

## Strategic Transport Forum 16<sup>th</sup> March 2018

### Agenda Item 5b: Expressway Study

**Recommendation:** It is recommended that the Forum:

- a) Express its growing concern at the lack of progress made in arriving at a common understanding and agreement on the strategic objectives for the 'expressway';
- b) Express its growing concern at the lack of consideration of the strategic issues previously identified; and
- c) Notwithstanding its support for investment in improved east-west connectivity to be delivered at pace, it is essential that infrastructure requirements are identified within the wider strategic context provided by the emerging overarching Transport Strategy for the Oxford – Milton Keynes – Cambridge corridor.

#### **1. Background**

- 1.1. The Oxford – Milton Keynes Expressway Study was originally one of three strategic studies across the Heartland area commissioned as part of Road Investment Strategy 1 (which covers the investment period upto 2019).
- 1.2. The National Infrastructure Commission Interim Report – published October 2016 – identified the 'once-in-a-generation' opportunity presented by the delivery of a 'multi-modal spine' that would deliver a step change in east-west connectivity. The Interim Report suggested that the 'spine' would be a combination of East-West Rail and an 'expressway'.
- 1.3. The Commission recommended that the Government should commit £27m to the end of 2018/19 to fund the next phase of development work on the Oxford-Cambridge Expressway study. The Government in its response to the Interim Report (published in November 2016) accepted the Commission's recommendation.
- 1.4. The Stage 3 report of the initial phase of the strategic study was published in November 2016 ([Highways England Stage 3 report](#)).
- 1.5. Consultants Jacobs were appointed by Highways England in summer 2017 to take forward the next stage of work on the 'expressway study'
- 1.6. The National Infrastructure Commission published its Final Report on the Oxford – Milton Keynes – Cambridge corridor in November 2017. This reinforced the recommendations of the Interim Report with regard to the critical role that improved connectivity has to play in realising the economic potential of the corridor and in unlocking the delivery of planned housing and economic growth.

- 1.7. In its initial response to the Commission's final report – published alongside the Autumn 2017 Budget – the Government set out its commitment to develop

*'... an Expressway of high-quality east-west roads between Oxford and Cambridge, key elements of which will be built in the second Roads Investment period, from 2020 to 2025. In addition, and in line with the NIC's recommendations, the government will accelerate development work, completing option selection and detailed design work on the 'missing link' elements of the Expressway between the M1 and Oxford so that it is ready to open by 2030. A decision on corridor choice will be made by summer 2018. The government will commission England's Economic Heartland to study how communities not on the Expressway itself can still benefit from it.'*

It is interesting to note the use of the plural 'roads' in the Government's response.

- 1.8. At the beginning of February Highways England announced that it was inviting representations to be made on the output of the Stage 3 report, and in particular views on the merits of the three corridors identified therein.
- 1.9. Representations on the output from the Stage 3 report need to be submitted to Highways England by 12<sup>th</sup> April.
- 1.10. It is worth noting that it is anticipated that Highways England will shortly seek views on the detailed objectives to be used in the identification of its preferred corridor for the 'missing link'.

## **2. Highways England's Stage 3 Report**

- 2.1. The 'Stage 3' report published by Highways England in November 2016 concluded:  
*'The study has identified that there is currently a lack of east-west transport connectivity across (the corridor).'*

*'Failure to address the challenges identified in these studies and invest accordingly in east-west transport links within the study area, is likely to constrain economic growth...'*

- 2.2. The 'stage 3' report short-listed three options:

Corridor A – via Aylesbury  
Corridor B – along the East West Rail corridor  
Corridor C – along the existing A421 corridor

In addition the report identified the need to also consider issues relating to traffic movements around Oxford, and in particular along the A34 corridor.

- 2.3. It is interesting to note that the strategic objectives used to short-list options were generic, lacking as it did the wider strategic context that will be provided by the overarching Transport Strategy now being developed.
- 2.4. It is unclear from the 'stage 3' as to what extent the assessment took into account the impact that completion of the East West Rail might have on longer-distance movements, nor the impact that changes in travel demand that will arise from the expansion of the digital economy.

- 2.5. It is also interesting to note that the report identifies that from a road perspective the highest scoring strategic option was that via Aylesbury (i.e. corridor A). Given the potential for this corridor to support planned growth identified in the emerging Local Plans this is perhaps unsurprising.

