

Reading Transport Strategy 2036: Consultation Draft: Oxfordshire County Council Consultation Response, September 2020

1. Introduction and OCC approach to planning for cross boundary travel

a. Introduction

Oxfordshire County Council is pleased to submit a consultation response to the draft Reading Local Transport Plan - 'Reading Transport Strategy 2036.' Overall, we believe that many of the principles, objectives and policies set out in the draft Local Transport Plan, including those on supporting active and healthy travel and public transport improvements are sound and provide a good basis for continued partnership working on planning for cross-boundary travel between Reading and Oxfordshire.

However, we are opposed to the Plan in its present form, as we do not agree with the proposed schemes and measures it includes for cross boundary travel between Reading and Oxfordshire. We are particularly concerned about the approach proposed to developing large-scale '*multi-modal schemes*' to the north of Reading, in particular the proposed Thames Crossing, Reading Orbital Route and North of Reading Park & Ride sites. Specifically:

- We do not believe that development and delivery of these major schemes is consistent with the overall objectives and many of the policies of the Plan
- Their rationale is dated – yesterday's solution for tomorrow's world – which is especially relevant in the current COVID-19 pandemic situation where we have fast changing travel patterns, some of which will become permanent
- They would take many years, if not decades, to bring to fruition, so will become increasingly less relevant in a future which will be very different
- The schemes proposed will not be effective in managing cross-boundary travel movements or providing mitigation, and are likely to have significant negative impacts on South Oxfordshire
- They lack any clear evidence or justification, in terms of economic benefit, helping to meet the growth agenda or in terms of how they would provide a solution to transport problems

In respect of the Reading Thames Crossing, the Council has specifically agreed a motion setting out its concerns, which is included at Appendix 1.

We therefore cannot support the Plan and the approach it sets out, and ask that Reading BC reconsiders its policy approach on cross-boundary travel between Reading and Oxfordshire, moving from an approach based on proposed delivery of significant infrastructure schemes to focus instead on development of a more sustainable package of transport options which cover all modes and takes the management and prioritisation of existing infrastructure as a starting point. We would welcome the opportunity to work together where needed to help develop this revised approach.

b. Current and future demand for cross boundary travel

Oxfordshire County Council recognises that there is currently some cross-boundary demand for travel between Oxfordshire and Reading. The draft Reading Local Transport Plan indicates the outline geographical scope of the travel to work area for Reading on page 26, whilst other relevant evidence base documents give more detail. For example, the 'South Oxfordshire Sustainable Transport Study for New Developments' report included in the current South Oxfordshire Local Plan evidence base library gives an overview of commuter transport movements between South Oxfordshire and Reading from the 2011 census.¹ This shows that:

- Overall, 5% of journey to work movements originating in South Oxfordshire travelled to Reading (a total of 2,514 trips)
- Certain settlements have stronger journey to work movements to Reading than others, in particular Didcot, Cholsey, Goring and Woodcote, Sonning Common and Henley
- Didcot, Cholsey and Goring and Woodcote have a higher rail mode share for the longer commuter journeys, reflecting the rail access from these settlements to Reading (and beyond to London)

Looking to the future, the current focus for planned development growth in South Oxfordshire is away from the north of Reading, with major proposed development in South Oxfordshire's emerging local plan located in the Science Vale area around Didcot, and the area to the South of Oxford, close to major areas of employment such as Milton Park, Culham and Oxford Science Park. Planned development closer to Reading is more modest, focused on smaller scale development as part of Neighbourhood Plans such as Goring and Henley. This indicates that the proportion of residents traveling to work in Reading from South Oxfordshire is not likely to increase in the future, with greater demand for travel internal to Oxfordshire as new housing and employment comes forward.

Another factor that will be important to consider is post-Covid planning, and in particular how uptake in behaviours such as home working and active travel during the periods of restriction which have had benefits in reducing carbon emissions and congestion can be maintained for the longer-term. In June 2020, Oxfordshire County Council agreed a Covid recovery strategy, 'Restart-Recover-Renew' which includes longer-term priorities for post-Covid transport planning, including in particular promotion of sustainable modes of transport. We would like to understand Reading's post Covid planning in more detail, including how it may align with Oxfordshire planning. This will help us better understand the longer-term demand for cross-border travel and how this should be best managed, including through promotion of sustainable transport.

We believe that planning for cross-boundary travel with Reading should therefore be considered in the context of relatively modest cross-boundary travel demand, focused on access to/from key settlements in Oxfordshire, and in the context of post-Covid 19 planning.

