POETS

Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably

HIF 1 Letter to all County Councillors
Cc City & District Leaders

2 September 2025

Dear Councillor

Climate change, continuing congestion and financial risk; the HIF 1 problem

I am writing on behalf of POETS. We are a voluntary think-tank of planning, environmental and transport professionals and academics, providing analysis, commentary and ideas on sustainable transport and planning for Oxfordshire.

We hope you have had a chance to look at our refreshed and expanded vision for Oxfordshire.

We congratulate the Council on being rated as the best performing Council on the Climate Emergency UK's Climate Action Scorecard.

We agree that many of the Council's policies in this area are excellent, not least the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan with its ambitious car traffic reduction targets.

However, **we believe that the Council is falling short on putting these policies into practice**. Nowhere is this seen more sharply than in the Council's HIF 1 road proposal, which would run from A34 near Didcot to A4074 south of Nuneham Courtenay.

Although we know that planning permission and the CPO for this road has been granted, we continue to be very concerned for several reasons. We believe:

- It is a fundamentally wrong approach – on the Council's own admission providing only 10 years' traffic relief, at the end of which the traffic problem will be much harder to address.
- There will be a huge cost - the latest figures show *cost estimates have nearly doubled* and experience shows it will be likely to swallow at least half a billion pounds.
- There are still major construction uncertainties - we understand that track possession from National Rail is not yet agreed and that therefore the timetable (think Botley Road!) and costs are not within the Council's control. The planned timescale is already long; it is quite possible that the full scheme could end up undeliverable and/or leaving a partially constructed 'white elephant'.
- There will be many years of costly traffic disruption inevitable with such major construction work. Therefore, traffic could worsen significantly before any (and then temporary only!) relief is achieved.

- Traffic problems for other communities (for instance Abingdon and Nuneham Courtenay) will be worsened.
- As there is not even external funding for all currently known costs, there remains a huge financial risk which will fall to the County Council. This would be matched by climate and reputational damage.
- By building HIF1, which lacks bus and cycle priority measures, the Council will surely not be able to show that it will achieve its net zero and traffic reduction targets.

There is a much better way. This would:

- Involve a climate and finance friendly approach focussed on public transport and healthy travel. **(In fact, complementary bus priority and active travel measures need in any event to be developed <u>now</u>, given the potential construction disruption).**
- Develop off-road cycle and walkways (including a light river crossing – the garden line).
- Cluster denser development in the most accessible locations and take advantage of future potential rail improvements, with bus and cycle hubs at rail stations. (This also frees up land for longer term development.)

This letter is not just about an expensive and potentially damaging local road purportedly to solve local traffic. Oxfordshire is in practice a City-region and the rigorous principles of the 'decide and provide' approach applied for many years to Oxford's traffic, now need to be considered for the remainder of Oxfordshire. Otherwise, policies for dealing with traffic congestion will be undermined and become unaffordable – and render Oxfordshire's planned contribution to carbon reduction impossible. Indeed, a Strategic Plan for the whole County is needed.

We would be very happy to work collaboratively with the Council's officers to develop and evaluate the alternative approach described, before the financial and reputational risk of going ahead with HIF1 becomes irreparable.

We will be approaching the relevant Cabinet Members to discuss how to progress this further.

Many thanks for reading this.

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