

Policy & Programmes

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Dear Transport for South East,

Thank you for inviting responses on the Transport for South East (TfSE) new Strategic Investment Plan, comprising a Draft Strategic Investment Plan for the South East document and a range of Evidence Base studies which are available on the TfSE website for consultation between 20 June – 12 September 2022. Please find below a response from South Oxfordshire District Council.

Part of the TfSE area comprises West Berkshire, Reading and Wokingham which is defined in the consultation documents as the “Wessex Thames” area. The Wessex Thames area borders South Oxfordshire district along its southern boundary.

A key strategic transport connection between South Oxfordshire and the Wessex Thames area is the Great Western Mainline Railway which extends between Reading Station and Didcot Parkway Station. While a strategic highway connection falls close to South Oxfordshire’s boundary via the A34.

A range of further ‘A’ roads connect the two areas, including A417/A329 between Blewbury and Streatley, A4074/A4155 between Cane End and Reading, and A4130 and A321 connect Henley-on-Thames with Remenham Hill and Wargrave, respectively.

Sustainability and reducing carbon emissions are at the forefront of our district’s agenda for addressing the climate emergency. As such, road construction to increase capacity and/or divert car travel options through our district will not be supported by our Council.

Draft Strategic Investment Plan for the South East Document

The draft Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) includes a range of rail, mass transit, active travel, and highways interventions to “*decarbonise the transport system, level-up left-behind communities and facilitate sustainable economic growth in the South East*” over the next 30 years.

An intervention proposed for the Wessex Thames area which is likely to have direct impact for South Oxfordshire district is as follows:

- R6 – New Thames Crossing East of Reading

Further interventions that may have direct or indirect impacts for us are as follows:

- R12 – A34 Junction and Safety Enhancements
- O12 – Cross Country Service Enhancements
- P9 – Reading Mass Transit
- Q1 – Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey Inter-urban Cycleways

Our council is supportive of proposals which are in keeping with our vision and policies for sustainable travel. Therefore, subject to the details of the interventions, we are supportive of O12, P9 and Q1 and any other interventions which promote active travel and support the use of public transport.

However the council is concerned about the proposed highway scheme highlighted in intervention R6, as well as R12.

In the event that the proposed Reading Bridge in intervention R6 comes forward as a motorised vehicle scheme, it would encourage car travel through country lanes within the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) in South Oxfordshire. In AONBs it is important to protect tranquillity, as part of fulfilling statutory duties on public bodies to have regard to conserving and enhancing them (section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000).

As a car bridge, the intervention would increase the capacity for cars to travel north from Reading into rural lanes that are unsuited to accommodate overflow traffic, and inappropriate for increased highway capacity because of their status in the AONB (see [Environmental Guidelines for the Management of Highways in the Chilterns](#)). The road network north of Reading is not well connected to the strategic highway network and there is a clear risk that providing additional road capacity in the location proposed would encourage vehicle trips that cut through the Chilterns AONB to access the M40 to the north-east and A34 to the north-west. This rural area is unsuitable for large increases in car traffic, and is located outside Transport for the South East’s boundary and jurisdiction. We question why such a proposal is within the scope of the TSE Strategic Investment Plan.

We do not believe that an assessment has been undertaken to adequately consider the environmental impact of this intervention or how this intervention has the potential to significantly increase carbon emissions. We consider an assessment is required that considers modal shift promotion, as well as embodied, operational and future user generated carbon.

Furthermore, it has not been demonstrated in practical terms that the proposed bridge and its associated links into the existing highway network within South Oxfordshire and beyond is fully deliverable.

The associated impact of additional traffic demand on junctions for the A34 and M40 will need to be considered in detail, as these junctions do not have capacity to receive large increases in car traffic.

Considering intervention R12, we are supportive of measures to improve safety and operational matters associated with the A34 strategic highway. However the degree of support is subject to the scope of works proposed. Our council would not be supportive of a scheme which seeks to increase general vehicle capacity on the A34. Any proposals should also consider provision of freight parking and servicing, as well as car and freight electric vehicle charging.

Evidence Base Documents

Delivery Plan - Version 6 June 2022

The Delivery Plan sets out eight different “packages” of interventions for the Wessex Thames area contained within overarching themes of rail, mass transit, active travel and highways.

Package O: Wessex Thames Rail considers the rail type proposed interventions. The modelling results for this theme state a reduction of 5,000 car journeys during weekdays as a result of the rail interventions modelled (page 105). However the Package R: West Thames Highways which considers road interventions state an increase of 5,000 car journeys per weekday (page 108). Thus the highway interventions negate any benefits to highway demand associated with rail improvements. Therefore, it would appear sensible to progress the rail interventions and not the highways interventions.

Page 108 provides some clarity on the intention of the highway proposals set out in R6 and R12. Supporting text for R12 states that proposals for the A34 include “*climber lanes for HGVs and other slower vehicles, where appropriate*”. However details of climber lane lengths and capacity changes will need to be provided to understand if any increase in capacity will result in bottle-necking in other parts of the network.

Supporting text for R6 states that the new Thames crossing would “*support the sustainable regeneration of areas and local placemaking*” and that it is “*designed to unlock opportunities to reallocate road space to active travel and public transport*”. However it is not clear how a new crossing north of Reading would address this.

