

# Public speakers

24 November 2020

## Question

### 1. Ian Ashley on behalf of Need not Greed Oxfordshire

NNGO notes that work is ongoing to refine policy options for the Oxfordshire Plan 2050. The description (Para 12) makes it sound as if there are a wide range of partners involved, but as far as we can see this is all related to different internal groupings within the local authorities. Given the long-term strategic importance of the Plan to the future of Oxfordshire, we are sure that all involved would wish to avoid the usual confrontational process where critical decisions are made behind the scenes and the public only get to tick a box (or not) at the end. At the start of the Plan preparation, there was considerable discussion about the comprehensive involvement of external informed stakeholders, such as NNGO and CPRE, at early stages in the process. How does the Growth Board therefore intend to test its internal assumptions and draft policy options with such stakeholders / critical friends prior to formal consultation?

### Response

The development of the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 will continue to be supported by a comprehensive consultation and engagement process. As with the Regulation 18 (part 1) consultation undertaken in 2019, we expect to use a wide range of engagement methods which will provide a diversity of opportunities for stakeholders, partners and the public to help shape this work. Our previous consultation involved a stakeholder event with over 100 delegates, including one of those mentioned, together with roadshow and drop-in sessions. This work was supported further by a range of online, press and media engagements generating over 1200 responses. This resulted in a substantial report which has been central to informing the next steps.

Upcoming consultations represent early stages in the process, and decisions relating to the Oxfordshire Plan will be subject to the proper democratic processes of each council. Any statutory consultation documents relating to the Plan will be considered by the City and District Councils before the consultation starts. I want to emphasise that the report in front of us says that the next consultation will present a 'range of options' for public consideration. No decisions on policy options have been made, and the next opportunity for us to test options with stakeholders and critical friends will be during the next consultation in 2021.

Separately, we launched a public engagement exercise last week to support the development of a Strategic Vision for Oxfordshire. I would strongly encourage Need Not Greed to engage with that process. We are making use of the Oxfordshire Open Thought platform to hear comments which can be found online. I would encourage you to meet with our officers to answer any further questions, and to hear any thoughts or policy suggestions you may have.

### 2. Charlie Maynard on behalf of the Witney to Oxford Transport Group

Thank you all for allowing me to present to you today. I am the newly elected Chair of the Witney Oxford Transport Group ("WOT Group") and am speaking to you in that capacity.

WOT Group is a not-for-profit, non-political, voluntary organisation. We have been busy over the last few months. Please see the link [here](#) for a Google Earth presentation outlining a rail route from a junction with the Cotswold Line at Yarnton, through Eynsham and Witney, to Carterton and RAF Brize Norton. We believe the presentation clearly demonstrates that there is indeed a feasible route for the railway line which would generate very large economic, social and environmental benefits for West Oxfordshire. Importantly, this route closely follows the A40 and therefore minimises the impact both to people's homes and to our countryside. Prior studies have looked at reinstating the old route, which is not a viable option.

We are now working hard on quantifying the costs of such a line and would like to report back to you shortly on this point. We will soon be applying for a grant from the Department for Transport's Restoring your Railway [Ideas Fund](#). The application requires the sponsorship of one MP. The line runs through two constituencies. We have the support of Layla Moran; Robert Courts is considering. At Oxfordshire County Council's November 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting, every single councillor present, save one abstention, voted in support of a motion committing to "undertake a feasibility study, should funding be confirmed, in the next financial year, to look at a rail link from Carterton, Witney and Eynsham to Oxford".

We have recently received letters of support from Carterton Town Council and the Lord Mayor of Oxford and we are hopeful that we will soon have similar letters to Witney Town Council and Eynsham Parish Council. We will be seeking to submit a cross-party motion similar to that submitted to OCC to WODC's next full council meeting on January 20<sup>th</sup>. We will also be conducting a community outreach and consultation programme in the first quarter of 2021.

