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Policy paper

Planning for sustainable growth in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc: an introduction to the spatial framework

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1. Introduction: Why we need a new approach

1.1 At Budget 2020, the government committed to developing, with local partners, a Spatial Framework for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc – the area that spans the five ceremonial counties of Oxfordshire, Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire.

1.2 This is an opportunity for us to work with communities and local partners to develop a plan that will:

- support **long-run sustainable economic growth** across the area
- help to **make the area a brilliant place to live, work and travel in** – for existing residents and future communities alike
- support **lasting improvements to the environment, green infrastructure and biodiversity**

1.3 We will do this by focusing on the strategic opportunities for growth and environmental improvement that cross local administrative boundaries and require more joined-up thinking across the area – such as strategic approaches to support cleaner air and biodiversity net gain, or a more integrated approach to planning for new transport infrastructure alongside new development. In doing this, we will aim to set a framework that supports better, more sustainable planning and growth at the local level.

1.4 This paper sets out:

- why the government is taking this approach
- what it will mean for growth, spatial planning and infrastructure provision in the area
- how we will work with communities and local partners to develop it

Why the Oxford-Cambridge Arc?

A unique economic and environmental opportunity

1.5 The Oxford-Cambridge Arc sits at the heart of England. The area forms a strategic 'Arc', which is home to a unique business, science and technology ecosystem. Oxford and Cambridge are world-leading centres of research and innovation. There are 10 significant higher education institutions within the Arc, including Cranfield University, with its world-leading specialisms in automotive and aerospace engineering, the Open University, and the world-leading centres of learning at the University of Oxford and University of Cambridge. The Arc accounts for 7.1% of England's economic output (measured by Gross Value Added, or GVA) and it is home to some of the country's fastest growing and most innovative places. Cambridge's rate of patent applications – a key indicator of innovation – is the highest in the UK, at over 12 times the national average. Milton Keynes is the fastest growing city in the country (https://www.centreforcities.org/data-tool/#graph=map&city=show-all&indicator=patent-applications%5Csingle%5C2018). Work on the COVID-19 vaccine, testing and treatment is the latest example of the Arc's unique innovation and business environment leading efforts to tackle a global challenge.

1.6 The desirability of the Arc as a place to live, visit, work and invest is in part due to the quality of the local environment, the rich and diverse character of its landscapes, and the resultant high value of the area's natural capital. We value the natural environment, so we want to meet the economic potential of the Arc in a way that takes the significant opportunity for environmental improvement. Nature and the environment are not constrained by administrative boundaries, and delivering significant positive environmental outcomes requires long-term coordinated action from the public and private sector. 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. By working across the Arc, we have an opportunity to drive environmental improvement including recovery of nature and biodiversity net gain, cleaner air, reduction of flood risk and improving resilience to floods, ensuring communities have better access to green space and more sustainable energy and water supplies, and growing the £2.27 billion (https://www.oxcamlncp.org/building-our-evidence-base#page-section-5e860a509dbd75505c439f13) of value the Arc's natural environment provides each year in ecosystem services.

1.7 The Arc is also an area that is constrained by inadequate infrastructure, a stressed and fragmented natural environment, escalating housing costs, and complex local governance. It is at risk of worsening outcomes for the environment if we do not overcome constraints and meet future demands in the right way. Addressing these constraints is key to realising the full economic and environmental potential (https://nic.org.uk/app/uploads/Partnering-for-Prosperty.pdf) of the area.

1.8 Forecasts vary, but successive studies have found that there is a clear transformational opportunity. With the right interventions and investment, economic forecasts suggest that by 2050 we would see economic output growing by between £80.4 billion and £163 billion per annum, with between 476,500 and 1.1 million additional jobs (https://nic.org.uk/app/uploads/Partnering-for-Prosperty.pdf). The Arc's success is key to the UK's national prosperity, international competitiveness, and ability to meet the challenges and opportunities we will face as a country over the next century, including climate change and supporting nature recovery, technological change, fighting COVID-19 and preventing future pandemics.

