

14 November 2017

CASE FOR PUBLIC INQUIRY INTO OXFORD-CAMBRIDGE EXPRESSWAY and GROWTH CORRIDOR

Summary

The National Infrastructure Commission will very shortly publish its recommendation on an Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor of a million more houses, and job creation to justify them. Meanwhile Highways England will begin work this month to decide the route that the Expressway, which supports this growth corridor, should take. Both these issues are highly contentious, but the intention is nevertheless that both should be decided behind closed doors. **It is essential that there is a statutory public consultation and Public Inquiry into both, so that at the very least justice will properly be seen to be done.**

The Proposals

The National Infrastructure Commission is expected to recommend the development of the Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor in its upcoming Final Report into the scheme. In parallel, Highways England is proposing to start discussions with “stakeholders” on the process of determining the route of the Expressway which is central to the scheme.

For most of its length from the M4 to the M11, the Expressway will involve upgrading existing roads, the A34 from Chieveley on the M4, the A421, and the A428 to Cambridge.

From the point where the A34 enters Oxfordshire to Milton Keynes, there are a number of options under consideration, which break down into two main routings. One of these would be upgrading the A34 through Oxford; the other would be a new road striking across open countryside and Green Belt South of the City, and through open Aylesbury Vale.

The National Infrastructure Commission does not propose public consultation or a Public Inquiry on the principle of the Growth Corridor; Highways England does not propose to conduct either public consultation or a Public Inquiry on the alternative routes of the Expressway. Both are highly contentious.

1. The Corridor

Oxfordshire is at present the most rural County in the South East of England. It has effectively full employment and is in little need of any of the 700,000 new jobs and a million new houses the Growth Corridor is intended to create. It is widely thought that Oxfordshire is being targeted to become a development hub because it will be

easier to attract new workers to our (presently) green and pleasant land, and because some of our Councils are so taken with the income that would flow from over-development that they do not give proper weight to their most important duty, the protection of their residents and the maintenance of their environment. There is intended to be neither consultation nor an Inquiry on this transformative issue, which is also mentioned only as an aside in emerging Local Plans.

2. The Expressway

There is considerable research that suggests that new roads create rather than alleviate traffic. They are inevitably harmful environmentally and this would certainly be the case for all the options currently under consideration within Oxfordshire. One, upgrading the A34, albeit dealing with a road that already exists and clearly needs improvement or alleviation, would mean the removal of some existing housing alongside it at Botley and increase the harm already caused to the locally important environment, not least Wytham Woods.

The other, driving ten or more miles of new Expressway through open countryside and Green Belt South of the City, and then across Aylesbury Vale would be harmful both in itself and in relation to the burden of an average 10,000 new houses a mile which it carries with it.

The proposed route is badged as a wonderful opportunity to travel from Oxford to Cambridge, with all kinds of promises about collateral strengthening of the knowledge economy. This is not a truthful representation of a route which is actually just a link between the M4 and M11 (with associated housing). It is just another new major road. This is explicitly acknowledged in the 2016 report which includes a statement that the road would reduce the M4-M11 journey time by 40 mins.

The appalling impacts of the Expressway cannot be justified. Meanwhile, the East West rail link, which could theoretically provide a more sustainable solution to local transport requirements, must be encouraged. Although the section to Bletchley will no doubt be completed, the section from Bletchley to Cambridge does not seem to be making much progress, and we believe that this is where the NIC should be focusing its energy.

Highways England currently intends no public consultation or Public Inquiry into the choice of routes around Oxford and across Oxfordshire (which they confusingly call corridors) only on the detail of the chosen route *after* it has been decided. And no Public Inquiry in any event.

This lack of public consultation, and particularly the intention to make the decision “behind closed doors” is, we say, wholly unacceptable.

The Action Required

It is obvious, and the Leader of Oxfordshire County Council has said as much, that any decision to impose a Growth Corridor on rural Oxfordshire will be contentious to say the least; it is also obvious, as he also accepts, that any of the potential Expressway routes - including upgrading the A34 - will be environmentally harmful, albeit to varying degrees.

It is essential to open Government that important matters which are capable of being decided in the open, and with public involvement, should be decided in the open and not as is intended behind closed doors.

It is also clearly the case that whilst the outcome of an open consultation and a Public Inquiry may still lead to discontent, its teeth will be largely drawn if the public can see that the decision was fact based and open.

An open independent decision will also absolve authorities and elected representatives of the accusations of complicity or failure to do their duty which are already widely voiced.

CPRE Oxfordshire asks you to make representations to your Council that they should demand, or to the Government that they should provide, a full statutory public consultation followed by a Public Inquiry at which the environmental and social costs of the Growth Corridor should be weighed against the potential economic benefits envisaged, and the routing of any Expressway, at least through Oxfordshire, should be decided, in the open.

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