The sinking of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc: Strategic planning in England at a nadir?

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Abstract

There is a clear consensus amongst both academic commentators and the professional community that current arrangements for strategic planning in England are inadequate. The withdrawal of central government from leadership of the proposed 'Oxford-Cambridge Arc' in early 2022 marks a particular nadir, not least given the ambitions for the planning of the area set out only a year earlier. This paper offers a conjunctural reading of the failure of the proposed Arc Spatial Framework, emphasising that not only was the process of planning the Arc itself problematical, but it also faced wider governmental and political headwinds which fuelled public opposition to the scheme, reduced central government commitment, and redirected political priorities elsewhere. In this context the prospects for the future of strategic planning in England appear rather bleak.

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Introduction: The current state of strategic planning in England

Operating at regional, sub-regional and city-regional scales, strategic planning is concerned with the future of cities and regions and major cross-boundary issues of economic development, housing, environmental management and infrastructure. It is characterised by a number of key activities and objectives including: First, a focus on selectivity and prioritisation, highlighting the conception of problems to be faced, the consideration of responses, and the need for clear prioritisation to underpin effective policy-making and delivery (Albrechts, 2004); second, the imagination and management of urban and regional transformation and the concern to 'shape the dynamics through which larger urban regions evolve' (Healey, 2009: 440); and third associated questions of governance including who should make decisions over future directions, at what spatial scales, and how these decisions should be legitimated? What are the appropriate relationships between different levels of governance? And what are the associated arrangements for transparency and accountability?

International experience shows that effective strategic planning can be delivered in a range of governance arrangements from top-down to bottom-up systems and from decentralised to federal structures (LWSE, 2021). The most well-known examples of regional strategic planning tend to be those imposed from above such as the Métropole du Grand Paris (Enright, 2016) and the creation of the Toronto Mega Region (Nelles 2012; Taylor 2015). These are typically high-profile, designed to contribute to state and national government development objectives as much as to regional evolution, and accompanied by statutory arrangements that establish benchmarks, confer powers, and institutionally entrench new planning and governance structures. England has experimented with various forms of these top-

down approaches with Regional Development Agencies (RDAs), Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), and the Greater London authority (GLA), among others, adopting many of these principles with different degrees of local inputs, varied mechanisms for the representation of local authorities, and different resource profiles. Broadly, the approach here has tended to be very prescriptive of the structures, geographies, and functions of planning entities, without delegating commensurate resources or capabilities. Experience suggests, however, that the lack of formal powers to prepare and implement a strategy can be offset by embedded and extensive engagement processes with external arbitration (LWSE 2021), though there is clearly a distinction between countries which have sub-national government as part of their constitutional arrangements and the English case where sub-national structures are creatures of Parliament.

Recently, in their response to *Planning for the Future*, the Conservative Government's Planning White Paper released in August 2020, the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) made clear their position on the current state of strategic planning in England:

> Complex 21st century issues, such as the transition to net zero carbon, will continue to require long-term strategic planning across functional geographies and sectoral boundaries, with early and proactive engagement from a range of stakeholders. The Duty to Cooperate is widely recognised as being insufficient to this task. However, the White Paper offers no accountability for the dismantling of formal regional planning by successive governments, and the contribution this has had to the poor planning outcomes and complexity seen today.
> The void in governance for strategic planning has required new institutions and partnerships to emerge, including mayoral combined authorities, sub-national transport bodies, joint planning committees and non-statutory growth boards, along with direct intervention from government in places like the Oxford-

Cambridge Arc. While beneficial, these too have resulted in fragmented and complex governance arrangements. (RTPI, 2020 p7)

This reflects a clear consensus amongst both the professional Planning community and academic commentators that current arrangements for strategic planning in England are inadequate (see, *inter alia*: Boddy and Hickman, 2013; CCN/CRA, 2020, 2021; Geraghty, 2020; Gordon and Champion, 2021; HC CLG Committee, 2011; McGuiness and Mawson, 2017; RTPI, 2020). In short, the removal of Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) created a gap between national and local levels which has not been adequately filled. Subsequently, a complex patchwork of institutional and policy forms has emerged which lacks overall cohesion and rationale. The current approach is therefore difficult to interpret and to manage, provides little basis for consistency across larger areas, and is at once both congested and attenuated. Despite some positive experiences in particular cases, the overall picture is one of complexity along with a lack of transparency and accountability. Moreover, 96% of respondents to a County Council's Network survey on the 2020 White Paper were either concerned or very concerned about the 'lack of proposals around strategic planning and replacement of the duty to cooperate' (CCN/CRA, 2021: 5).

The current shortcomings derive from multiple causes (see for example Harrison, Galland and Tewdwr-Jones 2021a, 2021b). First, following the removal and revocation of RSS, the Duty to Cooperate was introduced as a legal requirement for cross-boundary engagement on strategic planning matters but was widely seen as ineffective (Boddy and Hickman, 2013; DCLG, 2017: para 1.9). Abolition of the Duty was incorporated in *Planning for the Future*, though no clear alternative was proposed at the time and the position remains unresolved in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill (LURB) introduced to Parliament in May 2022. Alternative 'joint spatial plans' (formal development plan documents, prepared under Section 28 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004) have generally lacked sustained

institutional and political support, resulting in limited or contested spatial detail, ineffective planning processes in some cases, and slow progress in others.

