

South East England: Provisional Policy Implications from the POLYNET findings

A network approach is needed: The research findings suggest that a key challenge for policy will be engaging with the MCR as a networked space relating to all geographical scales from the local to the global. Complex interactions between flows and space make strategic, integrated economic and spatial planning vitally important to sustain existing flows into London and the South East and to address issues of uneven development between two regions – a functionally polycentric West and an under-linked East.

Infrastructure investment is essential: Functional polycentricity has major implications for physical infrastructure and environmental sustainability. Economic globalisation and e-technology are not leading to greater self-containment of settlements; e-communication stimulates business travel. The strong message from London and the South East is that increased investment in transport infrastructure is critical just to support existing business flows.

Multiple policy scales are affected: Inter-urban functional relations cross-cut administrative and departmental boundaries leading to a need for long-term vision and co-ordinated inter-authority approaches to economic and spatial policy, primarily; EU and national regulation, transport management and urban housing development. London and regional economic and planning agencies, central government - the Treasury, ODPM and Department for Transport - and private sector should be involved.

Complementarity of functions: POLYNET reveals the complementary nature of inter-urban functional relationships. Service network flows produce inter-office and, increasingly inter-firm, co-operation; hence the notion of market competitiveness should not be conferred to inter-city relations.

Need for concentration: Concentration of global functions in First Cities should not be seen as reducing activity in other cities regionally or nationally – these highly clustered and specialised functions require concentration and support different functions in other centres. South East England's network connectivities extend across the UK and internationally.

Supporting market-led clustering: London interviews emphasise that business clustering cannot be created by design - market-led clustering should not be disrupted as its agglomeration economies cannot simply be replicated elsewhere. Policy interventions should focus on alleviating barriers to flows through long-term planning and managed investment.

Potentials and Prospects: The Policy and Spatial Implications

The POLYNET findings have important short and long-term implications for spatial planning and policy in South East England and London. An overarching finding is that London and the expanding 'mega-city region' are integrally linked through knowledge-intensive advanced service economy business functions and flows that are unique in North-West Europe. We focus here on the key spatial implications for the South East Plan and the South East's relationship with London. Other crucially important issues for London and the South East relating to national policy and regulation are discussed elsewhere in this

and other POLYNET reports.

Transport flows are shown to be critical to maintain high-value knowledge-based economic activity in central London and its development elsewhere in the South East.

The relationship between London and the region is symbiotic, with the region supplying skilled employees to support the central business services cluster while global functions, and knowledge concentrated there, generate spillovers into the regional economy. Accessibility to London for commuters and business meetings remains crucial in spite of developments in ICT and the potential for remote working. Key business leaders tell us that this is very unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, regardless of future technological advances, because the success of business services relies on the maintenance of relationships and trust through face-to-face contact.

While travel between the region and London can be accommodated sustainably by rail, transport policy needs to recognise the importance of accessibility by road outside London to support cross-cutting movements that cannot be undertaken by other means.

Road congestion and slow journey times are constant complaints of businesses for journeys between places outside London: the rail system provides inadequately for non-radial journeys while, apart from the M25, the road system is similarly inadequate, congested and slow. Building a second M25, as some respondents argue is necessary, is evidently not in the policy frame and it would clearly not be feasible to develop a rail infrastructure to fully support a functionally polycentric MCR.

Selective development and upgrading of existing rail and road infrastructure, radially and non-radially, would alleviate present congestion in 'overheated' areas and would help to stimulate economic development in earmarked growth and regeneration areas.

There is a strong case for selective upgrading of crucial orbital east-west and north-south highway links, such as the A26, A264, A281, A322 and A417, together with modest investment to create orbital rail and bus links, both within London and outside it; specifically:

- Orbirail ("Orbirail 1") as proposed in the London Plan, linking an extended East London Line, the North London Line, the upgraded West London Line and a connection across South London from Clapham Junction to Peckham Rye;
- An "Orbirail 2" comprising the Croydon Tramlink, the Richmond-Willesden Junction section of the existing North London Line and a busway along the North Circular Road from Ealing to Ilford;
- An "Orbirail 3" comprising the existing line from Oxford via Reading, Guildford and Redhill to Paddock Wood, the line from there to Strood, and thence via a new Lower Thames Crossing into Essex, continued there by reopening of closed lines (with short new links) to Cambridge and then via Bedford and Bletchley to Oxford.

