Policy & Programmes
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Dear OxRAIL 2040 Team,

Thank you for inviting responses on the OxRAIL 2040: Plan for Rail consultation materials, comprising a Summary Report (including a separate glossary) and a Technical Evidence Base document.

The aim of the OxRAIL 2040 Plan is to set out Oxfordshire County Council's ambitions for the future of rail in Oxfordshire. The OxRAIL Plan supports the ambitions of the Local Transport and Connectivity Plan and describes a vision of rail being a central part of an integrated, accessible and sustainable transport system in Oxfordshire.

The key infrastructure improvements in the OxRAIL Plan are grouped into Phases, with associated delivery timescales, as follows:

- Phase 1 – 2025-2030
    - Oxford station improvements – New platform, new bridge, better walking and cycling access, greater train capacity, Oxford Railway Station master planning
    - East West Rail – Connecting Oxford to Milton Keynes (2026) and Bedford (2030)
    - Oxfordshire Railway Stations Action Plan – Auditing of every station (develop remote monitoring) and setting priorities for improvement inc. accessible and safer stations programmes
    - New Railway Stations - New railway stations at Oxford Cowley and Oxford Littlemore will open while early development and business case work will progress for Wantage & Grove, Ardley, and Begbroke
    - Mass Rapid Transit - Develop mass rapid transit options for Carterton-Witney-Oxford corridor
    - Cleaner trains – Develop business cases and trials of cleaner, modern trains inc. battery electric trains, and Air Quality Management Action Plans
    - Oxfordshire Metro Concept – Tap-on tap-off ticketing

- Phase 2 – 2031-2037
    - Concept Service Plan - Development of a concept service plan to improve connections across Oxfordshire
    - New Railway Stations - Opening of Wantage & Grove, Ardley, and Begbroke
    - North Cotswold Line Upgrades – Service frequency and infrastructure upgrades to be installed for the line
    - Feight Terminals - Expansion of the Theale freight terminal and introduction of a Strategic Rail Freight Interchange at Ardley
    - Renewable energy pilots
    - Electric Freight Spine – Electric train capabilities to be installed between Didcot Parkway and Bletchley
    - Four Tracking – Four track installed between Oxford and Radley
    - Station Access Standards – Countywide standards to be developed
    - Transport Interchange Improvements – All train stations to integrate with walking, cycling and bus
    - Oxfordshire Metro Concept
- Phase 3 – 2038 onwards
    - East West Rail – Connecting to Cambridge with frequent rail services operating between Oxford and Cambridge
    - Electric Freight Spine – Expansion of electrification between Oxford and Cambridge, Reading and Basingstoke, Oxford and Cambridge
    - Mass Rapid Transit – Improved rapid transit for Carterton-Witney-Oxford corridor
    - Western Rail link to Heathrow – Improving journeys between Oxfordshire and international airports
    - Didcot Grade Separation – Removing rail crossing movements east of Didcot Parkway (Great Western Mainline – Science Line)
    - Climate Resilience – Improve rail resilience to climate changes
    - Heritage Station Design – Promoting heritage at Oxfordshire train stations
    - Oxfordshire Community Rail Partnership – Extend Community Rail Partnership working to all railway stations in Oxfordshire
    - Oxfordshire Metro Concept

Vale of White Horse District Council supports the OxRAIL Plan. We particularly welcome the Oxfordshire Stations Action Plan to improve station integration and accessibility for all railway stations in Oxfordshire at the start of the plan period. We would like to highlight our desire to be involved and contribute to the Oxfordshire Stations Action Plans for those in our District.

Further work to improve active travel to and from our stations in Phase 2 through the "All stations integrated with bus, walking and cycling" set out on page 18 of the Summary Report is also welcomed, as effective and attractive transport interchange is key to unlocking journeys by non-car modes. We would like to see more detail on how the County Council intends to work with private operators to ensure a seamless, integrated bus and railway timetable.

We also strongly agree that hourly train services risk reinforcing car dependency, as set out on page 18 of the Summary Report, and we thus request that the aspiration for Wantage & Grove station be for 2 services per hour. This is particularly important as the station has been categorised as a Tier 2 Sub-regional connector station (page 61 of the TEB) alongside other stations such as Bicester Village and Oxford Parkway.

We would like to understand more about the "Accessible Stations Programme" and "Safer Stations Programme" (page 21 Summary Report). Not much detail is provided in the reports on either of these schemes.

The OxRAIL 2040 Plan proposals support our Vale of White Horse Council Plan through promotion of sustainable travel for “climate and nature recovery”, the proposed schemes help to promote “healthy, sustainable, and inclusive communities” and identify “infrastructure [that] people need”. Enabling sustainable travel through new and improved infrastructure supports our Nature and Climate Action Plan target, which is to be a carbon neutral district by 2045.

The OxRAIL Plan proposals also align with our existing and emerging Local Plan policies which seek to promote the use of sustainable travel, including Core Policy 33: Promoting Sustainable Transport and Accessibility and Core Policy 35: Promoting Public Transport, Cycling and Walking (Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2031 Part 1) and Policy IN2 – Sustainable transport and accessibility and Policy IN3 Transport Infrastructure and safeguarding (emerging South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse Joint Local Plan 2041).

While we support these potential improvements to rail and associated services in our district, we have the following comments regarding the content of the consultation. Below we have set out some suggested improvements and considerations.

The scheduling of some of the elements of the OxRAIL Plan appear to be unhelpful, particularly with regard to standard setting and appearance of railway stations. It is unclear why the ‘Station Access Standards’ would be developed in Phase 2, particularly when two new railway stations are planned to be delivered in Phase 1 and further three railway stations are to be built in Phase 2. Furthermore, ‘Heritage Station Design’ is scheduled for Phase 3, however it may be more sensible to set design standards from the beginning of the Plan to prevent unnecessary retrofitting for the new railway stations.

