

Fencott and Murcott Parish Council

Proposed Oxford Cambridge Expressway - Summary – 1st May 2018

Overview

- The National Infrastructure Commission has issued a report proposing a 'corridor linking Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge with an 'expressway' which will engender economic growth in the region, and enable the perceived chronic shortage of homes in the region to be addressed by the addition of 1 million new homes in the vicinity of the corridor by way of new towns and cities.
- Three corridors for possible routes are being considered by Highways (see map).
- Highways will make a selection in July 2018 from Corridor routes A, B, C and then commence technical design and planning.
- Public consultation is to begin Autumn 2019 once initial plans are made available.
- Route will be announced in Autumn 2020.
- "Commitment to Construct" will be made in 2025 following detailed technical planning, and commercial considerations.
- Open Road is expected in 2030.
- Expressway Action Group (EAG) has been formed and recognised as a stakeholder by Highways, and has submitted evidence to them.
- We have enquired if F&M parish should be a contributor to this group as most of Otmoor is within our parish.

Fencott and Murcott Parish Council submitted the following letter to Highways England on 12th April, copying EAG, Department for Transport, OxLep, local and district councillors, and our MP:

To Highways England, re Impact of the S2 Corridor of the Oxford-Cambridge Expressway

We write to you from Fencott & Murcott Parish Council, the parish within which almost all of Otmoor lies. We would like to support the comments sent by our colleagues in the neighbouring parishes around Otmoor, and verify the information contained in the document "The Environmental Impact of the S2 Corridor" compiled by the parish of Beckley & Stowood. Our apologies for writing late, but we were not contacted by any of the parties involved in the development of the Oxford-Cambridge Expressway.

Process

By not consulting widely with the local communities along the proposed routes, either a genuine mistake has been made or there has been an attempt to circumnavigate the democratic process: either way, trust is being eroded. The opportunity is also being missed to gather local knowledge, vital for ensuring that all decisions are fully informed. We would like to see a period of proper consultation take place before a decision is made on Expressway routing, and we will contribute with our detailed knowledge of the Otmoor area.

Free-flowing Network

The Expressway is intended to reduce travel times. The road is also providing an opportunity to build 1M new homes. One million homes represents a population increase of 2.4M. The towns of Aylesbury, Banbury, Bedford, Bicester, Buckingham, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Northampton, Oxford combined currently constitute a population of less than one million people, so a 2.5x increase in population in this area, planned during a time when the overall UK population increase will be perhaps only 5-10%, is an extraordinary burden on this region. Moreover it is difficult to see how the addition of one Expressway, 1M new homes and 2.4M people, and the cars added to local road networks, will reduce journey times: journey times and associated pollution are more likely to increase. It is also likely that new housing between Oxford and Cambridge, with easier connection to the London radial motorways, will create a new commuter belt, contributing to London-centric economic growth. This appears to be contrary to the premise of the infrastructure project of HS2.

Improving Air Quality and Reducing Noise

We look forward to an era dominated by relatively clean electric vehicles, but it must be recognised that the majority of noise heard by people living in the vicinity of a fast road comes from tyre noise, with safety surfaces producing more noise. So vehicle noise is here to stay, and the residents of our parish live with the noise of the M40 motorway, with its recognised impact on well-being. Pollution is already a serious threat to public health in the Thames Valley; new road and house building will increase this, with all the attendant health costs.

Protected Environment

"Green lungs" are crucial to human health, well-being and livelihood. Biodiversity is not a luxury for a minority to study, but a key indication of the health of the ecosystem of which we are all a part, and upon which humankind depends. The protection of biodiversity needs therefore to be a crucial factor in every plan for economic growth.

