

Closing statement on behalf of the Mayor

The Mayor's opposition to the C2C busway was clear in his statement of evidence and his oral evidence to the inquiry. He believes this is an outmoded proposal, which doesn't provide value-for-money. It doesn't fit the direction that he is setting for local transport policies. Moreover, he can give no guarantee that the services envisioned for the busway, by the applicant, will be permitted to run under bus franchising.

The Mayor leads the Combined Authority, which is the Local Transport Authority. It is his authority which sets strategic transport policies for the region, not the applicant nor the GCP. He is responsible for developing the new Greater Cambridge Transport Strategy. In his evidence, the Mayor was clear that he intends to proceed with bus franchising. The independent review on franchising implementation is examining the model that will be adopted, not whether to proceed. Bus franchising is therefore a dominant, contextual fact when considering the application. Although the timeframe for implementation is likely to shift from September 2027 to April 2028, bus franchising will happen – and it will happen before any C2C busway would be completed.

It is the Mayor, and only the Mayor, who is responsible for creating a bus franchising scheme. This includes the specific bus routes that will operate across Cambridgeshire. These franchised routes, including routes from Cambourne to Cambridge, will already exist. So for new routes using the busway to be created, an operator would need to apply to the Mayor for a service permit. An additional route would need to satisfy conditions that he will set down. As he outlined in his evidence, two criteria, in particular, could present a problem for any service permit applications:

The first is safety, given the non-physical guidance technology involved. The Mayor was clear that this would need to be proven technology, which is not the case at present. Even the existing busway, with physical guidance, has had considerable safety problems. The applicant has been subject to a £6 million fine and is currently constructing new fencing, the length of the route. Unauthorised access has been an ongoing problem, despite the concrete guide-rail design. By contrast, the C2C design, in effect, is a road. Unauthorised access could be a far greater problem.

The second is competition – a new route cannot undermine the financial viability of the Mayor's franchised routes, including those from Camborne to Cambridge. At this stage, those routes have not been specified. However, any service operating on the busway would obviously have an impact on other routes.

At various points, the applicant and the GCP have sought to downplay the Mayor's powers relative to his board. This board includes the Council Leader of the applicant as a member. Yet service permit applications will be determined by the Mayor and the Mayor alone. It is far from clear that he could allow the busway to operate as intended. Even if safety concerns could be addressed and overcome, there is significant uncertainty about the frequency of any permitted services and the overall routes that they would follow.

The applicant assumes that guided buses would continue from the busway to serve various locations in Cambridge. But one plausible outcome is that new bus services would only be permitted to operate on the busway itself, between Stirling Road and Grange Road. Another is that even this would have an adverse effect on the Mayor's franchised routes and the busway would not be used at all.

So there are good reasons to believe that the busway might be incompatible with the Mayor's approach to bus franchising. There is a second, potential, incompatibility with emerging local transport policy. The Mayor has been clear that he wishes to develop a light rail network for Cambridge. Through the Cambridge Growth Company, work has already begun with the Combined Authority on a mass rapid transit study, funded by the DfT. This will be modelled in the Greater Cambridge Transport Strategy.

As the Mayor noted in his evidence, a new busway is at odds with his ambition. It would not form part of light rail services and could also cost more to build than light rail tracks. A busway could only be converted to light rail at further, significant cost. Although a busway is arguably compatible with the existing Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, which was produced by the Mayor's predecessor, the whole local framework is set to change.

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill will abolish the applicant and give the Mayor considerably enhanced powers, including in relation to the Combined Authority's board. The applicant will no longer exist by April 2028. From that point, the board is likely to have just two constituent councils. All transport decisions will be taken on the basis of a simple majority vote, with the Mayor having both a casting vote and a veto.

The Local Transport and Connectivity Plan will be able to be reviewed or replaced on the basis of these new voting arrangements from Royal Assent, next summer, rather than 2028. When he appeared at this inquiry, the Mayor indicated ways in which he disagreed with the Plan and wished to alter it.

As the Mayor also noted, from next summer, he will be solely responsible for setting local transport policies. This includes sole responsibility for producing the Greater Cambridge Transport Strategy, which will model different transport interventions across different growth scenarios, using the updated CAP-CAM model. That work, as he said, will take place over the next nine months and there are three associated points.

The first relates to modelling. The applicant, the GCP, the Combined Authority and the Cambridge Growth Company all agree that the updated CAP-CAM model is the right one for assessing local transport changes and showing the interrelationships between different interventions. The Cambridge Growth Company also intends significant growth beyond the emerging local plan. How different interventions perform across the different growth scenarios will include the potential impact of East West Rail on demand for bus services from Camborne to Cambridge. The Greater Cambridge Transport Strategy work may result in substantially different results to the modelling presented to this inquiry, within months rather than years.

The second relates to justification. The Greater Cambridge Transport Strategy may undermine any justification for the busway, through the inclusion and testing of other transport interventions, including mass rapid transit solutions.

The third relates to local transport policy. A busway may be incompatible with the conclusions of the GCTS and the approach it adopts. If the policy is to build a light rail network, it makes no sense to build a busway, which is difficult and expensive to convert – and might be in the wrong place.

Even without these points, and the ways in which the busway may be incompatible with both bus franchising and new local transport policies, the Mayor believes it would still offer poor value-for-money. It has a poor, underlying BCR. As others have argued during this inquiry, development at Bourn Airfield should not be included in the calculation. As the Mayor noted, it is possible to change the Grampian condition in the Section 106 agreement. Indeed, altered transport patterns following the pandemic, with lower road usage, provide strong grounds for such a change. The airfield will still be being built out when East West Rail is complete and taking passengers to Cambridge South and Cambridge at high speed.

Beyond light rail and East West Rail, immediate alternatives to the busway may also exist. It is unfortunate that, for the purposes of the inquiry, such alternatives are subject to the same evidential tests as the busway proposal, when those proposing them lack the resources of the GCP and the applicant. The Combined Authority itself lacks the resources of the GCP in this respect. As the Mayor has only been in office for six months, it has not been possible for him to complete detailed feasibility work on on-road options. That process will begin with the Greater Cambridge Transport Strategy. Nevertheless, given a dual-carriageway route to North Cambridge and other options for Maddingley Road, the Mayor's belief is that such alternatives are plausible.

The busway began as an unspecified, mass rapid transit connection to a tunnel, which would form part of a Cambridge Autonomous Metro. Now it would essentially serve West Cambridge, if it ever took buses at all. Taking buses at reduced frequency and without the connectivity envisaged would make the cost unjustifiable and make maintenance costs difficult or impossible to recoup. And any bus that got beyond the end of the busway would find itself in the same traffic and congestion that still needs to be solved.

C2C is a route to a tunnel that doesn't exist. And when a mass rapid transit network does begin, it won't connect. No-one is actually enthusiastic about the busway. As the Mayor argued, C2C's supporters recognise the need to do something - and this is something. Because it has taken time to get to this stage, they feel obliged to keep going rather than thinking again. The GCP feels obliged to keep going with busways because they are all it has left before its time is up.

But none of that makes this busway a good idea. None of that makes it provide value-for-money. None of that resolves the uncertainty around the modelling or the services it might take. In fact, given the safety concerns and the potential impact on franchised routes, it is

possible that the busway could be constructed but never allowed to take a single passenger service. It could become a £200 million white elephant.

The Mayor's entire approach is to be pro-growth and pro new transport infrastructure. The tragedy of the time and effort spent on this application is that a C2C busway won't help to get Cambridgeshire and Peterborough moving. He believes these plans should be rejected as uncertain, expensive and backward.