

**Dear Mr Simpkins,**

We are writing to you as Leader of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc Chief Executives' Group.

We understand that a working group has been set up to consider the terms of reference for the Arc Leaders'/ Chief Executives' Groups, including how to address issues of transparency and public involvement.

CPRE has been concerned for some time about the lack of public awareness, especially in local communities, of proposals for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc. Apart from the initial report by the National Infrastructure Commission (2016-7), there has been no public engagement or consultation on the principles of the Arc nor on specific proposals for development within it. We still do not know how it will be planned strategically or how this will be subjected to community impact or environmental assessment.

An exception to this has been in the sphere of transport where more detailed proposals for East-West Rail and the Expressway have been put before the public. The Arc's transport strategy is progressing, with selected stakeholder involvement, although we feel that this will be of limited value in the absence of an overall plan. CPRE has responded in detail to the various transport consultations. There have also been valuable discussions in respect of natural capital although, again, these can only be very general without a spatial plan.

We are also concerned about public accountability, given that the connection to the local electorate is only a very indirect one via the local authorities. No local authority that we are aware of has sought a mandate for its position on the Arc or consulted its residents.

We urge the Chief Executives' Group to place the matter of transparency and public engagement high on its agenda. This should include:

- Early involvement of informed stakeholders in the discussion of policy, so that expertise can be captured at initial stages, rather than setting up later 'tick box' consultation exercises which are inclined to lead to the suspicion that the engagement is not being taken seriously. The current England's Economic Heartland 'Influencers Group', being used to inform development of the Transport Strategy, shows early promise in this regard, although it is not by any means a complete answer.
- Each local authority to establish a clear, democratic mandate for its position on the Arc.
- Early and meaningful opportunities for consultation including publicity, exhibitions and public meetings in order to involve local communities right from the early stages of the proposals.
- Meetings to be held in public, with published agendas and minutes, and the opportunity for members of the public to ask questions and address the Groups.

Experience with the Oxfordshire Growth Board, which has gone through not dissimilar teething problems, suggests that it is possible to introduce a more democratic and transparent approach without any serious hindrance to its work.

We would also ask you to consider the spatial framework for the area. We understand that this may be non-statutory, which would exempt it from many of the rigours of options testing, environmental and community assessment, and consultation. We would find this to be highly unsatisfactory, for local authorities when bringing forward their local plans would feel bound by a document that was only advisory. We urge you and your fellow Chief Executives not to accept this position and to press for a much more robust statutory spatial plan. Such a plan needs to specify much better development outcomes than we see currently, especially in terms of the provision of a greater proportion of affordable (and especially social) housing, better design, and the creation of good quality places with excellent public transport links and green infrastructure, and avoiding the temptation to create mere dormitory suburbs and commuters' estates.

We are keen to work with the Leaders' and Chief Executives' Groups to consider and identify positive steps that can be taken to build public confidence in the process, so that the final vision and delivery plan for the Arc is robust and can be shared by all concerned.

We would be delighted to meet with you to discuss these issues in more detail – virtually if necessary. It would be good to understand what your approach might be and to consider how we might input into a robust process that would gain greater confidence from the general public.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Brooks  
Chair, CPRE OxCam Working Group  
c/o East of England Regional Office  
The Town Hall, Market Hill, St Ives, Cambs PE27 5AL

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