

AYLESBURY VALE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Chief Executive

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12 April 2018

Mr Matt Stafford
Ox-Cam Project Director
Oxford to Cambridge Expressway
Highways England
Woodlands
Manton Lane
Bedford
MK41 7LW

Response sent via email

Dear Mr Stafford,

Oxford to Cambridge Expressway – Stakeholder Engagement on Corridor Options Response from Aylesbury Vale District Council (AVDC) to Highways England

Further to the Members' forum meeting held on 9 February 2018, the Council's Cabinet has formally considered the request from Highways England to respond to the two questions it posed regarding a preferred/least preferred corridor. Attached as appendix 1 is a copy of the Cabinet report, together with a draft of the minute from that meeting as appendix 2.

The Cabinet very much welcomed the opportunity to provide feedback to help inform the first of a number of very important decisions that will be taken in respect of this locally and nationally important project and the "expressway" is of course just one of the components of the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford (CaMKOx) corridor programme. The Council is very keen to help influence and inform the decision that you are planning to make on the 'missing link' of the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway (between Oxford and Milton Keynes), particularly as approximately 70% of the missing road length will pass through Aylesbury Vale District, whichever corridor is chosen. This is of course one of the main reasons why AVDC has been one of the champions for the development of the Central Area Growth Board (CAGB), as it is clear that planning across such an area and at such scale needs to be driven forward by the CAGB and the wider Cross Corridor Group.

The importance and impact of this decision and indeed the wider work on the CaMKOx corridor in relation to the long term future prospects of the Vale cannot be overstated: **for Aylesbury Vale it will be truly transformational.** AVDC's Cabinet has carefully considered this matter and sees it as the most significant issue that will affect the future of the Vale and its residents and businesses for decades to come. It is for this reason therefore that the Cabinet has requested that MHCLG and other Government departments and agencies recognise the very particular and special need for there to be regular and direct dialogue with AVDC as the planning authority on this matter.

Cabinet has also asked that this response **reiterates the authority's willingness to partner future discussions and to continue and increase dialogue and engagement with Highways England and Government in the decision making processes on the "expressway"** both at



an officer and member level. However the Cabinet also wanted our response to emphasise in particular ***the critical need for the “expressway” project to be delivered as a co-ordinated and integral part of the wider ambitions for the CaMKOx area***, as set out in the National Infrastructure Commission report ‘Partnering for Prosperity’ published in November 2017. For that reason, we have framed this response as part of our overall response to the NIC report. We have also copied this response to our local MPs as well as Iain Stewart, MP, the Government’s champion for the corridor.

The National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) in its report ‘Partnering for Prosperity – a new deal for the Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford Arc’ (published November 2017), recognised the significant economic potential of the arc at a national level and put forward a bold vision. This stated that without urgent action, a chronic undersupply of homes could jeopardise growth, limit access to labour and put prosperity at risk. The NIC report stated that East West Rail (EWR) and the Oxford – Cambridge Expressway provide a once-in-a-generation opportunity to unlock land for new settlements. The report included 9 recommendations and proposes a series of deals between Government and local areas to commit to the ambitious arc-wide vision and robust plans integrating planning for jobs, homes and infrastructure.

AVDC is concerned that the strategic case for intervention and the answer to the crucial question of ‘what could be achieved if east-west connectivity was improved’ is not yet known and the key drivers for the “expressway” in the context of the NIC recommendations have not been effectively identified or communicated in the current project engagement. **AVDC consider it is critical that the “expressway” delivers more than just a connection between places in the fastest possible time** and if this is the principal objective, this once in a generation opportunity to unlock sustainable and aspirational growth may be wasted. A decision therefore on the choice of corridor made in isolation of the wider context as described above would in our view represent a missed opportunity and has the potential to undermine the effectiveness of the “expressway” to help deliver the vision set out by the NIC.

Highways England engagement

Highways England using Jacobs have undertaken stakeholder engagement on the corridor options, and no real engagement with the general public and with formal public consultation not offered until the stage of route selection. This is a disappointing and frustrating output of the process as the announcement of the corridor alone will have a significant impact on the corridor area and beyond in terms of land values, local communities, pressure for development in advance of the infrastructure. To reiterate, this is particularly relevant in the Vale owing to the length of missing link which passes through the District.

The strategic aims of the Project have been set out at engagement events as follows:

1. Connectivity – provide an east-west strategic road link between MK and Oxford that delivers enhanced connectivity through faster, safer and more reliable connections across the corridor in the broad arc
2. Strategic Transformation – support the creation of an integrated corridor between Oxford and Cambridge, reflecting and advancing plans for infrastructure, housing, business investment & development
3. Economic Growth – unlock economic potential by facilitating strategic growth to the benefit of the UK economy through increased productivity, employment and housing and maximising synergies with potential growth associated with East West Rail
4. Skills and Accessibility – promote accessibility and wider socio-economic benefits by improving access to job opportunities
5. Planning for the Future – Reduce the impact of new housing on local roads for communities and contribute to better safety, security and health whilst promoting sustainable transport modes

