

Give Oxford city growth powers to lead national recovery, Localis report urges



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Failure to invest in Oxford's unique economic and innovation assets and support strong city-led governance could stymie attempts to keep the UK ahead of the curve for international scientific-led innovation and hold back UK post-COVID recovery, a report issued by the think-tank Localis today has warned.

In its study of Oxford's growth potential, entitled 'At the right level – a strategic case for city-led growth, innovation and renewal' the think-tank found that because of its unique strengths and assets as a compact global city - reinforced by the success of the Oxford/Astra-Zeneca vaccine - the city could accelerate the successful growth of the Oxford to Cambridge Arc into a world economic area through health-tech and clean growth industries.

Oxford's economy already generates £6.75bn each year and is a net contributor to the Exchequer, but to address the central issue of the city's own budgetary uncertainty and the need for a single long-term investment strategy for city-led growth, Localis is calling for a £1bn Endowment Deal for Oxford.

This deal would give Oxford City Council and partners power to:

In addition, the report argued that in order to deliver accelerated growth, the city needs strong local governance and growth powers to tackle transport and housing bottlenecks through delivering physical, digital and social infrastructure at pace alongside a long-term investment

strategy which would enable Oxford to compete with its international peers.

Additionally, Oxford alongside other cities key to the Arc's future growth, including Cambridge, and Milton Keynes need to have a clear voice within its governance, including direct representation on the proposed Arc Growth Body, the study claims.

Localis chief executive, Jonathan Werran, said: "If the UK is to remain globally competitive, then it needs a successful innovation ecosystem. As our leading knowledge economy hub, there is a clear national strategic case to ensure Oxford, and everything that makes it unique as a compact global city, is able to succeed as the dynamo for the Oxford/Cambridge Arc.

"A devolution revolution which would enable Oxford to deliver good and sustainable long-term growth has the potential to spearhead regional and national growth recovery long into the future."

Zayn Qureshi, senior researcher at Localis and report author, said: "Oxford is a core element in of a number of distinct economic geographies, including the functional economic areas of the city, travel to work and housing market areas, the "knowledge spine" that runs north to south of the city and more broadly the Arc and the Thames Valley.

"This requires the city to coordinate and align strategies across administrative boundaries locally and regionally. This collaborative approach involving neighbouring councils, OxLEP, the Oxfordshire Growth Board and the Arc, strikes a vital balance in enabling a strategic vision and underpinning wider COVID economic recovery, whilst also allowing for the local knowledge and focus on area specific issues and opportunities to be maintained."

Cllr Susan Brown, leader of Oxford City Council, said: "I very much welcome this important piece of work. Localis' work on the importance of Global Compact Cities like Oxford is an idea that has found its time. The post-COVID, post-Brexit UK needs cities who lead economic growth but also support a "levelling

up agenda locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

“Over the past year our city has already demonstrated its importance on the world stage. Working with our partners across Oxfordshire and beyond, we want to see the economic power of Oxford working for the local and national economy and delivering more and better paid jobs for local people.”

The report is being launched from 11.00 to 12.00 on Wednesday 17 March via Zoom Webinar with a panel debate that includes:

Localis is an independent think-tank dedicated to issues related to politics, public service reform and localism. We carry out innovative research, hold events and facilitate an ever growing network of members to stimulate and challenge the current orthodoxy of the governance of the UK.

Recommendation: City governance at the right level

Governance at the Right Level

This recommendation is designed to situate Oxford as a compact global city within the aegis of governance frameworks not just vested in Oxford City Council but also extending sub-regionally to those of Oxfordshire County Council and OXLEP and regionally to the nationally vital Oxford-Cambridge Arc – so as to provide sufficient power and resource at the right level to allow the city to deliver for its residents and to further accelerate the growth potential of the Arc and the county.

Oxford's ability to grow at the city level

- The power to raise levies to fund placemaking efforts:
 - On businesses, in a manner similar to the provisions laid out in the Business Rates Supplement Act.
 - On residents, in a progressive manner using council tax bands as a guide.
- A long-term endowment fund for supporting good growth

within the city.

Oxford's relationship with the County and the Arc

- Some strategic planning powers for the city council, specifically on the ability to go further within the city than national and regional targets dictate for planning standards and design codes relating to good growth targets.
- Key cities for the Arc's future growth, including Oxford, Cambridge, and Milton Keynes need to have a clear voice on its governance i.e. through representation on the proposed Arc growth body.
- Statutory convening role in the development, alongside County and Arc partners, of a skills supply chain for the City of Oxford which focuses on maximising the human potential of the city's resident population.
- The city should put forward a transparent community asset and social infrastructure investment strategy as part of a revised social contract with residents.

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