¹ <http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/services-and-advice/planning-and-building/planning-policy/local-plan-2034/local-plan-2034-examination>

c. Planning for cross boundary travel and infrastructure in the current policy context

The current Oxfordshire infrastructure and transport policy focus reflects the need to plan for delivery of sustainable growth. This is set out in Oxfordshire Council's current Local Transport Plan 4, which includes the Connecting Oxford and Science Vale Transport Strategies which have a number of proposals that are currently in the process of being delivered following success in securing monies, mainly through the Housing Infrastructure and Growth Deal funding streams. These schemes will enable more sustainable travel within Oxfordshire, and support the delivery of new housing and employment as set out in district Local Plans.

Looking forward, we are now starting to develop a new Local Transport and Connectivity Plan 2050, which is likely to focus on how we can develop a future transport network in the context of climate action, and the need to support sustainable and clean growth. As part of this we recognise that there will continue to be demand for cross boundary travel between Oxfordshire and Reading (in both directions) that will need to be managed appropriately. We consider that transport measures developed should focus on ensuring that this travel can be undertaken in the most sustainable way possible, and would welcome further discussions with RBC on the planning and funding for these movements.

At present, we see the following opportunities for developing measures to help enable sustainable travel movements, which we consider should be progressed first, prior to consideration of the types of large-scale major 'multi-modal' schemes identified in Section 6 of the draft Reading Local Transport Plan:

- *Improvements to Active Travel, focusing on walking and cycling routes:*

This can build on the work undertaken in the Reading LCWIP to look at how proposed routes can link cross boundary, building on the current NCN 5 route to the north, but also including development of routes towards Henley, Sonning Common and Wallingford. There may also be opportunity for improvements to cross boundary public rights of way, including along the Thames Path, for example using the 'Greenways' concept being developed elsewhere in Oxfordshire.

- *Improvements to bus routes and potential development of transport hubs between Oxfordshire and Reading:*

Firstly, there is the opportunity to increase frequency of bus services between Oxfordshire and Reading, particularly along the A4074 corridor currently operated as the X39/ X40, and services towards Henley along the A4155 currently mostly operated by the 800/850 Reading to High Wycombe service. Options for funding would need to be considered, but there may be opportunity for funding streams arising out of the proposed Reading demand management measures to help 'pump-prime' improvements.

Secondly, there are opportunities to improve transport connectivity for all modes along the transport corridors routing between Oxfordshire and Reading, particularly the A4074 between Reading- Wallingford and Oxford. In particular, travel hubs at key bus stops along the route could be developed to include:

- Facilities to promote active travel, such as cycle parking, including for electric bikes.
- Car parking spaces, including charging points for low-emission vehicles

- Facilities such as improved waiting areas/ bus stops to promote interchange between demand responsive bus services operating from more rural areas and the higher-frequency bus services along the main corridors.

Larger travel hubs can be complemented by lower-scale interchange improvements at less well-used bus stops along the route.

- *Improvements to access to train services, including better transport interchange at stations with connections to Reading such as improved cycle parking.*

Planning for these types of sustainable transport improvements in partnership should form the basis of managing demand for cross-boundary travel for the future, fitting in with the principles and objectives of both the Reading and Oxfordshire Local Transport Plans.

2. Comments on Reading's LTP document

The following section sets out specific comments on the draft Local Transport Plan document on a chapter by chapter basis:

Executive summary:

Page 9 (and page 29):

We consider that the map on this page could be misleading as it shows significant housing growth in South Oxfordshire, but the majority of this is planned to be delivered some distance from Reading, particularly in the Science Vale area around Didcot and to the south of Oxford. Impacts and transport mitigation for this growth will therefore be focused within these areas, rather than close to Reading. If this map is still included in the final version of the plan, a further explanation should be given to give better context to what is shown and clarify that growth in South Oxfordshire is unlikely to significantly impact Reading.

Page 10:

We have the following comments regarding the types of schemes and initiatives proposed:

Demand management schemes- we would like further detail on the type and role of demand management schemes for Reading as part of the strategy, including their potential impacts on Oxfordshire, and whether and how any scheme could provide funding for delivery of sustainable transport measures.

Major multi-modal schemes- we have major concerns on viability and impacts of the proposed schemes to the north of Reading, particularly the proposed Thames Crossing and the associated North Reading Orbital Route.

Public Transport schemes-We are supportive of improvements to public transport in principle, but are not clear on the benefits and viability of the proposed Park and Ride and orbital bus routes to the north of Reading.

Active travel schemes- We are very supportive of improvements for active travel, and believe that the Reading LCWIP document is a good foundation for planning improvements to pedestrian and cycle routes. However, it does not identify locations for cross-boundary linkages with Oxfordshire which we believe is an omission of the work to date.

