

Public speakers

30 October 2020

OXFORDSHIRE

G R O W T H B O A R D

Questions

1. Michael Tyce on behalf of CPRE Oxfordshire

The Arc is an organisational fiction. None of us in the Arc knew we were part of an Arc until we were told we were. We still have not been told what it is that is both common to all of us and unique to the Arc that makes it an entity we have to be part of.

The Arc is a totally manufactured concept, like the Midlands Engine, the Northern Powerhouse, and the various other imaginary tribes England has been divided up amongst. Despite the advertising ours is a rural County and the Arc is not a unique home of the white heat of technology. Indeed, the area usually referred to as England's Silicon Valley is the M4 corridor of Slough, Windsor, Maidenhead, Reading, Bracknell and Newbury.

Neither is the Economic Prospectus economic. It contains scant information on income and expenditure. It promises a return on investment of £4 for each £1 invested but does not say how much should be invested or how such staggering returns would be generated, or over what kind of time scale they might be achieved. It is all stall and no merchandise. It is just a vehicle to compete against the other Engines and Powerhouses for Government money in the Spending Review Beauty Contest.

One thing is certain though, that if the Prospectus is endorsed the Arc will acquire governance and structure. Arc governance would lead to the same outcomes as Planning for the Future and the new standard method would – the withering away of local autonomy and accountability and the imposition of central decisions. That is precisely why Bucks has quit.

As a sign of things to come the prospectus has been sent to Government without your endorsement and without consulting what the public feel about an Arc overstructure to “fulfil their true economic potential to deliver transformational economic growth”. In fact, we know this is not what the public want because the just published Oxfordshire Vision tells us they want an approach that *is more Oxfordshire-specific and reflective of local people's views*.

There are motherhood and apple pie sentiments in the Prospectus on climate change and protecting the countryside of course with which no-one can disagree. But we do not need an Arc structure to implement those, nor to engage in desirable cross border spatial planning. But endorsing the Prospectus endorses the principle of the Arc as an entity and is a long stride in the direction of an Arc governance body which will make Oxfordshire development decisions and make funding agreements over your heads as well as ours: and which can only drain further power from Local Authorities and voice from the people they represent.

Now, with Bucks, which is the fulcrum of the whole edifice, deciding to go their own way, the very thing that the Oxfordshire Vision says Oxfordshire people also want, there is an

obvious point at which to reconsider whether the Arc should be endorsed. We say it should not. The Arc is an artificial construct without democratic legitimacy, or rationale. It does nothing good for us that we could not do for ourselves and it will inevitably restrict Oxfordshire's ability to move forward the way we want.

It is another top down step when we should be moving towards bottom up. For whatever reason they made it, we suggest Bucks made the right call. **We ask you not to endorse the Arc or its Prospectus because of the certainty of what will follow.**

Response (in italics below)

The Growth Board has asked that officers provide a response concerning matters raised by the comments from CPRE as there are many claims made in the statement that need to be challenged factually.

The Arc is an organisational fiction. None of us in the Arc knew we were part of an Arc until we were told we were. We still have not been told what it is that is both common to all of us and unique to the Arc that makes it an entity we have to be part of.

Response: The Oxford-Cambridge Arc (The Arc) has been identified as a region of economic significance by the Government in its response to work carried out by the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC). It is indeed a construct but one that is not fictional or without merit: our national government has given it relevance in terms of a fixed geography and a narrative as an area which is relied on for its economic success – but a success that cannot be taken for granted as warned by the NIC. There are many positives from working in collaboration with our neighbouring areas which have been set out previously to the Growth Board on numerous occasions. Fundamentally, being proactive through collaboration to positively influence sustainable outcomes for Oxfordshire is at the heart of the Oxfordshire Growth Board collaboration.

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Response: Nowhere else in the world can boast the combined capacity of Oxford and Cambridge universities and when that collaboration links with the other Arc universities, business partnerships and local communities, this is a globally significant region without comparator in the UK.

Neither is the Economic Prospectus economic. It contains scant information on income and expenditure. It promises a return on investment of £4 for each £1 invested but does not say how much should be invested or how such staggering returns would be generated, or over what kind of time scale they might be achieved. It is all stall and no merchandise. It is just a vehicle to compete against the other Engines and Powerhouses for Government money in the Spending Review Beauty Contest.

