

To: Oxfordshire Growth Board

Title of Report: Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study: Completion and Next Steps

Date: 22 March 2021

Report of: John Disley, Infrastructure Strategy & Policy Manager,
Oxfordshire County Council / Andrew Down, Chair of
Growth Board Executive Officer Group

Status: Open

Executive Summary and Purpose:

The purpose of this report is to set out the final conclusions of the Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study, a programme of work part-funded by the Board and other partners focused on “how can the rail system best support economic growth in Oxfordshire”. It builds on the completion of the first stage of this project, which was reported to the Growth Board in January 2020, and summarises the work completed since then, which has quantified the interventions and schemes on the main Oxfordshire Rail Network which are required to enable the connectivity and capacity enhancements outlined in stage 1.

The report also sets out the proposed approach for the next stage of work, which is to take the outcomes of the study and translate them into a proposed investment programme under the “Oxfordshire Connect” banner, and sets this programme in the context of the Oxfordshire economic development and recovery narrative.

Recommendation(s):

1. That the Growth Board welcomes the outcomes and conclusions of the completed Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study.
2. That the Growth Board endorses the proposed next stage of work, to be progressed in partnership with Network Rail and the rail industry via the Governance mechanism outlined, under the ‘Oxfordshire Connect’ banner

Appendices:

Annex 1 - Study Stage 1 Executive Summary and Recommendations
Annex 2 - GRIP 1 order of magnitude cost ranges
Annex 3 - Study Visualisation of Outcomes
Annex 4 - Supporting Text for the ‘Decision to Initiate’ process

Introduction

1. The Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study (ORCS) commissioned by Government and completed by Network Rail, has been overseen and funded by a partnership between DfT and Stakeholders, including the Growth Board. Other funding partners include England's Economic Heartland and the East West Rail Consortium. The Study has been given strategic direction by a Steering Group co-chaired by the Chair of the Growth Board's Executive Officer Group. The Growth Board approved the project remit and financial contribution in June 2018.

Stage 1

2. The first stage of work, completed in 2019, principally focused on the question of 'what is required from the rail network in Oxfordshire to support planned growth' and comprised two main workstreams:
 - (i) An overall strategic study of the rail network focusing on central Oxfordshire focusing on rail system capacity and connectivity requirements to best support economic growth in Oxfordshire'
 - (ii) A specific study looking at the engineering feasibility / rail infrastructure requirement for re-opening the Cowley branch line to passenger services
3. The outcomes of Stage 1 were reported to the Growth Board in January 2020 and the completed Stage 1 report has have subsequently been endorsed by the rail industry and the Department for Transport.
4. The conclusions of Stage 1 identified a number of strategic increased **Capacity** requirements on the network and, more significantly, better **Connectivity** between identified key rail hubs: Banbury, Bicester, Culham, Didcot, Hanborough, Oxford and Oxford Parkway. These two needs were then translated into a proposed **Train Service Specification**
5. A visual summary of the outcomes of Stage 1 of the Study is attached as Annex 1. These included
 - (i) Introduction of East West Rail services to Bletchley/Milton Keynes and the completion Oxford Station Phase 2 - by 2024. These are assumed included in the future baseline as Government committed schemes, although funding has only been committed to part of the Oxford Phase 2 programme, with further business case submission required to support the case for the full scheme. This is important as the ORCS programme is reliant on this project
 - (ii) The requirement for a major uplift in services across the network by 2028, include Cowley branch services, additional hourly "cross country" services and introduction of the full EWR service to Cambridge, with proposals to extend services west to Didcot and potentially beyond Oxfordshire, with a new station at Grove/Wantage
 - (iii) Proposed service enhancements on the North Cotswold Line – these are being progressed separately by the North Cotswold Line Task Force but reflected in the train service specification and outcomes of this study
 - (iv) Increases in the number of freight paths, particularly between Didcot and through Oxford

