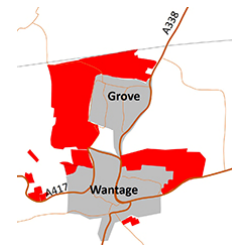


Wantage and Grove Campaign Group

Survey Response



England's Economic Heartland's Swindon-Didcot-Oxford connectivity study call for evidence survey

This response is from the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group.

The Wantage and Grove Campaign Group is a non-party-political group of over 1000 individuals who live in and around Wantage and Grove (between Swindon, Didcot and Oxford) in Oxfordshire. We are not against any development in Wantage and Grove but:

- Developments should be proportionate and sustainable; and
- The infrastructure should enhance and improve quality of life for its residents.

Please note that this response is not from one person but from the Wantage and Grove Campaign Group – a group of almost 1000 residents of the OX12 area and should be recognised as such.

In our response we have considered that England's Economic Heartland's Transport Strategy's action plan includes the following points:

Focus on decarbonisation of the transport system by harnessing innovation and supporting solutions which create green economic opportunities

Promote investment in digital infrastructure as a means of improving connectivity

Use delivery of East West Rail and mass rapid transit systems as the catalyst for the transformation of our strategic public transport networks

Champion increased investment in active travel and shared transport solutions to improve local connectivity to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to realise their potential

Ensure that our freight and logistics needs continue to be met whilst lowering the environmental impact of their delivery.

We also note that in parallel to this study, Oxfordshire County Council is preparing its Local Transport and Connectivity Strategy and would encourage you to work with them to ensure consistency with the transport strategy for our region.

Question One:

What are the key themes for the study area?

What are the over-arching themes that the connectivity study should look to consider when developing a package of potential measures?

Please identify three themes you consider to be the most important.

These could include:

- Decarbonisation
- Accessibility
- Safety
- Levelling up
- Access to public transport or walking and cycling provision

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group

Survey Response continued

- Digital connectivity
- Environment

The three themes which we consider to be the most important are:

- Decarbonisation
- Access to public transport or walking and cycling provision
- Digital connectivity

Decarbonisation:

We note that according to the UK Government report: The Road to Zero, 35% of road transport emissions come from HGV and LGV vehicles. We also note that in the draft Oxfordshire Local Transport and Connectivity Strategy, one of the specific challenges for Oxfordshire in relation to freight is listed as the construction and logistics movements associated with the large number of housing development sites.

We therefore believe that part of the study should focus on the decarbonisation of freight transport. The Government seems to be very focussed on private transport but the 35% of emissions caused by freight should not be ignored.

Access to public transport or walking and cycling provision

This area has seen, and is undergoing, significant house building but without a commensurate improvement in the transport (or other) infrastructure. This leads to the need to match the provision of infrastructure to the high volume of housing developments being built in the towns and villages in the area.

Although Wantage & Grove have some small centres of employment, many residents commute to one of the Science/Tech centres (Harwell Campus, Milton Park, Culham Science Centre), Oxford or Swindon (or further afield). The bulk of this travel is done by car. Some of this work can be done virtually (from home) as was shown during the Covid pandemic.

Recognising that we must reduce greenhouse gas emissions, more use of public transport, active travel and less need to travel must all be considered.

While we recognise that parts of Grove and Wantage currently have good bus services to Oxford and there are some direct buses to Harwell, Milton Park and Didcot, the services to Swindon or the South are either too poor to be useful for commuters or non-existent. We also note that the current services are funded by contributions from the developers and that this is temporary funding. There are very limited bus services between the villages in the area and the main locations for employment, leisure, and health services.

We understand that there are discussions in progress regarding the move of the Park and Ride from Redbridge to Milton Park. While acknowledging that this is closer to Wantage and Grove, it is still a 20-25 minute car journey and then a 30 minute bus trip (assuming that timings work). This is longer than the current timing of either a 40 minute bus trip or 35 minute car/bus journey to Oxford using Redbridge P&R.

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group

Survey Response continued

The re-opening of Grove Station would provide a much more eco-friendly low-carbon route to the major centres of Didcot, Swindon and Oxford and could be used as a transport interchange to allow bus linkage and cycling/walking to the station from a large part of Grove and Wantage and at least some of the villages in OX12.

There is some provision for active travel (cycling) within Wantage and Grove but this is being eroded as the roads become busier in response to the new developments. There are some specific routes but overall travelling between local towns and villages by bicycle, especially at peak times, is barely possible and generally dangerous due to both the quality of the road surfaces (especially close to the edges) and the width of the roads. So improvements to footpaths and cycleways must be part of any future strategy.

