

Railfuture response to Cambridge – Milton Keynes – Oxford: 'growth corridor' call for evidence

On 16 March 2016, the Chancellor asked the National Infrastructure Commission to make recommendations to government to maximize the potential of the Cambridge – Milton Keynes – Oxford corridor. The commission launched a 12 week call for evidence closing on 5 August 2016 asking interested parties to submit evidence, ideas and solutions.

www.gov.uk/government/consultations/cambridge-milton-keynes-oxford-growth-corridor-call-for-evidence

Railfuture responses to the questions the commission is particularly keen to focus on in this initial phase of work are:

Question 1

Many places across the Cambridge – Milton Keynes – Oxford corridor have very successful local economies and are perceived as highly desirable places to live.

What have been the key drivers of that success?

- a) Their success has been built on proximity to London. All are within an hour's commute to the capital which provides finance, access to markets, education and skills as well as its cultural offering
- b) All are surrounded by countryside. Although this makes for an attractive environment in its own right it has also given these towns room to expand and develop cultural and economic catchments.
- c) They have, particularly in the case of Oxford and Cambridge, world renowned academic institutions which attract a highly skilled graduate workforce as well as offering facilities for scientific research
- d) In combination these attributes have created a science led economy with a cluster of cutting edge businesses.

What is holding back further growth and greater productivity?

- a) Growth has come at a price. Congestion is now seen as a real issue by potential investors. Larger conurbations have a legacy of transport infrastructure inherited from the 19th century. The towns in this corridor have grown in size but their transport systems have failed to develop at the same rate, often through lack of available capital. Much of this growth has come in the last 40 years after much of the rail infrastructure linking these towns had been allowed to decline and, eventually close.

- b) Access to affordable housing. Although there has been much housing development along this corridor, it has failed to keep pace with demand. House prices, particularly in Oxford and Cambridge are now on a par with prices in London. To provide a mix of housing for both the skilled and semi-skilled workforce and their families that the economy needs, then their needs to be greater investments in housing as well as the transport infrastructure to get people from their homes to places of work, education, entertainment, healthcare and shopping

- c) Availability of reasonably priced business premises for supporting industries.

In particular, what planned or new infrastructure improvements would best support sustainable growth and promote innovation over the long-term?

Undoubtedly the most important and significant new infrastructure is the proposed **East-West Rail link** which will connect East Anglia with the Thames Valley and the West and will provide the principle spine through the Oxford to Cambridge corridor. Railfuture fully support this project and welcome its inclusion in the terms of reference to the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC). In particular we would like to emphasise the need for the NIC to work with the East West Rail Consortium and Network Rail and in no way to delay progress. Indeed, we see the involvement of the NIC as helping to accelerate the development of this line and to identify funding mechanisms to supplement the resources available within Network Rail's own capital programme.

Does the corridor require better connectivity to other major centres of growth?

The East-West Rail (EWR) project offers a unique opportunity to link this corridor to other important centres. To the west the railway links it to Swindon, Bristol and South Wales, to the south, Reading and Heathrow airport. To the east it links to Norwich and Ipswich with important science and telecommunication industries of their own. The EWR therefore brings growth opportunities throughout East Anglia and the South Midlands.

The rail link is also a vital artery for the growing **logistics business**. This year has seen the introduction of the 32nd and 33rd daily freight service from the **UKs largest container port at Felixstowe**. Currently the only lines available for this developing traffic are the North London Line (NLL) and the Felixstowe to Nuneaton (F2N) corridor via Ely. Both are congested pinch points on the UK rail network and there is a growing need to develop additional routes from the Haven Ports to the distribution centres in the midlands. In particular, the EWR permits access to distribution centres in Daventry and the Northampton area with the potential 'Rail Central' distribution centre near Blisworth requiring an east to north connection at Bletchley. Within the next 'control period' (2019-24) the daily flow of intermodal trains from Felixstowe is forecast to grow to 42 per day with demand expected to grow to 90 per day by 2043 (source: Network Rail Anglia Route Study).

Question 2

Does the Cambridge – Milton Keynes – Oxford area, including Northampton, form a recognizable economic corridor?

One might think that the concept of towns forming natural ‘economic clusters’ is less readily applied in the modern world with the development of communication technology. In the past, ‘clusters’ have developed around types of industry that developed from the presence of natural resources. From these, as importantly, developed a common set of interchangeable skills. It is noteworthy that these transferable skills often became more important than the original function of the cluster.