Network management and communication/ engagement schemes- Several of these schemes- e.g. electric vehicle charging and smart city schemes, and travel information appear valuable, but we would want to ensure that there is appropriate engagement on any schemes that may have impacts on Oxfordshire.

Page 11:

Implications of Covid-19: We recognise that the longer-term impact of the current situation on travel patterns is not yet known, but evidence to date would appear to indicate that there are likely to be opportunities arising to both reduce travel demand, for example, through greater home working, and promote and deliver active travel improvements. We would want to ensure that such trends are reviewed and recognised in prioritisation of Reading transport measures.

Section 2: Vision and Objectives:

Page 18:

Overall, we support the vision for transport in Reading, noting that it is given in the context of the overall Reading 2050 vision, including plans to deliver 'low carbon living.'

Page 19:

We believe that the 5 objectives as set out are a good basis for developing and delivering the policies and schemes as part of the Reading Local Transport Plan, including the focus on promotion of sustainable transport and improving the environment. However, we do not believe that several of the major proposed schemes, particularly the Thames Crossing and associated North Reading Orbital Route are compatible with these objectives.

Section 3: About Reading:

P.36 (and p62):

It is good to see that the opportunities for cross boundary cycling are recognised in this section and in the 'challenges and opportunities section' on page 62. However, this should also be reflected in further development of the Reading LCWIP, including opportunities to improve cross boundary cycle links with Oxfordshire.

Section 5: Policies:

Page 67:

Overall, we support Policy RTS1 on promoting and developing Sustainable Transport, including the principle of 1.4: ' develop sustainable transport schemes in partnership with neighbouring boroughs to support an increase in sustainable cross-boundary journeys'. However, we do not support all of the transport schemes which would have cross boundary impacts proposed for development and delivery within the 'Schemes and Initiatives' section.

Overall, we support the principles outlined in policies RTS2 to RTS 5.

Page 70:

We support Policy RTS7 on Public Transport, including the principle set out in 7.1 to ‘work with partners across Reading and the wider region to establish an accessible, affordable, reliable and sustainable, integrated public transport network.’ However, we note that the supporting text in para 5.24 references ‘strategic Park and Ride sites’ and we are not clear how these sites will contribute towards delivery of the policies included in this section.

Page 71:

We support Policy RTS8 on Bus and Community Transport, including the principle set out in 8.3 to ‘work with neighbouring authorities and other parties to enable the provision of community transport services.’

Page 75:

We support the principles set out in Policy RTS14 and RTS16 on Walking and Cycling and Rights of Way, but believe that they should also reference the opportunities to work with neighbouring authorities to improve routes across authority boundaries, including with Oxfordshire.

Section 6: Our Schemes and Initiatives

Page 89:

Paragraph 6.21 notes that, ‘further assessment work will be required to understand environmental and land constraints to inform the precise location of each scheme, and the scale of each facility.’ Notwithstanding that, we believe that development of these P&Rs is unlikely to be the right approach to strategy development, and we believe that the Borough Council should engage the County Council fully any feasibility assessments, including in relation to increased traffic within Oxfordshire.

Page 90:

Figure 33 references the potential for 3 Park & Ride schemes on the boundary of South Oxfordshire to be primarily served by the ‘Orbital Fast Track Public Transport Corridor’, which would link these to the Thames Valley Park and Winnersh Triangle business areas. We are concerned that experience from elsewhere shows that orbital bus routes, without the hook of a town or city centre, often struggle to reach commercial sustainability – particularly outside peak hours, and would therefore likely need long-term public funding support. In addition, to deliver this approach, a new Orbital Route road route, linked to the proposed new Thames Crossing is required which at present we believe is not financially viable, and would have significant environmental impacts on surrounding areas.

We are also not clear from this plan or supporting text about the viability and practicalities of delivering 3 major additional P&R sites to the north of Reading. There is little detail on the proposed exact locations or size of these sites, or of how bus services would be changed to serve these sites. The proposed ‘Quality Bus Corridors’ would also likely require significant bus priority to give journey time saving benefits over use of private cars for travel to the town centre, and it is not clear that this can be currently achieved.

We therefore have major concerns that the proposals to managing demand for transport to the north of Reading, including cross boundary movements as set out in Figure 3 is the right strategic approach, and do not believe it fits with the objectives and policies of the Local Transport Plan which rightly focus on development and delivery of sustainable transport improvements.

Page 91:

Overall we support development and delivery of Active Travel Schemes, including those identified in the LCWIP network. However, we consider that the LCWIP work should be further developed to identify opportunities to expand the network across the borough boundaries, including connecting into Oxfordshire.

