



The
countryside
charity



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Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP
Secretary of State for Transport
Department for Transport
Great Minster House, 33 Horseferry Road
London SW1P 4DR

19 February 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

Re: We call on the government to abandon plans for an Oxford-Cambridge Expressway

We write following your announcement on 20 November 2019 to hold a review into the proposed Oxford to Cambridge Expressway following the December general election. We urge you to abandon the proposal for the following reasons, which we set out in this letter:

- The Expressway will severely damage the historic and natural environment between Oxford and Cambridge;
- By encouraging increases in car traffic between Oxford and Cambridge, the Expressway will set back attempts to improve air quality in both cities and other towns, such as Bedford, where air pollution is also a serious problem. It would also increase carbon dioxide emissions from transport and thereby hinder government policies to tackle the climate emergency; and
- We support East West Rail (EWR) and, like you, want to see greater priority given to its completion. We welcome the Conservative Manifesto pledge to 'restore many of the Beeching lines'. As part of this the most suitable alignments should be identified in order to minimise habitat loss, and biodiversity net gain must be fully implemented on EWR and any other new schemes.

The Expressway will have a number of damaging environmental impacts. CPRE, the countryside charity, has shown that the building of new roads damages large areas of landscape in their own right, and increases overall levels of traffic in the areas in which they are built¹. Berks, Bucks and Oxon Wildlife Trust (BBOWT) has already highlighted that up to 345 wildlife sites, including 51 Sites of Special Scientific Interest and 20 reserves, will be affected by Highways England's currently preferred Expressway corridor, along with 8,474 ha of nationally important wildlife habitat. The RSPB has also raised serious concerns about the Expressway's likely impact on nature and greenhouse gas emissions, and questioned its compatibility with government commitments to restore nature and tackle climate change.

¹CPRE, *The end of the road? Challenging the road-building consensus*, report March 2017.

The increase in traffic associated with the new road, and the development planned in its wake, is in turn likely to increase air pollution if the new housing estates are geared around road access. There are significant problems with air pollution associated with road transport, particularly nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) and particulate (PM₁₀ & PM_{2.5}) levels. Based on local air quality monitoring reports, there are particularly concerning levels of air pollution in and around Bedford. Both Cambridge and Oxford city centres also have high levels of air pollution. Oxford city and Oxfordshire county councils have designated both a low emission and (from 2020) a zero emission zone. Also, in March 2018 the government directed Oxford City Council to take further action to address NO₂ levels on the Headington Road in the east of the city². The Expressway and an exponential increase in housing growth is likely to induce further traffic to enter Cambridge from the west, and Oxford from the east. So, there is a major concern that the proposed growth could set back efforts to improve air quality both in the city and the surrounding countryside.

We want to see improvements made to public transport, not a new road. We welcome the government's commitment to East-West Rail, and we agree that further progress needs to be made in restoring the link between Oxford, Bedford and Cambridge. Progress will be hindered or slowed by major spending on new roads in parallel. The Expressway is predicted to cost at least £3.5 billion and possibly as much as £9 billion; and it will add to air, light and noise pollution and countryside loss, and encourage additional traffic both to and from places outside the Arc. At a time when we desperately need investment in sustainable travel options, it makes no sense to lock in pollution and car-dependency for decades to come.

The recommendations of the most recent report of the Committee for Climate Change should be followed in planning all new development. In particular, as the Committee recommends³, the need for motorised travel should be reduced so that pollution is minimised and people can travel in ways that also benefit a healthy lifestyle. The Conservative Manifesto pledge to restore many of the lines cut by Beeching in the 1960s offers a further major opportunity. For example, the restoration of train services from Cambridge to both Haverhill / Sudbury and to Wisbech, respectively, would help to regenerate those towns, reduce road traffic within Cambridge, and also offer a more sustainable future growth pattern than stringing out hundreds of thousands of new houses along a main road. It would also provide Cambridge with a third rail route to London. We also recommend that any programme of rail re-openings must employ route options that do most to minimise damage to habitats and the historic environment, and biodiversity net gain must be fully employed on all new schemes.

We greatly appreciate your consideration of this letter and look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

[the original letter contains signatures]

² UK Air Quality website, <https://uk-air.defra.gov.uk/library/no2ten/2018-la-tfs-documents>.

³ Committee on Climate Change, June 2018, p.146.