Digital Connectivity

The importance of Science and High Tech businesses to the area must be underpinned by a good, high speed, digital infrastructure. The pandemic has highlighted the low performance of the digital infrastructure in the area with many households having difficulty in connecting to video conferencing during the lockdown periods.

Question Two:

What do you consider to be the key movements in the area?

For example:

- Based on your experience, what are the key journeys being made in the study area?
- How are these journeys being made? Could they be made by a different mode of travel in the future (including virtually)?
- Why are these journeys being made (employment, leisure etc)?
- Are there gaps in connectivity which means that people cannot easily connect between key places?

What are the key journeys?

Statistics of key movements in the area have not been updated since the 2011 census and the population of the area has increased by almost 50% since that time. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the key movements are mainly work related, either freight deliveries into the area or commuters travelling to one of the Science/Tech centres (Harwell Campus, Milton Park, Culham Science Centre), Oxford, Swindon or London.

Due to the poor quality of retail facilities in the area, many residents travel from OX12 to Swindon, Reading, Oxford or Newbury for shopping and many are now relying on online shopping resulting in high levels of delivery services.

Health services are also focused round the hospitals in Oxford, Swindon and Reading.

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group

Survey Response continued

How are these journeys being made?

Many of these journeys are made by private vehicles or taxis, although some routes are served by bus services as noted in the answer to question one above. Some of these journeys could be virtual (working from home or online shopping) but health and wellbeing does require face-to-face contact to reduce the levels of isolation found in rural communities.

A combination of rail (via a new Grove Station) and cycling/walking/bus or shorter car journeys to the station would also reduce the carbon emissions generated.

Why are these journeys being made?

Many journeys are work related (freight deliveries into the area or commuters) but as stated above, retail, health and leisure also create a need to travel.

Are there gaps in connectivity?

Yes. The nearest rail interchanges are Swindon or Didcot – neither served by sufficient bus services to mean that people are able to give up their cars. If Grove Rail Station was re-instated then most residents using rail services could get to the station by other means.

Question Three:

What are the key connectivity opportunities and challenges in the study area?

For example:

- Where are the opportunities to improve connectivity (location specific)?
- What types of opportunities and challenges exist?
- Who do you think would benefit from improving connectivity in this area?

Where are the opportunities to improve connectivity?

The existence of an electrified railway line between Didcot and Swindon (currently without a station at Grove) represents an enormous opportunity to improve connectivity and provide a lower carbon alternative to the use of the car for significant numbers of journeys.

Reinstating a station at Grove would provide rail access both for the growing population of Wantage & Grove and for the surrounding villages as well. It would act as a focal point for local bus routes and would serve a significant number of people within easy cycling and walking distance.

The nature of the fast, electrified railway line makes adding stations a challenge. However, the possibility of extending trains westwards from East-West rail would provide additional benefit with an Oxford-Didcot-Swindon link stopping at Grove.

Wantage and Grove Campaign Group

Survey Response continued

What types of opportunities and challenges exist?

One of the challenges is that many of the major roads in the study area are saturated and there is a large amount of housing development in the area.

Much of the network of 'A' roads and 'B' roads is not capable of handling the increased traffic being generated by the developments.

An opportunity is to improve cycle infrastructure. Even new cycle routes, between towns, is relatively inexpensive. The challenge is that many of the existing interconnecting A-roads simply do not have enough space to add cycle lanes. New infrastructure will need to be provided.

Who do you think would benefit from improving connectivity in this area?

The above would be to the benefit of everyone in the area.

Question Four:

What interventions do you think the study should consider?

The outcomes of the study will be a package of interventions to improve connectivity in the region.

Are there any interventions you think should be considered during the development of the study?

These could include:

- Bus priority
- Walking and cycling routes
- Bicycle hire schemes
- Direct bus or rail connections
- Electric vehicle hire clubs
- Road dualling.

What interventions do you think the study should consider?

- The reinstatement of a station at Grove between Didcot and Swindon. This should also become a transport hub in its own right, with additional bus services and car and cycle parking.
- New (and improved existing) cycle routes. However, the 'A' roads connecting towns are not suitable for having a cycle path added without widening and other routes may be more cost-effective.
- Improvements to local cycling and walking infrastructure which needs to be to a very high standard that will encourage people to make use of it. This infrastructure may become important for the use of e-scooters if the current trials give positive results.
- Provision of EV charge points and car clubs will also be necessary.
- Reductions in the emissions from freight services will also be critical to enable the carbon reduction targets to be achieved.