Page 93:

We agree to the principle that Demand Management measures should be reviewed for Reading, and indeed would be happy to share experience of developing demand management measures as part of our Connecting Oxford proposals. However, we would wish to understand the impacts of any proposal on neighbouring authorities, including Oxfordshire, and the potential for any identified revenue streams to fund sustainable transport measures between Reading and Oxfordshire.

Page 95:

We support the principle of development and delivery of Transport Corridor Multi Modal Enhancements, but would wish to know more detail about the benefits, impacts and viability before considering becoming 'delivery partners' for any schemes that have cross-boundary implications.

Page 97, Page 98:

We do not currently consider that there is justification for development and delivery of the proposed North Reading Orbital Route or Third Thames Crossing. It is unclear from the information provided of their impact and outcomes, and do not agree that we are 'delivery partners' for these schemes at this time. We also do not consider the text in this section properly recognises the following key issues associated with these schemes:

- The high cost for delivery of these schemes, meaning that the economic viability for their delivery is more uncertain.
- That these schemes do not link well with helping to deliver the objectives and policies set out elsewhere in the draft plan
- That these schemes will have significant and currently unknown environmental impacts, including on Oxfordshire, that need further careful study. This is recognised in the associated Integrated Impact Assessment document, which notes in section E.2 of the technical appendices that, 'No detail is given to the exact infrastructure requirements, land take, routing or associated physical environmental effects of the proposed Thames Crossing (and orbital route). Therefore, specific effects cannot be identified in the assessment.'

P.111:

As set out above, we have concerns around a P&R strategy focused on delivery of large-scale sites on the northern edge of Reading impacting on South Oxfordshire, and do not agree that we are 'delivery partners' for these schemes. We have concerns regarding the impact of any new P&Rs on the surrounding environment, including the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and traffic levels. We would also be concerned if any new P&R services abstracted local journeys within Reading from bus routes such as the X39/X40 and 800, which would reduce the viability of these services, thereby restricting sustainable transport options for those travelling between Oxfordshire and Reading. As set out above, we believe that alternative ways of managing travel demand sustainably between Oxfordshire Reading should be reviewed before progressing with development of large-scale P&R sites.

P.141/142:

We do not agree that the proposed large transport schemes such as the North Reading Orbital Route and the Thames Crossing fit well with several of the Plan objectives, particularly 'Creating a Clean and Green Reading' and 'Connecting People and Places.' We would wish to see further detail on how this assessment has been undertaken and how scheme outcomes have been measured against these objectives.

Section 7: Funding and Implementation

We have reservations that the larger-scale transport schemes such as the North Reading Orbital Route and the Thames Crossing can be funded and delivered in the timescales outlined, particularly given the significant detailed work that is needed to progress these schemes, and that in our view they are not currently justified as part of the overall strategy.

Section 8: Partnerships and Stakeholders

As noted above, we do not currently see ourselves as 'delivery partners' for the large-scale transport schemes proposed to the north of Reading, and would want much further detail on implications for Oxfordshire and assessment of alternative sustainable transport options before engaging in any more detailed feasibility work on these schemes.

3. Comments on supporting documents

Reading LCWIP

Para 4.13 in the Reading LCWIP notes that, 'Whilst the LCWIP area is concentrated on links to and from Wokingham and West Berkshire, it should be noted that links to planned and proposed developments within South Oxfordshire and Hampshire have also been considered where appropriate.'

We are not clear where this has been done from review of the LCWIP Network Plans in Appendix C, and would like clarification from Reading of where cross-boundary matters with South Oxfordshire have been considered.

Annex 1: County council motion on the proposed Third Thames Crossing:

**Copy of Motion Agreed by Oxfordshire County Council on 10th September 2019
Motion by Councillor David Bartholomew**

"Reading Borough Council is proposing to build a vast new bridge to alleviate Reading's traffic problems. It is included in their Draft Local Plan as a top priority. The bridge would take off at the Thames Valley business park near Reading and land near Playhatch 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.

Reading and the other Berkshire councils supporting the scheme are focusing almost entirely on the costs of building the bridge and the benefits it will bring to Reading. They recognise that the bridge would have a substantial impact on the Oxfordshire road network, but blithely state this will be dealt with by unspecified and uncosted 'mitigation measures'.

This council calls on the Leader to write to council leaders at Reading, Wokingham and Bracknell, plus 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 bridge and necessary mitigation measures (i.e. improvements to the Oxfordshire road network) must not be considered as two separate projects, but as one project so that the benefits, disadvantages and costs of the scheme can be holistically assessed."