6. It is important to bear in mind that the study work was undertaken and initial conclusions published pre-Covid. Since that time, the rail industry has experienced major disruption, significantly reduced passenger numbers (although freight activity has held up strongly) and fundamental changes to funding and operations. Some of these changes are likely to remain permanent and are likely to be reflected in the way the industry is structured and organised in future, and it is unclear how or when passenger demand will return. As a consequence there may be changes to some of the indicative timescales presented in the Study, for when outputs are deemed required to be delivered by based on passenger growth.
7. Nevertheless, development of connectivity including rail remains fundamental to the future success of Oxfordshire's recovery and good growth¹ post-pandemic and the requirement for supporting infrastructure projects, underpinned by the upgrade of the core rail network through Oxford (including expansion and redevelopment of the station) is as strong as ever. Oxford has a central position as national rail hub, underlining its position as a centre of importance and directly supporting our ambitious proposals across the Oxford to Cambridge Arc. This will be an important message to reinforce when making the case for why rail infrastructure investment should come to Oxfordshire
8. Rail development also supports the 'Climate Emergency' agenda and the industry is responding to this via the National Rail Decarbonisation programme. This is very likely to include further roll out of electrification of the network, alongside the employment of other technologies. An early beneficiary of this revised approach is expected to be completion of the Great Western Electrification programme to, and potentially through, Oxford subject to funding. Capacity interventions are being planned to not preclude the likelihood of this.

Stage 2 Outcomes

9. Stage 1 identified the high level interventions likely to be required on the network, based on the proposed enhanced train service. Stage 2 took forward the priorities identified in stage 1 for a more detailed level of analysis similar to that undertaken for the Cowley study, in order to quantify the likely scope, scale and cost of the interventions required to enable the proposed Train Service Specification.
10. Stage 2 covered two main geographic areas:
 - (i) The 'core' rail network through Oxford (Wolvercot North Junction, the junction of the North Cotswold Line through to Appleford, to the north of Didcot)
 - (ii) Didcot to Highworth Junction (east of Swindon), including the junctions to the north and east of Didcot, including Grove station.
11. Work completed included cost plans, scope assessments, industry consultation, constructability reviews, and concept of operations. The interventions identified in the stage 1 report have been further refined suitable for further development. The main conclusions from this for each area are identified below.

Wolvercot North Junction – Appleford

- (i) The most significant interventions are 4-tracking south of Oxford station and Oxford Station additional (east side) platform – which in turn would require a new station building and associated facilities as envisaged in the Oxford Station masterplan.
- (ii) 4-tracking between Oxford station and Radley will be achievable throughout. The section between Oxford station and Hinksey North Junction will be the most complex element.

Didcot to Highworth Junction

- (iii) The most significant interventions are grade separation of Didcot East Junction and 4-tracking between Wantage Road (Grove) and Steventon.
- (iv) The site of the former Wantage Road station is recommended for Grove station. Other sites considered were either unsuitable due to the presence of existing [rail] assets or had worse onward transport links.

12. Indicative ('GRIP1' stage) Cost information for these interventions has now been finalised and is summarised in Annex 2. This shows the total cost of interventions between Wolvercot and Appleford would be between £675m and £900m, with Didcot to Highworth between £1.6bn and £2.1bn. The total cost of all interventions required to support the Train service specification is between £2.25bn and £3bn.

13. Subsequent timetable analysis has looked in more detail at addition of services from the 2024 baseline to the 2028 service specification to check previous conclusions and understand in more detail the dependencies between interventions and new services. The key findings were that previously identified interventions are supported, with no new ones recommended, and that 4-tracking south of Oxford station and the provision of an additional [east side] platform at Oxford station are key enablers for all recommended services.

14. Overall benefits of the proposed service enhancements were also appraised. This exercise concluded that:

- (i) Extension of East West Rail trains beyond Oxford has significant benefits, especially services to/from Cambridge
- (ii) Extension of additional long distance trains from Birmingham beyond Oxford also has significant benefit
- (iii) Cowley passenger services have significant benefits, especially to London
- (iv) Service improvement at Culham (and Radley) is supported
- (v) A Didcot to Hanborough service is likely to be viable if delivered as part of a wider programme.
- (vi) These benefits, taken together and set against the operational and capital costs, yield an indicative high or very high value for money. This requires detailed appraisal at the next stage.

