
The Oxford Cambridge Expressway – time to debate?

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THE Oxford Cambridge expressway proposal is a chameleon project, changing shades depending on the viewer. For some, a virtually motorway-standard road will reduce car journey times from Oxford to Cambridge. For others a new road through open countryside will unlock the potential for house-building on a massive scale. For others still, the expressway is the ‘missing link’ that connects the M1 to the A34/M4, offering a new route for freight traffic, and reducing the HGV loads on the presently over-crowded M25 and M1. For the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC), the expressway and associated houses provide a ‘once in a generational opportunity to transform housing and transport’ and to boost employment in the hi-tech industries along the Ox-Cam Arc, and thus contribute to the future prosperity of UK plc.

The reactions to the expressway proposals are as varied as are the views of it. In 2016 the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Planning and Resources) wrote to the National Infrastructure Commission that ‘The University would be disinclined to support a strategic expressway if it were to be delivered at the expense of investment in solving more urgent local transport priorities’*. Those urgent priorities included poor physical connections between the labour market and an increasingly geographically dispersed housing supply, chronic congestion on the highway and public transport networks and poor air quality in Oxford city where NOx and particulates from road transport exceeded safe levels. These factors were priorities because more than half of the University’s staff lived beyond the ring road. Instead of an expressway, the University favoured the East-West Rail (EWR) that will connect Oxford and Cambridge city centres more directly, avoiding the first/last mile problem of the daily commute. It added that ‘delivering both road and rail strategic connections appear unaffordable’.

Over the course of the year or so following the 2016 submission to the NIC, however, the University subtly but significantly changed its position on the expressway. It retained its over-riding enthusiasm for East-West Rail, and even imagined a string of parkway stations along it, associated with new developments from which University workers could walk or bicycle to their local station for an easy commute to the city centre each day.

In 2017 Highways England engaged in a consultation with a select group of Stakeholders over three alternative and quite broad corridors for the expressway, A, B and C, following an essentially Southern route, middle and Northern route respectively. Corridors B and C passed around Oxford City but excluded both the City itself and the RSPB reserve on Otmoor and its immediate environs.

Highways England asked two specific questions, for responses by April 2018:

1. *What is your preferred Corridor and why?*
2. *Are there any Corridors you do not support, and why?*

The University’s initial response to this consultation, in April 2018, essentially re-iterated its position of more than a year previously; lack of affordable housing, poor connections of the housing and labour supplies and congestion on the transport network. It confirmed that the rail corridor ‘presents a sound strategic solution’ and, in response to the direct questions about the expressway, replied that it had insufficient evidence to form a clear institutional preference for any option, suggesting, however, that, if built at all, the expressway should enhance the strategic value of the rail link, for example by including park&ride schemes, parkway stations and clear cycle routes ‘that do not encourage increase commuting by car’.

Less than three months later, and therefore three months after the deadline for Corridor option responses, the University wrote again to Highways England in a letter titled ‘Oxford-Cambridge Expressway: Summer 2018 Corridor Decision’. In it, the Vice-Chancellor announced: ‘The University is in principle in favour of strategic connections between Oxford and Cambridge, such as an expressway’. It went on to say that ‘On the basis of information provided in the consultation, the University would support the (expressway) corridor that best follows and connects with EWR, which implies the central corridor, option B’. The letter later formally re-iterated the earlier requests for expressway plans to include park & rides, parkway stations and traffic free cycle routes for the critical first/last mile commute, but there had in the interim been no formal commitment by Highways England to any of these essential components. Thus the University was supporting the idea of an expressway without any of the mechanisms to prevent it from increasing traffic congestion where it is already most pronounced.

It appears to the outsider that the University was wary not to miss the opportunity to benefit from this push for the Growth Corridor despite the fact that the plans would not directly address the University’s own key problems; in fact they would probably make them worse. The University has been a member of Highways England’s Strategic Employers Group since late 2017 and remains today one of a number of universities brought together under the Arc Leader’s Group that also includes local authorities, England’s Economic Heartland (EEH) and the four Local Enterprise Partnerships across the Arc from Oxford to Cambridge. A March 2019 document announcing the Arc leaders group, and arising from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), re-affirms the Govern-

ment's ambition for 'up to one million high-quality new homes (across the Arc) by 2050'. The University is therefore effectively signing up to this part of the plan as well.