1.9 That is why the government has identified the Arc as a national economic priority area. National and local partners are jointly committed to reaching the potential for transformational growth and environmental improvement. (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/799993/OxCam_Arc_Ambition.pdf)

A unique growth context

1.10 We are taking a strategic approach to planning for growth and infrastructure to realise that transformational opportunity, and our approach reflects the key features of the Arc's economy, environment and places.

1.11 There are a number of urban and economic centres of comparative size across the region. Oxford, Bicester, Milton Keynes, Bedford and Cambridge form a west to east spine across the Arc, but Northampton, Luton and Peterborough are other important centres, and there are a number of north-south corridors connecting them to the core of the Arc. Much of the Arc's economic output relies on connections between these different centres, and in turn their connections south to London, west to Bristol, east to East Anglia and north to the Midlands.

1.12 This is not, therefore, just a story of Oxford and Cambridge and their sub-regions – Milton Keynes and Northampton have the highest economic output in the Arc (measured by GVA). Importantly, the sector profile of these places is different and complementary to Oxford and Cambridge. For example, Milton Keynes is a centre for financial and professional services, high performance technology, and is a key haulage and distribution centre. The area around Silverstone in Northamptonshire is a key location for the automotive sector and high-performance engineering, with strong business and research links to Oxfordshire and Luton. Peterborough, one of the UK's more successful new towns, had its origins as a town of industry, which has laid the foundations for a dynamic business environment. It continues to be a magnet for engineering talent, and trades on its connection to strategic north-south infrastructure. This connectedness is in spite of a severe and longstanding infrastructure deficit – particularly east-west transport infrastructure – felt across the Arc (https://nic.org.uk/app/uploads/Partnering-for-Prosperty.pdf). There is significant potential to foster

agglomerative benefits by better connecting people, places, services and businesses, and to see more effective commercialisation of research and development through better, more sustainable transport and truly sustainable patterns of development across the region.

1.13 These centres do not fit neatly within administrative boundaries – they are part of sub-regions with interconnected business and research clusters. The automotive and engineering sector that is concentrated in Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire and Luton and the 'Science Vale' cluster, which covers an area spanning Oxford, Abingdon and Didcot, are examples of this. This is an ecosystem that has grown around the Harwell Campus and Culham Science Centre, home to some of the most globally important facilities for applied scientific research. In the east of the Arc, the Cambridge bioscience cluster is located along a corridor south of the city. We therefore need a more coordinated, cross-boundary approach to planning for growth, and to ensure that the right infrastructure is in place to support it.

Heritage

1.14 There are areas of significant natural and built heritage, with internationally important environment assets, wetlands, ancient woodlands and rare wildflower-rich meadows that support unique biodiversity. The medieval centres of Oxford and Cambridge are key parts of our national built heritage and are surrounded by diverse and historic landscapes. Milton Keynes is a leading example of post-war architecture and place-making with over 6,000 acres of green public space provided in the city. The wider Arc is home to diverse landscapes and rich natural habitats, from the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the south, to the fragments of wet and species-rich fenland in the east, the remnants of ancient hunting forests to the north and central area, and rare wet grassland and ancient woodlands to the west. Yet there is a real need and a great opportunity to deliver nature recovery and an improved environment in the Arc and for this to contribute real benefits to new and existing communities and businesses. This is why the government has invested in a Local Natural Capital Plan for the area, and why the RSPB, National Trust, Woodland Trust and local Wildlife Trusts are campaigning for a focus on nature in the area (https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/campaigning/OxCam-Arc/). We want to protect, enhance and improve this rich inheritance for future generations and improve access to it as we support growth in the region, and we can only do that by taking a strategic approach to protect and enhance the Arc's heritage and environment.