We note that there is no mention of the new Thames crossing in the Evidence Base or Options Assessment Report documents, the latter of which reviews interventions using the Multi Criteria Analysis Framework (MCAF) to qualitatively assess their suitability. Our Council would like to request that all initiatives be reviewed appropriately, including assessment via the MCAF.

We note that the new Thames River Crossing is tabulated under “existing and committed programmes”. However, as identified within this consultation response, there is valid reasoning to review and remove this highway solution from the package of initiatives to be brought forward in this revised Strategic Investment Plan. While the specific A34 interventions will require further review once more detail is provided.

Additionally, “Figure 12: Wessex Thames SPOC – Corridors, Major Economic Hubs, and International Gateways” map on page 21 illustrates a range of major economic hubs and associated corridors which connect them. This correctly identifies the A34 corridor which extends through West Berkshire and into Vale of White Horse district and beyond. However there is an additional corridor illustrated which extends north-west of Reading which looks to follow A329/A417 via Blewbury and Streatley.

We strongly disagree with this route being considered as a strategic route for access to the A34 from Reading, particularly as the M4 already provides suitable strategic highway access to the A34 via Junction 13. Blewbury and the rural parishes towards Streatley fall within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In the event that this route represents rail travel on the Great Western line, this should be clearly illustrated to prevent misinterpretation.

South West Radial Area Study Options Assessment Report - Version 1.0 January 2021

As set out on page 17 electrified rail freight should be the key priority to support freight movements between the Solent and Midlands, as opposed to road freight. The Council agrees with this statement, with greater operation of rail freight there will also be less demand and therefore need for climber lanes on the A34 for example.

Summary of Integrated Impact Assessments – Steer June 2022

The summary document highlights a number of key issues relating to the R6 and R12 interventions, which further support their removal from the packages, as quoted below:

“Interventions such as new highways or highway improvements, for example [...] A34 resilience [...] could increase uptake of vehicular traffic which could lead to negative cumulative effects.”

“The 3rd Thames Crossing at Reading has the potential to cause significant negative impacts to the aquatic ecology of the River Thames and surrounding lakes throughout the construction and operation phases”

“The construction of road schemes such as [...] 3rd Thames Crossing at Reading [...] A34 Online enhancements [...] could increase uptake of vehicular traffic which could lead to negative cumulative effects. These options are likely to have high levels of embodied carbon associated with both construction and operation.”

Highways Thematic Plan – Version 3 June 2022

As set out in the introduction of this document *“thinking around highways investment needs to reflect”* *“the fact that increased highway usage can exacerbate global warming”* and *“their development has also been shown to induce demand if they are expanded in isolation”*. This further supports the removal or reframing of highway interventions.

This document also highlights a range of strategies that can be used to address road-based supply and demand such as *“road space regulation/reallocation, clean air zones, congestion charging, parking charges, workplace car park levies, spatial planning (particularly car parking provision), and national road user charging”*.

When considering future highway networks, this report considers the role of the transport network that helps to deliver a ‘place’ function or a ‘link’ function. The proposed Thames crossing fulfils neither the ‘place’ function as it is located away from the urban centre nor a ‘link’ function as it does not provide access to a suitable ‘movement corridor’ or ‘expressway’.

South Oxfordshire Motion

When Reading Borough Council included a new Thames Crossing in their Local Plan (adopted November 2019), they recognised that the new bridge would have an impact on the Oxfordshire road network, but have yet to develop or estimate costs for suitable mitigation measures. The following motion was passed by South Oxfordshire District Council:

Motion moved by Councillor David Bartholomew, seconded by Councillor Anna Badcock on 10 October 2019:

“Reading Borough Council is proposing to build a vast new bridge over the Thames at Caversham to alleviate Reading’s traffic problems. It is included in their Draft Local Plan as a top transport priority. The bridge would take off at the Thames Valley business park near Reading and land near the Playhatch roundabout in Oxfordshire. The only onwards option for traffic would be through the congested streets of Henley or along the narrow B481 country road through Oxfordshire villages.

To date, Reading and other Berkshire councils that are supporting the scheme have focused almost entirely on the costs of building the bridge and the benefits it will bring to Reading. While they recognise that the bridge would have a substantial impact on the Oxfordshire road network, the Berkshire councils blithely state these will be dealt with by unspecified and uncosted ‘mitigation measures’.

This council calls on the Leader to write to the leaders of Reading Borough Council, Wokingham Borough Council and Bracknell Forest Council, together with MPs John Howell, John Redwood, Matt Rodda and Theresa May, stating that:

a) In the context of the Climate Emergency a car-based solution to a car-based problem that would pour thousands of cars and HGVs into Oxfordshire is totally inappropriate and should a new bridge be built it should be restricted to public transport, cyclists and pedestrians;

b) Notwithstanding the above, if a car-based solution is pursued, the proposed bridge and necessary mitigation measures (i.e. improvements to the Oxfordshire road network) are not considered as two separate projects, but as one single project in order that the benefits, disadvantages and costs of the complete scheme can be holistically assessed”.

Please keep us informed of any further consultation documents and please do not hesitate to contact us if you wish to discuss any matters relevant to our Council.

Yours faithfully,

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Senior Transport Planner
South Oxfordshire District Council