

Policy & Programmes

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25 August 2022

Dear Transport for South East,

Thank you for inviting responses on the Transport for South East (TfSE) new Strategic Investment Plan, comprising a Draft Strategic Investment Plan for the South East document and a range of Evidence Base studies which are available on the TfSE website for consultation between 20 June – 12 September 2022.

Please find below a response to the consultation from Vale of White Horse District Council.

Part of the TfSE area comprises West Berkshire, Reading and Wokingham which is defined in the consultation documents as the “Wessex Thames” area. The Wessex Thames area borders Vale’s southern boundary.

The key strategic transport connection between the council and the Wessex Thames area is the A34, which is a strategic road managed by National Highways. A strategic public transport link falls close to our district boundary, the Great Western Mainline Railway which extends between Reading Station and Didcot Parkway Station.

The A338 also connects the Wessex Thames area to Vale to the west of the A34, between Wantage and Great Shefford.

Sustainability and reducing carbon emissions are at the forefront of our council’s agenda for addressing the climate emergency. As such, road construction to increase capacity and/or divert car travel options through our district will not be supported by our Council.

Draft Strategic Investment Plan for the South East Document

The draft Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) includes a range of rail, mass transit, active travel, and highways interventions to “*decarbonise the transport system, level-up left-behind communities and facilitate sustainable economic growth in the South East*” over the next 30 years.

Interventions proposed for the Wessex Thames area which may have direct or indirect impacts for the council are as follows:

- R6 – New Thames Crossing East of Reading
- R12 – A34 Junction and Safety Enhancements
- O12 – Cross Country Service Enhancements
- P9 – Reading Mass Transit
- Q1 – Berkshire, Hampshire and Surrey Inter-urban Cycleways

Our Council is supportive of proposals which are in keeping with our vision and policies for sustainable travel. Therefore, subject to the details of the interventions, we are supportive of O12, P9 and Q1 and any other interventions which promote active travel and support the use of public transport.

However, we are concerned about the proposed highway schemes highlighted in interventions R12, and indirectly, R6.

We are supportive of measures to improve safety and operational matters associated with the A34 strategic highway that are set to be included in intervention R12. However, the degree of support is subject to the scope of works proposed.

It is widely reported that increased highway capacity leads to artificially increased demand, with road users changing their route and or travel mode to utilise parts of the network that undergo works to generate additional capacity. As such, we are not supportive of a scheme which seeks to increase general vehicle capacity on the A34.

Alterations to flow on the strategic highway of the A34 to the south of the district could result in more or less congestion, with flow rate increase from the provision of crawler lanes. Therefore modelling of any proposed works will be required to understand the knock on impact on our district’s road network.

Any proposals for the A34 highway should also consider provision of freight parking and servicing, as well as car and freight electric vehicle charging.

In the event that the proposed Reading Bridge in intervention R6 comes forward as a motorised vehicle scheme, it would encourage car travel through country lanes of South Oxfordshire and may result in alterations to the flow of traffic onto the A34. Junctions providing access to the A34 from South Oxfordshire do not have sufficient capacity to receive large increases in car traffic.

It has therefore not been demonstrated in practical terms that the proposed bridge and its associated links into the highway network is fully deliverable.

Evidence Base Documents

Delivery Plan - Version 6 June 2022

The Delivery Plan sets out eight different “packages” of interventions for the Wessex Thames area contained within overarching themes of rail, mass transit, active travel and highways.

Package O: Wessex Thames Rail considers the rail type proposed interventions. The modelling results for this theme state a reduction of 5,000 car journeys during weekdays as a result of the rail interventions modelled (page 105). However the Package R: West Thames Highways which considers road interventions state an increase of 5,000 car journeys per weekday (page 108). Thus the highway interventions negate any benefits to highway demand associated with rail improvements. Therefore, it would appear sensible to progress the rail interventions and not the highways interventions.