Overall Study Conclusions

15. The Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study has established that:

- (i) Oxfordshire is one of the UK's most productive economic regions – uniquely high growth forecast over next 15 years. Transformation in transport infrastructure is required to support this housing and employment growth
- (ii) Oxfordshire's rail system is a strategic hub for local and national services and freight. It has little further capacity and does not link priority hubs within Oxfordshire, which require better connectivity both between them and to connect Oxfordshire to high priority, high value hubs outside the county
- (iii) A comprehensive upgrade to passenger services is required to support growth. This includes introduction of East West Rail services and new services from other existing programmes. New services must link growth hubs and existing strategic transport hubs
- (iv) A major programme of interventions is required to deliver the new services. These are required to unlock capacity that benefits all new and existing services. A programme vision that incorporates all identified services and interventions is required in order to support growth and unlock local, regional, and national benefits

Further Stage 2 Work

16. Underspend on the overall study programme has enabled some further work to be commissioned, specifically to develop the interventions required for the Cowley Branch Line to the next stage, building on the Stage 1 study work, including connections into the main line and interface with future electrification. Some funding will also be used to support further business case development work outlined later in this report.

Next Steps – 'Oxfordshire Connect'

17. The opportunity now is to turn the outcomes of the study into a comprehensive investment programme for the Oxfordshire Rail Network, and to take this forward via the rail industry 'pipeline' of projects - with a clear sense of what the highest priorities are, which can be taken forward initially and upon which further proposals would build.

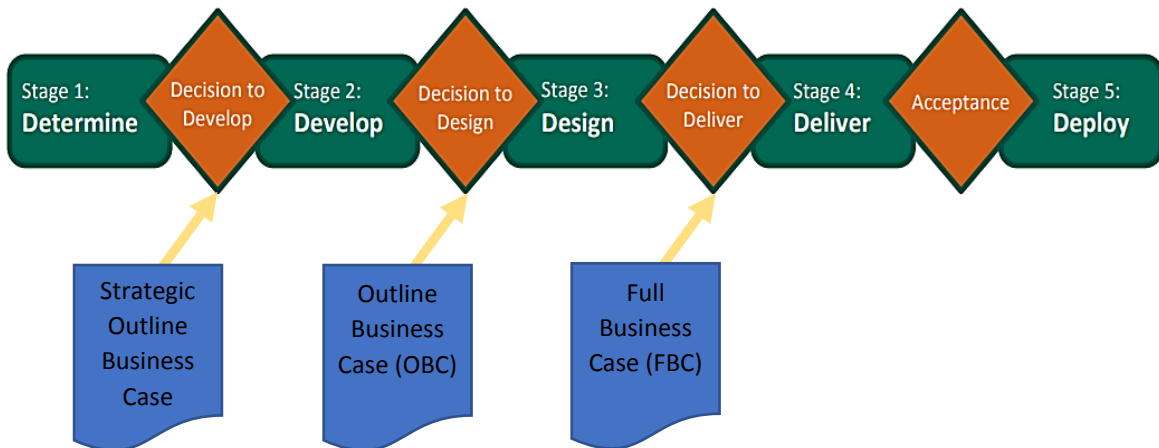
18. Annex 3 provides an initial visualisation of this approach. The four slides show

- (i) The economic development market opportunity, including envisaged increased housing and jobs, rail freight growth and growth at main station 'hubs'
- (ii) The principal cross-Oxfordshire Connectivity outputs
- (iii) The train service vision which illustrates both the enhanced connectivity and service offer at a local and regional/national scale
- (iv) A high level view of the interventions required

19. This programme is proposed to be titled 'Oxfordshire Connect', consistent with other established rail industry 'connect' programmes – see below for branding:

OXFORDSHIRE CONNECT

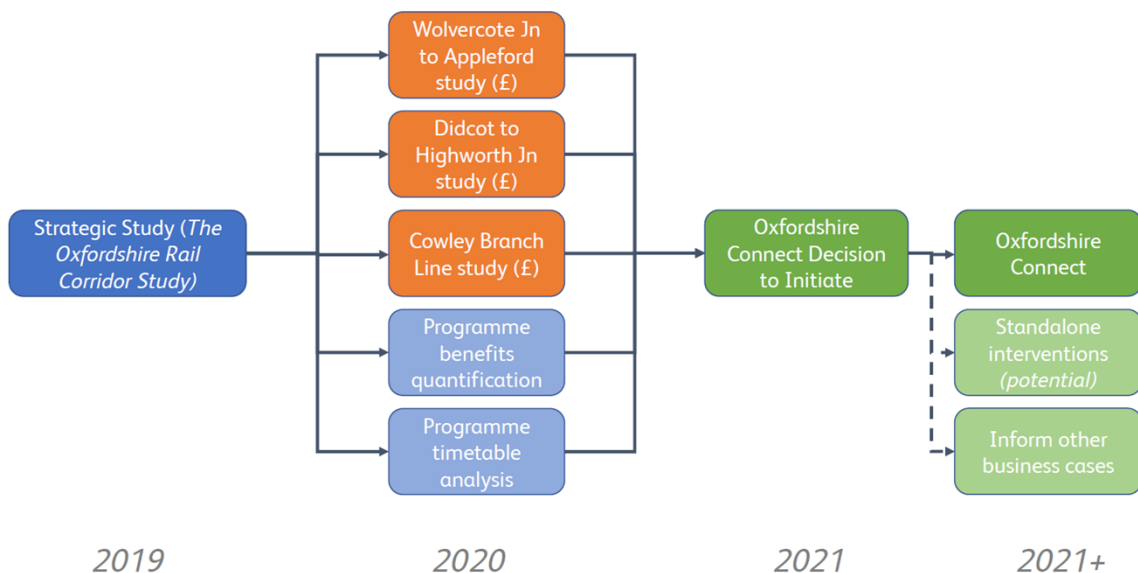
20. Oxfordshire Connect would be the vehicle to take forward ORCS outputs into a programme for all schemes across Oxfordshire, with an overall programme strategic business case, which would support a 'Decision to Develop' for the full Oxfordshire Connect programme – fitting in with the current 5 stage industry Rail Network Enhancement Programme ('RNEP') process outlined below.



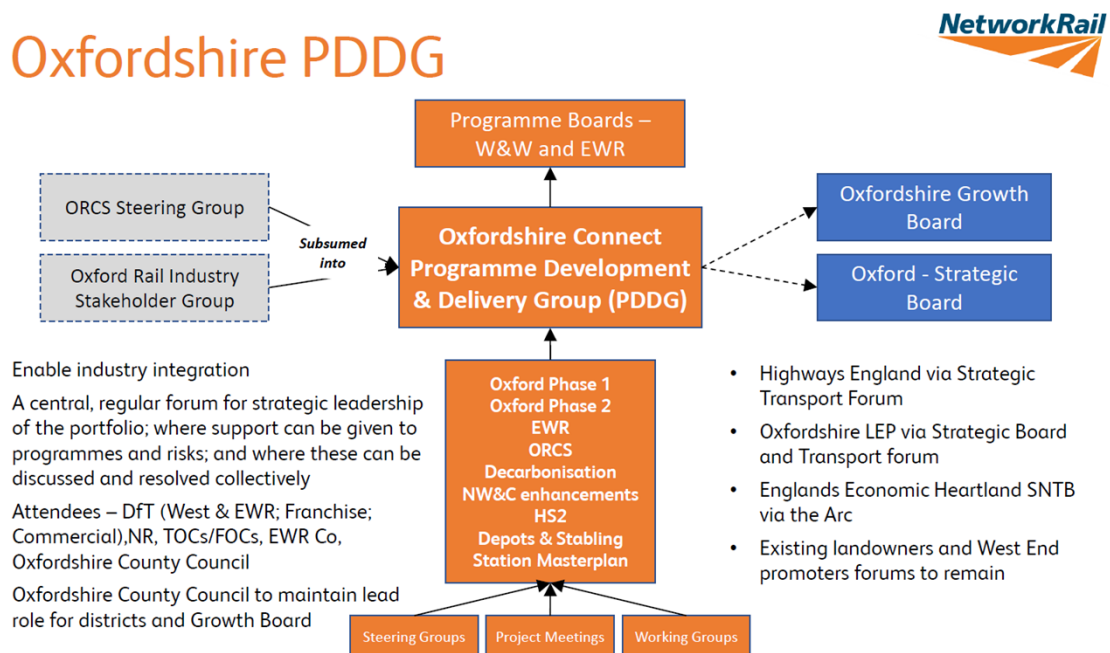
21. Completion of the Develop stage of Oxfordshire Connect would confirm the 'Key Outputs' of the programme that can progress as individual proposals through future stages of this pipeline. That stage in turn will produce Outline Business Cases to support 'Decisions to Design' for each project, within the overall Oxfordshire Connect Programme