### **3. Strategic Transport Forum's Previous Consideration**

- 3.1. This Forum considered the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway at its meeting on 15<sup>th</sup> September 2017 (which included a presentation from the study team).
- 3.2. Whilst the Forum welcomed the commitment by Government to invest in improved east-west connectivity, it identified the need:
- For the Forum to work with Highways England and the project team to arrive at a common understanding and agreement as to the strategic objectives that form the basis for the public sector making the investment
  - For a series of strategic issues (reproduced as Annex 1 to this report) to be considered in more detail in arriving at a common understanding and agreement on the strategic objectives.
- 3.3. Whilst the study team has undertaken a range of stakeholder engagement events during the final few months of 2017, the focus of these were largely to disseminate information on the study. As noted above, Highways England will shortly seek views on the detailed objectives to be used in the identification of its preferred corridor for the 'missing link'.

### **4. Issues for Consideration**

- 4.1. In considering its response to Highways England's invitation to set out its views on the output of the 'stage 3' report it is important to note that:
- a) There has yet to be a detailed discussion with Highways England and the project team on the strategic objectives for the expressway study.
- This is particularly concerning given that the 'expressway' proposal cannot be considered in isolation: investment in improved east-west road connectivity needs to be viewed in the wider context of investment in East-West Rail. This is particularly pertinent given that delivery of the Western Section of EWR has been accelerated by the Secretary of State. Opening of EWR will in itself be transformational for the Heartland and is likely to lead to changes in travel patterns and demand.
- b) There is need to also consider any proposal relating to the 'expressway' in the context of the implications for connectivity to the wider highway network.
- The Autumn 2017 Budget explicitly recognised this by commissioning England's Economic Heartland to take forward a study specifically to consider the wider connectivity issues. Intuitively this reflects the reality that choices made with regard to the 'expressway' will have implications with regard to the scope, nature, and ultimately cost, of connecting infrastructure.

On the basis that the level of funding available from the public sector to invest in new highway infrastructure is finite, it is clear that it is absolutely critical that the wider (network) cost implications associated with the expressway options are factored into the decision making process.

Specifically there is a need to consider the existing requirement for public sector investment in the wider road network in order to unlock planned housing growth in emerging Local Plans. Failure to take such requirements into account in the decision making process for the 'expressway' runs the risk of stalling the delivery of planned housing growth.

It is for this reason that the Strategic Transport Forum's response to the proposal to identify a Major Road Network sets out the need for that to be informed by the work underway to develop the overarching Transport Strategy for the corridor.

- c) Improved east-west (road) connectivity may be achieved through investment in more than one corridor (as identified by the Forum at its September meeting).

Indeed it could be argued that investment in existing road infrastructure is required along all three corridors to some extent in support of planned growth. Moreover, investment in improved road infrastructure along a number of corridors could contribute significantly to improving network resilience for road users.

- 4.2. At this stage in the process, and based on the information that is currently available:
  - a) There is a need for investment in a number of existing road corridors (including those identified in the 'stage 3' report) in order to support planned growth (economic and housing); focusing on a single new corridor will not remove the need for that wider investment if planned growth is to be delivered.
  - b) Any proposal to consider prioritising investment in a single corridor must be taken in the wider strategic context provided by the emerging overarching Transport Strategy, and in particular having taken into account of the strategic objectives of EWR and any initial advice from the 'connectivity study'.
- 4.3. Whilst the Government's desire to move the work on the 'expressway' forward at pace is welcome and supported, it cannot be taken forward in isolation of consideration of the work to deliver EWR nor without also being informed by the work on the upcoming 'connectivity study'.
- 4.4. The Forum is itself committed to driving forward its work on the overarching Transport Strategy at pace: the ambition being to have a draft of the framework available for wider engagement at the turn of the calendar year.
- 4.5. In supporting the work of Sub-national Transport Bodies, the Government's Transport Investment Strategy (published in July 2017) emphasised their critical role in providing the forum for a single conversation on strategic transport issues.

- 4.6. This Forum's work on developing the overarching Transport Strategy provides a timely and appropriate strategic framework within which to align decision making on what will potentially be transformational investment.