Response: The Arc Economic Prospectus does not present itself as the complete volume on the economic value and assets of the Arc – but it does reference other sources and

studies completed (including the Joint Local Industrial Strategy work of the Arc Local Enterprise Partnerships). These numbers reflect conservative estimates of the return on investment for research and development. As this country has committed to increasing that level of investment in the future, it is right that we remind Government of this rate of return to ensure appropriate funding is leveraged for our universities, our businesses and our councils to ensure we can continue to play our part in supporting our own success as well as that of the country, as it is also a fact not all regions can contribute so positively to help the national economy – particularly at times of significant economic impact.

One thing is certain though, that if the Prospectus is endorsed the Arc will acquire governance and structure. Arc governance would lead to the same outcomes as Planning for the Future and the new standard method would – the withering away of local autonomy and accountability and the imposition of central decisions. That is precisely why Bucks has quit.

Response: In their letter to the Arc Leadership Group, Buckinghamshire Council cited it could not accept the decision-making of the Group on a spatial framework for the Arc; however, Buckinghamshire Council was incorrect in suggesting that decision-making for the Framework rested with the Group. The Arc Spatial Framework is being developed, funded and delivered by Government not the Leadership Group. It is of course the right for any individual organisation to leave this group as it is not a statutory or formal committee with such decision-making powers. However, it is a forum where members choose to work collaboratively to positively influence the national decision-maker, exercising its democratic accountability, for this part of the country. In that same letter, Buckinghamshire Council also felt it needed to refocus on a Devolution Deal with Government.

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Response: The Oxfordshire Strategic Vision has not been engaged on with the public as yet; however, it is part of the argument for doing so that Oxfordshire seeks to positively influence a wider geography with its vision so that it may have more success in delivering to the outcomes we expressly want. Waiting, disengaging and reacting to an emerging national statement of intent is one approach; another is to try to positively influence that intent before it reaches a stage to defend against or change.

There are motherhood and apple pie sentiments in the Prospectus on climate change and protecting the countryside of course with which no-one can disagree. But we do not need an Arc structure to implement those, nor to engage in desirable cross border spatial planning. But endorsing the Prospectus endorses the principle of the Arc as an entity and is a long stride in the direction of an Arc governance body which will make Oxfordshire development decisions and make funding agreements over your heads as well as ours: and which can only drain further power from Local Authorities and voice from the people they represent.

Response: Government, who has determined the significance and geography of the Arc, can carry forward its own work programme and priorities for the Arc. The principle of the Arc is already established and not to be gained by endorsement of the Prospectus: what is hoped to be gained is influence and commitment to secure better outcomes for

Oxfordshire. We do not get access to the regional programmes which benefit those Combined Authority communities in the North, and Midlands. If we are to develop a pathway to sustainable development, then we need access to funding and regulatory change. This is more likely working in large regional alliances.

Now, with Bucks, which is the fulcrum of the whole edifice, deciding to go their own way, the very thing that the Oxfordshire Vision says Oxfordshire people also want, there is an obvious point at which to reconsider whether the Arc should be endorsed. We say it should not. The Arc is an artificial construct without democratic legitimacy, or rationale. It does nothing good for us that we could not do for ourselves and it will inevitably restrict Oxfordshire's ability to move forward the way we want.

Response: Buckinghamshire Council and its LEP have left the Arc Leadership Group. The geography of the Arc has not changed and still very much includes Buckinghamshire.

The repeated call for a lack of democratic accountability is in our view misleading. Government – an elected body – has determined the status of the Arc. Further, that elected body has called on locally elected leaders to engage with it to develop the concept of the Arc. None of this has required any statutory decisions to be made but if, or when it does, then democratic accountability will be served through individual organisations. It is not clear on what evidence no good will come from this.

It is another top down step when we should be moving towards bottom up. For whatever reason they made it, we suggest Bucks made the right call. We ask you not to endorse the Arc or its Prospectus because of the certainty of what will follow.

Response: The report subject to this set of comments is indeed asking if there is local (“bottom up”) support from our Growth Board partners to this process. It has been overseen by officers and Leaders/Chairs from the vast majority of councils, local enterprise partnerships and universities from across the Arc. This is a bottom up prospectus seeking to positively influence the top down central government position. Endorsing the prospectus confirms the Growth Board wishes to proactively engage in developing the Arc concept and not abdicate that responsibility.