Levelling up

1.15 This government is committed to levelling up growth and opportunity across Britain. Inequalities within regions are even larger than those between regions (https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/geographical-inequalities-in-the-uk/). That is true in the Arc, as is not felt evenly, and inequalities between and within the Arc's towns and cities are acute. Bedford, Luton, Corby and Kettering have high levels of deprivation and have not seen the economic growth of their Arc neighbours. This is also true of some of the Arc's more rural areas, such as Fenland, which has been disconnected from the recent economic growth in Greater Cambridge (https://www.cpier.org.uk/final-report/). In many of these places, population growth has been driven by 'overspill' from neighbouring centres but the economies of these places are characterised by low levels of productivity and wage growth. As growth happens (https://www.centreforcities.org/data-tool/#graph=map&city=show-all), we need to 'level up' opportunity and outcomes across the region to address the specific challenges the Arc faces. At the same time, inequality is high within the major economic centres of the Arc – Oxford and Cambridge are two of the most unequal cities if the Gini coefficient is used as the metric.

The risk we face – worse outcomes for communities, the economy and environment

1.16 With high growth comes growing pains – and the Arc, like Silicon Valley, is experiencing the pain that comes from the movement of people outpacing the delivery of new infrastructure needed to accommodate them. The Arc has seen significant population growth since 2000, up 17% in that period – only London has seen a higher rate of growth (drawn from internal analysis based on ONS population data). Rates of job creation in almost every authority in the Arc far exceed current jobs targets in local plans, and housing delivery rates (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/799993/OxCam_Arc_Ambition.pdf) are significantly below the level likely to be needed to accommodate current housing need and future job creation rates.

1.17 There are three areas we are particularly concerned about:

- the natural environment and climate change
- connectivity and infrastructure
- the availability of homes where they are most needed

1.18 These are vital in maintaining and improving the Arc as a great place to live and work.

1.19 **Environmental outcomes are poor, and the risks of further harm are high**, with regional level transport emissions responsible for 46.8% of total carbon dioxide emissions in the area, compared with 36.6% nationally. This is driven in part by car-dependence, with 67% of the workplace population travelling by car, compared to 60% nationally (http://www.englandseconomicheartland.com/Documents/Draft%20Transport%20Strategy.pdf). Air quality is poor in many parts of the Arc – reflected in the number of Air Quality Management Areas (http://www.englandseconomicheartland.com/Documents/Draft%20Transport%20Strategy.pdf) established by local councils – harming the health of local residents. Flood risk is high and growing, with 74,000 properties within the Arc at a 0.1% or greater annual risk of flooding, particularly around the floodplains of the Rivers Great Ouse, Thames and Nene, and in the Fens in Cambridgeshire. Large areas of the Arc have limited ecological value and many parts of the Arc's natural environment are relatively inaccessible to the public. Looking to the future, there is a risk that the development that comes with growth will harm the natural environment (https://www.rspb.org.uk/globalassets/images/get-involved/campaigning/oxcam-arc/natures-arc-4-pager-final-low-res.pdf) and the ecosystem services it provides to us, rather than restore nature.

1.20 **East-west connectivity is poor**. Cranfield University is 7 miles from Milton Keynes but getting there by public transport involves a 45-minute bus journey. Cambridge is further away – 45 miles – and can take nearly 3 hours by a patchwork of buses and trains. This is driving up car dependency, which in turn is causing high and increasing congestion (http://www.englandseconomicheartland.com/Documents/Draft%20Transport%20Strategy.pdf). The East West Rail scheme will significantly improve east-west rail connectivity, but more needs to be done to promote sustainable transport, raise first and last mile connectivity around transport hubs, and better connect communities, employers, employees, businesses, cultural attractions, nature and universities, including through public transport, cycling and walking – making these the first choice for journeys.

