

Didcot and Surrounding Area Infrastructure Improvements Consultation

Consultation response, by Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably (POETS)

April 2020

POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably) is a small group of senior planning, environment and transport professionals and academics focussed primarily on planning and transport in oxfordshire. For more information go to (www.poetsplanningoxon.uk).

General Comments

1. When new development takes place, movement of people and goods has to be carefully considered. In recent times in Oxfordshire however, there has been a presumption that this movement can only be met by providing unfettered capacity for private motor vehicles.
2. This has long been an inefficient and environmentally destructive way of meeting this need, due to the failure to ensure a large proportion of trips can be provided by public transport, resulting in greater land take, marginalisation of walking and cycling, and higher levels of noise and air pollution. However, in 2020, with a climate emergency having been declared both nationally and locally this approach is no longer credible or acceptable in policy terms.
3. The Department for Transport's report "Decarbonising Transport – Setting the Challenge" - https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/878642/decarbonising-transport-setting-the-challenge.pdf - makes it clear that simply switching to electric propulsion, will not be enough to achieve the Net Zero objectives. In its foreword, Grant Schapps, the Transport Minister declares that "Public transport and active travel will be the natural first choice for our daily activities. We will use our cars less and be able to rely on a convenient, cost-effective and coherent public transport network".
4. The proposals put forward in this consultation, sadly show that Oxfordshire's councils have yet to adapt to the new reality. Despite Oxfordshire County Council having many sound transport policies in place, where in this package of measures is there anything to attract road users out of the cars and on to public transport? Where is the core rapid transit link from Didcot/Milton Park to the rest of the county and beyond that would reduce traffic on local roads and reduce traffic on the A34 and other strategic routes? How and where will the indicated cycle facilities connect into a county-wide network? Instead we have a dualling of the A4130 and other links which will simply feed more vehicles onto the A34 and other roads.
5. The Covid-19 pandemic will have long-term impacts on patterns of movement. It is inevitable that there will be considerably more home-working in the future which would translate into less traffic movements, particularly at peak times. There is therefore an opportunity for the county council now to try to lock in those benefits to ensure that traffic volumes and congestion do not return to their previous levels. Much of what is proposed in these measures is the antithesis of this, as it seeks to substantially expand capacity for the movement of private vehicles and thereby feed even greater levels of traffic onto the adjoining road network, notably the A34 and into Abingdon, Didcot and other towns in southern Oxfordshire.
6. While there is some generous provision for pedestrians and cyclists in terms of allocated space, what does this link in to at the end of the new tracks? In most cases it deposits pedestrians and cyclists at large over-engineered roundabouts and other junctions which will create hazards and/or substantial inconvenience for vulnerable road users.
7. Given the huge underfunding of infrastructure in the county as identified by OXIS and the Growth Board, it is indefensible that such a substantial capital sum should be allocated to a package of measures that will actually result in a significant increase in traffic (and indirectly congestion and pollution elsewhere in the county) rather than investing the major part in measures to get people out of cars and on to public transport, while encouraging more walking and cycling.

8. While some of these proposals have been in gestation for many years, it is not too late, particularly given the urgent need to decarbonise transport, for Oxfordshire County Council to go back to the drawing board and produce a package of measures that results in less traffic, less pollution, and less land loss and damage to the physical environmental and could genuinely be described as “Improvements”. The Climate Emergency and Net Zero targets and the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic demand nothing less.
9. The reduction in traffic as a result of the current pandemic offers a unique opportunity for the county council to pause and review the plans for Didcot (and elsewhere) to increase capacity for cars, and instead redirect this capital investment towards walking, cycling and public transport.

Specific Comments

A4130 Widening

10. Dualling this length of road would provide a huge and unnecessary increase in capacity for motor vehicles. This would encourage rapid traffic growth and deposit substantially more traffic on to the A34 (and the Milton Interchange) and in to Didcot. There needs to be a genuine attempt to encourage more people on this corridor to use public transport, rather than private vehicles.
11. The land take for the new road is astonishing, creating a corridor in excess of 30m wide. By instead retaining a single carriageway for motorised vehicles, a substantial area of land could be put to better use, even if it is just added to the open space available for local people to enjoy. The only rational justification for the widening proposed would be if it were needed to provide a priority corridor for an enhanced public transport network to protect it from delays, but this might simply be accommodated by local widening on the approach to junctions.

Didcot to Culham River Crossing

12. While this would provide some relief to local roads and the centre of Appleford, it would create a new traffic corridor with adverse impacts elsewhere. It would also result in a very large increase in traffic and emissions. Traffic levels on the A415 corridor would increase substantially with adverse impacts along its route. In particular, unless a new link to the A34 were built south of Abingdon, it would feed more traffic through the centre of Abingdon which is already blighted by congestion and poor air quality.
13. The new road and bridge would result in the loss of land and habitat and have a significant visual impact.
14. Large roundabouts are proposed at either end of the new link road. These would present a significant barrier to pedestrians and cyclists involving either hazardous circulation on the carriageway or delays and diversions to negotiate the off-carriageway facilities.

Clifton Hampden Bypass

15. While this would eliminate the congestion at the current signalised crossing, it would introduce traffic and emissions onto a new corridor to the north, so that overall there would arguably be environmental disbenefits.
16. Large roundabouts are proposed at either end of the new link road, which are not attractive to vulnerable road users. They are not ideal for encouraging cycling, particularly the junction at the west end of the new link.