

Response to NIC Paper on Strategic Planning and Governance for the Cambridge – Milton Keynes – Oxford Corridor

About CPRE

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) welcomes this opportunity to respond to the National Infrastructure Commission's discussion paper *Strategic Planning and Governance for the Cambridge – Milton Keynes – Oxford Corridor* (March 2017). CPRE works for a better future for the English countryside. We work locally and nationally to protect, shape and enhance a beautiful, thriving countryside for everyone to value and enjoy.

As a charity with about 60,000 members, a branch in every county, over 200 district groups and more than 2,000 parish council members, we have long had an interest in infrastructure proposals, whether of local or national scales and we engage with the planning system at all these levels. We are most grateful for the invaluable input provided into this response by our Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire branches and our South East and East of England Regional Groups with their extensive local knowledge of the geographical area being considered by the Commission.

CPRE has set up a specialist cross-regional working group to take forward its involvement in the work on the Corridor and to demonstrate how seriously we take these proposals. We note in para 4 of the Paper that this 'represents the start of a debate, not its conclusion', and confirm that CPRE nationally, regionally and locally look forward to participating fully in that debate. We welcome opportunities for further discussion and of course involvement in any further consultations.

References in this Response are to the current Consultation Paper unless otherwise stated.

Our vision for the area

CPRE's vision is to protect and enhance the area's environment, including landscape, biodiversity and heritage, whilst enabling local communities to accommodate locally arising sustainable growth in a way that retains their separate characters and identities, and supports rural businesses and a thriving agricultural sector. We look to transport in and through the area becoming more sustainable, with a decreasing emphasis on private and commercial road transport, with improved and increasing use of public transport including a fully completed East-West Rail, and pro-active support for walking and cycling.

Introduction

We note the Chancellor's original Terms of Reference of March 2016 that new infrastructure should 'maintain and/or protect the area's environment and cultural assets (including the Green Belt)', and that environmental assets should be identified. These must be major themes running through the studies and proposals, and ones that we strongly support.

CPRE promotes the principle of subsidiarity in planning, that decisions should be made at the most local level appropriate to the issues at hand. With that principle in mind, we do support strategic planning in cases such as coordinating the delivery of regeneration, development and infrastructure for a city and its hinterland, but such planning must be the result of local communities identifying for themselves the need to work together to resolve their own identified issues.

We note that para 2 in the NIC's Paper states that:

the NIC has taken into account input from officials from local authorities and local enterprise partnerships across the corridor. It has taken into account input from officials within the Department for Transport and the Cities and Local Growth Unit.

However, *nothing* is mentioned about responses received from parties other than local authorities and LEPs, either in the present consultation document or in the NIC's Interim Report (Nov 2016) following the Call for Evidence, and how the Commission has had regard to them. We have yet to see the NIC engaging directly with local communities or environmental NGOs at all. Para 8 refers to *key local and national stakeholders*. It is not implicit that this includes local communities nor is it clear who qualifies as a 'key' stakeholder. These proposals will fail unless there is engagement with local communities and the environmental sector, not merely at the later stages of specific development proposals but early on. We sense that there is already building up a local feeling of 'what we are about to have done to us': this is no way for the planning system to operate.

We trust that the NIC will publish not only the comments received in respect of this Consultation but also its response to them, acknowledging any differing views expressed.

We now go on to answer the specific Questions posed by the Commission.

An integrated strategic plan

Q1. Can the approach to strategic planning explored in this paper help to:

- a. tackle major constraints on future economic growth – i.e. the undersupply of homes and weaknesses in east-west transport infrastructure;
- b. maximise the potential of major new east-west infrastructure links; and
- c. develop distinct towns and cities into a major economic corridor?

1.1 There is an inherent assumption here that is not universally accepted, namely that the so-called "Corridor" represents a single coherent geographical area for which strategic planning is appropriate. The Corridor is as yet geographically undefined but potentially large and includes a wide diversity of communities and history.

1.2 CPRE supports the principle of strategic land-use planning at an appropriate geographical scale, provided that there is rigour in transparency, public participation and genuine consultation, and that ownership is by democratically elected authorities and not unelected bodies. The large urban metropolitan conurbations are examples of an appropriate geography for strategic planning: they have a major urban focus on which transport networks converge and a regional or sub-regional identity. However, land-use planning over a large area away from the major metropolitan cities, even if they comprise a number of smaller cities and larger towns, will not work if it becomes distant from – and undemocratically rides roughshod over – local communities. Localism must not be forgotten.

1.3 This was a major drawback of most of the former Regional Strategies: the scale was far too large, communities could not identify with them and participation by anyone other than local authorities and developers was actually quite difficult, although NGOs (including CPRE) did their best to take part. But at least these regional plans covered a wide range of social, economic and environmental issues and were subject to a rigorous process, with full consultation and public examination (intimidating though the latter was for some local groups).

