

England's Economic Heartland

Oxford to Milton Keynes Connectivity Study: Call for Evidence

A response from CPRE

Q.1: What are the key themes for the study area?

It is difficult to pick just three themes as the most important as the examples given are interrelated. Furthermore, some e.g. decarbonisation are largely dependent on progress with national – rather than local – policy and initiatives. Nevertheless, we would list the following as the top three:

- Protection and enhancement of the rural environment
- Access to public transport, together with walking and cycling provision
- Reducing the need to travel (and therefore more and better digital connectivity, including for rural areas)

Q.2: What do you consider to be the key movements in the area?

The level of warehousing development in the Milton Keynes area in particular has unwelcome consequences in maximising the HGV road traffic. This also applies to the Bicester area, which has otherwise been billed as a 'garden / healthy / eco town' and was promised high tech jobs as part of the 'knowledge spine' in Oxfordshire but is instead being ringed by large warehouse development. Heavy freight movements in the Corridor represent a major proportion of road traffic, with their negative environmental effects and demands for roadspace. We do not want to see these increase. Alternatives need to be sought, including transferring more freight to rail for appropriate journey lengths, in order to minimise pollution, congestion and carbon impacts.

EEH should take a longer-term and holistic approach to the consideration of rail freight interchanges and their location through a regional freight strategy, including public consultation, rather than its being left in effect to speculative applications by landowners/ developers. Brownfield sites for such interchanges are more suitable, being adjacent to urban area markets. (Hams Hall in the West Midlands is a good and successful example.) Warehousing and logistics are a form of strategic transportation and should be subject to a strategic approach to sustainability, i.e. to manage overall traffic volumes, minimise carbon emissions and address air quality/congestion impacts. There are also land-take and landscape impact issues – tracts of land between towns with open landscape character are becoming characterised by warehousing.

Local connectivity for villages and market towns must not be forgotten. Rural areas suffer from the worst public transport provision, with car-dependency as a consequence and isolation for those without access to a car. There is much scope for hub-and-spoke solutions and innovative demand-responsive services.

Q.3 What are the key connectivity opportunities and challenges in the study area?

The Corridor would benefit from a more integrated approach to public transport, with hubs for seamless modal transfer (rail/bus/cycle) and co-ordinated timetables. We expect East-West Rail (EWR) dramatically to improve public passenger transport between Oxford, Bicester and Milton Keynes, but modal shift will only be optimised by integration between public road transport, rail, walking and cycling access.

For many rural residents, the essential focus will need to be on building up the alternative options, reflecting the established hierarchy of sustainable travel, that is: reducing the need to travel; minimising journey distances; and supporting modal shift to active travel and public transport.

Buses should serve new housing developments and industrial estates from the outset in order to encourage public transport use before residents and employees get into the habit of car use, after which it becomes too late. Indeed, many existing new developments and urban extensions are without suitable bus services at all. Bus operators should make it a particular objective to serve popular destinations such as hospitals, colleges and shopping centres, with a good all-day service frequency.

A major expansion of National Cycle Network off-road routes is required in the Corridor. Less than one third of the route between Oxford and Milton Keynes is segregated. There is none between Oxford and Aylesbury and only about a quarter of the route between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes. There are a few short local sections within built-up areas. Cycling provision is not merely about longer-distance routes, however, and ultimately every community should be provided with segregated cycleways, beginning with links that have the most potential for modal transfer. A separate study of cycling provision and potential throughout the Corridor should be undertaken.

Transport interventions should not have as their objective the 'opening up' of greenfield areas for housing or other development, but rather should seek to remedy existing deficiencies and to contribute to national and regional decarbonisation. Better use of existing infrastructure can often be preferred (in terms of impact, sustainability and value) to major new projects. No new trunk road routes should be proposed. Projects should be 'future-proofed' in order to avoid infrastructure that may become outdated.

The overall strategy and individual interventions should be 'rural-proofed' in order to assess their impacts on rural communities, agriculture and the countryside. Particular protection should be maintained for rural heritage, Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), County Wildlife Sites and ancient woodland, but also for locally-valued landscape areas, whether formally designated or not. Tranquillity needs to be maintained and light pollution avoided. There should be no community severance. Rights-of-way should be protected and not severed or subjected to lengthy diversions. Access to the countryside and open space 'on the doorstep' is vital for recreation and wellbeing.

Q.4: What interventions do you think the study should consider?

All towns and cities should introduce bus priority measures on radial routes where they have not already done so.

We would draw EEH's attention to the recent CPRE report *Every Village, Every Hour* at <https://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/every-village-every-hour-2021-buses-report-full-report/> regarding rural bus service provision.

All new developments are supposed to be subject to a compulsory multi-modal transport assessment. The trouble is that hitherto these have largely concentrated on road capacity and improvement, and necessary public transport improvements funded or contributed to by developers have not been demanded by local authorities. The report by Transport for New Homes at <https://www.transportfornewhomes.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/garden-village-visions.pdf> is relevant here.

If large sites come forward through the local plan site allocations process, then strategic transport impact/potential should be assessed at that stage – i.e. can the site be sustainably accessed/serviced in principle? When an applicant is asked to do a transport assessment, the local planning authority doesn't have many legs to stand on if it tries to argue that the location isn't sustainable on transport grounds. This raises the wider question of how these Connectivity Studies inform plan-making and site allocations. Transport cannot be planned in isolation, but then neither should development.

We would in principle support reinstating the Aylesbury branch to the EWR project in order to improve connectivity northwards from Aylesbury, given the large amount of development that has already taken place in and around the town. However, we do not want to see this used as a pretext to open up virgin countryside for development north and west of Aylesbury.

EWR should be fully electrified throughout, with electrification continued southwards to Didcot, and freight capacity increased.

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