

Berkshire
Buckinghamshire
Oxfordshire



Bedfordshire
Cambridgeshire
Northamptonshire



Media release

For immediate publication

Government must urgently rethink Oxford-Cambridge Arc to protect nature and climate

Proposals for significant new housing and infrastructure development are bypassing critical safeguards for environment

Government plans for rapid growth and development between Oxford and Cambridge, known as the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, risk damaging impacts on nature and climate unless they urgently rethink their approach, according to nature conservation and countryside charities the RSPB, The Woodland Trust, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust, The Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire, and CPRE.

The charities say Government proposals for increased house building and infrastructure development – including new towns – are bypassing critical processes for safeguarding the environment. They are calling on Government to rethink their plans and asking people to [respond to a public consultation](#) on ‘the Arc’ to tell Government they want to see nature and climate prioritised and prevent unsustainable and damaging development.

How is Government’s current approach to the Arc putting nature and the environment at risk?

1. Government is bypassing critical steps and processes designed to protect nature by ensuring environmental impacts are considered. **For example:**
 - Proposals for new settlements between Bedford and Cambridge are being developed ahead of sustainability and environmental assessments of Government’s overall growth plans.
 - East West Rail is moving to choose a route for the new line between Bletchley and Cambridge, which will determine where new housing is built, but has not been subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment of the options and their environmental impacts.

[\[Note 1\]](#)

2. The consultation does not support or even mention the [environmental ambitions](#) adopted by a majority of the Arc's council leaders as well as many of its universities and leading business organisations.

These ambitions aim to reduce the environmental impact of growth and make a positive contribution to nature recovery and tackling climate change but have been ignored by Government since their publication in March this year. [\[Note 2\]](#)

3. Government has yet to announce any specific commitments to or targets for restoring nature in the Arc or adopting higher standards of environmental sustainability in the new houses and infrastructure its proposals will see built.

The charities say that Government must rethink its plans for the Arc to ensure that, *if* they go ahead, they protect the natural environment and respond to the linked nature and climate emergencies by restoring nature across Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire.

A Government consultation is asking people for their views on what the priorities should be for the future of the Arc.

The charities are encouraging people to [respond](#) by highlighting the importance of protecting and restoring nature and sharing their concerns about the damage unsustainable growth and development could do if Government doesn't rethink its approach.

Ask Government to rethink their plans for the Arc to make them better for nature: [click here](#) to complete the [Rethink the Arc](#) campaign action.

Quotes

Emma Marsh, RSPB England Director:

"If the Government's plans for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc are to go ahead, they must make good on their stated aim for the Arc to be a world-leader in tackling the nature and climate crisis. The plans cannot be allowed to circumvent environmental safeguards designed to protect nature and they absolutely must adopt ambitious targets for restoring nature and tackling climate change.

"Nature is critical to the health of people and communities, the environment, and the economy. Protecting and restoring nature is vital for any transition to a greener, more sustainable future. That is why we are urging Government to rethink the Arc to ensure their plans protect and restore nature."

Estelle Bailey, Chief Executive, BBOWT:

"The Government's plans for the OxCam Arc do not properly consider the impact on nature. As long as this is the case, they are a failure. You cannot plan for sustainable growth without factoring in the costs to the environment. But even that is the bare minimum. As it stands, funds will only be created to restore nature across the Arc *if development takes place*. Funding for nature's restoration cannot be solely dependent on development. We have taken and used so much of what nature offers for generations, without paying it back. Now is the time for ambitious plans to restore nature on a landscape scale, in its own right."

Matt Jackson, Conservation Director, Beds, Cambs and Northants Wildlife Trust:

“There is a window of opportunity here to make a big difference for wildlife in one of the most nature depleted parts of the UK. The OxCam Arc was supposed to be an example of economic and housing growth planned with environmental sustainability at its heart. But what we’re seeing is a worrying lack of ambition when it comes to both protecting nature and creating new habitats for threatened species.

“We can’t continue to build homes, offices and roads for humans without thinking about homes, habitats and landscapes for birds, mammals, butterflies and bees.”

Toby Bancroft, Woodland Trust Director for Central England:

“It’s astounding that the Government has set out a draft vision for the Growth Arc which does not even mention the environmental ambitions which that have been agreed by a majority of the Arc’s council leaders as well as many of its universities and leading business organisations. At a time when there is urgency to act to start reversing the serious twin climate and biodiversity crisis we now face, plans for Nature should be front and centre, with vision and ambition – committing to the doubling of land managed for nature and an increase in tree cover from 7.4% to 19%, could be transformative if delivered sensitively and at scale. Government needs to rethink their vision for the Growth Arc to ensure that these vital environmental considerations are included.”