One wonders how it is possible that statements made in the 2016 letter to the National Infrastructure Commission concluding that:

a) *'East-West Rail is clearly the preferred inter-city solution offering rapid, city door-to-door connections'*,

b) *'Expressway investment as the sole inter-city solution would... likely encourage more longer distance car-borne trips causing more gridlock... air quality problems... and lock the area into a carbon intense transport system'*,

should, by mid-2018, become endorsement by the University of both rail and road links between the two cities that, it had concluded in 2016, were 'unaffordable'.

The completion of East-West Rail by 2030 seems far more certain than even the start of the expressway by that date. The qualification of support for the expressway with a request for station parkway or park&ride schemes (for that first/last mile commute) implies that car drivers will come from across the Arc to out-of-town stations from which they will complete their journey by other forms of transport. If we have East-West Rail there will be no need for such out-of-town decanting points, and journeys can be completed much more quickly, entirely by rail.

The expressway plans are driven by Highways England that can think only in terms of car-based solutions to any commuting problem. The car lobby's response to being told that there will be a half-hourly train service between Oxford and Cambridge when EWR is completed was that business-people may want to leave on the quarter hour, and thus need an expressway for their journey. Even if completed, the expressway journey to Cambridge will be at least half an hour longer than the train journey, and it will not deliver travellers to the city centre (Highways England's journey times are from ring-road to ring-road, not city centre to city centre).

The expressway is a twentieth century solution to a twenty first century problem. Albert Einstein said "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them", but that is precisely what Highways England's South East Regional Traffic Model (SERTM) does. To calculate how many houses can be accommodated near each new expressway junction, the traffic model calculates (on the basis of information in a large database of past traffic flows along strategic routes) how many cars might arrive at each junction during peak travel times; the car numbers in the model are based on existing cars plus additional amounts for all presently planned growth to about the mid 2030s. The difference between the maximum junction capacity (determined by the road engineers who design junctions) and the modelled traffic flow is called the 'spare capacity'. This spare capacity of the new junction for extra cars is in turn used to calculate how many new houses around the junction would 'produce' those cars. In turn each house is assumed to be home to 1.27 workers or 2.33 people (both average national statistics). So the SERTM determines cars which in turn determine homes which in turn determine workers. The result

is an estimate of the numbers of additional houses and workers that the presence of the expressway could 'unlock' locally. Fairly obviously, an expressway junction in open countryside, where there are very few existing cars, houses or workers, has a great deal of 'spare capacity' for more. Such junctions have the potential to develop very large populations indeed. For example, an expressway junction 'East of Oakley' (a small village just over the Oxfordshire border in a very rural and beautiful part of Buckinghamshire) has spare capacity for the cars of 82,000 workers, implying a total population of 150,000 people – a brand new community about the size of Oxford City (154,000 souls in 2017) to be completed by 2050 (the date for most expressway targets). Who needs old Oxford City when you can have a brand new one, less than 15 kms away, within the next 30 years?

All along the Ox-Cam Arc the story is the same; the more open the countryside, the greater the potential to be unlocked for new cars, houses, people and jobs (yes, there's also a jobs model). Some of the NIC's aspirational growth target of one million new homes by 2050 are already in Local Plans, but the majority are not. Oxfordshire's share of the one million is about 300,000 new homes, approximately 100,000 in Local Plans and the remainder expressway-related. The total current housing stock of the county is 280,000. In other words, in the space of 30 years, the entire county will double in houses, cars, people, congestion, pollution and, yes, the difficulty of getting to work on over-crowded car-based infrastructure.

Both Oxford City Council and Oxfordshire County Council in recent meetings have acknowledged a climate emergency and voted for zero carbon targets within a decade or so. Consistent with that, the City Council also voted to oppose the expressway; the County Council did not do so but instead asked for more consultation before it could finally decide.

And indeed, whilst information is not in short supply (the Highways England Corridor Assessment Report, plus Annexes, that finally opted for Corridor B, comes in at over 1,000 pages), public consultation certainly is. The minutes of a meeting of Highways England with a small, select group of Stakeholders in March 2018 included the following:

"Engagement will continue until DCO application. Engagement with members of the public on corridors is challenged by the scale of the Project area. There are c.3.3 million people living in the arc. Consultation on corridors would require years of additional work at substantial cost to taxpayers. It would also leave a level of uncertainty across the region that was undesirable."

"The Project Team are therefore engaging with Stakeholder Reference groups who themselves represent various public interests (environment, road users etc)."