Second, strategic planning practice has been set against a background of sustained and even 'super-' austerity, effectively shifting responsibility for deep spending cuts and service reductions to local levels, with major implications for local government capabilities (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016; Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012). In May 2019 the Institute for Fiscal Studies reported that average local government spending on services in England had declined by 21% in real terms since 2009-10, with spending on planning, development and housing down by more than 50% over the period, and highways and transport services down more than 40% (IFS, 2019). A concomitant decline of strategic planning capacity has been apparent across all tiers of government, with the loss of experienced strategic planners capable of integrated systems thinking in support of sustainable growth (CCN/CRA, 2021: 19).

Third, local government structures have become an assortment of unitary, combined and two-tier arrangements operating at diverse scales and with varied patterns of leadership and powers, including with regard to strategic planning (Sturzaker and Nurse, 2020). Combined Authorities, for example, have core competencies in transport, skills and economic development, each with its own bespoke devolution 'deal' negotiated with central government and more encompassing powers where a directly elected Mayor is accountable for decisions made over devolved matters. Further progress with local government reorganisation had been expected in a 'Devolution and Recovery' white paper in 2020, though this generated a good degree of opposition amongst local authorities, resulting in a long delay of the paper which was then superseded by the LURB. There are also signs of tension around proposed 'County-Deals' and deal-based policy more generally has received critical academic attention, with authors noting the ongoing reality of central government influence and direction (O'Brien and Pike, 2018; Wall and Viela, 2016; Sandford et al, 2017),

as well as the overall constraints imposed by austerity (Shaw and Tewdwr-Jones, 2017; Beel, Jones and Rees-Jones, 2018). Additionally, strategic planning has been impacted by governmental and policy issues including siloed and inflexible approaches to devolution amongst government departments and agencies (HC CLG Committee, 2021: para 27), uncertainties around the status and future of Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), the vague specification of the levelling-up agenda, and a predominant focus on housing numbers over wider issues of infrastructure and place-making (CCN/CRA, 2021: 37).

Clearly the general context for strategic planning has not been propitious, though it should be noted that positive cases are also evident. The London Plan, as a formal spatial development strategy, has statutory foundation and clear lines of leadership, accountability and scrutiny through the London Mayor and the GLA (though on the limits of planning the wider London metropolitan region see Bowie, 2014; Gordon and Champion, 2021). In Greater Manchester, the Mayoral Combined Authority progressed a joint development plan for nine of its councils, despite the withdrawal of Stockport Council from the previous Greater Manchester Spatial Framework plans in December 2020. Elsewhere, some local authorities worked to cut through the congestion. The Cambridge and Peterborough Independent Economic Review (2018), for example, provided a well-regarded single strategic position to help unlock further fiscal devolution and deliver growth, though institutional tensions subsequently emerged.

However, these more encouraging experiences have generally been outweighed by more fundamental problems: Regional planning has been anathema to governments committed to a predominantly centrally-orchestrated localism since 2010 (MacKinnon, 2018; Peck, 1995); replacement arrangements have been largely ineffective; the diversity of governance structures complicates potential responses; and ongoing restructuring and *ad-hoc* experimentation has gradually exhausted and

undermined strategic planning capacities (cf. Jones, 2019). It is into this very difficult context that ambitions for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc - a putative Silicon Valley for the UK - were formally introduced by the National Infrastructure Commission (a new executive agency inaugurated responsible for providing expert advice to the UK Government on infrastructure and related issues) from 2016 (NIC, 2016, 2017). The NIC's early impetus behind the Arc then gradually led to the eventual launch of an Arc Spatial Framework planning process in February 2021 (MHCLG, 2021).

The paper now moves on to recount the failure of this strategic planning process, focusing firstly on the overall conception of the area and the associated governance and policy approaches, and secondly on the evolving context of political opposition and declining central government enthusiasm within which the Arc project emerged. The analysis set out here draws on a sustained programme of research and participation, including interviews, participant observation and non-participant observation, attendance at numerous online meetings, secondary review of policy documents and council minutes, and further ad hoc discussions over the past three years. The authors were all engaged in an independent research project reviewing strategic planning arrangements for the Arc Spatial Framework carried out under the umbrella of the Arc Universities Group (AUG, see https://arcuniversities.co.uk/), and funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG, subsequently the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, DLUHC) between October 2021-January 2022. This also benefitted from a focus-group discussion (November 2021) with a group of leading academic commentators on strategic planning in England and other comparator nations. Valler additionally participated in regular meetings of the stakeholder-led 'Strategic Place Working Group' comprising local authority partners in the Arc area and other public sector organisations, and in the AUG's Environment Partnership Board. The extensive engagement here clearly offered important insight into the workings of the policy-making process for the Arc and privileged access to key policy actors both

within the Arc area itself and in central government. However, it also required a good degree of discretion in navigating sensitive institutional relationships, recognising shifting and uncertain agendas, and accepting the very real constraints imposed by engaging with a live and unpredictable policy-making process of national importance.

