

CABINET – 24 MAY 2016

Investing in the A40 - Long Term Strategy

Report by the Deputy Director for Strategy and Infrastructure Planning

Introduction

1. This paper gives a progress update on the A40 long term strategy following the completion of public consultation in Autumn 2016. This report outlines the consultation responses received as well as other considerations in order to facilitate a wider discussion on future ambitions for tackling the congestion issues on the A40. A recommended approach for the direction for a long-term strategy for the A40 is put forward for debate and agreement.
2. Cabinet are asked to:
 - a) Note the A40 Long Term Strategy Consultation Results;
 - b) Consider the officer recommendation for the A40 Long Term Strategy comprising:
 - I. Road width expansion to a dual-carriageway on the section of the A40 between Witney and a park and ride at Eynsham,
 - II. A further bus lane (in addition to the eastbound bus lane currently under development) so as to provide bus priority in both directions along the A40 between a park and ride at Eynsham and the Duke's Cut canal bridge west of Wolvercote roundabout,
 - III. Provision of high quality cycleways along the length of the route;
 - c) Agree the recommended strategy for further feasibility assessment; and
 - d) Include this recommended strategy for the A40 within LTP4 Update, which is due to go to Cabinet for approval in June 2016.
3. Information received during the public consultation which could be used to identify specific individuals has not been published.

Background

4. In July 2015, Oxfordshire County Council's Cabinet agreed to a major infrastructure project for public transport improvements to be made along the A40 from Eynsham to Wolvercote, as well as providing a park and ride site in the Eynsham area. This was largely funded through the Local Growth Fund in order to provide congestion relief in the short to medium term. This £40m project, in addition to the other investments across the length of the A40 corridor, set the stage for a much larger undertaking to tackle congestion in the long term.

5. Oxfordshire County Council is committed to finding a long-term strategy to tackle current and projected congestion on the A40.
6. There are numerous views about the best approach to tackling the congestion issues on this key strategic route. The long history of undelivered improvement schemes for the A40 means there is a significant debate regarding the variety of options for a long term strategy. To aid this debate, the County Council held a public consultation in autumn 2015 to seek current views on the issue and identify consensus.

Considering the parameters for an A40 Long Term Strategy

7. In order to focus priorities, objectives for identifying a long term strategy were set out as follows:
 - a) Improve travel times and journey reliability along the A40 corridor, particularly between Witney and Oxford;
 - b) Stimulate economic growth, in line with the Oxfordshire Strategic Economic Plan; and
 - c) Improve safety and reduce environmental impacts such as air pollution and noise along the A40 corridor.
8. These objectives for the A40 long term strategy consideration align with the overarching LTP4 objectives:
 - a) To support jobs and housing growth and economic vitality;
 - b) To reduce transport emissions and meet our obligations to Government;
 - c) To protect, and where possible enhance Oxfordshire's environment and improve quality of life; and
 - d) To improve public health, air quality, safety and individual wellbeing.

Public Consultation Outcomes

9. The consultation ran from the 26th September to the 8th November 2015 with a high response rate of nearly 800 views. The conceptual options presented were:
 - a) A40 Bus Lanes in both directions between Witney and Duke's Cut Canal Bridge
 - b) Guided busway between Ducklington Roundabout and Duke's Cut Canal Bridge in both directions along the alignment of the old railway line
 - c) A40 Dual Carriageway from Witney to Duke's Cut Canal Bridge
 - d) Train from Witney to Oxford by joining the Cotswold line at Yarnton, either by re-instating the old line or building a new route entirely to the north of the A40
 - e) Tram from Ducklington Roundabout and Duke's Cut Canal Bridge in both directions along the alignment of the old railway line.

10. Details of the responses received as well as the consultation questionnaire are published in Annex 1 of this report.
11. In summary, the greatest level of support was for the dual carriageway option, which also received the lowest number of respondents who do not support the concept. Train and bus lanes also received good levels of support with around 50% of respondents supporting both of these. Tram was supported by 41% of people and guided bus received the lowest level of support at 26% as well as having the highest number who did not support this option.

Themes and analysis of consultation responses

12. In addition, respondents were also given the opportunity to explain in their own words the reasons for their choice, as well as providing other comments.
13. The following re-occurring themes have been identified from the comments received:
 - a) Houses should be built close to where people work
 - b) Longer distance traffic using the A40 will not utilise public transport schemes
 - c) Disappointment that cycling did not feature in the consultation including a lack of mention of the B4044 community cycle path between Eynsham and Botley
 - d) The need for flexibility for direct buses to serve a range of destinations in East Oxford and other locations
 - e) Some said that car users already currently park in Eynsham and board the bus to Oxford
 - f) The importance of the future delivery of an A40/A44 link road (or A40/A34 junction)
 - g) The importance of retaining and improving the current A40 cycle route
 - h) Desire not to progress options that might preclude long term reinstatement of the railway line.
14. There were also a number of responses from organisations suggesting alternative transport schemes to those concepts presented including the WestOx Monorail Limited and SkyCabs International Limited. Both promoters suggest that a scheme between Witney and Oxford would cost around £210m, however it is unclear if these costs are compatible with those presented at the exhibition for the other schemes, particularly with regard to the level of contingency and risk that have been included. A new monorail or a SkyCab as a concept is broadly similar to the tram model included as one of the consultation options. Although there are a number of similar examples in operation around the world, the use of monorails in an urban or inter-urban context remains untested in the UK. Choosing this as a way forward would therefore represent a considerable risk. However as this seems to be a cheaper alternative to other fixed-link systems (e.g. rail or tram) then if any such scheme

