



Creating new homes to be proud of in the Arc

Accessibility,
community,
quality and
affordability –
how do we
make it
happen?



Foreword



Joe Marshall

We have a significant legacy in the Arc, as well as ambitious plans... demonstrating our commitment to building truly affordable high-quality homes.

Our commitment to the Arc

Catalyst's purpose is to build and maintain homes people love, across all tenures and price points, and create communities that can flourish and grow.

Nowhere is this needed more than in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc. The challenge is considerable – but so are the opportunities to provide the sustainable, accessible and affordable housing needed to support economic growth.

We have a significant legacy in the Arc, as well as ambitious plans. The acquisition of King Street Housing in Cambridge in the east anchored our presence in this key area, while our merger with Aldwyck Housing Group strengthened our presence and pipeline across the Arc's central counties. There is also our regeneration of Blackbird Leys estate, and our development of 270 new affordable homes at Littlemore Park in Oxford demonstrates our commitment to building truly affordable high-quality homes.

Volume and breadth of housing delivery is important, but equally crucial is where and how this development takes place – with the right homes in the right places.

The government's draft Oxford-Cambridge Arc Spatial Framework is due to be published next autumn. When finalised and formalised, this will play a huge role in determining the direction of development throughout the region.

It is therefore critical that the Spatial Framework supports the right mix of homes and that these are supported by the community infrastructure they need. As the UK seeks to build stronger and more sustainable communities following the Covid-19 pandemic, considered development will be at the heart of this. There is an opportunity for the Arc to set the example for how place-based growth agendas can have real, long-term positive impact.

Working with our residents, partners and the wider sector is at the core of what we do. So too is listening to different views, learning and taking a collaborative approach to the way we do business.

In this spirit, we were delighted to be able to recently bring together a wide range of leading figures from across the Arc for dinner and a discussion about the Spatial Framework. The discussion from the roundtable event has helped us as we finalised our response to the government's Spatial Framework consultation.

After a challenging 18 months, it was an absolute pleasure to be able to host what was a lively, engaging and honest discussion about what we – as a broad sector – need to do to make the Arc a success and deliver the homes that its communities need.

I'd like to thank everyone who attended the evening, not just for sharing their expertise during the discussion, but also for their time and company.

Joe Marshall
Managing Director,
New Homes (Counties), **Catalyst**



The Printworks, Dunstable, Bedfordshire. 61 new homes for affordable rent and shared ownership.



How do we create new homes to be proud of in the Oxford-Cambridge Arc?

The vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc is ambitious. To support economic growth, the government wants a substantial number of quality new homes built by 2050. The original target was one million, however, the government has subsequently moved away from this figure.

At Catalyst's roundtable discussion, such specific numbers were deemed unhelpful as they focus attention on the volume of delivery, not what should be delivered, where and how.

To truly deliver on its economic potential, the consensus was that the Arc needs homes that are accessible, affordable and inclusive. This means a mixture of tenures and types in the right locations driven by local needs, not just where there is space.

Oxford and Cambridge have some of the highest house prices in the country so, crucially, the Arc needs homes that are affordable to a broad range of people.

Given the scale of delivery needed, it is critical that these homes are sustainable and focused on enhancing existing communities as well as creating new ones.

To deliver on that vision, the Spatial Framework needs to address a number of issues.

The Arc – more than just homes

While homes are a vital part of the Arc's infrastructure, you can't build them without the support of other vital infrastructure such as power, water and digital communications. These are major pieces of work that require strategic planning.

And while this infrastructure is an enabler to housing delivery, it requires investment, often up front, so how it is funded and by who needs addressing.

There was consensus, though, that treating housing and infrastructure as competing against each other creates a false dichotomy. Instead it needs to become the norm for housing – and, crucially, genuinely affordable homes – to be seen as an important part of community infrastructure.

There also needs to be uniformity across environmental credentials, quality and placemaking. Within the Arc region, there are already some exemplar schemes from which to learn, such as Eddington in Cambridge. It was pointed out, however, that it isn't a level playing field: 'The challenge for us is how do you do that in Dunstable or Luton or somewhere that isn't Cambridge and doesn't have the land value or the sales that come with it.'



And how do you ensure homes are located where they are needed, where people want to live, so that people can easily access jobs – and ideally access jobs without needing to jump into a car? This requires local knowledge and community engagement which presents a further challenge – who has control?

On the one hand, you need an overarching vision and leadership, but there was a warning about taking a ‘top-down approach’; imposing targets that don’t make the most of local knowledge and expertise or engage existing communities.

So how should the Spatial Framework address these issues and support the vision?

Regionalism vs localism – finding the balance

Major strategic infrastructure, such as utilities and broadband, is a region-wide challenge rather than local. The framework could work to ‘bring attention to those really difficult cross-boundary challenges’, which are more challenging for local authorities to solve alone.

It was also suggested that an Arc Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) could be a way to ‘equalise the up front investment’. Contributors felt this should be based on the London Mayoral CIL model, rather than regional models. The Mayoral CIL is deemed to have worked well, partly because it’s a relatively small cost per dwelling and therefore doesn’t add too much financial burden to developers.