(Mis-)Conceiving the Oxford-Cambridge Arc

As a proposed strategic planning area the Oxford-Cambridge Arc (figure 1) was clearly distinct from other regional, city-regional, and sub-regional planning spaces in England. The two cities are physically distant, located 66 miles apart, but 85 miles and over 2 hours on the most direct driving route and a timetabled 3 hours 40 minutes by bus connection. Historically the two cities were connected by rail with the 'Varsity Line' in operation from 1922 to 1967, but this was subsequently decommissioned. Sager could argue, even in 2005, that 'there is no physical link between the two – not even a proper road – and if it were not for the universities there would be no link at all' (Sager, 2005: 3).

The separation of the two cities is also apparent in jurisdictional terms. Oxfordshire has been a north-western outpost of England's South East region since the formal creation of the Government Offices for the Regions in 1994, with Oxford identified in the 'Western Policy Area' of the South East, while Cambridgeshire was part of the East of England region. Thus the emergence of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc as a substantive strategic planning orientation is relatively recent. Indeed, there was little before 2000 which suggested the notion, though the late Sir Peter Hall's earlier idea for a "Golden Doughnut" of major development outside London's green belt incorporated the area within a wider band of high employment, high productivity regions beyond the metropolitan area as a whole (Cambridge Econometrics-SQW,

2016). Clearly, though, such a plan had little geographical, institutional, political or cultural foundation upon which to build.
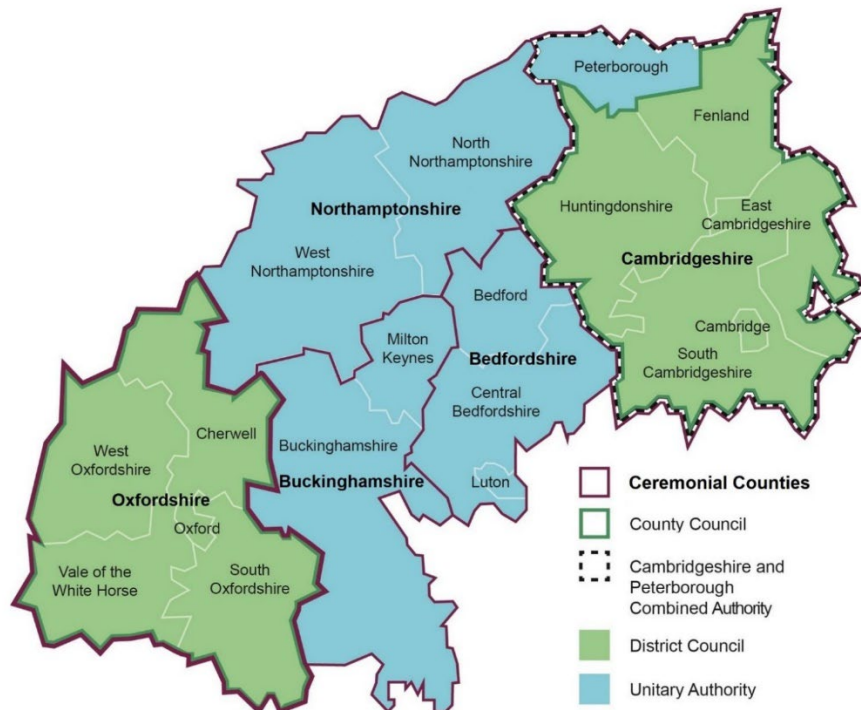
During the 1990s some parts of what has become the Arc area began to engage in local efforts at regional upscaling in the face of mounting growth pressures. In Cambridgeshire, for example, a crisis discourse emerged, largely orchestrated by high-tech entrepreneurs operating in and around the city of Cambridge. Growth proponents highlighted a need to 'unblock the city', release land for new development, and improve local transport linkages, especially the A1-A14-M11 connector linking an imagined 'Greater Cambridge' region to London and the South East (While, Jonas and Gibbs, 2004). At this stage, however, a putative high-tech corridor regional imaginary did not yet extend across county council jurisdictional boundaries in this part of the area. At the other end of the Arc the South-East England Development Agency included the Oxfordshire-Milton Keynes/Luton/Bedfordshire/Aylesbury Vale area as one of seven sub-regional drivers in its regional economic strategy for the South East, which led the Economic

Partnerships for Oxfordshire and Milton Keynes to develop a formative 'Technology Arc' idea, though the progression of this in the late 1990s was negligible (Smart Growth UK, 2019: 30).