1.4 That is not to say that a level of planning above that of the Districts and Unitary Authorities cannot be achieved. There are locations where this could work well and the forthcoming co-operation between Cambridgeshire and Peterborough is a case in point. In that instance, the two authorities are adjacent, have much in common and have historical associations. Another example is the Oxfordshire Growth Board, a joint committee of the county, district and city councils, which ‘brokers’ the Duty-to-Co-operate between member authorities (although it has to be said that local NGOs remain far from content that democratic accountability is adequate even here). There may be potential for a similar arrangement between Milton Keynes and Aylesbury Vale, and another (separate) one between Bedford Borough and Central Bedfordshire. However, to achieve that there is a need for enhanced engagement with all sectors involved in achieving sustainable development.

1.5 Another assumption is that large-scale new inter-urban transport infrastructure is required in order to stimulate growth. Public transport links need to be improved anyway, both inter-urban and local, to provide sustainable alternatives to road transport. But the very notion that major new transport links are required in order to facilitate growth in the already overheated economies of South East and Eastern England is only to exacerbate existing problems and create new ones. Such transport improvements that are shown to be necessary can go ahead without strategic planning on this scale – indeed, work is already underway by Highways England and Network Rail.

1.6 We would refer the Commission to CPRE’s publication¹ *The impact of road projects in England* which *inter alia* points out the additional induced traffic, on top of that displaced from other routes, that new road construction brings, and also the resulting highly car-dependent patterns of land development in out-of-town locations, such as offices and retail, that would be better located in town centres which are better served by public transport, walking and cycling. Nevertheless, in several cases we may support small scale, local road ‘pinch-point’ relief to deal with local congestion, as part of a multi-modal approach. However, major new trunk road capacity between cities and towns does nothing to solve the well-recognised ‘last mile’ problem.

1.7 There is scope too for a complete segregated off-road cycle route between the two cities (at present, there are only relatively short sections such as NC Route 51 between Bedford and Sandy). Both Oxford and Cambridge have well-established cycling traditions with high levels of usage and Milton Keynes has its extensive ‘Redway’ network. Linking these by a high quality and attractive route would be an important contribution.

1.8 All development within a defined distance of the proposed Milton Keynes – Bedford Canal (whose route has been established and protected) should contribute, through s.106 or other mechanisms, to the construction of the canal. The adjacent towpath/bridleway could form part of the cycle route referred to in the preceding paragraph. (The canal route passes through Milton Keynes, Central Bedfordshire and Bedford local authority areas.)

1.9 East-West Rail (EWR) is needed anyway, whether or not we have a ‘corridor’ – and sooner rather than later. EWR has a national as well as a regional role in reducing the necessity for cross-country passenger travel via London (although it must provide adequate interchange opportunities with north-south rail routes). It will also provide an alternative to the inexorable growth in road traffic for both passengers and freight. The business and transport case for EWR is not dependent on development in the Corridor.

¹ See <http://www.cpre.org.uk/resources/transport/roads/item/4542-the-impact-of-road-projects-in-england>, March 2017.

1.10 The very notion of being ‘developed into a major economic corridor’ (para 24) is a heavy-handed top-down approach and the antithesis of the assertion (para 32) that

By working collectively, and from the bottom up, planning authorities can exploit these opportunities within the existing National Planning Policy Framework, bound by the duty-to-cooperate, rather than by top-down targets.

1.11 At a wider level, we are concerned that other Regions will experience outgoing migration to the Corridor, adding to the overheating of the area. Parts of the Midlands and the North of England, not to mention other extremities of the UK, are crying out for even a fraction of the levels of investment that are being considered here.

1.12 We nevertheless recognise that local towns and cities need to grow in order to sustain their own local economies and to accommodate natural internal growth, but they need to do this in a way that retains their individual characters and distinctiveness and that does not lose their separate and unique identities. The imposition of additional housing on them over and above their objectively assessed locally arising need would make this aim impossible to achieve.

1.13 The worst possible outcome for local communities would be for a corridor of ribbon development 120km long, even if punctuated by a few green spaces here and there. We have already seen developer proposals for major ribbon development to the south of Milton Keynes, extending well outside the new town itself, swallowing up villages and quality agricultural land.

1.14 The statement in para 41(e) that –

The need for collective decision-making must be balanced against the need to protect the interests of communities

– rings very hollow throughout the remainder of the NIC’s Paper.

1.15 Local authorities in the Oxford – Milton Keynes – Cambridge arc already suffer from the demand for housing from London commuters – a demand which will only increase, since the more housing that is built in the area, the more London commuters will be attracted, defeating the object of providing for local or even sub-regional need. To suggest that the Corridor needs to be opened up to enable long-distance east-west commuting as well, especially by car, is highly unsustainable and should be resisted.

