

## CABINET – 20 MARCH 2018

### PROPOSALS FOR THE CREATION OF A MAJOR ROAD NETWORK – CONSULTATION

#### Report by Strategic Director for Communities

#### Introduction

1. At the end of 2017, the Department for Transport (DfT) published consultation proposals for the Creation of a Major Road Network (MRN) for England. This was a response to the publication of a report in October 2016 by the influential Rees Jeffries Road Fund (RJRF), which proposed such a Network.
2. The RJRF argument was that the existing Strategic Road Network (SRN), essentially Motorways and high standard dual carriageways including the A34, needed to be complemented by an equivalent network of major local roads. Critically, a similar approach needed to be taken to funding and programming upgrades/improvements to this network, akin to the 5 year “Road Investment Strategy” approach adopted by Highways England for the SRN.
3. Accordingly, the DfT has proposed a MRN be created, with ring-fenced funding to be identified from the National Roads Fund. Government is seeking views on three main areas: how to define the network; the investment planning process and eligibility and assessment criteria. The consultation document and proposals, including the 16 consultation questions, are set out at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/670527/major-road-network-consultation.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/670527/major-road-network-consultation.pdf)
4. The deadline for responding to the consultation was Monday, 19<sup>th</sup> March. Because this meeting falls the day after the consultation response deadline, we have submitted an OCC response as set out in annex 1 of this report, with the caveat that it is subject to Cabinet approval.

#### Exempt Information

5. None

#### Overview of Proposals

6. The proposals for the creation of a MRN are set in the context of Government’s central policy objectives, including:
  - How it can support the economic growth, particularly the National and emerging Local Industrial Strategies
  - The need for increased local road investment to support housing delivery, in particular land for new sites
  - Reducing congestion

7. Notable features of the consultation proposals include:
- i. The SRN and MRN would remain as separately funded and managed networks – so the County Council as Highway Authority would remain in control of its MRN.
  - ii. An indicative Network for England is included, which can be seen via the following link: <http://maps.dft.gov.uk/major-road-network-consultation/>. For Oxfordshire, this network includes the A40, A420, the remainder of the Oxford Ring Road, the A41 connecting Bicester to Aylesbury and the A418 linking the M40 to Thames. Much, though not all, of it is based on the former trunk roads which were transferred back to local authority control in the early 2000s – for example the A44 is not included.
  - iii. Investment Planning and priorities are seen as being progressed on a region-wide basis, with a strong role for Sub-National Transport Bodies (such as the one being developed for England's Economic Heartland) being envisaged to develop the MRN investment programme.
  - iv. Funding for any scheme proposals on the MRN is targeted at projects costing between £20m and £100m, though a lower £50m ceiling is envisaged in all but the most significant proposals, and local contributions would be sought.
  - v. Maintenance of the MRN would remain as now, with separate funding arrangements managed by individual local authorities.
8. Views of Oxfordshire's partners are also a consideration. This report takes into account comments made by partners on the Oxfordshire Growth Board and Local Enterprise Partnership. The EEH Strategic Transport Forum (which OCC is a Member of) has developed its own response to the consultation, for consideration at its meeting on 16 March, which will be circulated once ready.

### **Views on what is proposed - Overall**

9. The principles of the MRN proposals are essentially sound and reflect the wide support for the RJRF report when it was published. Providing a dedicated funding stream to underpin the MRN would enable growth and development to be more effectively planned and the Strategic and Major Road Networks considered together. It is worth noting the EEH view that the DfT's proposals divert from the RJRF recommendations in that the SRN and MRN networks would remain separate, rather than being considered as a 'single network'.
10. For Oxfordshire, it will provide the opportunity for heavily trafficked corridors such as the A40 and A420, which we have struggled to secure funding to upgrade, to develop new or updated route strategies and secure access to new funding streams. This will be particularly important where we are looking for corridor based infrastructure upgrades to support committed and planned development envisaged and being planned for as part of the proposed Growth Deal and emerging Joint Spatial Plan.

