

NIC Cambridge – Milton Keynes – Oxford: 'growth corridor' call for evidence ~ Response from Campaign for Better Transport

Campaign for Better Transport is a leading charity and environmental campaign group that promotes sustainable transport policies. Our vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the call for evidence on the Cambridge – Milton Keynes – Oxford: 'growth corridor'. The call for evidence sets out a number of questions for response. We have focused our response on the transport and related infrastructure needs of these communities.

We would also identify the need to for any measures promoted by the NIC to minimise resource use, improve public health, reduce inequality and respond to climate change as a process.

The challenge of managing sustainable growth

The designation of the Oxford-Milton Keynes – Cambridge area as a growth corridor is more of an economic than a geographic construct. The focus is on the “Knowledge corridor”, creating an environment to foster high skill jobs in IT, R&D and HE, established applied science sectors and emerging sectors such as biotechnology, renewable energy, and robotics, rather than the traditional concept of a transit corridor.

The cities and their hinterlands do face some common challenges and share some common areas of strength. Oxford and Cambridge are world class centres of intellectual creativity, sharing the benefits of outstanding architecture and heritage and state of the art science parks at Harwell Campus and Milton Road respectively.

Milton Keynes, as a new town, combines a range of purpose built public amenities with a wide range of housing, and a flourishing technology centre based around MK:IT. All three cities have excellent public services, particularly in health and education, attractive surrounding countryside, and high quality rail links to London.

These are not communities in need of regeneration. They already enjoy a high degree of economic success and are attractive places to live and work. The challenge is less to stimulate growth than to manage demand for growth in a sustainable way. The goal must be to provide sufficient affordable housing and employment space, without undermining the quality of the environment that makes these attractive locations.

Sustainable housing development

Meeting housing demand is the largest challenge, with a shortage of housing supply driving prices upwards, with knock on effects on the labour market. There is a strong influence from the London economy, with large numbers of commuters and high pressure for housing, in particular, affordable housing.

Viewing the arc as a single place risks over developing it, undermining the rural landscapes and distinctive urban characters which make these cities attractive places to live and work. We believe that focusing on developments that meet very high sustainability criteria is the best approach to address this problem.

Specifying low carbon developments that are not car-dependent has multiple benefits. Energy efficient homes are more affordable for residents, while lower parking provision makes best use of scarce land. This is especially important given the constraints posed by the Oxford and Cambridge Green Belts. In addition there are health benefits from tackling air pollution and obesity, and economic benefits from connecting people without access to cars to local jobs, and supporting local high streets.

Harwell Campus has adopted a successful strategy of having high quality homes close to its workplaces with good walking, cycling and bus connections to nearby town centres. Its Science Transit Shuttle service provides an express minibus service linking the campus with other science sites in Oxford, removing the need for car commuting.¹

Bicester is also embracing green growth through initiatives such as EcoBicester which has seen a zero carbon sixth form at the local secondary school, zero carbon homes at NW Bicester, a car club, and improved cycling and walking routes.² This is a model for the style of development for the whole growth corridor.

New housing developments with inbuilt green travel plans have proven a success elsewhere, for example Kilnwood Vale, a 2,500 home urban extension to Crawley, West Sussex, developed by Bovis and Crest Nicholson. The site is designed to support and promote sustainable travel with the aim of minimising the amount of traffic generated by the development. The layout of the development is designed to promote bus travel and additional bus services are funded by the developer. New home purchasers receive a travel voucher to the value of £100 which can contribute towards the purchase of an adult bicycle, bus season ticket, rail season ticket or local authority travel pass.³

Further afield, Houten, an urban extension to Utrecht, Netherlands (and a contemporary of Milton Keynes), is a model of sustainable design, with high quality train connections, linked by cycling and walking routes that take precedence over motorised transport.⁴

Sustainable transport infrastructure

New infrastructure should not be seen as an end in itself but a means to the end of supporting economically and socially flourishing communities in a high quality, sustainable environment. We support the Commission's commitment to a multi-modal analysis of transport need.

Any new transport capacity should be designed to avoid the known problems of induced traffic, minimise environmental impacts and be sustainable and future proofed in terms of carbon reduction and tackling air pollution.

Improved East-West transport connectivity and increased capacity should primarily be delivered through public transport and sustainable modes. Adding more car-dependent development and population growth in an already busy commuter belt clearly makes little sense.

Instead, the focus should be on:

- Completing East-West rail as quickly as possible
- Developing rail capacity and services to provide good journey times to London for places along the route
- Ensuring new development is high density and with easy access to public transport, especially rail
- Supporting and expanding the existing X5 coach route, alongside the proposed east-west rail link.

We echo the aspiration of Iain Stewart MP in the recent Westminster Hall debate on the growth arc, that the east-west rail link *"will not only be of huge economic significance for Oxford and Milton Keynes but hopefully will see a modal shift of transport away from roads and on to rail, thus enhancing the environment"*.⁵

We do not believe the case has been made for significant new road capacity linking Oxford to Cambridge.

¹ Harwell Campus <http://harwellcampus.com/>

² EcoBicester website <http://www.ecobicester.org.uk/cms/>

³ Kilnwood Vale website <http://www.kilnwoodvale.co.uk/travel/>

⁴ Case study Houten

https://www.itdp.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/22.-092211_ITDP_NED_Desktop_Houten.pdf

⁵ Oxford-MK-Cambridge Arc debate Westminster Hall 12 July 2016 www.theyworkforyou.com/whall/?id=2016-07-12a.94.1

Both Oxford and Cambridge have, from a combination of the constraints of their historic centres and a positive approach to sustainable development, pioneered measures to reduce car use through development of Park & Ride schemes, traffic-free areas in the city centres, parking restrictions and widespread cycling provision.