1.21 **Housing affordability is poor**. The supply of new homes in the Arc's main centres has not kept up with demand – in Cambridge, the affordability ratio has risen to 12.76, in Oxford to 11.45 in 20 years, and in Chiltern and South Bucks to 17.62 and 15.56 respectively (the England average is 7.83) (ONS, 2019. Table 5C. Ratio of median house price to median gross annual workplace-based earnings by LAD). This has put home ownership out of reach for many. The wider economic effect of this is to make it harder for businesses to attract the skilled workers they need, to locate in the most productive locations, and is forcing longer and more polluting journeys as people travel longer distances to get to work. Population growth has been highest in areas of comparative housing affordability – Corby (30% since 2000), Milton Keynes (28%) and Peterborough (27.5%) (this is also explained by the location of existing administrative boundaries, which do not reflect the full spatial

coverage of economic centres such as Cambridge, Northampton and Bedford). Huntingdonshire is experiencing inward migration from South Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire due to housing pressures in those areas, in turn leading to some existing residents moving northwards to Peterborough, Fenland and South Kesteven as house prices have increased. Over the long term, this pattern of growth is unlikely to be sustainable for the economy, the environment or for communities in the Arc.

1.22 We can progress towards a better future by planning better for growth and seeking to provide for future needs before they bite, delivering the right infrastructure in the right places at the right times.

## The need for a government-led approach to strategic planning

1.23 Addressing these issues requires coordinated action across the Arc, and some coordination is already happening. Unitarisation of local councils in Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire (building on existing joint planning arrangements in place in the latter) will support more strategic planning in those areas, as will the Joint Strategic Spatial Plan in development in Oxfordshire, and the non-statutory Spatial Framework in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Alongside this, the government is investing in the new East West Rail link to connect Oxford and Cambridge and providing over £400 million of Housing Infrastructure Fund investment to support delivery of housing on strategic sites. The Government has also agreed city deals with Oxford and Cambridge – an ambitious growth deal with Oxfordshire as they take forward a joint plan for the county, and a devolution deal with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority. We have also made a commitment to examine the case for development corporations, linked to the new transport hubs around East West Rail stations. But action is needed across the wider area on strategic planning, environmental, economic development and infrastructure issues.

1.24 A coordinated approach is difficult because the Arc comprises: 23 local planning authorities; a mayoral combined authority, eight transport planning authorities, the area's Local Enterprise Partnerships (which have responsibility for economic development), and England's Economic Heartland – the sub-national transport body that covers a slightly wider area than the Arc. There is also no single institution with the necessary competence and authority to lead a coordinated approach. This means that planning at the local level for homes, business space, infrastructure and the environment is not integrated, and is unable to take an Arc-wide view. If we want a better future, we need to plan for growth by thinking about the provision of infrastructure, housing, the environment and the needs of businesses and universities at the same time. We cannot continue to plan for transport, the environment and housing separately, or to think of economic development as separate from housing provision and commercial development.

1.25 To realise the full opportunities – and overcome the challenges – will require coordination of planning functions across the region. Local councils cannot do this on their own because of the level of coordination needed across the area, and because they do not have all the levers needed to develop a genuinely integrated plan. Government needs to play a supporting role to bring together a strategic approach at the Arc level to support better planning and ultimately better outcomes for the economy, environment and communities.

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 National Infrastructure Commission's recommendation in 2017, to the recent County Councils' Network (https://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/new-report-argues-for-stronger-collaboration-between-councils-to-fill-

