

Why the Oxford-Cambridge Arc matters for London's city region

Jesse Honey and Tom Venables call for more strategic planning

The future success of London and its city region is challenged by an increasingly acute vacuum in strategic planning.

The latest Draft London Plan is very detailed, but shows limited evidence of thinking beyond the GLA boundaries, despite recent census data demonstrating that London's commuting relationship with its hinterland is as strong as ever - over a million people cross it every day in both directions.

Four years ago AECOM produced its London Manifesto 2065 which showed that local plans across the South East are collectively a million homes short of target based on housing demand, this makes the draft London Plan's lack of regard for the area outside its boundaries even more troubling.

If, as we are told, there are to be no significant changes to national Green Belt policy, then there is one part of the South East in particular that could help to meet the demand displaced from London, as well as offering a strong case for growth in its own right: the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge Corridor, located beyond the Green Belt.

The potential of the Corridor has been recognised in recent months by a number of players, including the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC), which considers that it could become 'the UK's Silicon Valley' - a world-class centre for sci-



Figure 1. The Oxfordshire-Swindon, MK-Northampton-Bedford-Luton, and Greater Cambridge sub areas, defined for the purposes of the study's analysis.

ence, technology and innovation. The case for such a vision has only strengthened if we are to compete globally post-Brexit.

It was for this reason that the National Planning Forum, hosted by AECOM in London this February, took the strategic planning of this Corridor as its theme. AECOM's recent study for the NIC highlighted that alongside new rail, roads and jobs, more than one million new homes would be needed across the Corridor by 2050.

This is almost three times faster than current development rates. Analysis of case studies from the English planning system and across the world suggested that this speed of development can only be achieved through the provision of large-scale new settlements, with a landowner, locally-led development corporation responsible for each. To deliver this joined up thinking - and strategic planning - will be vital.

Our conclusions were subsequently endorsed both by both the Chancellor in the 2017 Budget and Communities Minister Sajid Javid. The most appropriate delivery model seems to be a public-private partnership, rather than the publicly-funded post-war new town approach. The key attraction of the development corporation model is the speed and quality of delivery it offers, as witnessed in places like Milton Keynes and Almere in the Netherlands.

However, the Corridor can only realise its full potential through strategic and (sub)-regional planning coming back onto the agenda. Encouragingly, this is already happening, and not just through combined authorities. For example, AECOM has over recent months helped to develop several Growth and Infrastructure Frameworks for county councils around London, each of which aims to improve on the traditional infrastructure planning model by integrating the planning of housing, infrastructure and utilities across multiple local authorities into a single process. These collectively demonstrate an increasing gap in



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infrastructure funding and a much greater need to plan effectively across authority boundaries.

This kind of silo-busting is one example of an effective lever for accelerated sub-regional growth. Other levers identified in our report for the NIC include greater use of devolution deals and combined authorities; central government intervention and support where appropriate, particularly commitments for early strategic and local infrastructure funding; and greater use of innovative delivery mechanisms. Such mechanisms might include Tax Increment Financing (TIFs) and land value capture and/or increasing the capacity of the construction industry, for example through automation, off-site assembly and modular building.

However, confining such mechanisms to the Corridor alone would be a missed opportunity. If the South East as a whole is to grow and prosper post-Brexit, we must urgently reconsider the links between its component parts and across its boundaries. The Corridor would not offer the potential it does without London; having a global city only forty miles to its south-east drives its growth at least as much as the world-class reputations of its universities. Strategic, cross-boundary regional planning is needed across London and its city region more than ever. ■

AECOM's response to the London Plan can be found here: <https://www.aecom.com/cities-insights/>
Our report to the NIC can be found here: <https://www.nic.org.uk/publications/planning-delivery-analysis-research-national-infrastructure-commission/>