**National Infrastructure Commission / Oxford to Cambridge Expressway**

**Some reasons for objecting to the southern route options for the Oxford-Cambridge Expressway (O2C) through Oxfordshire: Would they meet the National Infrastructure Commission’s objectives?**

Key Points

A Southern route option (Route A) for the O2C Expressway would not deliver the NIC’s intended advantages for economic development (Item A below)

A Southern O2C route sub-options south of Oxford could not be supported in adopted and emerging Local Plans and by Oxfordshire’s Infrastructure Strategy (see item B below)

A Southern route on the the O2C route sub-options south of Oxford would not help to alleviate pressure on the existing road network (see item C below)

A Southern route for the O2C Expressway round Oxford would cause far more harm to the Environment and wildlife than other options (see item D below)

A Southern route for O2C round Oxford would cause the most harm to existing rural settlements (see item E below)

**The adoption of the Northern route sub-option S1 which follows the A34 north of Oxford will avoid major problems associated with all the southern sub-option routes (see item F below)**

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***A. Could the O2C route sub-options south of Oxford deliver the NIC’s intended advantages for economic development? – No – for these reasons:***

1. **A Southern route for the O2C Expressway would run along the Southern edge of the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge Growth Corridor rather than down its centreline**Two of the O2C route sub-options south of Oxford (S3 & S4) would go to Aylesbury instead of to Bicester.

As a consequence, further large-scale development in Bicester, Banbury, Northants, Coventry etc. would be adversely affected, as a Southern route running along the edge of the O2C Corridor would be less accessible to those towns: running the Expressway along the periphery of the O2C corridor rather than along the centre near the Rail corridor would deliver less overall growth and worse transport and housing outcomes.

Although Aylesbury lies within the broad corridor investigated by the NIC for routes for O2C,  it is not part of the Oxfordshire Knowledge Spine extending from Science Vale to Bicester. The Knowledge Spine is an integral part of the economic region which extends eastward to Milton Keynes and ultimately to Cambridge.

Aylesbury expanded in the 1960s as an overspill town for London’s population. Its subsequent commercial development as part of the outer London commuter belt is not strongly linked to the Oxford-Cambridge axis of knowledge-based initiatives: new housing development there is more likely to meet the needs of the London commuter belt rather than the Oxfordshire Knowledge Spine.

In contrast, both housing and business enterprises are expanding fast in Bicester and Witney: there is sufficient building land available for this rapid growth to continue and become more sustainable if it is on the northern route for O2C.  Bicester also has easy access to existing road and rail infrastructure so that the first/last mile of journeys into and out of this town can easily be achieved.

For the route of O2C not to run close to Bicester would be a total contradiction of the NIC’s rationale for O2C. Bicester is an existing settlement with the local infrastructure already in place to support further rapid growth.

Any transport hubs which might be needed on an O2C sub-option route extending beyond Aylesbury would need to be created from scratch. The consequence would be a very much slower delivery of any new housing with access to the Expressway.

That would also mean **delayed new revenue for the Treasury** from these new homes and their associated employment.

1. **None of the sub-routes which are proposed around the south side of Oxford would provide any access from the Expressway to the new O2C Rail Link, which is a key element of the NIC’s Enterprise Corridor and the Expressway project**.

If the O2C Expressway route is separated from the O2C Rail Link, the option for O2C commuters to choose rail for their journeys into the key towns along the corridor becomes more difficult, or impossible. However, if the northern route following the line of the A34 around Oxford City is selected, the new transport hubs at Oxford Parkway and Bicester Station will be in exactly the right place for fast access to and from the Expressway.

Rail provides a vital ‘last-mile’ benefit into key City centres: but if a southern route is selected, access to the new Bicester and Oxford Parkway stations will not be easily available from the Expressway, and commuters will have to make their journeys by road, **increasing city centre and transit congestion**.
2. For provision of specialised services and for the mobility of personnel in high-tech employment all along the Oxfordshire Knowledge Spine, an O2C Expressway which routes near to Bicester, rather than ignores Bicester and diverts to Aylesbury, would be essential.
Employment and retention of highly skilled staff within the Knowledge Spine would be best served by the Northern route running along the Spine, rather than choosing a route one leaving A34 South of Oxford and heading off towards Aylesbury.

4.       Only one Oxford sub-route (S2) around the south side of Oxford City eventually connects with Bicester: however it would need to be built across one of the most sensitive parts of the Oxford Green Belt which includes important amenity open space, established residential areas, and one of the largest Sites of Special Scientific Interest in Oxfordshire. The local and national opposition to such a damaging option would be considerable, and would cause long delays in appeals: its chances of being judged deliverable are remote.