The proposed work to increase rail capacity at Oxford Station and the dual tracking to Hanborough are both critical enabling steps for this next step of building a railway to Carterton and we fully support both plans.

We all know how troubled West Oxfordshire's transport situation is and we are trying our best to contribute to the solution. We have two requests to each of you today:

- 1) Please have a look through our presentation. If you have questions or comments, we are very keen to hear them.
- 2) We ask for your support in exploring this opportunity further, including giving your support for a Feasibility Study. Importantly, we recognise that giving your support to a Feasibility Study is not the same as giving your support to rebuild the railway line. We stress that we are only looking now for your support on the former, not the latter.

### **Response**

Thank you for submitting your ideas and speaking at the recent meeting of the Oxfordshire Growth Board. The Board has asked Oxfordshire County Council to provide a response as the local transport authority.

First of all, I welcome your enthusiasm and commitment to developing and upgrading transport in West Oxfordshire, particularly public transport.

To achieve the change we need, we must work to deliver our existing commitments and then build on those. It's important to recognise that we have around £400m already committed or proposed to invest in public transport in West Oxfordshire. This includes stage 1 of the A40 project which will provide a dedicated bus rapid transit lanes and a new P&R site. Construction of this project is now getting underway with more infrastructure, including additional bus lanes coming with stage 2 of the project.

To complement the A40 project, we are working as part of the North Cotswold Line Task Force partnership and have a fully developed proposal for a business case to invest £200m to significantly upgrade the North Cotswold Line with dual track and redevelopment of Hanborough station as a transport hub for the area, with links proposed to Witney, Eynsham, Woodstock and other surrounding areas.

The latter project is reliant upon long-promised investment in extra capacity through Oxford station, and the £160m investment which the Oxfordshire Growth Board has agreed to write to Government in support of includes a £10m contribution from Oxfordshire funds, some of which has been reallocated from other projects, recognising how essential to Oxfordshire's future that this investment is.

There is always more you can do. The North Cotswold proposals allow for a significant uplift in services on the line, but to run even more trains requires more capacity throughout the Oxfordshire rail network, otherwise they have nowhere to go. This is why the Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study (ORCS) has focused on the strategic upgrades and investment needed to enable new services which connect across Oxfordshire and support growth. Through the ORCS, we are already looking at providing significant extra capacity required to run more on Cross Country, East West Rail and Cotswold Line services.

Operating anything else over and above this would require significant further investment on the network, and we already have new proposals coming through via the Restoring Your Railways Fund for reopening the link from the North Cotswold Line to Stratford for example – this would require a further upgrade of the line.

In this context, consideration of the feasibility of what would need to be a brand new railway to connect Oxford, Eynsham, Witney and Carterton must be something that we look at in the future, and would require government and the rail industry to support and, in all likelihood, substantially fund – it's important to bear in mind that the County Council does not have direct responsibility for rail. The particular proposals you are putting forward also appear to require a significant amount land acquisition, which would add complexity and cost compared with other rail projects we are supporting, which largely involve increasing capacity within existing rail ownership.

Our (now considerable) experience of working with the industry on rail development projects is that it takes some significant time and effort to develop all aspects of rail proposals – engineering, operation, demand, market analysis and so forth – and bids for funding end up needing to demonstrate a high level of detail in terms of scheme proposals, costs and benefits. We are already fully committed on our existing portfolio of projects coming on stream as a result of the ORCS work.

It is also important to note that the business cases for the A40 and North Cotswold Line projects are heavily linked to demand generated from planned growth, including the 'Salt Cross' Garden village which another major transport investment proposal would only compete with.

However this is not to say that there won't be the need for this kind of scheme at some point in the future, where it could build on the proposed investment in the North Cotswold Line assuming that comes forward. Much may depend here on the future scale and location of growth in Oxfordshire, which the Oxfordshire Plan 2050 is considering. It is also likely to be important for any proposed scheme to be able to show regional and national, rather than simply local, benefit - including wider rail connectivity opportunities. This is as an aspect of East West Rail which has been instrumental in getting this project funded by Government

In the meantime, we need to maintain our focus on current plans, which have been agreed and signed off by the Growth Board, Rail industry and Department for Transport. I am keen to keep the dialogue going, and if WOT can get behind and support our hard-fought North Cotswold Line and A40 corridor proposals, and help get the rail investment over the line, then this really will give us something to build on.