A previous paper (Valler et al, 2021) has described in detail two main episodes in the planning of the Arc, first between 2003-09 as the 'O2C Arc' established by three English regional development agencies 'to create one of the most successful knowledge-based economies in Europe, with world leading aspirations' (Miles, 2008, p. 2), and second, more substantially, from 2016 as the 'Oxford-Cambridge Arc', supported by MHCLG and driven initially by the NIC. Here the focus was on a 'new deal between central and local government' to support expansion of the world-class research, innovation and technology located in the area, and thereby underpin UK prosperity in a changing global economy. This would:

> align public and private interests behind the delivery of significant east-west infrastructure and major new settlements, and seek commitment to faster growth through a joined-up plan for jobs, homes and infrastructure. (NIC, 2017 p.3)

In particular, the NIC's 'central finding' was that rates of house building would need to double to achieve the Arc's economic potential, while improvements to East-West infrastructure through major new rail and road connections provided 'a once-in-a-generation opportunity to unlock land for new settlements' (NIC, 2017 p.3).

The conception of the Arc chimed on the one hand with the growing perception of the importance of global city-regions as emergent spaces of globalisation and development (Karlsson et al, 2020; Moisio & Jonas, 2018; Vogel et al., 2010), and on the other with an acknowledgement that the planning of such spaces is problematic, not least where areas lack functional labour markets, connectivity and strategic

services (Scott, 2019). Against this backdrop, infrastructural corridors have become widely understood as forward-looking visions for cities, nation-states and regional trading blocs. At various scales and in diverse national contexts, corridors became 'a common-sense reference in discourses of governance and policy-making' (Grappi, 2018: 175), organising 'economies, politics and social life around particular directional priorities' (Newhouse & Simone, 2017, p. 4). High-tech corridor regions such as the Oxford-Cambridge Arc are illustrative, identified by the presence of innovative clusters of research and technology-driven industries (e.g. biotechnology, advanced manufacturing, ICT, etc.) and perceived as keystones of national economic development. However, these spatial formations often face challenges of regional development, given their spatially dispersed and sometimes poorly connected urban form, their fragmented and under-developed governance arrangements, and their lack of embedded culture and identity (Wachsmuth, 2017; Storper, 2013).

In this context, the central task of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc was one of regional formation and the construction of a new political space, based on the development of a convincing spatial imaginary and the cultivation of public engagement and support (for a full account see Valler et al, 2021). Yet in the event these tasks were substantially underplayed, in favour of the more delivery-based or outcome-oriented focus associated with planning for 'soft-spaces' (Allmendinger et al., 2015; Haughton et al., 2013). As a result, attempts to reach out to communities and the wider public specifically were notably limited and the development of the Arc into the public consciousness was problematical. As we demonstrate below, opposition mobilised against the proposed Oxford-Cambridge Expressway road in particular, resulting in its delay and subsequent abandonment, along with further criticism of proposed housing numbers and urban expansion, environmental and climate impacts, and the loss of greenbelt and other designated land.

Additionally, the Arc project as a whole lacked clarity. In terms of imagery, notions of the Arc remained substantially under-developed, betraying ongoing questions of

definition in the search for a shared narrative. While it did achieve a level of profile amongst both stakeholders and opponents, and exerted variable influence in the framing and detailing of planning policy, it did not become hegemonic in the sense of predominating over competing spatial discourses and deriving associated authority and legitimacy (on discursive hegemony see Hajer, 1993; Watkins, 2015). Rather, it tended to exist alongside established local political contexts which retained their own particular cultures and imaginaries. It also lacked a core focus around an established city-region or physical form such as an estuary which might lend an obvious spatial identity to the area (cf. Haughton and Allmendinger, 2015; O'Brien, 2019), even perhaps lacking the underlying city-regional/urban-agglomeration based economic rationale which underpinned the similarly fuzzy notion of the Northern Powerhouse (Hincks et al, 2017 p.653). Thus the Arc tended to remain inchoate and somewhat amorphous, lacking in discursive and material coherence, instead of developing as a fully entrenched territorial structure legally defined by jurisdictional borders, institutional capacities and flows of fiscal resources.

As a result, local authorities were often unsure of the political calculation and the opportunities and costs that might be implied. Some were sceptical and cagey, with initial enthusiasm for the economic growth and infrastructure aspects of the Arc tempered by a perception of the increased central government focus on additional housing. To some extent, therefore, a state of limbo characterised the experience of the Arc at the local government level. Moreover, the lack of clarity was not confined to local authorities. While linking the research and associated activities of two leading UK and global universities ostensibly 'made sense', a feeling remained that such partnerships and synergies could be more fully explored and that the universities still sought more certainty regarding the added value of the Arc idea. Similarly, some (though not all) private sector interests seem to have been less immediately inspired by the Arc itself than by more local and focused initiatives, though there have been exceptions to this, not least on the part of Bidwells (Property Consultants) who have been notably active in supporting the Arc idea and who in partnership with

Blackstock Consulting published a 168-page 'Radical Capital' report in support of the Arc, with contributions from across academia, business, real estate and the knowledge economy (Bidwells, 2022). This is not to say that the universities and private sector did not see the potential advantages of larger-scale strategic planning *per se*, but in general their needs had not been clearly articulated through the Arc project.