The towns in this corridor all share similar growth pressures brought about by the development of a variety of high tech industry that need to share the available pool of skills as well as their convenient location in relation to London described above.

Towns with common ‘community of interest’ are likely to develop relationships with one another along recognised transport corridors or through a shared interest in their improvement. Some towns can find themselves in more than one such ‘cluster’. As much of the road and rail network radiates from London, so the towns along these radial corridors form links that are linear in nature. Northampton and Milton Keynes are obviously linked by their proximity to one another and their shared road and rail links. Yet Northampton does not enjoy the same relationship with Bedford or Oxford. Once completed, the East-West Rail link will unlock a matrix of journey opportunities including to Stansted and Luton airports. It will uniquely provide a transport artery linking the main radial routes from London without having to travel into the capital: the Great Western, Chiltern, West Coast, Midland, East Coast, West Anglia and Great Eastern main lines, and the towns and cities that lie along them, will all be served by East-West Rail.

For this economic corridor to function cohesively requires a step-change in the transport connectivity enabling the exchange of skills and ideas among this group of towns and cities who share an appetite for growth.

So, yes there is a recognisable economic corridor but it does not function efficiently as such because of the lack of a high quality railway link. Getting the skills pool being utilised efficiently is of paramount importance.

If so:

What factors unite the area?

See answers to Questions 1 and 2 above.

Would greater emphasis on corridor-wide planning and decision making benefit local communities and local economies?

We believe it would. Local communities benefit from the certainty provided by commitment to new strategic infrastructure that will provide the focus for new development and will enable it. The creation of the ‘East-West Rail Consortium’ of local authorities is a perfect example of the ‘bottom up’ approach taken by towns and cities who recognised the benefits of coming together to lobby for infrastructure that would bring common benefit. Founded by Ipswich Borough and Milton Keynes councils in the 1990’s the consortium now boasts a membership of all county and most district councils along the route and has enjoyed the cross party support of MPs, local enterprise partnerships as well as Network Rail, the Department for Transport and the Treasury!

Would that same emphasis on coordinated planning and decision making provide wider benefits for the UK economy?

Yes. Other examples are emerging, such as the 'Northern Powerhouse' and the partnership approach through witnessed in the 'devolution' agenda. The particular case of the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge arc will, as described above, bring benefits to the adjacent regions of the UK by offering connectivity which is absent at present.

There is currently no east/west rail link between the North London line in the south and the Birmingham – Leicester line 95 miles to the north, and a line through the growth corridor would reduce this gap in the network and also link to major distribution centres around Daventry and Hams Hall .

Should adjacent towns and cities be incorporated into the corridor in terms of growth and infrastructure planning?

Yes. There are 3 main reasons for this:-

- a) As described above, this corridor needs to extend into East Anglia. To the east of Cambridge, the railway already exists towards Norwich and Ipswich yet services along these routes need to be improved in both frequency and journey time. These improvements will naturally accrue if investment in the East-West rail corridor is integrated into the broader network at each end.
- b) As the main cities along this corridor continue to grow, so they will continue to generate their own commuting catchments. Towards the east of the corridor, Cambridge is generating significant travel to work patterns that are unevenly catered for by road and rail. To the north, Ely enjoys a frequent service into Cambridge and rail attracts a large proportion of these journeys. Newmarket, although the same size and distance by both road and rail from Cambridge, attracts very few rail users as the rail service is both infrequent and poorly timed. Other important settlements such as Wisbech, Haverhill and Cambourne are not currently rail served. This imbalance creates greater pressure on the local road network resulting in congestion and poor air quality in the city of Cambridge. Further east Bury St Edmunds and Ipswich could be brought within an hour's reach with the introduction of a semi-fast service.
- c) The greater the scope of investment, the more useful and politically popular the investment becomes. Investment in a particular region can be demonstrated to benefit adjacent regions and thus generate additional jobs, wealth and tax revenues.

Question 3

Describe your vision to maximise growth, maintain a high quality environment, and deliver more jobs and homes across the corridor over the next 30 years:

"The development of well-connected and affordable settlements offering maximum mobility and prosperity for their inhabitants with the minimum environmental impact"

What does that mean for growth and infrastructure investment in your area?

The key to maximising growth, while maintaining a high quality environment, is the development of a frequent and reliable low carbon transport service. The East West Rail link is at the top of the transport hierarchy required to satisfy the mobility requirements of this corridor.

- a) Speed
- b) Frequency
- c) Cleanliness (electrification)
- d) Convenient choice of destinations
- e) Good connectivity

What steps are currently being taken to realise that vision, and what more needs to be done?