22. The overall Programme Vision, which shows how the strategic study leads to the Oxfordshire Connect Programme, is set out below:

The ORCS programme vision



23. The DfT Programme Board has now endorsed the ‘Decision to Initiate’, allowing the overall programme to enter the RNEP and to launch ‘Oxfordshire Connect’. At this stage, the programme is proposed to include the highest priority interventions (including interventions 0 to 8 set out in Annex 2) and service enhancements between Hanborough and Didcot identified in the strategic study and subsequent development work. The supporting narrative for this is set out in Annex 4.
24. Existing ORCS funding supports the work outlined in the Decision to Initiate and the Strategic Outline business case submission. Further development of projects would however require further funding to be bid for at the appropriate stage.
25. To oversee this process, it is proposed that the previous ORCS steering group becomes a new Programme Development and Delivery Group (PDDG) for Oxfordshire Connect. Proposals are being drafted and developed with the DfT, with a view to this being established for the 2021/22 Business Year. Below is an illustration of what these Governance arrangements could look like:



26. This approach is supported in principle by the Oxfordshire Strategic Transport Forum, a cross-organisation group of senior Stakeholders and local authority representatives, which also has a seat on the Growth Board’s Infrastructure Sub-Group. This forum is also exploring how complementary networks, including Active Travel and Bus/Rapid Transit, can be progressed to maximise ‘cross mode’ opportunities which will be essential to meet our overall strategic vision and specific ambitions on reducing Carbon and Climate Action. This would all be brought together within the new Local Transport & Connectivity Plan, which would use the outcomes of the Corridor Study as the basis for an updated Rail Strategy.

Related Funding Opportunities

27. Separate opportunities are being pursued to develop specific rail projects further, particularly through the Government’s ‘Restoring Your Railways’ funding stream. These include a further submission for Grove Station via the ‘Ideas Fund’ and Cowley branch line via the ‘Accelerating Proposals’ Fund. These are being framed in the context of the Study outcomes and ‘Oxfordshire Connect’ Programme.

Further/Future Consideration

28. The overall study programme still needs to reach a view on how additional growth expected up to 2050 (being considered in the emerging Oxfordshire Plan 2050) is taken into account. This would enable the study to identify potential interventions that provide the capacity and connectivity necessary to accommodate passenger and freight growth over a longer 30-year timeframe
29. These will need to be considered as part of the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy update, which directly supports the development of Oxfordshire Plan 2050 and the economic ambitions set out in the Oxfordshire Local Industrial Strategy and associated Investment Plan.

Financial Implications

30. As outlined above, funding has only been secured to develop the Oxfordshire Connect Programme to Strategic Outline Business Case stage. Further funding would be required to progress the programme further.

Legal Implications

31. None specific at this stage

Other Implications

32. There are no specific implications beyond those identified in the report.

Conclusions

33. The completion of the Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study work paints a clear picture of the critical role which Rail will have in supporting planned growth and significant employment opportunities across Oxfordshire. The study outcomes places Oxford in a central position as a major UK rail hub for inter-regional travel, as well as providing significant rail connectivity and capacity benefits locally.
34. In order to fully demonstrate the case and provide clear justification for further rail investment in Oxfordshire, the development of the study outputs into the Oxfordshire Connect programme would enable specific projects and interventions to be taken forward subject to the necessary funding being secured at later stages. This would all be overseen by updated Governance arrangements and continued regular milestone reporting to the Growth Board and its partner organisations

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