

HAPPY new year. Readers of my column may recall the many times I have mentioned that planning myopia and land greed has meant that grid roads which were always designed to extend both west and east of Milton Keynes as the city inevitably expands have been cut off, truncated or seriously downgraded. Evidence of this betrayal can be seen in both the Eastern and Western Expansion Areas. And, as we all deep in our hearts know, the key thing that users of our city transport infrastructure need more than anything else is quite simply this: convenience. Without it we are all condemned to endless gridlock, emotional frustration, missed appointments, high blood pressure, higher travel cost and resulting air pollution.

The provisional good news, as we enter 2017, is this. It is beginning to look as if not only will Milton Keynes be in the middle of the new East West Rail link - a reopening of the historic Varsity Line between Oxford and Cambridge - but we may soon (a relative term as it is pencilled in for 2031) also have an East West Expressway. That is assuming, of course, that we have not built all over its planned route by then.

The Oxford to Cambridge Expressway Strategic Study, the very recently published proposals by the government, rightly comments that: "Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge [are] better connected to London than [to] each other."

It also shows how poor is the current road connectivity, highlighting the lack of a direct dual carriageway route between the three towns via Bedford. It cites the most direct route from west to east is via the A34 from Oxford, the M40-A43 or the A41-A4421 via Bicester, the A421 through Buckingham, Milton Keynes and

Bedford to the A1 and the A428 via St Neots to Cambridge.

In its socio-economic summary the study says: "Expressway and EWR interventions are critical to overcoming the existing local, regional and national infrastructure deficits, connecting skilled people with jobs, linking employment clusters and creating an efficient national transport network grid that enables future regional housing and jobs growth to be delivered in a way that supports the efficient movement of goods and people. Expressway and EWR interventions will ensure that a lack of transport connectivity and

capacity does not prevent the region from successfully competing in the global marketplace and providing resilience for the UK economy."

Surely then, this work is vital to the continuing success of Milton Keynes.

Buses are not left out of the study either. The main towns are connected by the X5 coach service which provides, the report says, "a relatively high end-to-end journey time from Oxford to Cambridge and vice versa of approximately three hours 40 minutes."

Which is frankly shocking and compares with car or lorry journey times of about two hours 20 minutes.

The study proposes three different routes for the proposed Expressway. On the eastern side of Milton Keynes all three come through Junction 13 of the M1 but then diverge quite significantly. Option A takes the Expressway via Aylesbury, Option B goes via the East West Rail corridor and Option C along the existing A421 corridor. Most of these options come with some variation and alternatives.

The estimated cost of the options, which ranges from just over £3,000 million to £3,514 million, is fairly eye-watering but surely cost cannot be a consideration when it is so vital to all our futures.

Now at the risk of being called an incorrigible cynic, I would say that Option B-S1, one of the roughly-outlined routes along the East West rail corridor, is the most likely to be passed which certainly has some implications for those whose homes and businesses border the currently little used East West Rail lines. But, of course, there will be years and years of planning consultation and horse-trading before shovel hits dirt.

In principle this is a good thing for Milton Keynes; in practice and eventual delivery, who knows? Cheerio.

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