



England's Economic Heartland 2025 – 2026 Work Programme

1. Introduction

- 1.1. [England's Economic Heartland](#) (EEH) is the sub-national transport body for the region stretching from Swindon and Oxfordshire to Cambridgeshire, and Northamptonshire to Hertfordshire.
- 1.2. This is a region recognised by Government for its unique economic potential and world class strengths in the knowledge intensive sectors outlined in the Industrial Strategy green paper. It is home to one of the biggest transport infrastructure projects in the UK: East West Rail.
- 1.3. Established in 2016, EEH plays a leading role in the planning and delivery of transport connectivity in the region.
- 1.4. We are a trusted partner of our local and combined authorities, National Highways, Network Rail and the East West Railway Company. In 2024/25, recognising the importance of collaboration across the private and public sectors, EEH deepened its relationships with key economic bodies in our region: the Oxford to Cambridge Universities Group and the Science Supercluster Board. The strength of EEH's partnerships are a key part of our ability to leverage delivery towards the Government's missions.
- 1.5. In 2022, we published a three year plan. While the three-year plan completes at the end of 2024/25, the work programme set out here for 2025/26 represents a one year 'roll over'. This is in line with the approach being taken by the Government. Over the coming weeks EEH will develop its Spending Review submission for 2026 onwards, reflecting current considerations around the long-term role of EEH as a devolution partner.
- 1.6. A long term Spending Review settlement will give EEH certainty and allow us to work towards producing an ambitious five-year plan, taking us into a new phase of partnership and impact between 2025-2030.
- 1.7. EEH works with local and combined authorities across the region, tailoring our approach to individual circumstances and structures. For example, we work to ensure EEH's tools and expertise are supporting the development of local transport (and connectivity) plans, reducing duplication of effort, sharing sources of data and evidence and supporting innovative approaches. In other examples, EEH is focusing on specific areas of interest to both local partners and the government, such as providing advice and guidance on options for future bus reform models.
- 1.8. Recent successes in making the strategic case for East West Rail and Ely Area Capacity Improvements have demonstrated the impact that England's Economic Heartland has when making the case for major infrastructure investment by:



- Acting with a single voice for the region
- Basing the case for investment on robust and trusted evidence
- Joining partners in both the public and private sectors together to identify those priorities.

- 1.9. As partners in the region consider their devolution options, EEH will remain agile and work with them to ensure our role continues to focus on their needs while still remaining as low cost as possible.
- 1.10. EEH also continues to work closely with Government to ensure priorities of national interest are well planned and delivered, bringing regional insight, expertise and balance. This includes: maximising the opportunity and legacy of East West Rail; working alongside partners to support investments of national significance where the opportunity arises; and supporting areas such as Cambridge to achieve their economic growth potential.
- 1.11. The EEH Transport Strategy, published in February 2021, remains the policy driver behind EEH's three year business plan and ongoing programme of work. The principles set out in the EEH Transport Strategy align closely with the Government's missions and the strategic priorities of the Department for Transport and therefore every element of the proposed work programme for 2025/26 will deliver against one or more of those missions. Our work programme and approach is intentionally designed to be agile, helping EEH and our local authority partners to respond quickly and flexibly to evolving government priorities.
- 1.12. In 2025/26, EEH will set about reviewing the Regional Transport Strategy to ensure it remains fit for purpose. A proportionate review of the strategy will ensure it can continue to work in support of the government's missions and the emerging Integrated National Transport Strategy while also evolving to support new Strategic Authorities as they come on stream.
- 1.13. Every year, EEH publishes an Annual Report (2023-24¹) which sets out how EEH is delivering against its priorities and commitments. These, along with the Three-Year Business Plan, published in May 2022 set out the golden thread of delivery of EEH's work from DfT priorities, EEH transport strategy and individual annual work programmes. These documents, along with our one year Spending Review submission therefore form part of the 2025/26 work programme submission. The det

2. Reflections on 2024/2025

- 2.1. Our work during the upcoming financial year will build on the successful approach put in place since 2022 – successes which have further solidified and enhanced EEH's reputation as a trusted and influential partner in the region.
- 2.2. During 2024/25 EEH:
- Delivered the agreed annual programme of work due to strong programme and budget management – ensuring that following the change of government, we have been able to deliver the programme within the timeframe required.