Andrew Wood, CPRE’s spatial planning lead:

“It’s alarming that the consultation document doesn’t mention the environmental ambitions that local leaders and stakeholders had previously published. In the midst of climate and nature emergencies the Arc vision must show how it will reduce greenhouse gas emissions, restore nature, soils and rivers, enhance landscapes, enable sustainable farming and a countryside that works for everyone. If it doesn’t do so, then the Arc is set up to fail.”

ENDS

For more information please contact

RSPB: E: Rupert.masefield@rspb.org.uk M: 07709 821511

BBOWT: E: lisspeight@bbowt.org.uk M: 07845 014524

Notes to editors

1. Government launched a public consultation on the vision and priorities for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc on Tuesday 20 July. <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/creating-a-vision-for-the-oxford-cambridge-arc>

The consultation will run for 12 weeks, closing on 11 October.

The main consultation [document](#), ‘Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc’, states on p.35, para 5.8:

In parallel to the development of the Spatial Framework, the government is also exploring options to speed up new housing and infrastructure development in the Arc

to help meet its ambitions, where evidence supports it. This includes examining (and where appropriate, developing) the case for new and/or expanded settlements in the Arc, including options informed by possible East West Rail stations between Bedford and Cambridge and growth options at Cambridge itself.

Alongside the vision consultation Government is consulting on a [Sustainability Appraisal Scoping Report](#) that sets out the proposed scope and process for planned Sustainability Appraisal (SA) and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the Spatial Framework and the strategic development it is intended to guide. *New and/or expanded settlements* are not mentioned anywhere in the Scoping Report or its [Annex](#), meaning they will not be considered in the scope of any SA and SEA process, fundamentally undermining the assessment of the cumulative environmental impacts of these potential new and/or expanded settlements in combination with other strategic growth.

Meanwhile, East West Rail has declined to undertake a Strategic Environmental Assessment of the different route options for the line between Bletchley and Cambridge, meaning there will be no strategic assessment of the environmental impacts of this scheme in combination with the new housing and *new and/or expanded settlements* it is explicitly designed to unlock. See [RSPB June 2021 response to the latest non-statutory public consultation on EWR](#).

2. In March 2021, the Arc Leadership Group published their [Shared regional principles for protecting, restoring and enhancing the environment in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc](#), which include among them
 1. ensuring development in the Arc stays “well within environmental limits”
 2. achieving net zero carbon in the Arc by 2040
 3. doubling the area of land managed for nature by 2050

Most council leaders across the Arc, LEPs and the Arc Universities Group have supported the ‘Environment Principles’.

The RSPB, Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust, and the Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs and Northants, [welcomed the publication of the principles](#) and called on Government to support and help deliver these ambitious goals of protecting, restoring and enhancing the natural environment in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc.

To date though, the Westminster Government has not publicly acknowledged or responded to the publication of the Environment Principles, and they are absent from MHCLG’s consultation, *Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc*.

In contrast the consultation does refer to publications that describe Arc local leaders’ and Government ambitions for economic growth and accelerated rates of house building:

1. [The Oxford-Cambridge Arc Economic Prospectus, published by the Arc Leadership in October 2020](#)
2. [Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, The Oxford-Cambridge Arc: Government ambition and joint declaration between Government and local partners](#), March 2019.

3. The RPSB, Woodland Trust, Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs and Northants, Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT), and CPRE are asking Government to rethink their plans for the Arc to prioritise protecting and restoring nature and tackling climate change by:
 1. Reviewing the economic growth, housing and infrastructure ambitions for the Arc to ensure they protect nature and landscapes.
 2. Making protecting and restoring nature and tackling climate change a top priority and a strict requirement for all future growth and development in the Arc.
 3. Adopting the ambitious goals set out in the "Shared Regional Principles for Protecting, Restoring and Enhancing the Environment in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc" and embedding these in the vision and policy that will shape the future of the Arc.
 4. Ensuring that decisions about key infrastructure projects like East West Rail, and potential new settlements, are informed by rigorous environmental assessments.
 5. Investing in and supporting nature's recovery in the Arc regardless of the level of future economic growth and development in the region.

View the full campaign action: [Rethink the Arc](#)

4. The RSPB, Woodland Trust, Wildlife Trust for Beds Cambs and Northants and the Berks, Bucks & Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) have long opposed the environmental damage that plans for the ARC would cause. BBOWT campaigned against proposals for a major new road, the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway, which was cancelled earlier this year. Read more BBOWT [here](#) BCN [here](#).