The work being undertaken by the Department of Transport, Network Rail and the East-West Rail Consortium of Local Authorities is an important first step to realising this vision. What needs to be done is the final determination of the route between Bedford and Cambridge and the financial commitment from the treasury to bring forward the railway at the earliest opportunity.

What value could new cross-corridor intercity road and rail links bring?

The value of the East-West rail link will be a direct investment in the economic productivity of the region. The saving in journey time, the relief of congestion and the ability through the provision of Wi-Fi on trains permits people to work while on the move. The railway provides a missing link in the nations transport network and permits travel not only between the towns and cities along the route but completes a matrix of journey opportunities with the major main lines radiating from London to the east, west and north of Britain. From anywhere along the route, every major city in the UK will be accessible with a single change of train.

Good road links are also required. Although additional road capacity between these towns and cities can be provided it is far more difficult to achieve this and associated parking within existing centres. Unless radical and potentially unpopular solutions are adopted in city centres the benefits of new roads will be compromised (e.g. road tolls, congestion charging or loss of green space).

How do these compare to other transport initiatives e.g. intra-city links, or wider infrastructure, priorities?

East-West Rail is key but needs complementary investment in quality local schemes such as light rail in Cambridge.

Question 4

Are there lessons to be learnt from previous initiatives to maximise the potential of the corridor?

We recall the multi modal studies of the 1990's which were seen as justifying current road-based projects which lacked public support. Cambourne, west of Cambridge, is an example of a poorly planned major settlement which lacks longer distance public transport provision.

Question 5

Are you aware of any examples of UK or international good practice, for example in respect of new technology, local frameworks or the built environment, that are relevant to this review?

A) In the UK the route between Cambridge and London Kings Cross via Royston and Stevenage has been developed since electrification in the 1990s into a high quality link. A timetable has been developed that consisted of a series of overlapping services; fast, semi fast and stopping.

This has allowed each segment of the market to grow. The fast non-stop half hourly service from Cambridge to London has been fundamental in allowing the immensely important high tech industries in and around Cambridge to flourish.

The train service has enabled the development of housing along its route including to the north at Waterbeach, Ely, Littleport, Downham Market, Watlington and Kings Lynn. Service development is in hand to cope with growth. It is noticeable that other rail routes, say out to March and Thetford, have not seen growth owing to poor service levels, while Wisbech, without a rail link, has failed to realise its potential.

The sector needs to recruit its highly skilled workforce from a wide area but above all from the London area. There are large numbers of youthful workers who are prepared to travel from London each day as they want to live there as they appreciate the London lifestyle and excitement. The locally recruited workforce comes largely from the universities but the fast link to London is much valued for leisure and access to venture capital. The excellent train service has enabled the hi-tech industries to recruit and retain staff.

Along the route the various parts of the timetable provide half hourly connections to and from Cambridge to other high tech centres at Melbourn via Meldreth, Stevenage and Hatfield. London has been mentioned for finance and networking but it has its own fast developing technology cluster around Old Street whose station is directly linked to Cambridge via Finsbury Park. It is no accident of planning that huge and soon to open Francis Crick Institute at King Cross / St Pancras is built at the end of the frequent 45 minute train journey from Cambridge.

The development goes on along this route. Cambridge station now handles a footfall of 11 million a year with growth of 6% year on year. The City station is the centre of massive business /office block building project with Microsoft moving to a new block next to the station so important is the railway to them. Cambridge North is being developed two miles to the north of central Cambridge and will serve the ever expanding north Cambridge science parks. The rapidly bio medical park just to the south of Cambridge is to get its own station within two years.

The railway to Cambridge from London Liverpool Street is fast developing its own science based hubs around for example Whittlesford/Great Chesterford, Harlow. So rapid is the growth of these industries that Cambridge creates £1 in every £100 produced in the UK. The science and bio tech industries are international in outlook. There are many daily trips both on short haul flights as well as to the USA, South Asia and the Far East. Links to airports are essential. Already reasonable links are available to Stansted and when Thameslink comes to fruition in 2018 excellent links will be available to Gatwick and Heathrow via Farringdon and Crossrail. East/West rail must provide through links via Bedford from Cambridge and the east to Luton Airport.

B) Excellent practice can be studied in the Netherlands at the Sloterdijk development to the west of Amsterdam. A state of the art transport hub has been developed to be the catalyst of hi tech industry in and around Amsterdam. High Speed, intercity, international, local trains, metro, trams, buses all meet to interchange. All around new research and business parks are developing.

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