the-strategic-planning-void/) 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 (https://www.bidwells.co.uk/assets/Radical-Regeneration/6.pdf).
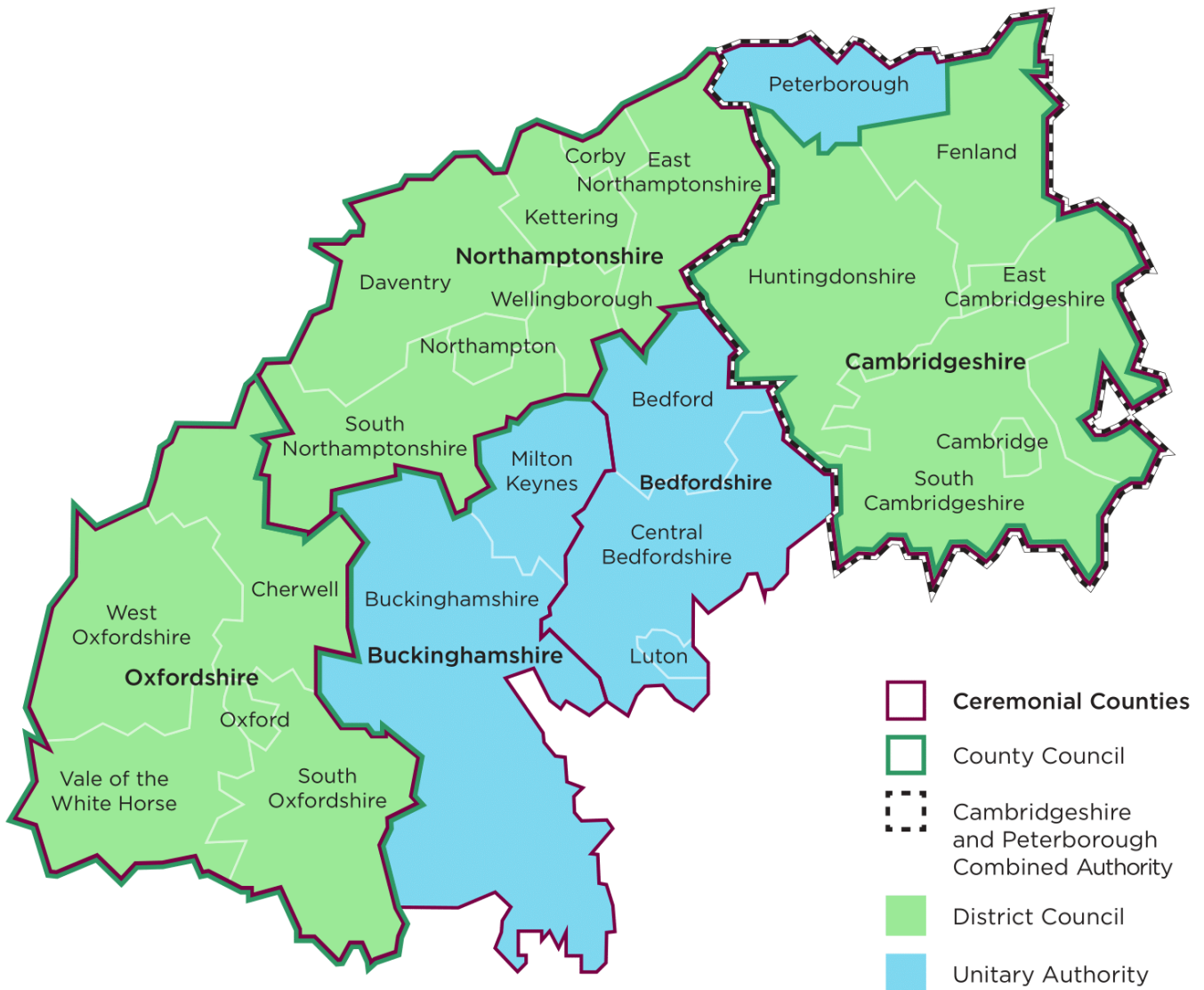
2. What the Spatial Framework will do

Introduction – core principles

2.1 Our intention is to develop a long-term Spatial Framework for the Arc that will support better spatial planning, provide a blueprint for better-targeted public investment, give investors and businesses greater long-term certainty over growth plans, and allow communities to shape the long-term future of places across the region. The nature and content of the Spatial Framework will be subject to the outcome of both detailed consultation and sustainability appraisal.

2.2 Our approach to the Spatial Framework will be based on 10 core principles:

- **Collaborative** – we will develop the Spatial Framework with local partners, including communities, local councils, businesses and universities.