Value and Impact

Otmoor is an area of historical, cultural, natural, conservation and scientific significance. The MoD uses part of Otmoor for military training and works closely with Natural England and the tenant farmers, whose livelihoods have been provided by this land for generations; the RSPB has invested heavily to protect this last area of habitat for a number of rare species; local inhabitants and the general public enjoy the tranquility of this area's public rights of way; geology, hydrology, environment, conservation and species are all areas of scientific study; Cherwell District Council protects the local environment and character of this area and the value of Otmoor was recognised when the decision was made by the Inspector to re-route the M40 to protect this unique landscape. Otmoor is also a natural flood-plain, which has always been vital to the management of flood-water around Oxford. The Environment Agency monitors and alters Otmoor water levels, and has included Otmoor in its complex modelling of the flood defences of the city of Oxford. Because the A34, the M40 and the house-building at Bicester & Banbury have all caused rain-water run-off to enter the water-courses in this flat low-lying area, there is no doubt that reducing the effectiveness of this floodplain, by developing in or around Otmoor, would have serious consequences beyond Otmoor.

We look forward to your response and to being included in a proper and transparent consultation, in order to contribute to a joined-up process and a democratic decision.

We received the following response from Highways England Oxford to Cambridge Expressway Team:

Thank you for contacting the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway Team. We are at a very early stage in the development of this proposal, as such, no substantive work has yet been done on route options for the proposed expressway. Given the importance of this investment to government and the communities within the study area, we decided to commence engagement at the earliest possible opportunity, much earlier than would normally occur on a scheme such as this.

We have invited strategic organisations and elected representatives across the study area to submit their opinions on the three corridor areas to access their unique knowledge of the area and its communities in order to help select a suitable corridor for route assessment. We are not asking any groups to comment on our technical work as this will come later once we have developed some ideas. The wider stakeholder group also includes special interest groups, statutory and non-statutory organisations. We have invited a wide selection of stakeholder groups in order to be representative of communities and road users.

Due to the incomplete nature of our plans we have not opened this information to more specific areas or the wider public. We have planned for a public consultation after our robust programme of analysis is complete in Autumn 2019. It would be unfair for us to accept submissions from individuals when there has not been an even opportunity for all individuals across the study area to access the same information. Please understand that we cannot accept individual submissions for this reason. Please confirm if this submission is on behalf of one of the organisations we have already invited to comment by April 12. Please be assured we value your contribution and we will log your interest in the scheme and will be in touch nearer the time of a public consultation.

We received the following response from the CEO of Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership:

I wanted to advise you that the project is being led by Highways England and their consultants, it is not a project promoted by ourselves, nor has the Board had the results of any consultation/options analysis with which to take any considered view at this stage.

I will forward your concerns to Matthew Stafford OX-CAM Project Director at Highways England (HE) and with your permission, keep a record of your correspondence for future reference.

The current timetable published by HE indicates that a decision of the preferred Corridor (not route within it) will be taken over summer. I attach a link to the latest presentation made by HE to the Oxfordshire Growth Board in which the corridor, routes, timetable and key dates are flagged.

<http://mycouncil.oxford.gov.uk/documents/b15453/Oxford%20to%20Cambridge%20Expressway%20presentation%20Tuesday%2027-Mar-2018%2016.00%20Oxfordshire%20Growth%20Board.pdf?T=9>

Thank you once again for taking the time to write in with your concerns and I hope the information provided is helpful in setting out the timetable and consultation process associated with the Ox-Cam Expressway.

Nigel Tipple - Chief Executive

Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (OxLEP) Ltd

And a response was also received from John Howell, our MP:

To Fencott and Murcott Parish Council

Thank you for your recent email concerning the proposed Oxford to Milton Keynes to Cambridge Corridor and the Expressway. I appreciate the concerns that the proposals are raising and indeed share many of them. Although I am not a decision-maker in the process of taking the project forward, let me set out what I have done.

I have had discussion with the Secretary of State for Transport to ensure that he is aware of the local issues and have also put these concerns in writing to him. I am of the firm opinion that the route should utilise existing roads wherever possible rather than carve a new path through Green Belt land or damage other areas of environmental interest.