### ***Defining the Network***

11. Current traffic flow is proposed as the main indicator of which roads should form part of the MRN, with the proportion of freight traffic carried also a factor. Whilst basing proposals on the volume of trips is logical it is a somewhat crude methodology as it takes little account of the future of the network, and how roads are seen as developing, in order to facilitate the level of growth that the creation of the MRN is designed to support. Also, it doesn't reflect the potential of routes as strategic multi-modal transport corridors (with better public transport connections). A more strategic route based approach is essential.
12. It is proposed that the Council supports all the specific Oxfordshire roads identified for inclusion in the MRN, which currently comprise:
  - The A40 linking the west through to the M40
  - The A420 between Swindon and Oxford
  - The A423 and A4142, making up the remainder of the Oxford ring road
  - The A41 from M40 J9 via Bicester and on to Aylesbury
  - The A418 between the M40 and Aylesbury
  - The A422 between Banbury and Brackley (although this needs to be extended to include the route into Banbury via Hennef Way)
13. Whilst it is proposed to review the MRN every 5 years, it is important we reinforce the need to look forward now, and identify where including particular roads is needed to support growth and development – both what is currently planned and what emerges through emerging work on the Joint Spatial Plan.
14. In particular, the A44 should be included in the MRN as it would directly support proposed growth at Chipping Norton, Woodstock, Begbroke, Yarnton and the Northern Gateway site in Oxford, with the southern length of this route proposed for a new Rapid Transit corridor including Park & Ride site. As part of the Primary Route Network, this was also previously a Trunk Road. This may depend on the views of neighbouring authorities and could also lead to pressure for consideration of bypasses for some settlements.
15. It would also be beneficial to put a marker down for existing or future routes that either would directly support development or play a greater strategic connectivity role. Examples could include the A361 (Swindon to Banbury), and A4074/A429 (Oxford to Reading) corridors and the proposed Culham River Crossing. The review mechanism will need to pick these up
16. It is also critical to reflect the important role the MRN would play in securing high quality, funded first/last mile connections on the Oxford to Cambridge corridor, and for the network to support Oxfordshire growth corridors, including the specific proposals set out in Oxfordshire's Housing & Growth Deal and Housing Infrastructure Fund proposals. The development of the Oxford to Cambridge Expressway, including the proposed identification of a preferred corridor by Highways England in summer 2018, will also have implications for the development of Major and Strategic Road Networks in Oxfordshire, including connections to it and links to strategic hubs including rail and Park & Ride interchanges and ports.

### ***Investment Planning***

17. It is proposed that investment planning is not confined to local authority areas but be considered on a region-wide basis, including strategic transport bodies where they exist. Given the relative strength of our partnership arrangement across the Oxford to Cambridge corridor and England's Economic Heartland, the developing evidence base which is underpinning their work and that fact that a STB is expected to be formalised by 2019, this approach is considered beneficial. What requires further consideration is the final decision-making process for the prioritisation and allocation of funds.
18. Proposals for investment would be progressed in a similar way to how schemes are developed and accepted onto the SRN programme. The proposal is for Highways England to have a significant role in this, which should help ensure the development of a more integrated network. Integration is proposed between investment decisions made for the MRN and the SRN, and coordination of programmes.

### ***Eligibility & Investment Assessment Criteria***

19. It is important to note that MRN funding does not replace highways maintenance funding (which would continue to be awarded separately) or other funding streams /bids that can be targeted at local roads, such as the Integrated Transport Block. Instead, MRN funding would be targeted at specific, higher value schemes including route widening, bypasses, junction upgrades and major structural renewals. This is illustrated by the proposed minimum scheme value of £20m.
20. However, the proposals also identify a maximum Government contribution of £100m and make it clear that, for most requests, there would be a limit of £50m, with the higher figure requiring a demonstrably strong case to be made. The requirement for third party and/or local contributions is also implicit. Whilst in theory these could make a reasonable contribution to overall scheme funding, our experience (taking the A40 project for example) is that local contributions are a relatively minor source of funding (in that case, £5m out of the £40m total cost). In this context, the proposed funding ceilings appear at odds with the stated purpose of the fund as being "*targeted towards significant interventions that will transform important stretches of the network*". Notably, one of the case studies quoted references a £79m scheme which funded just 3.5km of existing bypass widening. It is unlikely therefore that this fund (as currently framed) would provide the level of transformational upgrade identified (for example in the Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy) or that communities may be looking for on our main corridors.
21. Whilst the 5 headline investment criteria objectives are hard to disagree with, it is notable that the first of these, 'Reduce Congestion' includes criteria focused on environmental impacts, for example Air Quality and Noise. Our preference would be for a separately identified 'Environmental' objective to cover these areas, and for a more granular approach to the criteria for reducing congestion, including how this might be quantified for example.

22. There is also no specific reference to how the development of the MRN and funding for it would link to greater use of technology to enable more intelligent route management. This is an area which needs to be developed further.
23. Exclusions are identified which are relatively self-explanatory, but do reflect an allowance for public transport upgrades to be included if part of a wider scheme. It will be important to emphasise this point in the context of supporting growth and ensuring multi-modal connectivity, especially for first/last mile proposals.