¹ [Annual Report 2023–24](#)



- Significantly enhanced our technical capability and evidence suite, introducing new tools for EEH and local partners including Cadence, ECVI and the decarbonisation playbook (CAP tool).
- Strengthened the team, particularly through the (external) investment in our analytical capability.
- Further developed our relationships with National Highways and Network Rail moving further towards shared priorities and outcomes (for example, this led to Network Rail progressing the opportunity for rail services between Bristol and Oxford, which could be in operation as early as 2025).
- Established the Wider South East Rail Partnership, a significant opportunity to work across STB areas and London.
- Played a key role in securing government commitment to one of the region's flagship schemes: East West Rail (with the East West Main Line Partnership). We continue to press for investment in the second flagship scheme: Ely Area Capacity Enhancements.
- Developed the EEH Centre of Excellence, which is now being rolled out including through careers networks; quarterly masterclasses; daily policy bulletins; sharing lessons learnt on major infrastructure delivery; and playing a key convening role for the sharing of best practice.
- Led the region's approach to increasing bus patronage: hosting our second bus symposium which gave members and officers access to expert advice and has led to continued focus on bus policy and approaches during 2024/25.
- Contributed evidence to the Transport Committee inquiry on East West Rail and responded to many different consultations to ensure the region's voice was clearly articulated.
- Engaged with the new intake of MPs to understand the priorities for their areas, which has directly supported new work being undertaken in conjunction with local partners, for example on extending the Luton-Dunstable busway to Leighton Buzzard
- Secured around 25% of additional funding through innovation funding and other project-related activity, demonstrating that with certainty of core funding, STBs are able to leverage more support and bring wider benefits.

3. Ambition for 2025/2026

- 3.1. Producing a three-year plan was an important way of ensuring EEH had an agreed, long-term programme of work and, that our Board and Ministers were able to hold us to account. This additional roll-over year allows EEH to further embed the Government's priorities, and to ensure the region is delivering our own priorities and realising our own economic opportunity.
- 3.2. Our submission to the Spending Review will set out the long term direction for EEH, as an established devolution partner and a body that can provide streamlined approaches that improve transport and connectivity for communities and businesses across the region.



- 3.3. While showing the flexibility to respond to new challenges and opportunities as they have arisen, we are proud that we have successfully delivered the plan's priorities over the last three years. It's a success we will replicate in 2025/26.
- 3.4. The EEH region is made up of a large number of smaller, polycentric economic areas consisting of relatively small cities, large towns, market towns and rural communities. As a result, the transport and connectivity challenges in this region vary significantly from those experienced in other parts of England, particularly where a metropolitan city plays a dominant role in the region's economy.
- 3.5. EEH recognises the strong synergies with our partners in Transport for the South East (TfSE) and Transport East, who have similar polycentric economies and similar links with London. While ports feature highly for TfSE and Transport East, the EEH region is critical to a successful freight and logistics sector for both of those STBs given our role in connecting the south and east with the Midlands, the north and the rest of the UK. It is for this reason that 2025/26 will see us supporting the continuation of those partnerships with Transport East and TfSE, notably through the continued development of both the Wider South East Rail Partnership and the Wider South East Freight Partnership.
- 3.6. With a GVA of more than £170bn, the EEH region is already a net contributor to the economy. We're home to five out of six of the UK's 'fast growth cities' (Cambridge, Peterborough, Milton Keynes, Oxford and Swindon).
- 3.7. According to research by Cambridge Econometrics, of the seven sub-national transport body areas the EEH region is ranked first for:
- Economic growth
 - Jobs growth
 - Population growth
 - Exporting intensity
 - Foreign investment
 - Concentration of R&D jobs
 - Patent filings
- 3.8. The region accounts for 25% of all life science jobs in England, while other knowledge-intensive sectors such as advanced physics and engineering and digital and creative also feature prominently.
- 3.9. There are 183 established 'innovation clusters' (as defined by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology) located throughout the EEH region, hosting 15,900-plus knowledge-intensive firms and receiving £855m of public research funding. Thirty-three of these clusters, including those associated with med-tech, robotics, data, artificial intelligence, pharmaceuticals, quantum physics and food-tech, are ranked within the 10 biggest in the UK for their specialism – these clusters are located in Oxfordshire, Milton Keynes, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire.
- 3.10. But, as government has recognised, the region could deliver more and, as business leaders repeatedly tell us, improved connectivity is crucial to unlocking our true potential.