The question was whether the CIL should be set at a regional level or a local level. It would need to be agreed upon in collaboration with local authorities and written into the Spatial Framework.

In fact, collaboration was seen as key to delivery because it ensures all stakeholders are on board.

There is naturally a little tension between centralised leadership and local decision-makers. An overarching vision that creates a uniformity of approach – and uniformity in standards and quality – is important.



Sidney Close, High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire,
19 new homes for affordable rent.

It is also necessary for joined-up thinking, so that neighbouring communities interact and sustain each other, rather than live in isolation.

Bold leadership can also work on canvassing central government, keeping the Arc on the agenda and securing appropriate funding.

Where local leadership comes in, is harnessing important on-the-ground knowledge and engaging communities to ensure what is delivered and how much is appropriate to local needs. The strategic framework needs to balance the broad vision that sets out the agenda for what growth looks like with a more granular local offer, both supporting development and those charged with delivery.

What is critical for leaders at all levels across the Arc, however, is delivery of genuinely affordable housing. If the Arc Spatial Framework is to work coherently, then affordable housing must be seen as a key part of mixed, balanced and inclusive communities. This is essential to enabling strong and sustainable development at a national, regional and local level.



Planning for the future in the Arc

Questions were raised on whether the Arc is moving towards a regional planning model, with concern that this could undermine existing Local Plans. It was pointed out that these have been developed using a robust methodology and ground-level knowledge – unlike the government’s now scrapped approach to setting housing targets.

Local Plans have helped make the planning system ‘more muscular’ and are starting to deliver on their goals. This means a sophisticated form of regional planning is needed, which sets out the targets but enables local authorities to be more specific in responding to local needs.

The government has net-zero carbon targets and the Arc presents an opportunity to build truly sustainable communities. Since Catalyst’s roundtable discussion, stories have emerged about the government’s plans to rewrite the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) to align with its climate change targets.

It was suggested during the discussion that the Spatial Framework should perhaps have ‘its own NPPF’ that is more granular. The planning system often operates to the lowest common denominator, so the Framework should be used as an opportunity to raise standards and level the playing field.

Would an Arc-focused NPPF also help with delivering on placemaking? Potentially.

History shows that single-use developments can be problematic and create soulless ‘dormitories’. Equally, badly thought-through mixed-use development can lead to residential blocks with empty commercial space on the ground floor.

The change in work/life trends, which the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated, should be seen as an advantage in delivering the placemaking agenda in the Arc. People are less tied to working in specific places five days a week, which presents an opportunity for creating more localised workspaces, whether formal or informal. Localised working can also support local businesses such as cafés and community facilities.

Delivering a mixture of tenures is also important for community building – as well as accessibility and job mobility. A cookie-cutter approach to housing is undesirable and housing associations were recognised as playing a leading role in providing alternative forms of housing stock and supporting mixed communities.

The market is also seeing more build to rent (BTR) investment which helps broaden the offer, particularly when house prices are putting homeownership out of reach for larger numbers. BTR operators often put community building at the heart of their development.

It is important that the Framework supports alternatives to traditional housebuilding and building for sale as a vital ingredient to realising the Arc’s potential.

Ultimately the hope of those around the table is that Framework mirrors the drivers for the Arc: ‘It’s a corridor of innovation, and that needs to be reflected in the Framework and housing delivery.’

A bold vision requires a bold strategy that harnesses the best of what is already there while ploughing a new path where necessary.

A bold vision requires a bold strategy that harnesses the best of what is already there while ploughing a new path where necessary.



With thanks to our guests

This report is the result of a Catalyst-hosted dinner and discussion held in Cambridge on Wednesday 29 September 2021 at the Hotel du Vin.

Catalyst was pleased to be joined by a number of senior figures and stakeholders in a lively debate.

At the table were:

David Bainbridge, Director, Planning, Savills

Amelia Cherry, Head of Land and Planning, Stonebond Properties

Steve Cox, Executive Director for Place and Economy, Cambridgeshire County Council

Rob Hall, Deputy Managing Director, Hill Group

Doug Higgins, Project Director, First Base

James Scott, Group Director of Strategy and Planning, Urban and Civic

Amy Shaw, Partner, Trowers and Hamlins

Councillor Bridget Smith, Leader of the Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council

David Foster, Director of Land, Partnerships and Preconstruction, Catalyst

Joe Marshall, Managing Director, New Homes (Counties), Catalyst

Stacey Meadwell (Chair), Freelance property writer and former National and Sectors Editor at EG



Get in touch

6 Houghton Hall Business Park, Porz Avenue, Houghton Regis, Bedfordshire LU5 5UZ

Joe Marshall
Managing Director,
New Homes (Counties)
07701 284985
joe.marshall@chg.org.uk

David Foster
Director of Land, Partnerships and
Preconstruction (Counties)
07971 969003
david.foster@chg.org.uk

chg.org.uk

 Catalyst Housing Limited