

OxIS: The Oxfordshire Infrastructure Strategy: Stage One Consultation

Consultation response, by Planning Oxfordshire's
Environment and Transport Sustainably (POETS)

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POETS (Planning Oxfordshire's Environment and Transport Sustainably) is a group of senior planning, environment and transport professionals and academics focussed primarily on planning and transport in Oxfordshire.

For more information go to www.poetsplanningoxon.uk

Overview

1. All the relevant organisations are to be commended in compiling this list of measures which is of immense value in helping to plan Oxfordshire's future.
2. The scale of unfunded schemes – already of the order of £6bn with more to be added – demonstrates the inability of Oxfordshire to provide the infrastructure that is needed today and why great caution must be exercised before committing to anything more than organic growth over the next couple of decades. To the county's current inability to keep up with pressures for capital expenditure must be added the huge and growing backlog in maintenance of highways, buildings and other infrastructure.
3. Valuable though the list of outstanding infrastructure schemes is, it is important not to rely on it in isolation to determine future spending priorities for a number of reasons:
 - a) there are many schemes not yet on the list that are currently under development, for example active travel measures that are currently being worked on and should be a high priority given current council and national policies
 - b) the multi-criteria assessment applied, although very useful, is inevitably rather subjective and coarse and must not be used to override policy priorities
 - c) the scoring assessment does not take into account cost, deliverability issues or value for money
 - d) a number of schemes on the list such as SO65: Stadhampton & Chiselhampton Bypass and SO66: Cuxham Bypass have never been subject to public or member scrutiny and would therefore be better placed on a separate provisional list. While some such schemes have been flagged as red for deliverability, others surprisingly have not
 - e) there is a danger in assessing schemes in isolation. A highway capacity increase in one location for example, will have adverse traffic consequences on the surrounding road network
 - f) many schemes on the list have been on similar lists for decades eg Marcham bypass, and they have little realistic prospect of being funded in the foreseeable future (nor of being a priority for the limited funding that might be available)
 - g) there appears to be a random element to how some schemes have got on the list while others have not.
4. Future spending priorities need to be determined by national and local policies in a way that has not been evident in recent years. Funding through the Housing Infrastructure Fund (HIF) for example, has been predominantly committed to measures to increase highway capacity, while stated policies would suggest that it should have been more heavily focussed on measures to increase public transport use, active travel and reducing the use of private vehicles.
5. Section 6.6.5 (p276) of the technical report focusses on "Connectivity Scheme Gaps". A glaring failure at present in Oxfordshire is the need to better prioritise cycle schemes in growth towns because a) they can be funded from development (and at modest cost if established before construction starts and b) encouraging a cycling culture in new residents could significantly contribute to low carbon and health objectives.
6. Before the pandemic, bus patronage in the county was falling due largely to increasing congestion, demonstrating the failure of the last Local Transport Plan to deliver on its priorities and why future schemes need to be more closely aligned with policies, particularly now we have the added imperative of tackling the declared climate and health emergencies.

Key Themes

7. The 5 Key Themes are broadly reasonable and appropriate and clearly inter-related. POETS however believes that greater emphasis needs to be given to the environment. While society can adapt over time to other measures such as productivity, once the environment is substantially harmed it may take centuries to recover (if at all).

Recommendations

8. POETS would therefore make the following specific recommendations:
 - a) Future measures – particularly transport schemes – need to be more closely linked to local and national policies and priorities. Future scheme assessments therefore should include an additional score for how closely they align with policies. Those that score poorly against such an assessment should be dropped.
 - b) New schemes to enhance bus priority – particularly the long-promised bus transit network - and to facilitate county-wide active travel networks need to be developed and added to the assessed scheme list as a matter of urgency. Safe, largely segregated, and well maintained active travel networks are needed both within towns (where often developers should provide funding) and between them, particularly as electric bikes increase the distance that people are prepared to travel for routine journeys.
 - c) There should be a presumption against giving approval (and funding) to any scheme that achieves a negative score under the environment heading. Those that do, should be critically reviewed and assessed against alternative ways of achieving the same objectives.
 - d) Schemes that have yet to be subject to appropriate public consultation or member scrutiny, should be moved to a provisional list and not be eligible for funding until they have been properly assessed and scrutinised.
 - e) The assessed list should be subject to an annual review and measures with low scores (particularly in respect of their environment impact), and low convergence with priorities and policies should be dropped from the list to ensure they cannot receive funding from the limited funds available. The annual review would also offer the opportunity to take into account changing policies and priorities and incorporate new schemes that have been developed.