

Scrutiny Committee



Report of Head of Planning

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To: Vale Scrutiny Committee

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OXFORD TO CAMBRIDGE EXPRESSWAY: VALE OPTIONS

Recommendation

That the committee consider the current evidence on Expressway options presented, and give their views or preferences on these proposals for further consideration by the Cabinet member and to help inform any further officer discussion with the NIC or Highways England.

Introduction

1. The purpose of this report is to give an update on the progress of the National Infrastructure Commission; Oxford to Cambridge Expressway (O2C) proposals, and ask scrutiny members for their view on the emerging potential routes in Oxfordshire.
2. It is suggested that any views are fed back to the Cabinet member to ensure they are taken account of in any further discussions with the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) or Highways England (HE) on these proposals.

Background and Outline of Process to Date

3. The Government asked the NIC for proposals and options to maximise the O2C corridor as a single, knowledge intensive cluster that is globally competitive while protecting the high-quality environment and securing much needed homes and jobs.
4. The Government has set aside £27m to fund the O2C Expressway Study, which is a 130 mile long corridor covering 3,900 square miles with a population of 3.3m people of which, approximately 1.83m are employed and contributes £90.5bn to the UK economy. It will connect the M4 to the M11, crossing the M1 and A1(M).
5. An outline of the NIC work to date is set out below in three sections:

Early development culminating in Stage 3 report; November 2016

6. Proposals for the Oxford to Cambridge expressway have been developing over the last three years, with the 'strategic study' being part of the Roads Investment strategy (2015-2020) published in November 2014 with the following key objective:

'The strategic objective of the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway study is to investigate the case for linking existing roads and creating an Oxford to Cambridge Expressway, which would provide a high quality strategic east-west road link between Oxford and Cambridge via Bedford and Milton Keynes, improving connectivity, building network resilience and supporting economic growth'

7. The Expressway in this study is believed to mean a dual carriageway with limited access points and where junctions do exist they will be slip roads to allow free flow of traffic. The route could also be a corridor for other means of transport, such as electric vehicles. It is understood that the A34 would be upgraded from the M4 and continue into the Expressway.
8. The Stage 3 report on this study was published in November 2016 by the Department for Transport (DfT), which summarised the work undertaken in 2015/ 2016.¹ The main conclusions from the study were the identification of potential core route options as follows:
 - A. a northern option, roughly following the existing A421 to the south of Bicester and via Buckingham to the east of Milton Keynes (Route A)
 - B. a central option, following the east-west rail corridor (Route B); and
 - C. a southern option via Aylesbury, linking to the M1 south of Milton Keynes (Route C)

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/oxford-to-cambridge-expressway-strategic-study-stage-3-report>

These routes are shown in the report on key schematic diagrams, **Appendix 1** (two diagrams; 1. Wire diagram, 2. Arcs diagram).

9. The Stage 3 report focused on the strategic economic and transport case for expressway road improvements, and did not go into any detail on environmental or social impacts.
10. Each of the main routes (A-C) could align with routes to the west or south of Oxford. However, the southern route option (Route C) is likely to be more clearly linked to a route south of Oxford, whilst the central and northern options (Routes A and B) could either route around the north and west of Oxford to re-join the A34, or route to the east and then South of Oxford. Alternatively, it could tie with upgrades to the existing A34 in the area.
11. As well as the core routes, there are sub-options (Bicester to Abingdon), including a more southerly option linking to Route C which would re-join the A34 near Didcot rather than north of Abingdon as per the core route.
12. Each of the routes were costed at approximately £3 to £3.5bn for delivery, but the report did not go into detail on the environmental and social impacts of different route options.

Related NIC work happening in parallel

13. Also in autumn 2016, the NIC published a report titled, 'Cambridge - Milton Keynes - Oxford: Interim Report' which set out the need to invest in infrastructure to support economic growth along the corridor and help deliver significant new levels of housing.²
14. The report suggested that, within the O2C corridor, up to 1 million additional homes and 700,000 additional jobs could be delivered by 2050. This could give an estimated increase in gross value added (GVA) by £1.63bn.
15. The report recommended £27m investment for more detailed work on the expressway, as well £100m towards the next stage of East-West Rail. This investment was announced in the 2016 Autumn budget.
16. In addition, the NIC launched an 'ideas competition' in Summer 2017 with the aim 'to gather, showcase and promote imaginative responses to integrated place-making with the proposed infrastructure projects across the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford Corridor'. Four multi-disciplinary teams were shortlisted (Barton Willmore, Fletcher Priest Architects, Mae and Tibbalds Planning & Urban Design) to take forward more detailed concepts, with the winner to be announced in mid-November 2017, possibly linked to the Autumn budget. The 'ideas competition' included