The sinking of the Arc

Questioned on the status of planning for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc at the Levelling Up, Housing & Communities Committee on 13th June 2022, Secretary of State Michael Gove responded:

> We are talking to all of the local authorities involved, but some of the figures that have been bandied around about housing growth related to the Ox-Cam Arc have been both inflated and unhelpful. Oxford and Cambridge are jewels in the UK's crown. They will grow. There will be some uncomfortable conversations about how that growth manifests itself, but anyone who thinks that we are going to try to constrain that is wrong. But the idea that you create a ribbon development between Oxford and Cambridge as intense as that which has been suggested, is overstated. (HC LUHC Committee, 13 June 2022, Q39)

This substantially confirmed rumours earlier in the year that the Arc had been metaphorically flushed away (Financial Times, 2022). A report to South Cambridgeshire District Council on 22nd February (SCDC, 2022) noted a 'significant change in the government's approach to the Ox-Cam Arc' following the creation of DLUHC in September 2021, and the appointment of Gove as the new Secretary of State. After a period of some uncertainty it had become clear that the government would no longer drive the Arc project centrally. There was no mention of the Arc in the Government's Levelling-Up White Paper published on 2nd February

(DLUHC, 2022), and discussions with DLUHC officials indicated that the project should be locally-led, in line with the Government's local leadership narrative. It would be "up to local leaders to identify the priorities they wish to support across the Arc (if it does indeed continue as a locally led project)" (SCDC, *op cit*), though the Arc Leaders' Group (ALG) had already expressed concern about the level of commitment that government would make to the Arc in terms of future funding, and had agreed at a Leaders' meeting on 28th January to continue in 'transition' for six months whilst all options were further considered.

Yet all this stands in stark contrast to the publication one year earlier of 'Planning for sustainable growth in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc', the introduction to a proposed 'Arc Spatial Framework' which would develop by late 2022-early 2023 (MHCLG, 2021). This had argued for 'a new approach' to what was portrayed as a national economic priority area, planning for growth and infrastructure to realise a 'transformational' opportunity. Government would play a vital supporting role in the project, bringing together 23 local planning authorities (LPAs), a mayoral combined authority, eight transport planning authorities, four LEPs, and a sub-national transport body through a 'genuinely integrated plan'. A specialist unit of 40 staff would be constituted in MHCLG to develop the Spatial Framework through collaborative working with residents and local partners, policy review and development, integrated sustainability appraisal, and a common digital platform and robust evidence base. It would constitute a unique element of spatially specific national planning policy, to which LPAs would have to have regard, in parallel with other national policies and guidance.

The Government certainly executed a remarkable shift in its position over the course of a year – a classic 'reverse ferret'. In seeking to explain this, we emphasise a conjunctural reading of the politics of the Arc project; not only was the process of planning the Arc itself substantially misconceived, as we have suggested above, but

it also faced wider governmental and political headwinds which fuelled public opposition to the scheme, reduced central government engagement, and redirected political priorities elsewhere (on conjunctural analysis see: Leitner and Sheppard 2020; Peck, 2017; Roy, 2016; Sheppard, 2019; Zeiderman, 2018). We illustrate this with reference to three particular aspects of the Arc project: the postponement and subsequent cancellation of the expressway; the increasing reluctance of central government to provide leadership in Arc governance and politics; and the shifting position of the Arc with regard to the government's levelling-up agenda. These are discussed in turn.

(i) The tribulations of the Oxford-Cambridge expressway

A proposed 'expressway' road was initially a core element of the Arc project, to connect from the M4/A34 junction north of Newbury, north to Oxford and across to Cambridge. In late 2018 a possible corridor was announced ('Corridor B'), with options to go either west or east of Oxford. Highways England planned to publish a number of specific route options in autumn 2019, and deliver them for public consultation before the end of the year, though this was subsequently delayed due to a general election on 12th December. A 'priority review' of the expressway was promised after the election, but in March 2020 the Department for Transport's Road Investment Strategy 2 for the period 2020-2025 announced that: "We are now pausing further development of the (expressway) scheme while we undertake further work on other potential road projects that could support the Government's ambition for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, and benefit people who live and work there, including exploring opportunities to alleviate congestion around the Arc's major economic centres such as Milton Keynes." (National Highways, 12 March 2020).

Opposition to the expressway had been intense. The plan had proved unpopular among rural communities in Oxfordshire, as well as in other counties on the route,

resulting in a campaign to oppose it. The 'No Expressway Group' (NEG) was formed initially in March 2018 and extended once the preferred corridor was announced to include groups and Parish Councils across Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. Local group membership expanded through 2019-2020 in villages and communities across the Arc area, with NEG arguing forcefully that the expressway would extend reliance on private transport and contribute to greenhouse gas emissions. NEG activities focused on fact finding and scoping of the context (cf. Healey, 2009) and awareness raising through village, town and group meetings (including over 40 meetings in 2019) a mobile display, public events, and through a website and social media campaign. A 'no expressway' petition was presented at 10 Downing Street in February 2020, alongside a drop-in event in Parliament open to all MPs. Activity continued through the Covid-19 lockdowns, with NEG tracking Arc discussions through various webinars and reporting back to members through email and website updates. This organised opposition clearly exerted considerable influence and was recognised explicitly by senior members of the NIC including Sir John Armitt (Chair) and Commissioner Bridget Rosewell.