5.       All of the O2C route sub-options (S2, S3, & S4) would require the construction of a new multi-lane road bridge over the River Thames and a long raised embankment on both sides of this across its wide flood plain, and in these places it would be impossible to link O2C with the existing road network at the same level.

***B. Would the O2C route sub-options south of Oxford be supported in adopted and emerging Local Plans and by Oxfordshire’s Infrastructure Strategy? – No – for the following reasons:***

**Any route option on the south side of Oxford City would run through the Oxford Green Belt.**

1. The Green Belt is protected against most building development by the policy guidance in the NPPF: this is the basis of the Green Belt policy contained in the adopted South Oxfordshire Local Plan and in the emerging South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2033, and in the emerging Oxford City Local Plan.

The development of any strategic housing sites for Oxford in the Green Belt near to the axis of a O2C route south of Oxford would be most unlikely to qualify for approval under “exceptional circumstances”, would be refused by SODC Planning, and any Planning Appeal would be most vigorously contested by many objectors.

The delays and difficulties inherent in such a high-profile and well-resourced appeal would delay final works, and even if the Appeal fails, this would again delay the Treasury receiving the expected uplift in revenues, as well as the housing and employment opportunities.

Unless or until there is any major change in central government policy on the protection of Green Belts, the prospects of any speculative urban extensions to Oxford being permitted in the Oxford Green Belt near any of the proposed southern routes for O2C around Oxford are remote, as clear alternative ways exist to provide more housing in Oxford, and so the prospect is remote for building any housing and integrated transport hub for O2C in the Green Belt.

2.       The Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy does not contain any provision for the addition of an O2C Expressway to the county’s existing infrastructure.

***C. Would the O2C route sub-options south of Oxford help to alleviate pressure on the existing road network? – No – for the following reasons:***

1. The Oxford Ring Road is already very heavily congested by inter-regional traffic travelling between Portsmouth & Southampton in the south to and from the Midlands and the North, with its capacity exceeded on most days at peak times.

None of the proposed route sub-options for O2C south of Oxford would relieve the extreme traffic congestion experienced most days on the A34 section of this Ring Road, which also forms the western sector of the Ring Road. This is because such southern sub-option routes for O2C would not connect easily to the most direct routes for through traffic heading northward from Oxford to the Midlands and the North, and so **that traffic would still continue North up the unimproved A34 to M40 Junction 9.**
Conversely if the north-western sub-option S1 route is selected for O2C to follow the line of the A34, not only would this northern route provide more direct communications along the axis of the Oxfordshire Knowledge Spine and towards Cambridge, but the major investment in Expressway road and junction improvements **would also alleviate the severe and costly traffic congestion** currently experienced on the A34 Ring Road where inter-regional through traffic is mixed with local Oxford traffic.
2. If a Southern route for the O2C Expressway is selected, arriving at the M40 at Junction 6, 7 or 8, the associated new housing developments would inevitably attract new residents whose employment focus would be London rather than on the Oxford -Cambridge axis. **This would increase traffic on an already-congested M40 southbound**, a motorway which is already subject to regular traffic jams and delays.
3. If a southern sub-option route is selected for O2C, it will also become a tempting option for London-bound traffic on a congested M4 to swing north up the improved A34 and along the Southern expressway to the M40 and down to the M25. This would also impact traffic levels on the already congested Oxford Eastern By-pass junctions and all along the A34 Newbury to Oxford section, probably exceeding those quoted in the traffic maps in NIC Phase 3 Report.

This extra traffic ‘rat-run’ would not be viable if the Northern / A34 – J9 M40 route is chosen, as the extra distance and travel time would be too great a deterrent for London traffic.
4. If any of the southern sub-option routes are adopted, there will still remain two major traffic bottle-necks in the present road network: at the Botley interchange on the A34, and at the Junction 9 on the M40 with the A34. **Choosing a Southern expressway route would not provide the major investment and improvements these require**.

If the northern sub-option S1 route along the A34 is selected for O2C Expressway, both of these junctions would receive significant investment and improvement

 D. ***Would the O2C route sub-options to the south of Oxford cause any harm to the natural environment? – Yes – for the following reasons:***

1.       All the sub-options for O2C routes south of Oxford would need to be built on new bridges across the River Thames and on raised embankments across and along its sensitive Thames flood plain.