is proceeded with in the future then a monorail alternative should be considered.

Oxford Meadows Special Area of Conservation

15. An important consideration in deciding the future of the A40 is the Oxford Meadows Special Area of Conservation (SAC) which lies immediately south of the road for much of the section between Cassington and the Cotswold Line at Wolvercote. This international designation requires that projects or plans that might have a significant adverse effect on the integrity of a SAC must not proceed unless there are both no alternative solutions and “imperative reasons of overriding public interest”. Oxford Meadows is primarily designated for its historic lowland hay meadows, a nationally rare priority habitat.
16. The impacts which could impact upon the SAC include physical encroachment but also schemes which either increase levels of airborne pollutants alighting onto the protected area, either through increased traffic or reduced screening of the road. A note on the requirements placed on the Council for assessing the impact of any proposal on the SAC will be included as part of the upcoming Cabinet papers.
17. While any scheme on the affected section of the A40 will need to undergo a Habitats Regulations Assessment before it can proceed, this designation does have a particular impact on the viability of converting the section of A40 between Eynsham and Wolvercote into a dual carriageway road. Such a scheme would be likely to encroach into, or closer to, the SAC (unless the whole road was moved to the north in which case it would need to pass through redundant gravel workings increasing both the engineering complexity of the scheme and its likely cost). A dual carriageway would also be likely to attract additional traffic onto the A40 leading to an increase in levels of pollutant impacting on the SAC, although this is likely to be mitigated, to some extent, by a reduction in congestion.

Considering the Options

18. While the consultation has provided a significant insight into people’s views about the A40, there are further considerations as part of a recommendation for an approach to a long term strategy. These include: timeframe for delivery, available funding (or likely future available funding), engagement with key delivery partners, effectiveness, and environmental and other physical constraints. Officers have considered these factors in light of the consultation results and have come to the following recommendations. An Option Assessment Framework evaluation was completed and is included in Annex 2.
19. **Two Options should be discounted:**

Tram (approximately £240m)

Guided Bus (approximately £165m)

- a) The view emerging across the consultation is that there is little support for the tram and guided busway concepts; where there is support there is

acknowledgement of the limitations and high costs associated with these types of scheme. These two concepts received the greatest number of respondents stating they did not support these modes.

- b) The challenges to delivery of both these concepts include the complexity of land assembly along the route of the former railway line and, in particular for the tram option, how this infrastructure continues to key destinations along road or heavy rail infrastructure. Delivering these options would potentially limit the deliverability of rail in the future, due to the need to utilise the former railway alignment.
- c) It is therefore recommended that the tram and guided busway concepts are excluded from further consideration in the A40 long term strategy.

20. One Option should not be progressed at this point in time

Train – Heavy Rail (approximately £285m)

- a) Considerable support was recorded for the train concept, as the most favoured of the public transport options presented.
- b) A key economic concern for pursuing heavy rail any further is the unlikelihood that a commercially viable rail service (for a rail operator) could be delivered based on the estimated low frequency of trains. Capacity issues on the rail line through Oxford station would also be likely to place a similar constraint on the level of service that could be provided. Beyond considerations about the commercial viability of this to support the investment in the infrastructure, that level of service raises questions about its attractiveness to users, particularly for short distance journeys to Oxford.
- c) In order to overcome the demand issue (above), a much greater population would be needed to support the new rail line. This is not part of the current local plan discussions being taken forward by West Oxfordshire District Council.
- d) Despite attending consultation events, there was no response from the Rail Industry on this option (positive or otherwise). Without support from that sector, it is unlikely that this option could progress beyond aspirational status at this point. Funding for any new rail line would need to come, predominately, from within the rail sector. Any scheme would need to be 'rail-led' and have a clear commercial justification.
- e) It is therefore acknowledged that the aspiration of re-instating the rail connection remains but recommend it is not taken forward by the Council at this point in time as the focus for the A40 long term strategy. Opportunities to realise the aspiration with lead partners Network Rail, and Rail Operators will be pursued in the future.

