Economic Heartland, and has been drafted with input from the Arc Local Nature Partnerships whose members include representatives from environment NGOs, local councils, LEPs, developers, businesses, business representation bodies, the Environment Agency, Natural England, and the Forestry Commission and important contributions from central government departments, other environment NGOs and businesses.