1.16 We reject the suggestion that the undersupply of new houses is exacerbated by poor east-west transport links. Local authorities in the area are already doing all that they can to increase housing supply towards extremely demanding targets. Any shortfall arises from a combination of developers not bringing forward all the sites for which they have permission, the lack of priority given to the development of vacant or derelict brownfield land and financial constraints.

1.17 Para 28 suggests that a strategic plan would identify ‘broad locations’ for different types of development, but

stop short of identifying particular sites for commercial and residential development.

This was supposed to be the intention of the Regional Strategies, but when it came to the justification of particular ‘strategic’ development locations and the arguments for and against them at Examination, the sites themselves had to be identified, effectively bypassing the local

plan process which could then do very little other than to specify detailed boundaries. It is by no means straightforward to choose 'broad locations' without identifying their capacity for development and their policy constraints.

1.18 Para 48b exposes the NIC's intention to ensure that any strategic plan(s) for the area constrain Local Plans. This is likely to be resented. Local communities and NGOs engage effectively at the Local Plan level and would not appreciate being told by the local authority that "there is nothing that we can do" because "the strategic plan says so".

Q2. How could the approach to strategic planning be amended or strengthened to better achieve these aims?

2.1 Local co-operation between adjacent authorities is already a requirement of the NPPF. There is no need to extend this over great distances. For example, the authority areas adjacent to Oxford and Cambridge respectively can (and do) come together in order to discuss housing and employment land provision and the opportunities that one authority might provide to an adjacent one where the latter is highly constrained. But to suggest that Milton Keynes or Bedford (for example) should provide housing for Oxford or Cambridge is to encourage unsustainable commuting between them.

2.2 The suggestion of a single strategic plan covering the whole area, whether formal or informal, should be dropped. Each local authority is already struggling to meet its own development needs without further imposition from above. We reject the suggestion that this proposal for a strategic plan for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc area would solve local problems with 5-year housing land supply. These problems stem from the usual tendency to overinflate estimates of housing need coupled with the unwillingness of house builders to deliver, which this plan would do nothing to address.

New opportunities

Q3. Can the approach to strategic planning explored in this paper provide a basis for improved long-term collaboration and engagement between the corridor and: a. housing developers; b. infrastructure providers (e.g. in the telecommunications and utilities sectors) and investors; and c. central government - through, for example, a new, long-term 'infrastructure compact'?

3.1 CPRE is deeply concerned that there no reference to collaboration with local communities, the environmental sector and NGOs. This appears to be a theme running through this whole project, namely that it can all be left to local authorities, developers, LEPs and infrastructure providers, and never mind anyone else. Para 48a confirms this:

... involving local authorities, LEPs, central government departments and national delivery agencies.

3.2 CPRE is strongly committed to the principles of sustainable development and this emphasises the importance of participation and engagement by all interests and sectors in plan-making. We have been concerned by the failure of discussions on the Corridor to date to be inclusive and the reliance on input from narrow groups with only commercial or political interests.

3.3 Whatever the final outcome of arrangements for the Corridor, it is vital to get local communities and local organisations on board. This involves meaningful participation rather than superficial consultation (often after decisions have to all intents and purposes already been made). Local communities and interested NGOs have much to contribute and will do so constructively, given the chance.

3.4 It needs to be ensured that there is a clear and rigorous process for developing, consulting on and testing any strategic plan through an independent Examination or equivalent. Otherwise, there is a risk of undermining the proper debate to be had in local plan making over strategic decisions affecting those areas, as pointed out in our answer to Q.1, above.

Q4. How could the approach to strategic planning be amended or strengthened to better achieve these aims? What else will be required for partners across the corridor to develop these relationships and exploit these opportunities?

4.1 CPRE believes that transparent discussion and co-operation between authorities is all that is necessary. We would add that the Local Enterprise Partnerships, having no democratic accountability and whose deliberations are highly opaque with no public input, should have no greater influence than any other interested party.

Governance

Q5. Do you agree with the design principles set out at paragraph 41? How might these be developed or amended to better enable collective decision-making?

5.1 Para 41a says that there should be a clear geographic scope. We therefore cannot understand the NIC's reluctance to reduce the boundaries of the Corridor at this stage. It may be too early to draw final detailed lines on maps, but at least an approximate boundary would eliminate the more distant and less relevant authorities. If we are going to define a Corridor at all (a principle that we do not accept), then it should only include authorities in the relatively narrow strip between the two cities. The larger the area, the less local communities will be able to identify with it, and the greater will be the difficulty of gaining their co-operation and acceptance.