- **Adaptable** – we will create a framework that provides certainty for communities, local councils and investors about where growth will happen, and the infrastructure that will support it. But it will also need to be flexible and adaptive to change as it happens.
- **Long-term** – we will plan to 2050 and beyond so that we create the foundation for long-term sustainable growth.
- **Integrated** – the Framework will be based on an integrated approach to planning which spans the economy, housing, environment and transport.
- **Inclusive** – the Framework will aim to bring benefits for existing communities and all places in the Arc – not just the highest growth centres.
- **Digital-first** – we will make better use of digital tools to support better, more collaborative long-term policy-making.
- **Evidence-based** – the Framework will be based on a robust and comprehensive evidence base, which we will make publicly available.
- **Sustainable** – the Framework must strengthen our ability to meet the government's commitment to combat climate change, support sustainable patterns of development, and support lasting improvements to biodiversity and the natural environment.
- **Quality** – we intend to set high expectations for the quality of new development and infrastructure, so that we can create the heritage areas of the future and enhance quality of life in all parts of the Arc.
- **Add value** – we will not duplicate local or national policies and plans, but we will take them into consideration in developing the Framework. Instead, the Framework will be genuinely strategic and focus on cross-boundary issues, policies and opportunities.

What it will mean for:

The arc's economy

2.3 We will take an integrated approach to planning for growth. We can set better policy in the Spatial Framework, and local and national partners can invest more smartly to unlock the area's full potential, if we have a robust understanding of how and where the Arc's economy has grown, the needs of its current sectors and forecasts for future growth.

2.4 As this is not just about land use policy, we will start by developing an Arc-wide Economic Strategy. This will include:

- analysis of the Arc's economy and forecasts of future growth, including analysis of local economies and key sectors, drawing on existing analysis that has supported existing Local Industrial Strategies, and understanding of the monetary value of the Arc's natural capital
- identification of specific employment space and infrastructure requirements to support future growth
- identification of the policies and investments needed to deliver the Arc's economic potential in a sustainable way, working with local partners to identify priorities, and supporting a green recovery

2.5 The Spatial Framework will help us to deliver the strategy by ensuring that businesses have access to the space and infrastructure they need to grow – including the Arc's high-growth, innovative industries, which have specialist requirements for employment space, such as laboratories

– and by ensuring that planning for delivery of infrastructure and housing is based on our Economic Strategy.

2.6 Specifically, the Spatial Framework will:

- provide an assessment of existing employment land, planned growth and anticipated future need
- set policies to support local planning authorities in allocating these as Strategic Business Zones or Strategic Industrial Locations, as appropriate
- set policies to support different land uses for different sectors and sizes of business

The arc's environment

2.7 The Spatial Framework will help to protect and enhance the environment and the Arc's natural capital through ensuring that the environment underpins economic, transport and housing and planning decisions. We will seek to support an integrated approach to water management, cleaner air, sustainable land management, nature recovery, climate change mitigation and adaptation, in line with the government's 25 Year Environment Plan, Net Zero commitments and Clean Growth Strategy. We will do this by taking a natural capital approach to inform planning and decision-making, and setting policy to:

- support retention of, and investment in, key existing and potential new habitats, and improve access to nature and accessible green space
- set high standards for new development, including on carbon emissions, water management, green space, integrated and functional green infrastructure, e.g. for active travel and biodiversity net gain
- support an integrated water management approach, taking into account sustainable water abstraction and drought resilience, water quality, reducing risk and resilience to flooding and how and where new infrastructure should be developed
- support clean air outcomes, with clear links to housing and transport policies
- embed the enhancement of natural capital across the Arc

2.8 The spatial framework will also identify environmental Opportunity Areas, including water services infrastructure incorporating nature-based solutions, supporting nature recovery, biodiversity net gain and carbon sinks.

Transport and infrastructure in the arc

2.9 Provision of new infrastructure is vital to ensuring the sustainability of development. In practice, that means taking an infrastructure-first approach to growth – identifying and delivering strategic infrastructure priorities as development happens. The spatial framework will help to do this by:

- identifying and mapping the existing provision of health, education, accessible green spaces, social and community infrastructure, utilities, green and blue infrastructure and other infrastructure requirements at an Arc-wide scale
- determining future need based on development, and social and environmental projections, and identifying gaps in existing provision
- using this assessment to create an infrastructure plan to facilitate future growth, including identifying opportunities to:

- deliver sustainable transport options
  - protect and enhance the environment
  - give communities access to the public services they need
  - ensure our waste is minimised, recycled or disposed of sustainably where this is the only option
  - provide the water, digital and utilities infrastructure needed to facilitate sustainable growth
- proactively setting strategic policies for local transport authorities and local planning authorities to enable this, building on the England's Economic Heartland transport strategy and evidence base
- outlining targeted climate resilience and air quality policies based on air quality modelling to ensure this new infrastructure is delivered in line with our environmental objectives
- outlining wider strategic policies to facilitate utilities investment in line with key development opportunities, including digital infrastructure

Housing and planning in the arc

2.10 We will plan for the right level of growth in the Arc, to ensure it is a great and affordable place to live and work – both for existing residents and communities of the future. To do this, the spatial framework will identify:

- the most sustainable locations for new homes, including identifying Opportunity Areas, to support local planning authorities to plan for this growth
- the infrastructure needed to support sustainable growth in those locations, and the key locations for strategic infrastructure to support sustainable growth
- locations for environmental enhancement to achieve greater environmental benefits that can allow development to take place elsewhere

2.11 The spatial framework will also outline policies to enable sustainable, transport-led development. This will include policies to enable:

- new settlements to come forward at the scale and speed needed
- new development to support habitat recovery, delivery of Local Nature Recovery Strategies, and provision of good-quality green space within schemes
- brownfield redevelopment and densification, and expansion of existing settlements, in sustainable locations or locations that can be made more sustainable by enhanced access to sustainable transport modes
- housing needs to be met in full, including delivery of much-needed affordable housing

2.12 All policy set in the Spatial Framework will be based on a robust evidence base and local consultation. It will indicate locations but will not include site allocations, and it will not include detailed policies set elsewhere in national policy or better left to local plans.

2.13 The government has also consulted on changes to the planning system more broadly. We will respond to the Planning for the Future consultation in due course, and we will work with local planning authorities in the Arc to ensure that the Spatial Framework supports transition to the new system.

3. How we will develop the Spatial Framework

Introduction

3.1 Over the next two and a half years, a specialist team in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will work with communities and local partners to develop a robust, evidence-based spatial framework. To ensure the spatial framework provides the foundation for better planning and investment for the Arc's communities, economy and environment, we are committed to:

- working collaboratively with residents and local partners, seeking input at each stage of decision-making
- understanding the environmental, social and economic impacts of policies before we finalise, adopt and implement them, by undertaking a full and integrated sustainability appraisal
- developing a common digital platform and robust evidence base to underpin the Spatial Framework and provide the basis for strategic planning in the Arc at the sub-regional level, including through a new and shared digital evidence base

3.2 We will seek to implement the spatial framework as spatially specific national planning policy. Local planning authorities preparing local development documents (including local plans) will have to have regard to the Spatial Framework, as they do with other national policies and guidance.

Indicative timeline

3.3 The timeline for developing the spatial framework covers three core phases:

1. Developing a vision for the future of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc – We will undertake wide public engagement to shape a vision for the area, through a consultation in summer 2021.

2. Towards a spatial framework – We will develop options for turning the vision into policy, based on engagement and initial evidence gathering and analysis. We will publish these options for consultation in spring 2022.

3. Draft spatial framework – To finalise the spatial framework, we will consider responses to this consultation, and undertake spatial analysis, option testing, impact assessments and stakeholder engagement. We will publish a draft spatial framework for consultation in autumn 2022, with implementation of the final framework shortly after.

Status and implementation

3.4 We will take an integrated approach to planning for the Arc, to ensure we can deliver the sustainable outcomes we want to see. To achieve this, the spatial framework will have the status of national planning and transport policy, providing a strategic framework for local planning.

- National planning policy status will allow it to have significant weight in the planning system for guiding local plan production and in decision-making. It will sit alongside the National Planning Policy Framework.
- National transport policy status will allow it to guide the plans prepared by local transport authorities. Transport policies will sit alongside land use policies in the Spatial Framework in a fully integrated single land use and infrastructure plan.