3.11. EEH has a vital role in planning and improving connectivity which will:

- Improve productivity (which has fallen to below the national average)
- Create agglomeration benefits by linking knowledge-intensive clusters and enlarging the labour market
- Attract international investors (for whom the choice is between our region and other international locations)
- Unlock opportunities for our local partners to plan sustainable housing growth

3.12. That's why EEH will continue to develop the key priorities of the Board, and the Department for Transport in line with the region's transport strategy. And we will ensure that our focus remains on delivering impact – on the ground – for communities, business and for the UK economy.

4. Staffing

4.1. The EEH team is small and agile. We have the benefit of staff who are dedicated to the region, hardworking and bring great diversity in experience, including:

- local government staff – on a combination of secondments, fixed term contract and permanent appointments
- staff with central government expertise – strengthening the knowledge transfer between central and local government
- staff with excellent links with private sector and universities – enabling EEH to maximise our impact in the region's science, innovation and technology sectors
- staff recruited from different sectors – for whom this is their first role in transport.

4.2. EEH has always had a commitment to increasing the capacity and capability of the transport sector in the region. Our ambition has been to develop and retain staff into the transport sector – ideally within EEH or one of our partner local authorities. To date, EEH has supported two (completed) apprenticeships. We have three early career stage team members – two graduates who are new to the transport sector and one individual who we are investing and supporting through a management apprenticeship. This year we recruited a further apprentice into the team as a data analyst.

4.3. DfT business planning guidance also requires STBs to reduce dependence on consultants and increase our focus on staff recruitment, further addressing the skills gap in the sector. EEH's wish is to balance this expectation with our ambition to remain small and agile. In 2024/25, we added three new posts to the team. These posts allowed us to significantly develop our capability in two key areas:

- Analytical capability - providing dedicated support to individual local authorities in the application of the EEH suite of tools and data bank and in the development of a new regional model (funded externally).

- Policy – particularly focusing on transport integration and door to door connectivity. The delivery of East West Rail as part of a genuinely integrated public transport network is an important priority for EEH.

5. Local contributions

- 5.1. In addition to programme funding from government, our member authorities also make a financial contribution towards EEH. This is an important part of our funding programme as it provides support to cover communications, effective engagement activities, and a proportion of operational and staff costs.
- 5.2. At a time when local authorities are experiencing severe financial pressures, their continued investment in EEH demonstrates the significant value they place in our work.
- 5.3. The financial contributions made by local partners ensures our Board members have a major stake in ensuring EEH's success as a locally-led body with flexibility to deliver local priorities. At the same time, EEH's local contributions leverage a significant uplift in government programme funding to plan strategic transport investment in the region.

6. Structure of the Work Programme 2025 -2026

- 6.1. England's Economic Heartland's work falls under three, cross-cutting 'pillars'. Within these pillars there are specific 'key focus' areas which are priority areas for EEH's work in 2025/26 and beyond.
- 6.2. The Work Programme is set out in Annex A (Excel spreadsheet).
- 6.3. The work programme is supported by contextual narrative for each of the three core STB functions, set out in the paragraphs below.
- 6.4. If funding remains unchanged, EEH will have, for the past three years, been in receipt of static funding from DfT. This, in the context of inflation and staff cost increases, represents a reduction in real terms. As a result, EEH is having to reduce programme activity our program. There are some projects that are essential to delivery of the EEH core programme and outcomes but, which we simply cannot afford to take forward. These are highlighted in the work programme – we would welcome a further discussion with the Department about how we manage these additional projects.