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-national-infrastructure-commissions-interim-report-into-the-cambridge-milton-keynes-oxford-corridor>

background and a map (**Appendix 2**) showing indicative expressway options³. The NIC has just revealed the final four design concepts which can be viewed in short video form on the competition website and comments can be submitted. These concepts vary, but in summary largely include proposals for new or expanded settlements between Oxford and Cambridge, linked to sustainable transport improvements.

Next Steps by NIC

17. It is understood that a more detailed study will be published later this year, including a 'Strategic Outline Business Case' for the expressway proposal. A stakeholder workshop is scheduled for 18 October 2017, and it is anticipated that this will give more detail on the process being undertaken on route option identification and selection. Any further detail given will be fed back to councillors for their consideration. It is expected, subject to HE, Department for Transport and Treasury agreement, that any proposal will be included in the next Road Investment Strategy; 2020 to 2025.

Considerations for the Vale

18. As part of the NIC's engagement with communities, Oxfordshire Leaders met with Lord Adonis (NIC Chairman) in July 2017. In addition, Leaders, Elected Mayors and Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) Chairmen across the corridor (27 councils and 3 LEPs) responded to the last round of consultation and recognised that this is a 'once in a generation opportunity' of national importance and 'are united in a shared ambition to capitalise powerfully on our area's potential, both domestically and internationally, across a wide range of sectors where we lead markets and have identified opportunities for continued growth'. The response was not signed by the Vale council, although we did respond separately.

19. Following this consultation, Cabinet considered the most up to date information on expressway options available in August 2017. As a result of this the Leader of the Vale of White Horse wrote to Lord Adonis to give his current view on the proposals. The letter is attached at Appendix 3. This includes some supporting plans that show officer interpretations of how route options around Oxford included in published Expressway or NIC reports could impact on the area to the South and West of Oxford. In the letter Cllr Barber states that he does not support any routes to the west of Oxford, or upgrades to the A34 in this location. Should any of the routes proposed to the south of Oxford be progressed, he notes that he would want further engagement on more detail, prior to any final recommendations being made.

20. For scrutiny committee to make an informed view at this time, officers consider the following points are important to assess potential options:

³ <https://competitions.malcolmreading.co.uk/cambridgeoxfordconnection/>

- There is significant impetus behind infrastructure improvements on the Oxford - Milton Keynes - Cambridge corridor, particularly if it enables more homes and jobs. It's happening whether we like it or not.
- Significant new investment will start with the delivery of East- West rail which is relatively well advanced between Bicester (Oxford) and Milton Keynes and Bedford by 2024, and will then follow with parts of the Expressway.
- It is not yet known when specific aspects of Expressway improvements could be delivered, with detail unlikely to emerge until the next Road Investment Strategy; 2020 to 2025.
- Any of the existing proposed options identified around Oxford as shown in **Appendices 1 and 2** and interpreted indicatively in the plans shown in **Appendix 3** would have both positive and negative impacts on the Vale and its surrounding area.
- The main negative impacts are likely to be related to potential environmental and landscape matters and also on Green Belt areas to the South & West of Oxford (depending on the option).
- The main positive impacts are likely to be further mitigating the transport impacts of planned new development as proposed in local plans, the economic benefits of improved strategic accessibility and some air quality and pollution benefits on the existing A34 corridor to the west of Oxford if traffic flows are reduced through re-direction to alternative routes. However, these benefits will vary depending on the route of the expressway around Oxford and the number and location of accesses to/ from the route.
- If the route followed more tightly to the South or West of Oxford it is likely to have less linkage with proposed development, apart potentially from Dalton Barracks. If the route was closer to Didcot Garden Town/ the Science Vale area and those areas of proposed development in the central area of South Oxfordshire (including Culham) and included junctions to existing roads it could help mitigate this development and potentially reduce infrastructure spend for these sites/potential sites
- If the route followed the existing A34 to the west of Oxford this would likely impact on existing settlements in the Botley/ North Hinksey area, and could route further traffic to areas already sensitive to air quality/ environmental impacts

