



## **Strategic Transport Forum**

25<sup>th</sup> January 2019

### **Agenda Item Number 5b: Oxford – Milton Keynes Section of Expressway**

*Recommendation:*

**It is recommended that the Forum:**

- a) Notes the letter submitted to the Secretary of State for Transport, as approved by Forum Members (annex 1).**
- b) Notes that work on the connectivity study is now being taken forward.**
- c) Receives an update from Highways England.**

#### **1. Context**

- 1.1. The previous meeting of the Forum discussed progress with development of the Oxford-Cambridge expressway project (Oxfordshire – Milton Keynes section).
- 1.2. During the discussion, Forum members raised concerns about the Expressway being planned in isolation of wider activity underway within the area, most notably the transformative impact of East West Rail. Forum members noted that the Western Section of East West Rail will be open at least 10 years, and potentially the entire rail route between Oxford and Cambridge could be open some 5 years, in advance of the proposed expressway. Additionally, Forum members noted that EEH Business Unit had been working with officials in DfT, DCMS and Network Rail to ensure that the Western Section is delivered as a digitally connected corridor – benefiting not only rail passengers but the surrounding area.
- 1.3. As a result, and in line with the Forum's vision and objectives for the EEH transport strategy, it was agreed that these investments would significantly improve overall levels of connectivity across the Heartland in a way that would benefit both residents and businesses. The investments present significant opportunities to deliver growth in ways consistent with the ambition of environmental "net gain" overall. The Forum was clear that any future infrastructure, including the expressway must not inadvertently undermine such progress in meeting the strategic vision and priorities of the EEH Transport strategy.
- 1.4. Recognising that funding to invest in transport was finite, and recognising the significant need for increased capacity on the road network across the Heartland area, Forum members were keen to write to the Secretary of State for Transport to ensure that where funding was available to invest, it would be targeted in ways that maximised the benefit to local communities and businesses (both existing and future).
- 1.5. A copy of the letter is attached at Annex 1.

- 1.6. In addition, Layla Moran MP (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD) secured an adjournment debate on the Oxford- Cambridge Expressway on Friday 11 January. In her opening speech, the MP raised two key concerns: i) Highways England's current lack of 'meaningful engagement' with local residents; and ii) the perceived conflicting objectives for the scheme in different parts of Government and the impact that might have on the options being tested.
- 1.7. In his response during the debate, Transport Minister Jesse Norman stated,  
*"In particular, the expressway is expected to reduce journey times between Oxford and Cambridge by up to 40 minutes. Some have argued that we should build only one of those routes, but the Government disagrees. Both road and rail have important roles to play, and they have different uses. They provide choice for users and competition, and they avoid overcrowding on unimproved networks.*  
 ....later in his speech, the Minister continued:  
*"It broadly aligns with east-west rail, making it easier for people to choose between different modes of transport, improving competitiveness between the two modes and reducing car dependency for existing and new communities.*  
*It is important for the House to be aware that we have not ruled out any options at this stage (...for the expressway). That is a preferred route. We do not make prejudgments about decisions as to the extent to which existing roads are upgraded versus new routes constructed. We have not prejudged any decisions about the number of lanes, junctions, or other features of the road."*
- 1.8. Forum members will find the minister's remarks of interest and will be keen to continue to hold Government to account on their commitment to engage, and also to not make prejudgements on the extent to which existing roads are upgraded versus new routes constructed. Future agenda items of this Forum will ensure members are continually kept abreast of progress.

## **2. Connectivity Study**

- 2.1. Forum members have been consistently clear that, in seeking to realise the economic potential of the Heartland area, and therefore in planning future connectivity challenges and opportunities, there is a need to consider a number of issues:
- a) *Economic Productivity* – in recent years economic growth across the region has largely been achieved by exploiting the capacity of the existing infrastructure. Increased demand, combined with underinvestment in infrastructure and services has led to deterioration in infrastructure condition, an increase in congestion and a decline in resilience.
  - b) *Digital Economy* - the continued growth of the digital economy, in particular the creation of new business models for service delivery (by both public and private sectors) means that the way in which people access opportunities and services continues to undergo fundamental change. This is already having implications on travel patterns and demand, and is a trend that is likely to continue moving forward: indeed it is one that we need to encourage if we are to deliver net betterment
  - c) *Changes in Geography* – improved connectivity (whether physical or digital) means that traditional 'market areas' have changed and will continue to change. Underpinning the National Infrastructure Commission's work is the premise that across the region the sum will be bigger than the individual parts: our approach to identifying future infrastructure needs through the connectivity study needs to be shaped by the principle that both housing market areas and functional economic areas will change.

- d) *Pace of Change* – in seeking to identify future infrastructure requirements there is a need for flexibility and adaptability in our approach. The extended timescale associated with designing and delivering major new infrastructure makes it vulnerable to becoming outdated by societal and economic changes. The danger therein is that the desire, and need, to encourage a more sustainable pattern of development is inadvertently undermined by investment in infrastructure and services that perpetuate patterns of travel and demand that are inconsistent with the need to deliver 'net betterment'.
  - e) *Vision-led Scenario Planning* – by definition transformational growth requires a paradigm shift. Traditional approaches to the identification of infrastructure requirements run the risk of perpetuating the current paradigm. We therefore require a new approach to strategic infrastructure planning, one that employs new tools and uses scenario planning to set the framework within which more detailed proposals at the local level can be developed and implemented.
- 2.2. This Forum at its previous meeting agreed the approach to be adopted in taking forward the connectivity study.
- 2.3. The EEH Business Unit is now working with local partners – local transport authorities, local planning authorities and local enterprise partnerships – to begin the initial phase of work on the connectivity study. An initial meeting is scheduled to take place within the next few weeks.

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