In other words we, the public, will not be consulted yet because there are far too many of us!

The public's interests in Highways England's closed meetings are represented *inter alia* by commercial companies, freight, port and bus companies, potential investors (including British/America Tobacco), various wildlife and environmental NGOs, several Universities (including Oxford) and District and County Councils along the expressway route. There has been virtually no

feed-back on any of the major decisions already taken for this vast project, and Highways England may well be in breach of national and international laws on Strategic Environmental Assessment and Habitats Regulations Assessment (both designed to protect habitats from excessive development). This amounts to a worrying democratic deficit in one of the largest infrastructure schemes proposed in this region for at least the last 50 years. And the University opportunistically joins in without itself consulting Congregation, or challenging any of the assumptions on which the proposal is based, or considering any of the environmental consequences. No estimates have yet been made of the carbon emissions that would arise from building the expressway, let alone of all the emissions from the additional traffic the expressway would encourage. A June 2019 document from POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainability) points out that ever since a 1994 Report by the UK advisory committee SACTRA, the evidence suggests that increasing road capacity often results in increases in traffic volumes.

With Oxford Colleges lining up to develop the Green Belt for Local Plan houses (e.g. Christ Church's 1100 home plan on land North of Bayswater Brook, within sight of one of only a few remaining rural view cones into

Oxford, and bordering a unique Site of Special Scientific Interest) and the corporate University supporting plans to double the County's houses, people and cars by 2050, future generations will ask their own two questions of the University:

1) *How did the University authorities arrive at the decision to support the expressway proposals?*

and

2) *Why didn't the rest of the University challenge this decision?*

For, as Francis Bacon wrote more than 400 years' ago: *'Silence is the virtue of fools'*

* Documents used to prepare this article were released as a result of a formal FOI request from the No Expressway Alliance (NEA), an umbrella group run by Oxford Friends of the Earth.

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The TEF: An Internal Consultation Or The Hunting of the E-Word

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WHEN the Minister asked how the Teaching Excellence Framework was going to work exactly, Sir Humphrey explained it with his customary thoroughness.

"The purpose of the Teaching Excellence Framework, Minister, is to compensate for the effects of the Research Excellence Framework. It will provide universities with incentives to channel resources into teaching instead of throwing everything they've got into trying to increase their share of whatever limited funding the government is able to allocate to research. That way we shall be able to tell the students that they are getting good value for the loans they take out, reassure taxpayers that we are reducing the proportion of the loan repayments that will eventually have to be covered by the exchequer, and claim that we are satisfying the needs of employers for work skills that are needed to sustain the national economy."

"Yes, I understand all that," said the Minister, "but how exactly will it measure excellence in teaching?"

"Well, we're not yet sure how that is going to be achieved, Minister. The pursuit of excellence is a difficult art, as you know. Our team is hard at work on the intricacies of the process as I speak, but there is always a risk that our Teaching Excellence Framework – or TEF, as we prefer to call it – will turn out to be more of a SOF."

"I thought that was already settled."

"You're thinking of the OfS, Minister – the Office for Students, which will ultimately carry responsibility for operating the TEF. No, the danger is that what can be measured is not the quality of the teaching as such,

but only the outcomes of the teaching for the students – their personal satisfaction with the teaching they have received, their satisfactory completion of the course in question, and the nature of the jobs they get afterwards. Hence the notion of a SOF, Minister – a Student Outcomes Framework."

"It doesn't quite have the same ring, though, does it?" the Minister observed. "'TEF' sounds as if it's making an impact, whereas 'SOF' is – well, it's more like the sound of being hit with a custard pie, eh, Humphrey?"

"Very droll, Minister. What the team is currently trying to establish is whether the relative effectiveness of teaching can be gauged at the level of the individual course. If we can arrive at something of that sort we shall be able to claim that we have a means of measuring the quality of the teaching offered."

"They'd better make it sound good, Humphrey. I've been telling parliament and the public at large that this scheme will provide a comprehensive guide to the value for money that university courses give, and if that turns out not to be the case, then my career prospects will disappear in a puff of smoke."

A week later, Sir Humphrey briefed the Minister on the results of the team's enquiries. "Well, Minister, any hopes we had of developing a unified tariff for courses based on the number of contact hours students receive were instantly dashed when we learned how many different purposes each contact hour might actually serve: you simply