

Annex 4 – Supporting Narrative for ‘Decision to Initiate’ Process

What are the drivers for this proposal and how will it support strategic objectives?

The drivers for the proposal have been identified and described in the Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study (ORCS), a Network Rail led study into the future of Oxfordshire’s rail system. The ORCS strategic study formed part of Network Rail’s Long-Term Planning Process and was followed by a joint DfT and Local Authority funded GRIP 1 study into its recommendations that forms the basis of the proposal. ORCS was overseen by a steering group consisting of representatives from DfT, Local Authorities, Train Operating Companies, and East West Rail, which has endorsed its findings.

ORCS reiterated Oxfordshire’s position at the heart of a rail corridor that links the Great Western Mainline (GWML) at Didcot with the Midlands and the North. This corridor is vital for passenger and freight services between the north and south of the country and is joined by the London Marylebone to Birmingham line south of Banbury. The same corridor provides branches to important rail corridors through the North Cotswolds to Worcester, and to Bicester, which in future will extend across the strategically important Oxford-Cambridge Arc.

Oxford station is a key origin and destination for passenger services to cities including London, Birmingham, Worcester, Hereford, Winchester, and Southampton. It is also the hub of the important local rail market in Oxfordshire connecting Oxford to the major towns of Banbury, Bicester and Didcot, plus other significant rail hubs including Hanborough and Charlbury. Didcot, positioned on the GWML, is a vital node in the UK rail network and is a junction for all north-south passenger and freight traffic west of London.

Rail is a key element of Oxfordshire’s transport system, with over 20.5 million journeys made to and from Oxfordshire stations in 2018-19. Demand for rail travel in Oxfordshire has grown rapidly and above the UK average. Journeys to and from stations in Oxfordshire have increased by 69% in the 10 years to 2019 against a UK average of 42%, with growth in the last 5 years particularly significant, at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 5.2% annually against a national average of 2.7%. This is particularly remarkable given the suppression of demand in that time imposed by major engineering works at Banbury and Oxford, and across the wider region from Great Western Route Modernisation.

Oxford station itself has seen an increase of passengers 63% over ten years. For a large station outside of London this is extraordinary growth: amongst stations of the same size or larger, only 5 stations grew faster over the same period. Those were Birmingham New Street and Coventry, as a result of demand unlocked by the upgrade of the West Coast main line, Gatwick and Stansted airports as a result of strong demand growth for air travel, and Manchester Oxford Road, the main commuter station serving the south of Manchester’s city centre. Since 1997-98, the start of the data series, passenger numbers have risen from 3.1m to 8.7m in 2019-20, reflecting the very strong demand for rail in Oxfordshire. However, the facilities at Oxford station are largely the same as they were when the station was last rebuilt in 1990, when passenger numbers and anticipated growth were at a historic low.

Investment delivered through the Great Western Route Modernisation programme led to significant improvements to rail capacity in the Oxford corridor in CP5 which have allowed the lengthening of freight trains, optimisation of the existing track layouts through re-signalling, and the introduction of the extremely popular Oxford - London Marylebone service. However, the rail network remains at full capacity and Oxfordshire remains poorly connected, both inter-regionally and within the county. The trend of improvements is being continued in CP6, with the Outline Business Case for Oxford Corridor Phase 2 currently awaiting a Decision to Design.

However, whilst that proposal will be necessary to meet the short term objects, and will provide a base for Oxfordshire Connect to build from, it will not be sufficient to support the strategic objectives described in this section.

In 2017, the National Infrastructure Commission reported that far greater regional connectivity is required to unlock the potential of the Oxford – Cambridge arc and facilitate the construction of a million new homes by 2050. Within that context, central government has agreed the Oxfordshire Housing & Growth Deal Growth with Oxfordshire’s Local Authorities, Local Enterprise Partnership, and key local stakeholders which includes a commitment to 100,000 new homes by 2031 and an additional 108,000 jobs by 2040, by doubling the size of the local economy. ORCS has incorporated that forecast housing and employment growth in a refreshed local growth scenario, which suggests that demand for rail in Oxfordshire will continue to grow well above the national average. However, without significant investment, rail will be unable to support the growth of Oxfordshire’s economy, which will apply more pressure to Oxfordshire’s at-capacity road network and lead to worsening levels of congestion.

Proposals have been brought forward by others to improve interregional connectivity, most notably East West Rail (EWR) which aims to transform connectivity through the Oxford-Cambridge arc, but also new journeys to stations towards Birmingham Moor Street and an improved service to Worcestershire.

In addition to passenger services, Oxfordshire hosts one of the most significant freight routes in the country. The route between the Port of Southampton and terminals and markets in the West Midlands and North runs directly through Oxfordshire and is a strategically vital freight route, critical to the UK economy. This is in addition to numerous other strategically important freight terminals and commodities that flow through Oxfordshire. Network Rail’s freight demand forecast suggest that strong growth will continue, particularly with new opportunities for flows through Oxfordshire provided by East West Rail. That will mean the number of freight paths through Oxford will need to double by 2043 to 4 freight trains per hour in each direction.

The existing Oxfordshire rail network cannot accommodate these service enhancements, so ORCS identified how Oxfordshire’s local needs could be met through these proposals and recommended a package of infrastructure interventions that will allow the services to be introduced.

The Oxfordshire Connect programme has been designed to meet those recommendations, and so will ensure that the rail network can provide support to housing and growth in Oxfordshire and across the wider region, as well as providing the vehicle for the delivery of all rail industry proposals through and into Oxfordshire. By doing so it will deliver against three of the four priorities for investments in the Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline:

- **Delivering the benefits from committed programmes and projects already underway.** Oxfordshire Connect will enable the release of benefits from East West Rail and HS2.
- **Offering more: new and better journeys and opportunities for the future.** Oxfordshire Connect will support economic and housing growth both within Oxfordshire and the Oxford-Cambridge arc.
- **Keeping people and goods moving smoothly and safely.** Interventions to relieve crowding at Oxford station, and level crossing mitigations across Oxfordshire will enhance the safety of the network.