## **Conclusions**

24. The proposal to create a MRN should be supported, as it is a logical step in securing investment on major local authority roads that could lever in some the additional funding identified to support growth in Oxfordshire.
25. However, the consultation document does not identify the full extent of what we would see as the Oxfordshire MRN and the network should be seen as based on the evidence at this point in time, as it is likely to need to change and be expanded in line with growth and development. Also, the levels of scheme funding on offer are at risk of being insufficient to provide the scale of upgrade likely to be needed in the context of the level of development being taken forward in Oxfordshire. The responses to the consultation questions in annex 1 reflect these points.

## **Financial and Staff Implications**

26. None arising from this report.

## **Equalities Implications**

27. None arising from this report.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

28. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to agree the proposed responses to the consultation questions, set out in annex 1 to this report.**

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Background papers: None

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## Annex 1 – Proposed responses to consultation questions

1. Do you agree with core principles for MRN?

**Yes.** Providing a dedicated funding stream to underpin the MRN will enable growth and development to be more effectively planned and the Strategic and Major Road Networks considered together

2. Do you agree with quantitative criteria and their application?

**Yes, but only as a starting point.** Whilst logical, the use of current traffic flows as a main determinant is a somewhat crude methodology as it takes little account of the future of the network, and how roads are seen as developing, in order to facilitate the level of growth that the creation of the MRN is designed to support.

It is therefore essential to ensure that planning for the MRN does not just reflect the current position and recognises the need to look into the future, as the status of routes are changing with the significant growth in and around the county. This needs to include consideration of new routes in plans.

Using existing data is an historic approach which needs to change and there should be a forward look and baseline agreement as to what the MRN for Oxfordshire (and elsewhere) will eventually look like. For Oxfordshire, that data and information is there to do this.

3. Do you agree with qualitative criteria and their application?

**In part.** Qualitative criteria should explicitly recognise the importance of enabling growth by linking economic centres. They also need to reflect the potential of routes as strategic multi-modal transport corridors, with the opportunity to facilitate strategic public transport connections. Significant locations should also include, in addition to ports and airports, other major transport hubs and main strategic employment areas, such as major military bases, e.g. RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire.

4. Have these criteria identified all road sections that should be in MRN?

**No.** There are two omissions:

- (i) The A422 [Henef Way] between M40 junction 11 and the A423 north of Banbury needs to be included, as this 'missing link' connects this major growth area to the SRN.
- (ii) The A44 Primary route linking Oxfordshire to Gloucestershire needs to be included as it forms part of the Primary Route Network and connects Oxfordshire Growth towns along the corridor

5. Have these criteria identified road sections that should not be in MRN? **No**

6. Do you agree with how MRN is to be reviewed in future years? **Yes**

7. Do you agree with roles for local/regional/national bodies? **Yes**

8. Any additional responsibilities needed and if so at which level?

**Yes.** It may be useful to review local authority compulsory purchase powers to ensure these are adequate

9. Regional groupings where no sub-national transport bodies exist? **Yes**

10. Any other factors/evidence needed in Regional Evidence Bases?

**Yes.** This should include housing costs and their role in generating longer commutes, a significant factor here in Oxfordshire

11. Do you agree with role outlined for Highways England?

**Yes.** It will be important to ensure integration with the Strategic Road Network. However, Local Authorities / any MRN group will need greater power to deliver with Highways England approval/involvement

12. Do you agree with cost thresholds outlined?

**No.** While the lower threshold of £20m feels about right, the upper threshold of £100m is too restrictive, especially as there is a presumption that schemes would only exceed £50m in exceptional circumstances. It may be that the right solution to support development requires a higher level of investment is required – our suggestion is that these limits are doubled to £100m and £200m respectively.

13. Do you agree with eligibility criteria outlined?

**No.** Consideration needs to be given for funding those routes which are an alternative – either used when congestion is high or are on formal diversion routes

14. Do you agree with investment assessment criteria outlined?

**Yes, but only in part.** Whilst the 5 headline MRN investment criteria objectives are hard to disagree with, it is notable that the first of these, 'Reduce Congestion' includes criteria focused on environmental impacts, for example Air Quality and Noise.

15. What (if any) additional criteria should be included?

Given the above, our preference would be for a separately identified 'Environmental' objective to cover these areas, and for a more granular approach to the criteria for reducing congestion, including how this might be quantified for example.

Consideration needs to be given to how development and funding of the MRN can be linked to greater use of technology to enable routes to be managed more intelligently

16. Anything else to add to MRN proposals? **No.**