I would be very happy to meet to discuss this further.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Ian Hudspeth

### **3. Cllr Liz Leffman, Oxfordshire County Council**

I am addressing the Growth Board as County Councillor for Charlbury and Wychwood. I would first of all like to say how pleased I am to see this paper and the draft letter that accompanies it. I strongly support the plans outlined in this paper and look forward to a successful outcome to the funding bid for Phase 2.

The North Cotswold line runs through the ward that I represent, and there are five stations in it: Finstock, Charlbury, Ascott under Wychwood, Shipton under Wychwood and Kingham. Only two of these stations, Charlbury and Kingham, have an hourly service and all trains currently stop at these stations. The other stations have just one train per day in either direction. Traffic on this line is limited because some sections of the line are still single track: the sections between Hanborough and Oxford, Hanborough and Charlbury, and Evesham and Pershore. The plan is that the sections between Hanborough and Oxford and Evesham and Pershore are doubled as part of the upgrade referred to in this paper – a total of nine miles. But as far as I can ascertain, there are currently no plans to double the section between Hanborough and Charlbury. This will severely limit the overall capacity of the line.

The upgrade of the section between Hanborough and Oxford means there will be four trains per hour from Hanborough to London as compared with one per hour at present. But because of the restriction on capacity caused by single track elsewhere on the line, and in order to improve the service from further up, under present plans Kingham and Charlbury stations would no longer form part of the core daily service and a limited number of trains will stop at these stations once the Hanborough upgrade is completed. Both Charlbury and Kingham are well-used: Charlbury served around 300,000 passengers per year prior to the pandemic. It should be noted that passenger numbers dropped slightly following the opening of Oxford Parkway station in 2016. The number of passengers using that station have grown steadily since its opening and that is because it offers two trains per hour to London as compared with just one on the Cotswold Line. This serves to demonstrate that if the frequency of trains stopping at Kingham and Charlbury is reduced, it is likely that people will drive to Oxford Parkway or Hanborough to catch a train to London. This undermines the intention of this strategy which is to provide county-wide rail connectivity which will encourage people to use their cars less.

I am therefore asking the Chair of the Growth Board to consider revising her letter to the Government to include reference to the North Cotswold Line, to emphasise the importance of doubling this line and to request confirmation that the doubling of the line along its entire length will be included in plans for Phase 3.

## **Response**

Thank you for highlighting the interest in rail developments. It is very important that members are focused on how to secure easier travel on alternatives to the car. I understand the particular issue is one that is within the work of the Cotswold Line Taskforce, as any development of service will require support from the operator.

It is not within the work of the Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study. The ORCS work was presented as an interim report to the Growth Board some months ago, and it is understood that the final report is likely to be published in the near future. This report has developed an assessment of demand for passenger and freight demand over the medium and long term, within, and through Oxfordshire. The main conclusion has been to identify a significant gap between demand and the capacity and connectivity of the rail network, now and in the foreseeable future. Network Rail have identified a need for a significant increase in track capacity through Oxford, which is a pre-requisite for a wider programme of service developments. This development would also enable the potential increase in services on the Cotswold line in the future.

The proposed letter of support at this time is deliberately focused on the pending decision on phase 2 Network Rail capacity programme. The interest of the Growth Board is in seeing the whole development programme of improved connectivity across Oxfordshire come to fruition, including potential developments along the Cotswold line. However, the next building block is to secure increased track capacity, and to present clear support for the decision and to avoid any delay in giving approval.

In the light of this imperative, while there are many individual rail developments all members will want it would seem prudent to keep the focus of the letter on the immediate issue, rather than adding references to one or other schemes that may come forward in the future.