21. Two Options should be assessed further and in combination:

- Bus Lanes (approximately £50m+A40 Science Transit Investment)
- Dual-Carriageway (approximately £120m)

Bus Lanes

- a) Bus lanes were the second most favoured public transport concept in the consultation.
- b) Of the options considered, it has the lowest relative delivery cost and by its nature the scheme could be delivered in phases as and when funding is available, building on from the Local Growth Fund supported A40 Science Transit scheme currently being developed.
- c) It is likely to attract new users due to improvement in journey times, as well as providing the flexibility to increase the range of origins and destinations the bus services could serve.

Dual-Carriageway

- a) The Dual-Carriageway concept received the greatest level of support from respondents of the five concepts presented. Over a quarter of respondents identified a dual-carriageway as their preferred scheme, and over quarter more identified a dual-carriageway and one of the public transport schemes as their preferred concept.
- b) However, many respondents commented that providing a dual carriageway would increase traffic and in the long term would not reduce congestion. It is likely that a congestion-free, high capacity road link would attract additional traffic onto the A40 from alternative routes such as A415 and B4044, as well as encouraging some travellers who currently use buses to transfer to car travel and new travellers to favour car rather than public transport.
- c) It is also likely that a Dual Carriageway approach for the length of the A40 from Witney to Oxford would require a complementary scheme north of the Oxford. A complementary scheme in this area would need to overcome substantial environmental and other 'setting' constraints and it would also significantly increase the costs for delivery. Previous public engagement undertaken for road options in this area has been met with heavy local resistance.
- d) As stated above, there are significant environmental constraints in progressing a dual-carriage way approach between Cassington and Wolvercote due to the proximity of the Oxford Meadows Special Area of Conservation.
- e) A partial dualling approach which extends from Witney Bypass to Eynsham may provide additional road capacity without triggering the issues above regarding dualling into and around Oxford.

Recommendation

22. In considering the issues above, it is the recommendation of officers that the long term strategy for the A40 take a combination approach which includes both increased road capacity as well as improvements to the public transport offer.
23. It is proposed a combined scheme is taken forward for further feasibility and a commitment to investigate in detail a package of measures comprising:
 - i) a dual-carriageway from Witney to a park and ride at Eynsham
 - ii) bus lanes in both directions along the A40 from a park and ride at Eynsham to the Duke's Cut canal bridge approaching Wolvercote roundabout
 - iii) provision of high quality cycleways along the length of the route
24. The cost of this combined scheme is estimated to be **£54 million**. This comprises £12 million to provide a westbound bus lane between Wolvercote and the new Eynsham Park and Ride and a further £42 million for new dualling between Witney and the Eynsham Park and Ride. As with the other costs quoted in this report, and presented at the consultation, this estimate is at current price levels and includes allowances for land, contingencies and risk.
25. Whilst more information is required to develop this package of measures, the concept has a number of advantages including:
 - a) Increasing overall capacity along the A40 corridor
 - b) Recognising the preference for a dualling approach, and progressing this, without entangling the scheme in the issues associated with a dual carriageway into and around Oxford
 - c) Being able to be taken forward in phases (and phases can be developed in parallel with each other) making delivery responsive to funding opportunities
 - d) Further developing the £40m investment A40 Science Transit Phase 2 Local Growth Fund scheme
 - e) Balancing the needs of long distance road traffic, including freight, with the needs of public transport users
 - f) Improving journey times
 - g) Requiring less funding than the other options considered
 - h) Supporting a public transport investment approach which is flexible to future demands for travel
 - i) Not being heavily reliant on delivery partners (like rail)
 - j) Being sensitive to the environmental constraints associated with the Special Area of Conservation
 - k) Being compatible with the County Council's Local Transport Plan and the Oxford Transport Strategy
 - l) Does not preclude a future consideration about reinstating the rail-line in the long term
26. Cabinet is asked to consider this recommended approach.

27. If the above recommended approach is agreed, officers seek approval to progress to further stages of assessment work, including HRA assessment, on this combination dual carriageway and bus lane long term strategy.

Financial and Staff Implications

28. The A40 long term strategy will be further developed by officers within Environment & Economy and utilise the revenue budget until work is sufficiently developed that the scheme is entered into the Capital Programme.

RECOMMENDATION

29. **The Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to:**

- (a) note the A40 Long Term Strategy Consultation Results
- (b) consider the officer recommendation for the A40 Long Term Strategy comprising:
 - I. Road width expansion to a dual-carriageway on the section of the A40 between Witney and a park and ride at Eynsham,
 - II. A further bus lane (in addition to the eastbound bus lane currently under development) so as to provide bus priority in both directions along the A40 between a park and ride at Eynsham and the Duke's Cut canal bridge west of Wolvercote roundabout,
 - III. Provision of high quality cycleways along the length of the route.
- (c) agree the recommended strategy for further feasibility assessment; and
- (d) include this recommended strategy for the A40 within LTP4 Update, which is due to go to Cabinet for approval in June 2016.

SUE SCANE,
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Background documents: Public consultation responses

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