

England's Economic Heartland

Peterborough–Northampton–Oxford 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)

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

The level of warehousing development in Northamptonshire and around Peterborough 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. We recognise that this generates a need for rail freight interchanges and that, by definition, these have to be near both a railway and major road junction.

However, we are concerned to learn of emerging proposals for a Strategic Rail Freight Interchange close to Junction 10 of the M40, which would require significant greenfield intrusion and impact severely on a number of small villages. The size and scale of the outline proposals imply that the rail element is almost peripheral, especially given that the Chiltern Line is not well connected to serve freight and the doubts surrounding provision for freight on East-West Rail. Our concern is that this interchange – and potentially others like it – will essentially be a massive road-to-road warehousing and distribution centre located inappropriately in the middle of the countryside. 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.)

EEH should take a longer-term and holistic approach to the consideration of such 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. 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.

The upgrade of the rail freight corridor between Felixstowe and national freight hubs in the West Midlands via Peterborough, which continues to be delayed by capacity and congestion problems at Ely, and has been for some years, should be completed as soon as possible in order to remove freight from the roads and free up rail capacity around north London.

Public passenger transport opportunities for medium-distance travel across the Corridor are poor. For example, Oxford to Northampton (72km) takes just over 1hr by car but the only public transport service is by changing at Milton Keynes with a fastest journey of 2hr 20min. (This may improve with the opening of East-West Rail although a change at Milton Keynes will still be necessary,) Peterborough to Northampton is 70km (just over 1hr by car) but the express bus takes just over 3hr, and rail passengers are directed to travel via London (over 2hr): a more direct rail alternative should be sought. These are only two examples, but modal shift is difficult to achieve with such journey time differences.

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.

For many rural residents, the essential focus will need to be on building up the alternative options, reflecting the established hierarchy of sustainable travel: 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 appropriate 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.

Peterborough is now a large city in its own right and with both north-south and east-west rail connections, it is of a size where Metro tram or similar LRT services such as those implemented in Nottingham, with the existing rail links at their core, could be considered.

A major expansion of National Cycle Network off-road routes is required in the Corridor. There is nothing between Oxford and Northampton nor between Northampton and Peterborough, except for some very short local sections within these cities/towns. 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 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 and mitigate 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?

Two rail interventions could be considered. One, a chord from Haringworth on the Midland Main Line to Luffenham (in part this could use the route of a disused railway), facilitating through passenger trains from Kettering and Corby to Peterborough and beyond, and also opening up a freight route from Oxford and the West via East-West Rail (EWR) and Bedford. Second, a west-to-north chord at St Neots from EWR to the East Coast Main Line, also for freight.

All towns should introduce bus priority measures on radial routes where they have not already done so. Whilst it is CPRE's preference for travellers to use public transport for their whole journey, where this is not possible park-and-ride can offer a useful alternative, reducing urban congestion. Northampton certainly needs one or more park-and-ride sites as peak-time congestion can be heavy.

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.

EWR (given that part of it lies within the Corridor) should be fully electrified throughout, with electrified connections southwards to Didcot, and freight capacity increased.

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