7. Focus area 1 – Planning and Priorities

"Planning, identifying and aligning policies and priorities which elevate strategic connectivity and support devolved regional partners"

Context

- 7.1. EEH published its transport strategy in February 2021. It was developed through extensive engagement, a formal consultation process and reviewed via an Integrated Sustainability Appraisal. As a result, the principles and policy framework in the strategy were designed to be sufficiently agile to accommodate and where appropriate make the most of national policy shifts, technological advancements and changes in travel demand.



- 7.2. The EEH Transport Strategy was received and acknowledged by the Secretary of State for Transport in 2021. In line with the legislative provision for STBs, the Secretary of State must have regard to the proposals contained in the Transport Strategy when determining (a) national policies relating to transport (so far as relevant in relation to such proposals), and (b) how such policies are to be implemented in relation to the area of the STB.
- 7.3. Since publication, a major focus of EEH's work programme has been to move the policies and priorities in the transport strategy to delivery. We have progressed regional priorities around bus, road, rail and active travel solutions for the benefit of a single integrated transport system. This includes work to ensure the benefits of East West Rail – one of the UK's flagship infrastructure projects – are maximised for the benefit of the region's residents and businesses as well as the country as a whole.
- 7.4. In addition to the regional transport strategy, England's Economic Heartland is amassing a comprehensive evidence base through which we are identifying the priorities which realise the region's significant economic growth potential, while improving access to opportunities, and supporting net zero.
- 7.5. In 2025/26 we will continue to work with partners to progress the strategic case for priority interventions including through business case development and regional advocacy.
- 7.6. Given the Heartland's position in the centre of England, connectivity with the wider country is a key focus. We are working closely with partners to advocate and progress the Ely Junction upgrade, which will transform the country's rail freight network. Other strategic priorities include Oxford-Swindon-Bristol and Northampton-Old Oak Common rail services. Through the Wider South East Rail Partnership we are setting the region's expectations for the needs of the freight industry.
- 7.7. We will also, working with partners, develop our model for becoming a 'devolution partner' to our local and combined authorities. We will align local, regional and national policies and priorities (including supporting the Integrated National Transport Strategy) and support our partners during the transition to strategic authorities.
- 7.8. We support the ambitions within the DfT's planned Integrated National Transport Strategy (INTS) and the recognition that sub-national transport bodies such as EEH have a key role to play in shaping it. We are supporting DfT engagement on the INTS, including through the regional roadshow.
- 7.9. Over the coming year, we will review the region's strategic transport strategy. This work will ensure the strategy is aligning with emerging policy priorities (such as the INTS) and with our evolving role as a devolution partner.



8. Focus Area 2 - Improving and Integrating

"Realising a better, integrated transport system which harnesses innovation and maximises benefits of investment"

- 8.1. Our region's geography is defined by its smaller cities, market towns and large rural population, creating unique challenges for improving connectivity and integration. Yet the opportunities here are also unique: a strong culture of innovation and trialling of new technologies, fuelled by its world-leading universities and knowledge-intensive industries.
- 8.2. EEH is progressing the improvements which work for the region and make a real difference on the ground. Significant areas of focus are improving bus journeys and ensuring that the benefits of investment in projects such as East West Rail are maximised for the region and UK.
- 8.3. Our work also includes with the private sector to attract investment in mobility hubs, exploring integrated ticketing, and ensuring that transport is people-focused and inclusive.
- 8.4. East West Rail is the largest infrastructure project to benefit the England's Economic Heartland region – and one of the biggest in the country. A major part of our work is on ensuring that the value of Government's investment is maximised for the benefit of the region and wider UK.
- 8.5. This means working with Government, local and combined authority partners, industry and the East West Railway Company to ensure as many people and businesses as possible (both within and outside the EEH region) can benefit from East West Rail services within an integrated transport system. The delivery of a new rail scheme provides an irreplaceable opportunity to embed the principles of the INTS. But it also means planning for how East West Rail is a catalyst for wider improvements, for example to biodiversity, access to green spaces, active travel and digital connectivity.
- 8.6. More broadly, our role in supporting the region's rail network has developed a programme of work focusing on targeted improvements on each of the rail lines that serve the EEH region. Completion of the Connectivity Studies programme as well as the EEH Rail Lines study has provided a clear, compelling plan of action for rail across the Heartland region. While some of this involves major new infrastructure, many other interventions are low-cost, quick wins, including, for example, the resumption of services between Oxford, Swindon and Bristol.
- 8.7. The creation of the Wider South-East Rail Partnership, agreed by the Strategic Transport Leadership Board in July 2023, is now complete. The partnership is ensuring leadership around rail decisions in the wider South-East is being led clearly by the three STBs in the area, on behalf of our all of our local authority partners.
- 8.8. EEH is widely recognised for the lead it has taken on improving bus journeys in the region. We are making the business case for our regional 'Heartbeat' bus network – including identifying the routes which have the greatest opportunity to progress in the shorter-term, and how the network can be integrated into schemes such as East West Rail.