I have also raised concerns about the transparency of the work on this project. A project of this magnitude should have ready access to as much information as possible in the public domain. I accept that some competitive data needs to remain private but feel that the lack of information is adding to speculation. I have asked the Secretary of State to intervene so that as much information as possible can be immediately put into the public domain with explanation as to what is being held back and why. I have also asked him to ensure that there is full public consultation before a route is decided and not just on the preferred option.

Iain Stewart MP has been appointed Government Champion for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc (as it is known at present) and I am in regular contact with him to try to make sure that we keep abreast of developments. I have arranged for him to visit the constituency shortly to meet with Parish Councils.

I am pleased to see that you have included the Leader of the County Council, Ian Hudspeth and Nigel Tipple, Chief Executive of the Oxfordshire Local Economic Partnership in your circulation. Although both of them have written to me to say they are not supporting a southern route, both organisations have influence on this through their work as part of the Oxfordshire Growth Board and it would be wrong for them to hide behind Highways England. It is important that they are aware of the views of our local communities and can express them.

*With thanks again for sharing your concerns on this project with me
John*

John Howell OBE MP FSA
Member of Parliament for the Henley Constituency

Other local parish councils have made inputs to the parties concerned and Ambrosden Parish Council has engaged County Councillor for Otmoor Dan Sames who made the following input to Highways England:

I'm responding to your consultation on the proposed Oxford to Cambridge Express Way. I represent the Otmoor Division on Oxfordshire County Council.

Looking at your consultation document there are 3 potential corridors. I also note that included within your documentation are images showing the constraints, environmental mapping and environmental sites. Your stated assessment suggests that you will be looking at congestion reduction and shorter journey times as well as economic growth aspirations.

Looking at each option in turn alongside the evidence that you provide in your slides as well as some local knowledge I will put forward my preferred and least preferred options.

Corridor A – This seems to be the most obvious of the three corridors. Not only does the corridor avoid use of the busy A34 junction with the M40, therefore, reducing the likelihood of increased congestion but looking at the images within your presentation it has the least impact on environmentally sensitive sites, will result in shorter journey times and connects to an area with significant economic growth aspirations within Aylesbury Vale.

Corridor B – This has two routes to it, one round the south of Oxford and one round to the north of Oxford. A significant section of the southern corridor contains the environmentally sensitive area of Otmoor. Otmoor is a wetlands nature reserve containing Special Areas of Conservation, Sites of Special Scientific interest and impacting on many rare and protected species. Indeed, Otmoor was deemed to be so special that the route of the M40 was diverted around it and therefore it makes no sense that it should be any different now. In terms of safety the area is very susceptible to mist and fog which has the potential to make it extremely hazardous should such weather conditions occur. Tragically we are all too aware of accidents that have occurred on other stretches of road affected by mist.

The northern corridor also has significant environmental constraints and impacts as it winds a path around Oxford Meadows and through the River Ray Conservation Target area. The environmental impacts alone should preclude this option but added to this is the potential to add to the already congested A34/ M40 junction as well as impacting on the land around Bicester. Bicester and Cherwell have already had significant growth and any growth that is likely to come with the Expressway will have a serious impact on local infrastructure not only for Bicester but the surrounding villages within the Otmoor Division.

Any route within corridor B is therefore going to have a significant threat to nature and the environment and does not represent sustainable development.

Corridor C - This still has options to run through environmentally sensitive areas but assuming that these are avoided in line with the reasons for dismissing corridor B then it would be a viable alternative to corridor A.