Conclusion

21. The following conclusions on the expressway are suggested at this time:

- There is significant national impetus behind proposals for an expressway, especially if it is seen as helping to deliver significantly more housing to support economic growth between Oxford and Cambridge.
- The economic and transport case for improvements seem strong, but environmental impacts need to be considered further.
- No routes have been specifically chosen, but there are a number of routes being considered, some of which would better link to the growth

proposals at Didcot Garden Town, Science Vale, and Enterprise Zones than others.

- There is an opportunity for the committee to express a view on the core route options already proposed or the possible alternative route options for a South/West Oxford route. This can then be fed back to the Cabinet member and help inform any further officer discussion on expressway options.

Appendices;

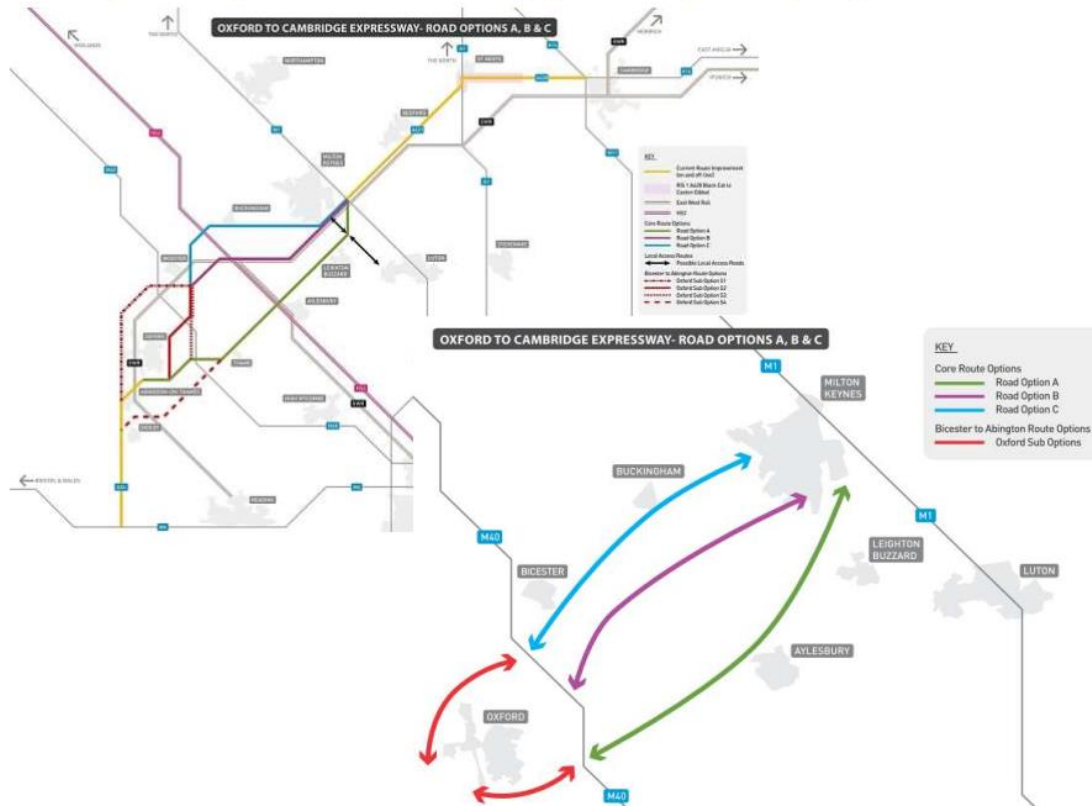
Appendix 1. Figure from Stage 3 Expressway Report

Appendix 2. Figure from NIC 'ideas competition' briefing note

Appendix 3: Letter from Cllr Matt Barber to Lord Adonis, 31 August 2017, including associated supporting plans

Appendix 1: Schematic figure from Stage 3 Oxford to Cambridge Expressway Report, Nov 2016

SHORTLISTED EXPRESSWAY OPTIONS



Appendix 2: Map (extract) showing Expressway Route Options from the 'ideas competition' documentation, June 2017