These include some of the specially protected sites for wildlife and habitat conservation along these routes. If O2C is constructed on the sub-option route S4, it would inevitably devastate the unique natural environment and flood plain of the valley of the River Thame all the way from Dorchester to the M40 and beyond to Thame itself.

2.       Natural wildlife would be adversely affected by the intrusion of traffic noise, nocturnal light pollution, and increased air pollution from O2C in a part of Oxfordshire where levels of all of these forms of pollution are currently very low,

**The physical barrier of the Expressway would separate and segment many contrasting but complementary wildlife habitats which form part of the total habitat for the survival of some species currently protected in SSSIs, in the other types of nature reserves, and in the Conservation Target Areas along these southern routes.**

3.       The segmentation of the natural environment which would occur by the construction of a section of O2C on the south side of Oxford and across the Thames valley would have an adverse and irreversible impact on the biodiversity in and around the city, which adds considerably to its natural capital value, and is an important element in the attractiveness of Oxford as a university city and as a centre for sustained innovation and entrepreneurial activity within the Knowledge Spine.

The physical barrier of an O2C Expressway on the south side of Oxford would restrict the in-migration of new species and the out-migration of existing species as a result of their responses to continued climate change: this would significantly reduce biodiversity near Oxford.

***E. Would the O2C route options to the south of Oxford cause any harm to existing settlements? – Yes – for the following reasons:***

1. There are many small but sustainable village settlements in the Oxford Green Belt where there is little scope for more than a 5% increase in the number of dwellings, so there would be no justification for providing direct access from them to the O2C Expressway.

If it is proposed to construct the O2C Expressway through their parishes, as would be necessary if any of the sub-option routes (S2, S3 & S4) south of Oxford are to be implemented, **O2C would constitute an unwelcome and visually intrusive physical barrier across these parishes which would introduce unacceptably high levels of traffic noise, air pollution and night-time light pollution**.

2.       A number of these villages are currently sustainable because they share some important services and facilities, such as Post Offices and GP’s surgeries for example, with adjacent villages, and so easy communication between them by road is essential for their sustainability. **If the route of O2C cuts through these communications, those villages will become unsustainable and their housing capacity will decline**.

If the southern sub-option routes are chosen for O2C, many villages, such as  Sandford on Thames, The Baldons, Garsington, Horspath, Littleworth, Wheatley, Waterstock, Ickford, Elsfield, Beckley and Cuddesdon would be very adversely affected.

The intrusion of the O2C Expressway into the visual landscape of some of the villages likely to be adversely affected along the southern sub-option routes through the Green Belt would destroy their residents’ sense of place which often binds such rural communities together and renders them sustainable.

These villages are often the preferred residential location for the entrepreneurs and innovators who bring their talent and professional skills to the Knowledge Spine, but with a route for O2C through some of them, these villages would lose their attraction for people who make such an important contribution to the economy of Oxfordshire.

***F. Would the adoption of the northern route sub-option S1 which follows the A34 north of Oxford avoid problems associated with all the southern sub-option routes? – Yes – for the following reasons:***

1. An O2C Expressway route following the route of the A34 route on the north-west side of Oxford would connect with the major housing developments proposed by Cherwell District Council around the Oxford Parkway station and transport hub, and would then be able to link Bicester directly into the Oxfordshire Knowledge Spine where the rapid growth of housing and employment is already underway.
2. The route along the A34 north-west of Oxford would fully link the O2C Expressway with the O2C Rail Link, improving traffic transfer from road to Rail and reducing ‘last-mile’ congestion in & out of Oxford and the other Knowledge Spine growth towns.
3. **An O2C Expressway constructed along the route of the A34 would necessarily involve the total redesign and improvement of the existing junctions at the Botley Interchange and at the appalling Junction 9 on the M40, so that these bottlenecks for traffic congestion are eliminated and the through traffic separated from the local traffic, to the greater advantage of both the local and national economy.**

4.       An O2C Expressway constructed along the line of the existing dual-carriageway A34 would not have a major adverse impact on nearby villages, since the villages located along the route of the line of the A34 have already developed in recent decades to accommodate such an arterial road near them. In fact the associated investments in noise mitigation and improved junctions would be likely to deliver positive outcomes.

5.       There would be no new transport routes to be constructed across the most sensitive areas of the Oxford Green Belt, with little significant additional adverse impact on the biodiversity or on the existing settlements around Oxford.

***Conclusion:***

**Of the sub-option routes around Oxford City for the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge Expressway, there is only one obvious preferred route which fully meets the NIC’s stated strategic planning objectives and causes the least environmental harm, and that is sub-option S1 to follow the route of the A34 around the north-west side of the city.**