Page 108 provides some clarity on the intention of the highway proposals set out in R6 and R12. Supporting text for R6 states that the new Thames crossing would “*support the sustainable regeneration of areas and local placemaking*” and that it is “*designed to unlock opportunities to reallocate road space to active travel and public transport*”. However it is not clear how a new crossing north of Reading would address this.

Supporting text for R12 states that proposals for the A34 include “*climber lanes for HGVs and other slower vehicles, where appropriate*”. However details of climber lane lengths and capacity changes will need to be provided to understand if any increase in capacity will result in bottle-necking in other parts of the network.

We note that there is no mention of the new Thames crossing in the Evidence Base or Options Assessment Report documents, the latter of which reviews interventions using the Multi Criteria Analysis Framework (MCAF) to qualitatively assess their suitability. Our Council would like to request that all initiatives be reviewed appropriately, including assessment via the MCAF.

We note that the new Thames River Crossing is tabulated under “existing and committed programmes”. However, as identified within this consultation response, there is valid reasoning to review and remove this highway solution from the package of initiatives to be brought forward in this revised Strategic Investment Plan. The specific A34 interventions will require further review once more detail is provided.

Additionally, “*Figure 12: Wessex Thames SPOC – Corridors, Major Economic Hubs, and International Gateways*” map on page 21 illustrates a range of major economic hubs and associated corridors which connect them. This correctly identifies the A34 corridor which extends through West Berkshire and into VoWH geographies and beyond. However there is an additional corridor illustrated which extends north-west of Reading which looks to follow A329/A417 via Blewbury and Streatley.

We strongly disagree with this route being considered as a strategic route for access to the A34 from Reading, particularly as the M4 already provides suitable strategic highway access to the A34 via Junction 13. Blewbury and the rural parishes towards Streatley fall within the North Wessex Downs AONB. In the event that this route represents rail travel on the Great Western line, this should be clearly illustrated to prevent misinterpretation.

South West Radial Area Study Options Assessment Report - Version 1.0 January 2021

As set out on page 17 electrified rail freight should be the key priority to support freight movements between the Solent and Midlands, as opposed to road freight. The Council agrees with this statement, with greater operation of rail freight there will also be less demand and therefore less need for climber lanes on the A34 for example.

Summary of Integrated Impact Assessments – Steer June 2022

The summary document highlights a number of key issues relating to the R6 and R12 interventions, which further support their removal from the packages, as quoted below:

“Interventions such as new highways or highway improvements, for example [...] A34 resilience [...] could increase uptake of vehicular traffic which could lead to negative cumulative effects.”

“The 3rd Thames Crossing at Reading has the potential to cause significant negative impacts to the aquatic ecology of the River Thames and surrounding lakes throughout the construction and operation phases”

“The construction of road schemes such as [...] 3rd Thames Crossing at Reading [...] A34 Online enhancements [...] could increase uptake of vehicular traffic which could lead to negative cumulative effects. These options are likely to have high levels of embodied carbon associated with both construction and operation.”

Highways Thematic Plan – Version 3 June 2022

As set out in the introduction of this document *“thinking around highways investment needs to reflect”* *“the fact that increased highway usage can exacerbate global warming”* and *“their development has also been shown to induce demand if they are expanded in isolation”*. This further supports the removal or reframing of highway interventions.

This document also highlights a range of strategies that can be used to address road-based supply and demand such as *“road space regulation/reallocation, clean air zones, congestion charging, parking charges, workplace car park levies, spatial planning (particularly car parking provision), and national road user charging”*.

When considering future highway networks, this report considers the role of the transport network that helps to deliver a 'place' function or a 'link' function. The proposed Thames crossing fulfils neither the 'place' function as it is located away from the urban centre nor a 'link' function as it does not provide access to a suitable 'movement corridor' or 'expressway'.

Please keep us informed of any further consultation documents and please do not hesitate to contact us if you wish to discuss any matters relevant to our Council.

Yours faithfully,

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Senior Transport Planner
Vale of White Horse District Council