We are also working with partners to better capture evidence such as around the economic value of buses in their areas and supporting them with expert advice and assistance around opportunities for franchising. EEH is also working with two local authorities to explore how the concept of 'total transport' can be applied in their respective areas.

- 8.9. The Regional Active Travel Strategy (the final phase published in July 2023) sets out how consistent approaches to planning walking and cycling connectivity will ensure communities across the Heartland region will be able to use active travel as a core part of local trips or to connect into bus and rail stations. Varsity Way is EEH's flagship project for active travel, providing a "green spine" across the region that will enable people to connect into an active travel network. Varsity Way provides new leisure, amenity and tourism opportunities and will continue to be developed in 2025/26 as an investable proposition.
- 8.10. We will also continue to seek support to ensure investment in digital connectivity continues is supported as a core part of the region's transport and connectivity offer (not DfT funded).

9. Focus area 3 – Analysis and Excellence

"Supporting the capacity and capability of local partners with data, tools, expert advice and best practice"

Context

- 9.1. A critical part of EEH's role is providing credible, clear and evidence-based advice to Ministers on the region's investment priorities.
- 9.2. EEH will continue to play an important role supporting our local and combined authorities. By creating a shared resource for evidence, data, expert advice and best practice, we are focusing on cutting duplication, creating economies of scale, saving money and adding value to the region.
- 9.3. The England's Economic Heartland's Centre of Excellence is ensuring that its local authority partners have access to the shared knowledge, expert advice and review, and additional tools which adds value to their work. This includes, for example, through our shared data platform and tools allowing authorities to understand the potential impact of policy decisions on carbon emissions for their areas.
- 9.4. At the same time, EEH's analytical capabilities are being transformed, creating a step-change in the way we are able to understand the impact of interventions in the region. This includes through working with private sector and university partners to develop an innovative regional model (strategic), developed using emerging AI and ML techniques which will allow EEH to more robustly prioritise investment and colleagues to test the strategic need for interventions. The cost of developing the model is being funded outside of the DfT.
- 9.5. Alongside our growing and ambitious analytical capability, the EEH Centre of Excellence will continue to focus on the capability of the region to deliver high quality early-stage scheme development proposals, with a particular focus on developing the strategic narrative for transport schemes at pre-SOBC stage.



- 9.6. The long term EEH ambition remains the creation of a small dedicated team comprising specialist technical and professional skills upon which all partners can draw to support their development of detailed scheme proposals. The formation of the analytical team within EEH is complementary to this ambition.
- 9.7. As we continue to develop the function and our offer, we will continue to see economies of scale achieved, providing value for money for taxpayers. The team will accumulate knowledge and experience that can be retained within the region to the collective benefit of partners and to the Department through reduced risk over funding and delivery timescales.
- 9.8. A universal area of challenge for partners has been skills. EEH will continue to prioritise activity to develop a long-term plan to address the transport planning skills challenge in the region, building on the conclusions of our transport planning skills roundtable. This will complement work undertaken by DfT and professional bodies, as well as being cognisant of the immediate pressures on local authorities in terms of resources and time constraints.

**England's Economic Heartland
January 2025**

Annex A – Business Plan Summary Sheet (including commercial and HR information – not for publication) – see Excel Spreadsheet