"Orbirail 3" would complete a "Regional Metro" comprising Thameslink 2000 and an extended Crossrail.

Thameslink 2000, currently delayed by planning problems in London which hopefully will soon be resolved, represents a new concept in rail planning for the South East: a north-south "regional metro" serving destinations up to 50 miles from London, connecting under central London. Several of these destinations, such as Bedford, Luton, Cambridge, Peterborough and Dartford, are important locations in the Sustainable Communities growth corridors. This scheme calls for early completion. But in addition, it needs to be complemented by a rethought and reengineered east-west Crossrail, similarly extending 40-50

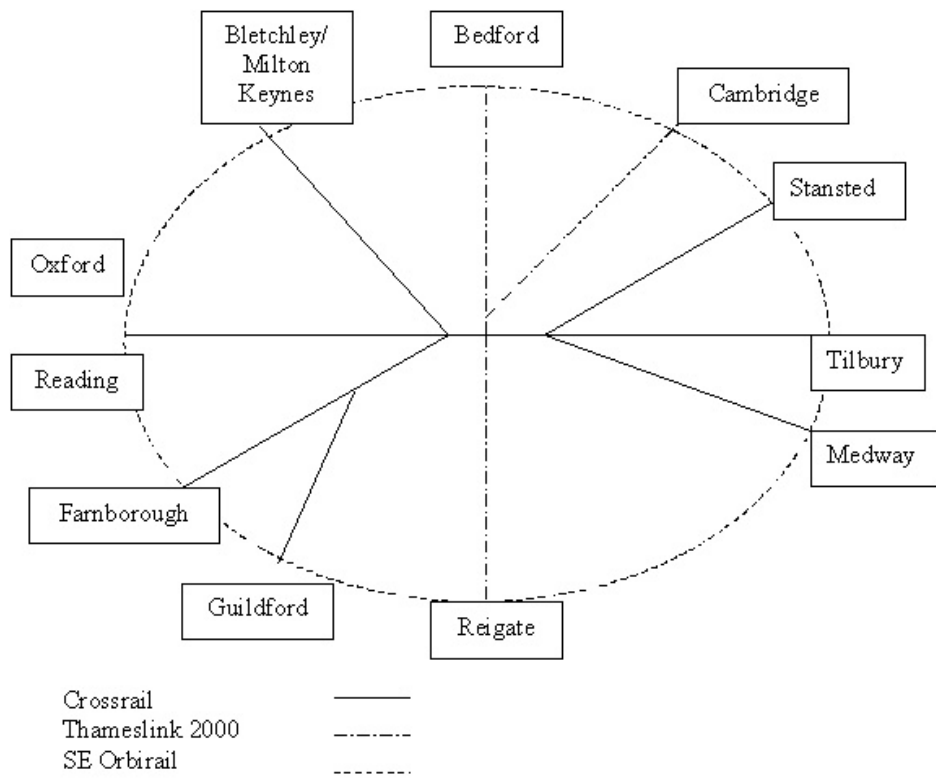


Figure 27: Route for Orbirail 3

miles on each side of London, to connect locations such as Milton Keynes, Reading, Basingstoke, Guildford, Chelmsford, Southend, Tilbury, and Medway. These extensions would serve Thames Gateway developments on the east side and - just as important - provide capacity for traffic from the west, which is critical for the economics of the entire scheme by correcting the current chronic imbalance between a heavily-trafficked east side and an under-trafficked west. "Orbirail 3" would then connect destinations at or near the ends of the two Regional Metro lines.

A new Lower Thames Crossing is crucial in the implementation of a regional rail network.