Oxford has set a goal of being a Zero Emission City by 2020 through a combination of extending such measures and phasing out diesel vehicles, together with demand management measures, such as extending remote park and ride sites to neighbouring inner-Oxfordshire towns.⁶

Cambridge, through the Greater Cambridge City Deal, is currently consulting on an ambitious programme for traffic management, including enhanced bus and cycling routes, peak time congestion controls, and a workplace parking levy.

Oxford and Oxfordshire are also considering such a levy to manage traffic and contribute to improving public transport and other alternatives. This follows from Nottingham's successful implementation of a workplace parking levy, which has managed the growth of traffic, and generated revenue for public transport infrastructure, notably trams, without constraining growth in homes and jobs.⁷

To increase road capacity between the two cities would inevitably increase traffic pressures on both, at direct odds with, and perversely undermining, the positive sustainable transport policies each is pursuing.

Milton Keynes has also set out plans for an environmentally sustainable future in the MK2050 Futures report, adopting the position that *"Green is a state of mind as well as defining the essence of Milton Keynes... Having long been a leading low carbon city, in 2050 Milton Keynes shows how every city can contribute to global carbon reduction targets. Many eco-companies have relocated to be near like-minded others, as well as firms seeking the prestige of being based in the most environmentally sustainable city in Europe."*⁸

In contrast, Northampton, which has relatively high levels of car dependence, has some of the worst air quality in the region. In July 2016, air pollution in Kingsthorpe, Northampton was recorded as the worst in the country, due to high volumes of traffic in hot weather.⁹

The links between motor vehicle traffic and air pollution are well-established. Some 80% of NO_x in areas exceeding EU limits comes from road transport, primarily diesel vehicles. Latest figures indicate that 97% of all modern diesel cars emit more toxic nitrogen oxide (NO_x) pollution in real-world conditions than in laboratory compliance testing, contributing further to illegal pollution levels.¹⁰ Given that the single biggest contributor to air pollution is diesel vehicles, joined-up working on sustainable transport is essential to tackling the problem.

Demand for new cross-country roads is driven less by the needs of these communities, and more by the perception that such roads are necessary to open up new housing and employment sites. As set out in our report "Getting There", it is both possible and desirable to develop high quality and high density homes without the need for new road capacity.¹¹

⁶ Oxford Transport Strategy: emerging themes

https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/sites/default/files/folders/documents/roadsandtransport/transportpoliciesandplans/areatransportstrategies/oxford/OTS_A1themes.pdf

⁷ Nottingham Workplace Parking Levy briefing <http://www.cbthoughtleadership.org.uk/WPL-Briefing-Nottingham.pdf>

⁸ MK Futures 2050 report <http://www.mkfutures2050.com/images/pdfs/reports/MK-Futures-2050-Full-Report-printable.pdf>

⁹ Northampton Chronicle "Northampton area suffers worst air pollution in the UK during heatwave" 21 July 2016 <http://www.northamptonchron.co.uk/news/northampton-area-suffers-worst-air-pollution-in-the-uk-during-heatwave-1-7486873>

¹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/apr/23/diesel-cars-pollution-limits-nox-emissions>

¹¹ "Getting There", Campaign for Better Transport, June 2015

http://www.bettertransport.org.uk/sites/default/files/research-files/Getting_there_final_web_0.pdf

A secondary aim, as acknowledged by Highways England's M25 SW Quadrant strategic study, is to relieve pressure on the M25, with little or no benefit to the surrounding area.¹² Other more sustainable options are already under consideration as part of the M25 study. Creating new road capacity through protected landscapes, including the proposed Oxford-Cambridge expressway, should be a last resort.

New infrastructure should be designed to meet future needs, not reinvent the problems of the past. There is evidence that so-called Mobility on Demand is leading to a decline in car ownership in some cities, and to increased modal flexibility in how people chose to travel. Advances in information technology are likely to accelerate this trend, particularly in the high tech sectors of the "Knowledge Corridor".

Fostering sustainable communities, liberated from car dependency has multiple benefits, for the economy, the environment and public health. Promoting active travel, in line with the Government's draft Cycling & Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS), has a proven economic and health dividend.¹³ As the CWIS acknowledges, *"realising this ambition will not only take sustained investment in cycling and walking infrastructure but also long-term transport planning and a change in attitudes amongst central Government, local bodies, businesses, communities and individuals."*¹⁴ Oxford, Cambridge and their surrounding areas provide the ideal environment for such an approach to be implemented.

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Campaign for Better Transport's vision is a country where communities have affordable transport that improves quality of life and protects the environment. Achieving our vision requires substantial changes to UK transport policy which we aim to achieve by providing well-researched, practical solutions that gain support from both decision-makers and the public.

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¹² M25 South West Quadrant strategic study <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/road-investment-strategy-post-2020#research-phase-m25-south-west-quadrant>

¹³ Economic case for active travel: the health benefits, DfT November 2014

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/economic-case-for-active-travel-the-health-benefits>

¹⁴ Draft Cycling & Walking Investment Strategy March 2016 <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/draft-cycling-and-walking-investment-strategy>