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**Programme Director**

March 2018

**Extract from Report to the Strategic Transport Forum**

**Strategic Issues for Further Consideration (by the expressway)  
(Section 4 of the Report of 15<sup>th</sup> September 2017)**

1. There is support in principle to the proposal set out in the National Infrastructure Commission as to the strategic importance (for the long-term future of the UK economy) of improving east-west connectivity. There is also support in principle for realising the 'once-in-a-generation' opportunity to establish a multi-modal spine across the Heartland area.
2. However, discussions with local partners subsequent to the publication of the National Infrastructure Commission's interim report have highlighted a number of strategic issues that need to be addressed as integral elements of the study's work programme.
3. The key driver for the study has to be ensuring that there is common understanding and agreement as to the strategic objectives that form the basis for making the investment in the first instance.
4. Based on the discussions with local partners to date the following issues are ones that need to be considered in greater detail in order to secure that common understanding:
  - a) The 'missing link' – the main focus of the Stage 3 report was the identification of three options for the 'missing link' between the M1 and M40. Discussions with local partners (both transport and planning authorities) suggest that there is an urgent need to discuss with Highways England and the study team the presumption that investment in the western half of the 'expressway' should be focused on a single corridor.

Recognising the importance of using investment in infrastructure to enable the delivery of planned growth (a key theme of the National Infrastructure Commission's Interim Report) it could be argued that delivery of the strategic objectives might be realised in a more cost effective way than simply investing in a single new corridor. If a strategic objective is to enable acceleration of planned growth across the Heartland then this may be realised more effectively by using the public monies available to invest in improving a number of existing corridors along which growth is already being planned.

Even if there were agreement that delivery of the strategic objectives might be best realised by investment in the creation of a single new 'strategic corridor', there would remain the need for additional investment to link that 'spine' to the surrounding network, and through that network the areas of planned growth.

- b) The 'eastern section' – the implied assumption appears to be that delivery of the A428 Black Cat to Caxton Gibbet improvement (an existing RIS1 commitment

scheduled for completion during RIS2) will result in the delivery of the 'eastern section' of the 'expressway'.

However, in looking forward it could be argued that, similar to the 'western section' there is a need to use the strategic objectives as the basis for reviewing whether in fact there is a need for further investment in order to enable the delivery of planned growth. And as with the 'western section' there is a need to consider whether such investment should be concentrated on a single corridor or whether there is a need for investment in a number of corridors.

- c) The Major Road Network - The National Infrastructure Commission's Interim Report identified that investment in the 'expressway' needed to form part of a multi-modal spine across the Heartland.

A step-change in connectivity will result in changes in existing travel patterns. It may also result in changes to both the current strategic housing market areas and the functional economic areas. By definition a step-change in connectivity means that there will be a need to make informed choices on future growth and the implications for future travel patterns.

All of this will have implications for the Major Road Network across the Heartland area. The concept of a Major Road Network has been supported by the Strategic Transport Forum since the publication of the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund report. In July 2017, the Department for Transport confirmed its support for the concept and announced that it would work with the emerging Sub-national Transport Bodies nationally to develop the proposal further. The same policy announcement – the DfT's Transport Investment Strategy – also announced that STBs would be able to seek investment for improvements to the Major Road Network from the soon to be established National Roads Fund (to be established 2020/21)

Delivery of the 'expressway' will in turn have implications for the scope of the Major Road Network across the wider corridor, and vice versa. As work is taken for on identifying the Major Road Network there will need to be a dialogue with the 'expressway' study team to ensure that each is taking account the other.

- d) East-West Rail – as noted above the 'expressway' forms part of the mutli-modal spine across the Heartland advocated by the National Infrastructure Commission. East West Rail forms the other part of that spine.

In a similar way to there being a need for a dialogue between the 'expressway' study team and the Strategic Transport Forum in respect to the Major Road Network, so there is a need for a dialogue in relation to the East West Rail project.

- e) North-South Connectivity – whilst the primary focus of the study is improved east-west connectivity, by association there will be implications for north-south movements. The study team will therefore need to be mindful of the potential for second order effects of this nature.

5. All of the above serves to emphasise the critical importance of the work on the next stage of the 'expressway' being taken forward on a collaborative basis with local partners.
6. Whilst the 'expressway' is primarily a piece of transport infrastructure its purpose is to enable delivery of planned growth (economic and housing). It is therefore essential that any collaborative working arrangement fully involves local transport authorities, local planning authorities, and local enterprise partnerships.