3.5 This will provide a clearer, coordinated framework for local transport authorities and local planning authorities when developing their own plans.

3.6 To ensure sustainability is at the heart of the Spatial Framework, the government will develop a sustainability appraisal to inform and underpin development of the Spatial Framework. The assessment criteria will be used proactively to embed sustainability into the development of the strategy. The sustainability appraisal will meet the legal requirements of Strategic Environmental Assessment as well as including social and economic factors so that we can best consider the wider impacts of policies as they are developed. We will integrate a Habitats Regulations Assessment into the sustainability appraisal.

3.7 We will underpin the Spatial Framework with a robust evidence base. We will work to ensure it meets a sustainable development test so that the Framework provides a clear and useful starting point for local councils.

3.8 We expect local planning authorities to continue to develop local plans before the publication of the Spatial Framework. These changes will sit alongside wider planning reforms, and as we take forward our response to the 'Planning for the Future' consultation, we will outline transitional arrangements and the role of the Spatial Framework within any new system.

Data and digital tools

3.9 We want to make best use of data and digital tools, in line with our vision for reform of the wider planning system.

3.10 We want to make it easy for communities, local councils and businesses to give their views on the Spatial Framework, and to ensure that we make best use of evidence and data analysis to inform policies it sets. And we have an opportunity to create a common, accessible resource for government and local partners to support better policy-making and planning in the future.

3.11 As we set out in the 'Planning for the Future' consultation, the planning system makes little use of interactive digital services and tools, with the process reliant on documents rather than data. This means that evidence is fragmented, diffuse and inconsistent, limiting the impact it can have. This means we need to go further to realise our ambition for data and digital tools in the Arc.

3.12 First, we will use data and digital technology to support our policy-making. We intend to support development of an open source, digital platform for data and evidence to support collaboration between government, businesses, local councils and communities in decision-making. We will work with local partners to create an accessible digital platform for economic, planning and environmental data, and easy-to-use tools so that people – including the public and businesses – can engage meaningfully in the process.

3.13 Second, it means using digital engagement processes to make it easy for people to raise their views about proposals in the spatial framework, including on smartphones.

3.14 Third, it means the spatial framework will be visual and map-based, standardised, and based on the latest digital technology, so that it is easy to access and understand.

4. How you can get involved

A collaborative approach

4.1 We want to ensure the Spatial Framework is built on the interests and priorities of the communities it will serve. We are committed to working collaboratively with local partners and want to give Arc residents a meaningful voice in development of the Spatial Framework. This will mean:

- we will engage early with local partners to shape a shared vision for growth, on which the Framework will be based

- we will consult meaningfully at each appropriate stage of the process, giving all relevant stakeholders the opportunity to raise views on policies and growth options as they are developed and before the Framework is implemented
- we will work collaboratively with local partners to inform, steer and challenge our approach

4.2 The Arc is home to a wide and diverse stakeholder landscape who will have an interest in the Spatial Framework's development. We intend to engage extensively across different audiences ranging from local councils, universities and business to residents, workers and local communities. We will keep accessibility at the core of our approach, harnessing digital technology alongside more traditional methods of consultation. This will make it easier for a wide range of people to contribute their views.

When you can get involved

4.3 We want to hear from residents and local partners at each stage of the Spatial Framework process:

- Vision – We want to hear from people across the Arc to shape our vision for the area, providing the foundation for policy-making and planning later in the process. We intend to launch this process in early 2021, and we will use what we hear from initial stakeholder engagement to produce a draft vision statement for public consultation in summer 2021.
- 'Towards a Spatial Framework' consultation – Building on the vision, we will develop policy and growth options that we will test through engagement and consultation. We intend to publish a consultation document in spring 2022 and will run an engagement process alongside this to give everyone a chance to have their say.
- Draft Spatial Framework – Once we have refined our preferred approach, we will publish a draft Spatial Framework for consultation. This will give communities and stakeholders a chance to shape the detailed policies and the spatial options it will contain. We intend to publish this in autumn 2022, with the final Spatial Framework implemented shortly after.

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