6. Environment – To provide a healthy, natural environment by reducing congestion and supporting sustainable travel modes and promoting equality and opportunity
7. Innovation – apply innovative technology wherever possible to support the sustainable planning, construction and operation of transport measures

However, stakeholders have not been furnished with information on how or if the strategic objectives are weighted in the decision making process. Moreover, the key purpose and driver for the “expressway” has not been clearly identified by Highways England as managers of the project and therefore, it is almost impossible to answer the two questions posed by HE in an informed way. ***AVDC recommends that the purpose of the “expressway” and exactly what is trying to be achieved is clarified and set at the heart of the project, which will then enable these posed questions to be answered in a more informed way.***

Stakeholders have simply been advised that the basis of the overall corridor assessment is to be made on the achievement of the strategic objectives; taking account of feedback from stakeholder engagement; considering affordability and value for money; and any other relevant factors.

The corridor areas have been developed from the previously indicated arrows depicting the corridors although no further detailed analysis of the impacts have been shared with stakeholders to help inform our views or provide a better understanding as to how the corridor areas were derived, although we are aware that technical teams have been working in parallel to collate information and evidence on traffic and economic modelling, environment and infrastructure. It is critical that as the route is derived as part of the project, access and exits to and from the road are also located to aid economic growth and that the road does not just pass through the District enabling fast connection from A to B in the way that HS2 is doing.

We understand that England’s Economic Heartland are due to commission the ‘connectivity study’ soon, which was announced in the Budget 2017, and the results of this study will help inform the understanding of additional connections needed along with any “expressway” to truly unlock aspirational growth. The absence of wider information of number and anticipated location of junctions (if known) and results of complementary studies again means AVDC consider it is not possible to properly answer the questions posed in the proposed timeline.

Growth context

To inform the written response, officers at the Council held two Members seminars (15.03.18 and 22.03.18) to inform Members of the project, the process and cascade the material provided by Highways England in order to seek their views. Officers had also mapped the constraints and existing planned growth areas in the Vale for information and provided commentary to Members on the growth context.

As an authority in 2016/17, Aylesbury Vale delivered 1323 new homes, more than Milton Keynes and with no significant investment into infrastructure from central Government. The Vale delivered a similar number in 2017/18 too. Our Local Plan (Vale of Aylesbury Local Plan) was submitted in February 2018 and plans for growth until 2033 and allocates land for delivery of 28,830 new homes in this time period. VALP also plans for new employment land across its key employment sites and which includes three sites benefitting from Enterprise Zone status (Silverstone, Westcott Venture Park, Arla/Woodlands).

In addition, with the level of growth indicated in the Objectively Assessed Need for areas like Aylesbury Vale shown in the recent Government consultation on this matter, and the increases to housing figures for the areas around the Vale, it is anticipated that the Vale will need to be a key contributor to the overall housing figure that the corridor is expected to achieve. Current calculations show Aylesbury Vale needs to allow for 970 dwellings per annum, but this will need to increase to 1,499 dwellings per annum under the new methodology. It should be noted that these figures are for Aylesbury Vale only and do not include any unmet need estimates.

Estimates prepared for the NIC suggest that meeting the needs of the arc's future population and workforce which is set to increase by between 1.4-1.9 million in the period to 2050 could require 23,000 – 30,000 net new homes per year but taken in aggregate, current local plans make provision for fewer than 16,000 homes per year. Accommodating between 1.4 and 1.9 million people could require between 782,000 and 1,020,000 new homes by 2050 but current development plans, if realised in full, might be expected to deliver only 230,000 new homes.

Therefore, AVDC considers that it is paramount that discussions around the “expressway” corridor choice are integrated with those around the delivery, scale and location of new homes and employment land to maximise the potential to support and deliver new and aspirational growth in the corridor. This is certainly what was envisaged by the NIC report and which also appeared to be a key driver highlighted by the Stage 3 Report but there is concern that the “expressway” project is being accelerated ahead of this other critical work and carved up as a discrete and potentially disconnected highways project. The significant growth context for the area and the Vale in particular is lacking so far in the engagement process, which appears to be a one size fits all approach for all stakeholders across the corridor irrespective of the impact that the project is likely to have in their area.

AVDC would suggest that as approximately 70% of the missing road length will pass through the Vale and a significant section of EWR also passes through the centre of the Vale, there is a case for more targeted engagement to take place with members and officers in AVDC going forward to maximise the potential of the east west connections, benefits for the area as well as effective mitigation. This is particularly important in light of the current and planned growth already taking place across the Vale and the scope for significant future levels of growth to take place in the Vale as we seek to create successful and sustainable places.

Timing and process

The HE project in setting out its milestones advises that stage 1 is split into 1a which is identification of the corridor (option A, B or C) to be complete by summer 2018 and 1b which is route selection within the preferred corridor, to be complete by Autumn 2020 following a public consultation to commence in Autumn 2019. The key milestones of the project thereafter comprise of the development phase which will include a Development Consent Order application which will be subject to Examination and a Public Inquiry to enable construction to commence 2025 with a view to the road being open in 2030.