5.2 The suggested inclusion of the whole of certain counties makes the Corridor area far too large. Some local authorities on the periphery may wish to be included merely because they see funds coming their way, but by doing this the Corridor loses its focus and the problems of strategic planning over such an increased area are greater. High Wycombe and Amersham (Bucks), for example, contribute nothing towards discussions about Oxford, Milton Keynes or Cambridge: they are too far south and are too influenced by London. Similarly, Northampton, Kettering and Wellingborough are too far north even if they have an aspiration to be linked in. Importantly, growth at these and similar 'outlier' locations can contribute nothing towards transport improvements in the Corridor as they will not benefit from them.

5.3 We disagree fundamentally with many of the other principles in para 41. In particular, the proposition at para 41b (ii) that boards or forums should be empowered

without the need for decisions to be ratified through individual local authorities' decision-making processes

would result in an intolerable democratic deficit, since any sub-regional body is not going to be accountable to the electorate except by the most indirect and ineffective means. Such an arrangement would be no more democratically accountable than the unpopular regional strategies, which were abolished partly for that reason. The Chancellor made clear in his March 2016 letter to the NIC that proposals should be brought forward *whilst ensuring democratic accountability is preserved* (our italics).

5.4 If any new form of collective governance is created, it should be democratically accountable and fully transparent. It must include comprehensive mechanisms to address the obvious democratic deficit that is inherent in any supra-authority arrangements. Failure

to recognise the legitimate concerns of the existing communities along the corridor or to work with the public and NGOs to address the Chancellor's commitment are likely to create significant difficulties within each local authority and its communities. Any governance arrangements therefore must indeed include safeguards to protect the interests of individual areas (para 41e refers). There must be a true commitment to this, not mere tokenism.

5.5 Para 41(i) has the desirable aim of minimising bureaucracy. However, this should not mean any loss of rigour in applying environmental and other assessments, reduction in public involvement or loss of accountability. Public scrutiny must be of the highest standards.

Q6. Should any new cross-corridor governance structures preserve a role for sub-regional collaboration?

6.1 Sub-regional collaboration should continue and not be superseded or overridden by an undemocratic governance structure.

Q7. Can the opportunities afforded by strategic planning, be exploited without statutory governance structures to 'lock-in' collaboration over the long-term?

7.1 Yes, definitely. The local authorities concerned can agree on common policies regarding s.106 and s.278 planning obligations and Community Infrastructure Levies in order to contribute to transport, environmental and other cross-boundary infrastructure.

7.2 However, no attempt should be made to bind local authorities, who produce statutory local plans, by a higher tier of non-statutory planning or guidance.

Q8. If informal models of collaboration are to be sufficient, how can local authorities give confidence to wider stakeholders that their commitment to a) their strategic plans, and b) joint-working will sustain over the long-term?

8.1 Local Plans typically cover 15-20 years. Compulsory 5-yearly updates are proposed in the Housing White Paper. Those Local Plans will have been devised and ultimately adopted following co-operation with adjacent authorities. Such co-operation should be more transparent than it is at present. That should give sufficient confidence to anyone who needs it.

Developing and delivering an integrated strategic plan

Q9. How could local authorities make early progress in the development of an integrated strategic plan, prior to the development of any new collective governance arrangements?

9.1 As stated previously, the Corridor is as yet geographically undefined but potentially large, and we do not believe that it is necessary to have a single strategic plan for the whole area in the form currently proposed. . There may be a case for strategic plans covering smaller areas, perhaps two or three adjacent authorities where they share housing market areas or travel-to-work areas. But whichever format is adopted, all strategic plans should be prepared with full public transparency and involvement, genuine consultation and debate, and independent assessment.

9.2 Our preference, however, is for more local cross-boundary collaboration, along the lines suggested in our answer to Q.1, above.

Q10. How can progress against the plan be assessed and the effectiveness of the plan monitored and evaluated? Are there examples of good practice from which lessons can be learned?

10.1 Effective monitoring is good practice for any plan. Monitoring reports should be readily accessible to – and readable by – all, not merely for favoured stakeholders.

Additional comment: Environment

11.1 References to important matters such as the environment and green infrastructure are conspicuous by their absence. There is a brief reference to the Chancellor’s request to the NIC in para 14 of the Paper: “... whilst protecting the area’s high quality environment” and to strategic environmental assessment (which is a legal requirement for all statutory plans anyway) in para 28. We support a robust appraisal framework for all forms of plan. There is much mention of housing, employment and transport infrastructure, but little or nothing on these other policy topics which are so important to people and must sit alongside and carry equal weight to development issues.

Conclusion

12.1 In summary, CPRE finds that existing planning arrangements are likely to be sufficient to absorb locally-generated growth without overwhelming existing communities or the natural and rural environment. The Duty to Co-operate could be strengthened by making it more transparent. Should cross-boundary planning be shown to be necessary beyond this, then it could be shaped on a county-by-county basis with cross-county agreements on transport and environmental infrastructure funding. The involvement of local communities and the voluntary sector is paramount and a democratic deficit must be avoided at all costs.

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