It is also unclear what the Grade Separation scheme for Didcot would entail. We are supportive of the scheme if it allows service capacity improvements, but wouldn't support any intrusive, large infrastructure projects in the middle of Didcot that would have a detrimental impact on urban design, landscape, or act as a physical or visual severance between the north and south of Didcot.

Summary Report comments

Figure 1 depicts population changes in Oxfordshire from 2025-2031, however the marker for Oxford Science Park should be in Oxford City, it is currently shown in a South Oxfordshire Mid layer Super Output Area (MSOA).

Figure 3 depicts a map of the growth sites in Oxfordshire, can these be checked as the markers to the west of Didcot look incorrect. Valley Park and North West Valley Park are located south of the railway line, while Didcot North East also looks like it has been incorrectly placed.

We would suggest, as passenger rail services are not currently available on the Cowley Branch Line, that this line not be shown on Figure 1 and Figure 3, or a more consistent approach be applied, with other commercial rail terminals / branch lines shown also e.g. the concrete plant line in Appleford (as identified in the TEB). These non-passenger lines could perhaps be colour coded differently. Other lines for consideration could include the heritage lines, which are further mentioned later in our comments.

Figure 4 (also Figure 9 of the TEB) provides housing and employment figures which are taken from OxRail June 2021. However, more up to date figures can be found in our Joint Local Plan (JLP), which is currently progressing through examination. The JLP states that employment supply for Vale of White Horse is 277.88ha (Policy JT1.1: Sources of Supply), while housing supply is 19,779 homes (Policy HOU2 2021-2041). Please note, that we will likely be publishing updates to our housing trajectories in the next couple of months, which may affect these figures slightly.

Figure 5 depicts existing and proposed railway stations with number of services per hour received. However, it is unclear if the number of services shown are existing or proposed. Perhaps for existing stations two colour differentiated figures could be provided - current and future.

The first paragraph on page 14 refers to the "rural areas" of some of the locations in Oxfordshire, stating that the new railway stations will link "fast-growing towns", however the Cowley Branch Line stations doesn't fit this description. It is apparent that the CBL addresses a different need and thus could be explored separately from the other 3 stations. Furthermore, "fast-growing towns and villages" would be a better fit, with Begbroke/Kidlington (Begbroke station), Grove (Wantage & Grove station), and Ardley (Ardley station) categorised as villages.

Page 14 and 18 of the Summary Report include text which refers to Cowley Branch Line unlocking east Oxford, however should this not read “south Oxford”?

The OxRAIL 2040 consultation materials comprise just the summary report and the Transport Evidence Base Document (plus a glossary), however the reports both infer that there is a subsequent document. The Summary Report states "… a wide range of other interventions are also set out in OxRAIL 2040…" (page 16) perhaps this could be re-worded to refer to the 'Technical evidence base'. While the Technical Evidence Base states: "Our OxRAIL 2040 Plan will outline what we believe needs to be delivered…" (page 23) but could be re-worded to "Our OxRAIL 2040 Plan outlines what we believe needs to be delivered…".

Although we acknowledge that travel is not constrained to county borders, it is difficult to control delivery times and promote transport schemes that are outside of the Oxfordshire boundary. Some of the content included in the Summary Report refers to locations outside of the plan area. These references work in the Transport Evidence Base, where more context is provided but some instances in the Summary Report appear to be promoting infrastructure changes that are out of OCC's control. One example is the Haddenham & Thame Parkway mobility hub referred to earlier, other examples include:

- Electrification of services for Reading–Basingstoke is not relevant to the Oxfordshire area.
- Western Rail Link to Heathrow (expected to cross the authority areas of Buckinghamshire, Slough, and the London Borough of Hillingdon).

Page 20 infers certainty that Oxfordshire will become part of the Thames Valley Mayoral Authority, which is not yet confirmed. Although this is a likely outcome, we suggest that the wording is revised to reflect this as a proposed arrangement.

We welcome references to four tracking between Oxford and Radley, noting that Appleford presents a constraint to four tracking further southward. However, continuous or discontinuous electrification between Didcot Parkway and Oxford has not been mentioned for passenger rail services (only for freight) in the Summary Report and we feel this should be added/highlighted for clarity.

Transport Evidence Base (TEB) Comments

Page 3 provides context for the evidence base. Please consider adding 'villages' to "Our landscape is punctuated by our villages, towns, and city…". The introduction also refers to settlements that are well served by railway stations, referring to the city and some market towns. However, the following sentence refers to Didcot but not it's excellent connectivity to Didcot Parkway station.

Figure 6 appears to show the heritage railway lines (Wallingford - Cholsey, Chinnor - Princes Risborough) but not the commercial rail terminals/branches. Please note that Figure 6 will require an update as the newest figures for the Business Register and Employment Survey are expected to be published on 23 October 2025.

Page 10 "Our Growing Population" suggests that the City and Districts are currently revising Local Plans for the recent Parliamentary pressure for growth, however three of the five districts are currently having their plans examined under the 2023 National Planning Policy Framework. We would suggest that the text is changed to state"…our City and District councils will be refreshing their Local Plans…".

We would suggest a revision to text on page 13 as follows "…this will relatively ~~grow~~ improve as the road vehicle fleet electrifies…".

Summary

We welcome the ambitions of the OxRAIL Plan for Oxfordshire particularly as they may help address the climate emergency we are facing. The schemes relevant to our District are welcomed, though greater service frequency for Wantage & Grove station would be beneficial.

Yours faithfully,

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Vale of White Horse District Council