Outside the NEG, a lobby group of planning and environmental experts called POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably), warned in Summer 2020 that a series of alternative proposed roads linked to housebuilding could fill the same role as the now paused Expressway. Roger Williams, a member of POETS and a former chief transport planner for Oxfordshire County Council, argued that the roads, if built, would act as a southern bypass of Oxford. A question was raised in Parliament on 28 January 2021 by Layla Moran MP (Lib-Dem, Oxford West and Abingdon):

> Residents in Oxfordshire, who are strongly opposed to the Oxford to Cambridge expressway, are worried that while the expressway is officially paused, it seems that parts of the road project are going ahead,

but in smaller chunks. One expressed it as "expressway by stealth". Can the Minister tell us how many subsections of the expressway project are in their planning stages, and does "pause" mean that "go" is still an option?

Opposition had also grown amongst Arc local authorities, with South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) deciding in April 2019 to 'oppose the Expressway project in all forms, including expansion of existing or new roads in the district to form part of it'. SODC's letter to Grant Shapps in August 2019 argued that the expressway "would have significant adverse impacts on Oxfordshire: it will create a major source of air and noise pollution, destroy farmland and habitats, increase CO2 emissions and bring more traffic onto the county's roads." Oxfordshire County Council then voted to oppose any route for the new road in January 2020.

Objection to the expressway effectively tapped into strengthening anti-roads sentiment especially in south-east England which was highlighting the environmental implications of roads development and the increasing urgency of the climate crisis (Melia, 2021). On 18 March 2021, Grant Shapps, Secretary of State for Transport, finally cancelled the expressway stating that the benefits the road would deliver were outweighed by the costs and that the project was not cost-effective. The Department for Transport would now investigate the need for more targeted road interventions in the area working with Highways England and England's Economic Heartland as the sub-national transport body, to study proposals which would support the spatial framework.

The cancellation represented a major setback for the Arc project as a whole and further energised oppositional voices whose focus could now shift to other aspects of the Arc project and to questioning its overall rationale. Welcoming the

Expressway cancellation announcement on the 18th March, the Secretary of NEG, argued, for example:

> "the other half of the Ox-Cam Arc proposals is the one million houses that have always been part of the Government's ambition to increase the Arc's economic output by £163 billion each year. Large though this increase is, investing in areas of the country away from the over-crowded South East would bring even greater economic benefits, without the need to build a million new houses and 'import' the workers from elsewhere in the country, or from abroad. Investment elsewhere would also reduce the inequality between the different regions of the UK; inequality which is greater than in all other countries in Europe." (STARC, 2021)

Subsequently NEG relaunched their campaign as the 'Stop the Arc' group and the critique fed into an evolving narrative of the Arc project fitting uncomfortably with the Government's wider agenda around 'levelling-up' (see below).

(ii) Central and local governance failure

Turning to the question of central government leadership, a core concern was the fragmented and complex governance arrangements facing the Arc project. Though the ALG was introduced in 2019 and internal organizational arrangements did gradually orientate around emerging 'growth board' geographies comprising the four main constituent areas in the Arc (Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, 'Central' and Cambridgeshire), governance remained a critical issue. The sheer number and diversity of local authorities involved was reflected in the difficulty of achieving effective decision-making mechanisms, coordinating across existing local state territorial structures, and – crucially – generating political leadership for the entire

region. As a local government departmental director argued in interview (27 January, 2020), for example:

> For local governments, I don't think there would be a consistent idea of the Arc. Are they participating and supporting the conversations to continue to explore its development? Probably. Quite a few of them are more passive than active. The Arc kind of represents the potential for government money, the potential for maybe being able to do something different. But what, until those things materialize? Some people are sceptical that it will happen, or that this is the right way to make some of it happen. The governance is a mess.

However, central government was generally reluctant to intervene in this question, and even in the Spatial Framework document remained non-committal regarding future arrangements:

> 1.26   We can only realise the full potential of the Arc if we also take a different approach to planning for growth in the area. That means planning at the right scale, at the right time, for the right level of growth in the right places. We must do so in a way that will allow us to improve the Arc's natural environment and combat climate change, raise prosperity in lower growth parts of the region, and give existing and future communities a genuine say in the long-term future of their homes and places. That is why calls for an approach of this kind are long-standing and growing – from the NIC's recommendation in 2017, to the recent County Councils' Network report calling for a new approach to strategic planning, to CPRE's calls for a statutory spatial plan for the area and industry calls for an Arc-wide planning body (MHCLG, 2021)

While the proposed Arc Spatial Framework would be a unique sub-regional strategy in having national planning policy status (and national transport policy status), thereby sitting alongside the National Planning Policy Framework and helping guide local plan production, no governance mechanism was proposed to underpin Arc-wide policy and decision-making. Rather, central government would play a vaguely-specified 'supporting role' to bring together 'a strategic approach' and the coordination of planning functions across the area (paragraph 1.25). This apparent reticence would seem to reference the Conservative government's general predisposition towards local leadership, localism in planning, and city-regional devolution, albeit within the context of overall central direction. However, the lack of central drive and definition around governance arrangements was associated with a number of difficulties.