This timeline accelerates even that which was referred to in the NIC report which recommended development work to deliver a clearly-defined and agreed route by 2025. This acceleration is welcomed in principle to enable greater confidence of the east west connections to come but it is critical that the sequencing of events is given careful consideration and the key drivers of the project are clear to ensure benefits are maximised and the opportunity for once in a generation growth is not wasted from this significant investment in infrastructure.

Of key concern to AVDC is that the timeline appears divorced from any of the other dependant decisions or work related to the very interrelated decisions and recommendations set out in the NIC report on the delivery of new homes – where and how many, new settlement and new garden community announcements – scale and location, mechanisms for land value capture. The sequencing of these announcements is crucial; there is a key opportunity to capture land value uplift to contribute to and deliver infrastructure and improve connections for the benefit of the wider community. AVDC is already planning for significant sustainable growth but is also committed to place making and it is imperative that there is interplay between the corridor decision and the ability to create sustainable places and enable the strategic planning of future long term growth.

Without being clear on exactly what needs to be achieved, it is difficult to answer the questions posed by Highways England, as all three corridor options are feasible, although it was acknowledged that Option C was probably the “least preferred” because it did not contribute as well as the other corridors could against all of the measured factors. The Cabinet requested though that improvements to the A421 (in corridor C) should be considered as part of the connectivity study.

Through the members seminars held, and following the technical work carried out by officers, the Council has gained various and detailed views on the benefits and limitations of the three corridor options depending on the purpose of the road. **Our discussions have also highlighted that there are further hybrid options of the corridor that need to be explored**, including a new junction from M40 at Bicester which could combine aspects of routes A and B as it links into Aylesbury (corridor A) (officer labelled B1 option) (see map attached as appendix 3). **North-south connections were also expressed as being important and that the A41 west of Aylesbury needs to be improved as well as extension of the A41 south dual carriageway from Aylesbury to East West rail spine.**

The Council is keen to work with Highways England and Government and to share information on the detailed views but consider this needs to be done in dialogue as the key drivers and purpose of the road are identified and in conjunction with other decisions on growth.

The common thread in the NIC report is for the close working of Government with local authorities, public and private partners, planning and transport authorities and LEPs in order to commit and deliver on the vision and it is key that this takes place and that this also involves a coordinated and integrated approach from Government departments including DfT, MHCLG and BEIS. As the NIC report states, if the arc is to maximise its potential, it needs national investment, local leadership, support from local communities and buy in from industry. The corridor needs to be a national priority to ensure it can be a serious contributor to the national growth project like the Midlands Engine and Northern Powerhouse. **An overall coordinated approach at Government level with timely announcements will ensure Councils across the corridor area can proceed to adopt their current local plans but also effectively plan for and commit to early reviews of their plans and also working with adjacent authorities, to work up the spatial plans referred to by the NIC to facilitate delivery of long term growth. We want to be able to do this but need the Government and its agencies to facilitate this process.**

Conclusion

In conclusion, AVDC positively welcomes the investment in infrastructure but consider it is critical that the purpose of the “expressway” is fully set out and understood in order to properly inform and influence the corridor choice and that sequencing of announcements makes sense to this purpose. Any of the three corridor choices are feasible (as well as a hybrid version) but depending on exactly what needs to be achieved, affects the weighting of the benefits and limitations of the options. AVDC consider it is critical that the road delivers more than just a connection between places in the fastest possible time but that it truly unlocks transformational and aspirational growth to maximise this once in a generation opportunity which must not be wasted.

To that end, the Council considers that the “expressway” project needs to be delivered as a co-ordinated and integral part of the wider ambitions for the Oxford to Cambridge arc as set out in the NIC report. The correct sequencing of decisions on settlement options, infrastructure, land value capture and new governance arrangements to allow effective interplay between these elements needs to be in place to maximise this opportunity. This also needs to be joined up at Government level to ensure the area achieves its full potential and in order to effectively plan on a scale of this magnitude.

Once again we reiterate the important message that we are willing to partner in discussions and continue and increase dialogue and engagement with Highways England and Government in the decision making processes on the “expressway” both at an officer and member level. As referred to at the beginning of this response, approximately 70% of the missing link of “expressway” passes through the district and therefore, the importance that this Government scheme has for our area is unparalleled across the corridor. There is therefore a special case for the Vale to be particularly and closely involved with the planning authority to ensure that the “expressway” is not simply a new road link and some housing but that the potential and benefits for the area are maximised and the ambitious proposals for aspirational growth are realised.

We look forward to continuing the real engagement on this important matter and to hearing back from you in respect of the points made and forming a special partnership in order that we can work together to achieve positive outcomes for Aylesbury Vale and UK Plc.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AG', written in a cursive style.

Andrew Grant
Chief Executive

cc Local MPs: John Bercow, MP: David Lidington, MP
Iain Stewart, MP
Central Area Growth Board Members
England's Economic Heartland
Bucks County Council
SEMLEP
BucksTVLEP
Simon Ridley (MHCLG)
Tricia Hayes (DfT)

Appendices

1. Cabinet Report 10.04.18
2. Draft Minute of Cabinet meeting 10.04.18
3. Map showing corridor options (including hybrid option)