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## Swindon-Didcot-Oxford Connectivity Study- Call for Evidence

### Q1

What are the key themes for the study area?

Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) Oxfordshire welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Call for Evidence for this study. We are a charity which works to improve, protect and preserve the landscape of Oxfordshire and its towns and villages for the benefit of everyone.

We strongly support the Transport Strategy 5-point action plan with the proviso that point 3 “Use *delivery of East West Rail and mass rapid transit systems as the catalyst for the transformation of our strategic public transport networks*” needs to give consideration to environmental and landscape impacts in the design and delivery.

We consider all the themes outlined in the Call for Evidence explainer document to be relevant and worthy of consideration within the study. We consider of highest relevance:

1. Environment: This corridor is predominantly rural, with the main A420 road running through villages and open countryside. It is vital that all interventions are sensitive to the need to protect the countryside and its landscape. It must always be remembered that much of this corridor is in, or in the setting of, the North Wessex AONB.
2. Decarbonisation: We strongly support the first point of the Transport Strategy’s 5-point action plan:

*“ONE: Focus on decarbonisation of the transport system by harnessing innovation and supporting solutions which create green economic opportunities”*

We also note the emerging Oxfordshire Local Transport & Connectivity Plan 5 (LTCP5) and would expect this to be given supremacy in any decision-making within Oxfordshire, particularly in relation to the low carbon ambition targets it sets out.

3. Access to public transport and walking and cycling provision. We consider this theme to be instrumental to the achievement of the above two themes.

Since Government appears, quite rightly, to be pulling back from the Arc as a Government-driven project, in favour of country-wide levelling up, we see this study as a good opportunity to re-frame the discussion around the primary focus being on meeting existing travel needs and tackling the backlog of issues that have built up, rather than any vast white- elephant projects to meet unsubstantiated growth ambitions.

### Q2

What do you consider to be the key movements in the area?

The key movements on this corridor are diverse and all need to be considered.

This is an essentially rural area, so the majority of mileage is intercity.

Oxford Didcot is essentially local commuting but overlaid by Oxford London demands. We feel the suppression of Oxford London commuting, especially on rail, should be a key objective to free up capacity.

Trips outside and beyond this corridor must also be quantified and projected in order to show a full and representative picture; with Bristol, Reading and Milton Keynes all being significant end destinations.

We feel this study must consider, and currently appears to omit, targets to achieve a **reduction** in the total number of journeys made, a **shift in mode** (e.g., from car to public transport or active mode) and **reduction in length** of journey (e.g., from inter-city to rural to suburban). Whilst the population may be forecast to grow significantly over areas of this corridor, interventions must be actioned to ensure that the number of journeys undertaken do not grow at a pro rata level and this must be both quantified and monitored.

### Q3

What are the key connectivity challenges and opportunities within the study area?

Rail connectivity needs to be considered beyond the Swindon and Oxford corridor, including Bristol, Milton Keynes and Reading.

An opportunity which must be addressed is a reduction in the number of trips and mileage undertaken on the route. Improvements in digital connectivity, alongside initiatives which are outside the scope of this study, such as greater provision of services and work opportunities within rural communities, will create greater independence and reduce the need for travel. It is vital that this study quantifies and assesses these opportunities in order to achieve decarbonisation targets.

### Q4

What interventions do you think the study should consider?

#### Road:

The A420 route will need to be considered in this study. This is a 50-mph limited, twisting historic route through rural communities and open countryside and it is arguably now not fit for purpose, especially for haulage traffic. A longer diversion via A34 and M4 exists but will be highly unattractive to the haulage industry unless they are incentivised to do so and/ or penalised for using the A420, which we feel should be considered. We will wish to support any action plan to minimise growing transport infrastructure needs and are acutely aware of the environmental damage from existing traffic dispersal, which will only grow, from this overloaded principal road. This suggests to us that there should be, firstly, an emphasis on public transport (for example rapid bus services between the major hubs, such as Swindon and Oxford, would reduce car use) and, secondly, encouragement of rail freight with local 'hub and spoke, delivery systems.

It is not clear whether the proposed Didcot HIF1 scheme would fall within the scope of this connectivity study. CPRE Oxfordshire is opposed to the scheme as currently proposed (Oxfordshire County Council Planning Application R3.0138/21) We have responded to this Planning Application in detail and would be happy to provide a copy of our response but, in summary, our concerns relate to the impact of this development on the local villages and the rural character of the area and the carbon and environmental costs of the scheme, which we believe will be substantial and have been understated.

#### Rail:

Rail interventions we consider the study should consider are:

Electrification of the route from Didcot to Oxford, sensitive to protecting the vista of the countryside it runs through when implemented. Also consideration should be given to upgrading the line to four tracks.

The provision of direct rail services from Oxford to Swindon (and Bristol beyond) via Didcot, splitting services between fast non-stop direct trains and local services.

Options for delivering a Wantage and Grove Train station, providing a viable public transport alternative for these towns and surrounding rural communities, with strong public and active transport links to the station.

Any intervention for passenger rail growth, such as Wantage and Grove station, should also accommodate growth of freight on rail both on the GWR mainline and through Oxford. Decarbonisation of road freight haulage requires considerable modal shift to rail to be achieved.

**Other modes:**

We will strongly support any initiative which promotes active travel and/ or a switch to a more environmentally friendly mode of travel.

We feel that there should be a review of the cycle network generally and this needs to include the Science Vale network which currently has design faults that deter cycle use. Users groups, such as HarBUG ([harbug.org.uk](http://harbug.org.uk)) should be consulted within this review.

The public transport offer on this corridor needs improvement, with a remit that a regular, reliable and cost-effective alternative must be offered if it is to be considered a viable alternative to car users.