In October 2020, the newly unitary Buckinghamshire Council announced that it had formally withdrawn from the ALG and the Arc project, along with the Buckinghamshire LEP and the University of Buckingham. It argued for control of its own future economic development and housing decisions, and that the Arc constituted an 'artificial geography'. As one of the major local authorities in the Arc area, the loss of Buckinghamshire Council clearly represented a significant challenge to the project as a whole. More recently, further issues emerged from the changing political complexion of local authorities in the area; in October 2021 councillors in formerly Conservative-led SODC, controlled since May 2019 by a coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party and Green Party, passed a motion calling on the government to pause the Oxford-Cambridge Arc project, citing ongoing concerns over the potential impact of economic growth on communities throughout the region. Around the same time, the Leader of Oxfordshire's Vale of White Horse District Council paused all officer's work on the Arc, following the abrupt

cancellation of an Arc Leaders' meeting with the government's new ministerial team in early December.

Shifts in local political leadership and attitudes towards the Arc also reference wider political dynamics, as the so-called 'blue wall' of established Conservative support in some of the 'home counties' of England has come under increasing pressure. In this context the politics of the Arc cannot be divorced from broader realignments underway in British politics. For example, while cautioning against any simplistic parallel with the Conservative's 2019 electoral gains in northern 'Red Wall' seats, where support for the Labour Party has been in longer-term decline, Curtice (2021) nonetheless demonstrates that Brexit had reshaped the geography of party support, especially that of the Conservatives, and that southern seats represent the 'first line of defence' in traditional Conservative territory:

> …most of the more vulnerable Conservative Remain seats are to be found in the south and east of England where the Conservatives have generally long been stronger. All but four of the Tory Remain seats where the Conservative majority in 2019 was less than 12 points are located south of a line from Cheltenham to Norwich (the four that are not are located on the middle-class edges of a major metropolitan area). (Curtis, 2021 p.199)

In particular, so-called 'blue wall' seats in the south represent an opportunity for the Liberal Democrats, who polled in second place in half of the Conservative 'Remain' seats where the 2019 majority was less than 12 points (Curtice, 2021 p.198). Seeking to exploit this opportunity, Liberal Democrat strategy has in turn picked up on increasing environmental concerns in the home counties. Indeed, despite nationally supporting low-carbon transport links such as HS2 and recognising the need to build more houses (pledging 300,000 net new dwellings per year in the 2019 manifesto),

the Liberal Democrats have been able to tailor their message to exploit local disillusionment and to target southern constituencies. Pressure group Unchecked.uk has argued that almost four in ten undecided voters in marginal blue wall seats say they would be more likely to support a political party that has ambitious plans for protecting the environment, and that undecided blue wall voters prioritise environmental issues over immigration & asylum, Covid-19, Brexit, and crime as the issue which would be most important to them when deciding who to vote for in an election (Unchecked.uk, 2022). In this context, the Liberal Democrats represent a significant threat to Conservative blue wall MPs; as Cutts et al (2021) argue, for example:

> …there are 28 seats where the Liberal Democrats currently occupy second place and are less than 20% behind the incumbent. Notwithstanding boundary changes, 25 of these 28 seats are held by the Conservatives and 17 have been held by the Lib Dems recently. Twenty voted Remain and nearly two-thirds are located in the southern belt stretching from South East Cambridgeshire to Winchester. (…) around two-thirds share 'blue wall' characteristics of 30% or more graduates and 40% or more professionals… the Liberal Democrats are well-placed to benefit from fractures in the 'blue wall', and even build a heartland presence.

In this context Conservative MPs were reluctant to lend explicit support to the Arc proposals, not least given the recent lack of central government backing. And the situation was crystallised yet further in a by-election result in Chesham and Amersham on 17 June 2021, when the Lib-Dems took Chesham & Amersham with a vote swing of 25.2% away from the Conservative Party which had previously held the seat in every election since it was created in 1974, and with majorities always in excess of 10,000 votes. Though the seat was no longer part of the Arc area following Buckinghamshire Council's withdrawal in 2020, the political implications for the Arc

project were palpable. As Curtice (2021) notes, concerns about planning and High Speed 2 (HS2) 'appeared to have a particular resonance in Chesham & Amersham', and the result was understood as a clear rejection of the Conservative Government's planning reforms (despite the Conservative candidate identifying as pro- green spaces). In turn, Conservative politicians nationally were simply no longer willing to drive the Arc forward and to provide the political impetus necessary to overcome the levels of scepticism and opposition that had become ingrained. Also there was no appetite to grapple with the complex governance implications of the Arc, and the controversy and opposition which would inevitably arise. Though a consultation process on 'Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc' had been instigated by MHCLG from 20 July 2021 to 12 October 2021 (alongside initial work on sustainability appraisal), momentum within central government waned. MHCLG was then rebranded as DLUHC in September 2021, with Michael Gove taking over as Secretary of State from 15th September, a move which in the event would ease the path towards the Government's eventual withdrawal.