Such a network could be completed only through a new Lower Thames Crossing, either above or below Tilbury-Gravesend. From a broader Thames Gateway strategic viewpoint, a lower crossing point, close to East Tilbury, would be preferable because it would maximise interactions in the lower or eastern end of the Gateway, connecting and assisting development in locations that will come on stream only in the later stages of strategic implementation, between 2010 and 2020.

Longer-term strategy needs to help develop a more even polycentric networked system of centres to the east of London, to balance already economically sustainable development observable in the west.

POLYNET has confirmed earlier research findings: the functional urban system is much more weakly developed to the east of London than to the west. This is partly the result of physical geography and resulting historical development: river estuaries, most notably the Thames, break up the system and inhibit orbital links between functional urban regions on the two banks of the estuary. To help remedy this, early completion of the Lower Thames Crossing is crucial. It should carry both road and rail traffic and it should connect the important urban centres on both banks: the Medway Towns to the south and Basildon-Southend-Chelmsford on the north. To this end, it should be located as far downstream as is physically and economically practicable, close to the widening of the estuary at East Tilbury-Cliffe.

The current Thames Gateway strategy needs to be underpinned by sustainable economic development to create a community that will be socially sustainable in the long term. It needs to be extended spatially to encompass areas presently outside it, notably the East Kent coastal towns.

The Thames Gateway strategy is based on the proposition that the Channel Tunnel Rail Link will bring unique locational advantages, leading to major commercial developments that will generate new jobs, to the sites around the station stops at Stratford City, Ebbsfleet and Ashford. But, as presently conceived, it is not designed to serve the seriously impacted coastal towns of the East Kent coast from Whitstable to Hythe, as well as Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey. To varying degrees, on opening CTRL will bring radically reduced journey times to London, enhancing the role of these towns as commuter dormitories but, beyond that, helping to grow their economies through local multiplier effects triggered by the growth of local, retail business services and advanced 'back office' employment. There is an urgent need to understand how domestic commuter services on CTRL (designed to start in 2009) could help generate such processes. This study should include the possibility of connecting CTRL, in the long term, to Crossrail through a link near Barking, thus extending the regional metro out to serve these depressed communities.

Selective road construction and upgrading will be needed, especially on key orbital links. But, crucially, better management of the system could help to alleviate current congestion and delays that are currently a major obstacle to business productivity.

Congestion on the region's highway system has been steadily growing, a function of rising population and rising incomes which bring increasing car ownership. Recent research on Surrey shows that socio-economic variables are more significant than land use or activity variables in determining car use. But these variables are clearly interdependent, and as the region becomes functionally more polycentric, the problem is paradoxically set to deepen, because increasing proportions of journeys in the growing high-value service economy will be non-radial and so less capable of being served by efficient public transport.

Given these basic facts, the correct strategy should be to make selective highway improvements, especially on the orbital links between the main highway and rail corridors, but also to develop orbital rail links connecting the main radial lines out of London, and to concentrate both employment and housing developments especially at key interchange nodes between radial and orbital links. The need then will be to manage the highway system so as to optimise its use, especially at peak periods. The announcement in May 2005 by the Secretary of State for Transport, Alistair Darling – that the government proposes to introduce national congestion charging in two-three years' time – is highly significant. Since the South East has one of the highest levels of car ownership and congestion in the UK, it would be logical to introduce the first pilot scheme here.

Rail services also require co-ordinated and better management to improve cross-regional accessibility and reliability of services and journey times into and out of London.

First Great Western has recently been reported as proposing the introduction of demand management on heavily used routes through Reading to the west of London by increasing peak commuting fares. The POLYNET research indicates that this would have seriously damaging environmental and economic effects, pushing essential journeys on to the overcrowded road network. Delivery of improved rail services on intensively used routes, through effective supply-side management, should be insisted upon by the Strategic Rail Authority.

London's airport system is the key to its primary global position among European cities, and can be complemented by the forthcoming enhancement of its European rail linkages. But it will continue to suffer from inadequate linkages between the two in comparison with its European competitors, which can be remedied only by radical rethinking.