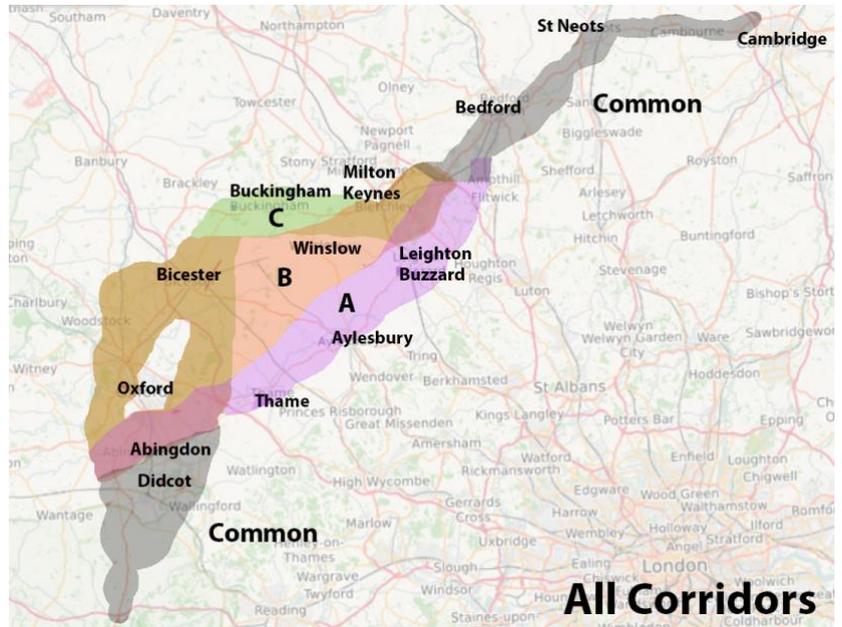
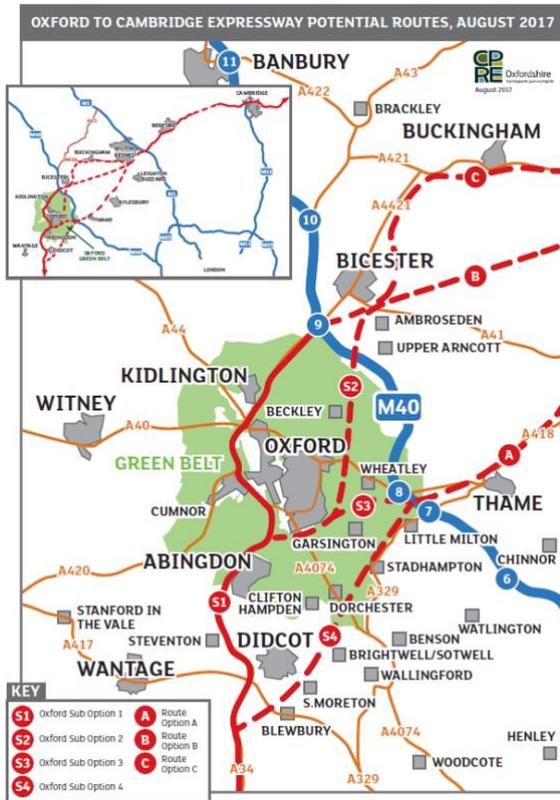
In selecting your preferred route please do take into consideration the detailed submissions from the Parish Council's surrounding Otmoor and from Cherwell District Council as well as from organisations such as the RSPB and Oxfordshire, Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire Wildlife Trusts that contain detailed analysis of the environmental impacts.

The most logical, safe and cost effective route with the least environmental impact is route A and I hope you will give this detailed consideration.

Cllr. Dan Sames - County Councillor for Otmoor

Oxford to Cambridge Expressway

Maps showing routing of potential corridors:
(Routes B or C could affect Fencott and Murcott)



Useful documents:

Highways England presentation:

<http://mycouncil.oxford.gov.uk/documents/b15453/Oxford%20to%20Cambridge%20Expressway%20presentation%20Tuesday%2027-Mar-2018%2016.00%20Oxfordshire%20Growth%20Board.pdf?T=9>

EAG Facebook page:

https://www.facebook.com/pg/expresswayactiongroup/community/?ref=page_internal

National Infrastructure Commission Reports:

<https://www.nic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Cambridge-Milton-Keynes-Oxford-interim-report.pdf>

<https://www.nic.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/NIC-FinalReport-February-2018-Rev-A-optimised.pdf>