(iii) The Arc in the context of 'levelling-up'

Lastly here, we mention very briefly the redirection of Government priorities consequent upon the 'levelling-up' agenda, a key part of the government's programme under Prime Minister Boris Johnson from 2019 (see, for example, Connolly et al, 2021; Jennings et al, 2021; Tomaney and Pike, 2020); Levelling up was referenced explicitly in the introduction to the Arc Spatial Framework in Feb 2021:

> This government is committed to levelling up growth and opportunity
> across Britain. Inequalities within regions are even larger than those
> between regions. That is true in the Arc, as its prosperity is not felt
> evenly, and inequalities between and within the Arc's towns and cities

are acute… As growth happens, we need to 'level up' opportunity and outcomes across the region to address the specific challenges the Arc faces. (MHCLG, 2021: Section 1.15)

However, the tension between the more southerly location of the Arc and the primarily northern focus of the government's levelling up agenda was clearly evident and became increasingly unavoidable into 2022. As an interview with a local government representative confirmed on July 26th, for example:

It's quite interesting that both the Conservative Party leadership candidates – Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak – are both publicly committed to the levelling up agenda and had made statements about regional policies. So we in the Arc have got literally to hold our breath until early September to get any kind of steer from Government.

Indeed, in the wake of the Levelling Up White Paper there was increasing appreciation that the Arc was no longer a government priority, as DLUHC attention pivoted towards northern England. This was in spite of influential voices arguing that growth in London and the South-East would be vital in improving national productivity and supporting public finances (e.g. Pryce, 2022), and the Conservative government's 2019 manifesto commitment to 'level up every part of the United Kingdom, while strengthening the ties that bind it together'. In the event though, the political focus was drawn elsewhere, in turn providing the government with something of a way out of the very difficult political challenges described above. Finally, Michael Gove's statement at the LUHC Committee in June 2022 seemed to confirm - at least informally - the abandonment of the Arc Spatial Framework process, and despite some mention of ongoing government interest in promoting local leadership of the Arc, and possibly the potential for some form of pan-regional working, the general sense for now is that this strategic planning project is at an end.

Conclusion: Prospects for Strategic Planning in England?

This paper set out to establish a conjunctural reading of the failure of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc as a strategic planning project. Against the background of attenuated strategic planning arrangements in England, not only was the process of planning the Arc somewhat misconceived but it also faced growing public opposition and limited central government engagement and leadership. In developing the analysis links have been drawn to a wider set of political trends and processes happening at broader geographic scales, thereby seeking 'to understand how historical trajectories at both the urban and supra-urban scale shape contemporary conditions in a particular [city]' (Leitner and Sheppard, 2020 p.492).

This form of conjunctural account helps to explain why strategic planning in England is currently stuck in a quagmire. While several well-considered and positive proposals for the improvement of strategic planning arrangements have already been brought forward (see for example: CCN/CRA, 2021; Gordon and Champion, 2021; LWSE, 2021; RTPI, 2019) the political commitment and institutional foundation required to drive them forward is currently lacking. Indeed, a critical precondition for progress here remains in providing momentum for change. This requires, at heart, political leadership and democratic accountability at national, city-regional and sub-regional scales to make the case for strategic planning, to navigate the institutional complexity and to rebuild strategic planning capacities. In particular it requires, we would argue, acknowledgement of the limitations of localism in resolving strategic planning dilemmas and delivering sustainable development.

Rebuilding here necessitates a restatement of the case for strategic planning in the current conjuncture and an understanding of its basic definition and tasks. In the context of localism, the task of strategic planning and its associated governance

forms is to buttress localised arrangements, temper associated tensions, and potentially recast and manage the problems to be addressed and the political and institutional landscape to be navigated. In this way strategic planning arrangements would reflect an improvised and temporary solution - a 'fix' to specific tensions based on particular forms of spatial strategy (He, 2019; Jessop, 2000, 2006). Given the current emphases on localism, rebalancing, and levelling-up via devolution and decentralisation, the context for strategic planning is set against the associated contradictions and dilemmas; hence the focus for strategic planning in: (i) ensuring coordination and coherence amongst policy structures, mechanisms and commitments; (ii) providing an effective basis for policy negotiation, decision-making, and delivery; and (iii) securing a foundation for effective political leadership and accountability at larger-than-local scales. These are therefore key objectives for contemporary strategic planning in England, though as McGuiness and Mawson (2017) have noted, achieving an acceptable institutional fix for sub-national governance has been a recurring quandary in England and – following Urlan Wannop (1995, xxi) – that 'regional planning and governance can never be perfectly arranged, except in the moment'. We would argue for the current moment to be grasped.

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