POLYNET's connectivity analysis has shown that London enjoys uniquely strong air linkages to other EU urban centres, although its rail connectivity is weaker than that of Brussels, Paris or Cologne. This may be remedied to some degree in 2007 with completion of the PBKAL (Paris-Brussels-Köln-Amsterdam-London) high-speed network including the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, though this will depend on the ability to develop through Eurostar services to Amsterdam and Cologne-Frankfurt not only from London but from beyond-London stations like Watford Junction and Milton Keynes (and, given electrification necessary for an extended Crossrail, Reading), using the direct link (now under construction) from the West Coast Main Line to the Channel Tunnel Rail Link.

However, London's main disadvantage in comparison with competitor cities (like Paris, Amsterdam and Frankfurt) will increasingly be the lack of integration between the new high-speed train system and the intercontinental air traffic system, since it will lack the direct interconnection already provided at these competing mainland European locations. This problem requires urgent investigation. A radical solution would have been a completely new four-runway Thames Gateway Airport to complement and eventually replace Heathrow, linked to the Channel Tunnel Rail Link – although it is not clear how this would have served the key need for access from the west of the region. But this solution was rejected in the White Paper without serious consideration.

The question therefore is how far Heathrow is capable of further runway extension while meeting EU environmental standards, and how far (and in what way) it could be integrated with the high-speed rail system. This might be achieved by converting Northolt aerodrome from military to civil use, connecting its two short runways to Heathrow by a dedicated airside people mover system, and constructing a new Eurostar station at Terminal Five, already provided for in the station complex now under construction, which would be connected to the West Coast Main Line at Willesden Junction and thus directly to CTRL. In this way through Eurostar, services could operate from Reading and Slough and from Southampton and Basingstoke (over tracks electrified for an extended Crossrail), via Heathrow to mainland Europe. This should be the subject of a further study.

Regional strategy should seek to achieve relative employment and housing concentration in the “growth corridors” north west and east of London, but must also provide adequately for local growth in other parts of the region, which should also be concentrated on growth corridors served by good public transport.

There is a built-in conflict between the aim of trying to divert regional economic growth away from the “western crescent” between the M3 and M40 corridors, centred on the M4, and into the “Sustainable Communities” major growth corridors north-west of London (M1/A6) and east of London (the Thames Gateway). Much of the wealth generation of the region comes from the highly networked information-rich knowledge economy centred in this western arc, and it would be dangerous to inhibit its ‘natural’ growth. This could have negative effects within the South East generally and could inhibit expansion of functional linkages to towards Swindon and Bristol. The aim should be to concentrate growth as far as possible in the main growth corridors along rail lines that would become part of an extended Crossrail (to Guildford, Basingstoke, Reading and Oxford), to develop key locations along these corridors (especially at interchanges with Orbirail 3, at Guildford, Farnborough and Reading) as locations for advanced services (as already achieved at Reading), and to extend the crescent northwards and eastwards into a “knowledge arc” along a newly-reopened Oxford-Cambridge rail line which would form a key component of Orbirail 3, with key interchanges north of Aylesbury and at Bletchley/Milton Keynes.

The need for increased housing provision within London commuting distance and close to regional business centres is emphasised by firms in London and outside. As in the case of economic development, it would be dangerous to limit housing growth along the corridor to the west of London. Continued buoyant economic activity, as in Reading, spawning vital cross-regional linkages, must be supported by appropriate housing supply. A high level of development surrounding towns in the north-eastern arc from Reading and Oxford to Aylesbury, Milton Keynes and the MKSM sub-region would seem to fit well with current spatial patterns of service economy clustering, linkage and economic growth potential. Proposed development in sustainable urban extensions should aim to locate new high quality housing that will attract business services, in proximity to employment opportunities, rail and major road links. While environmental factors are important in attracting business services, the vibrancy of town centres and time-distance accessibility to London will be of equal or greater importance to inward investors needing to attract young, skilled employees.