

# Strategic Transport Leadership Board

7<sup>th</sup> March 2025

## Rail Update

### Agenda Item 5

#### *Recommendation:*

**It is recommended that the Strategic Transport Leadership Board:**

- a) Agrees the position paper for the Wider South East Rail Partnership as given at Annex 1 as the basis to drive further partnership working on planning for rail across the wider south east**
- b) Notes the update on rail reform proposals and agrees the key areas for EEH's consultation response (section 4.9)**
- c) Notes the update on planning for rail investment priorities, including the proposed Oxford to Bristol service opportunity, now summarised in a narrative/ advocacy document as given in Annex 2, and the Ely junction project.**

#### **1. Purpose of paper**

- 1.1. To give an update on wider rail matters, including work of the Wider South East Rail Partnership, rail reform, and priority rail investment priorities, including the Oxford - Swindon-Bristol service, and the Ely Junction improvement scheme.

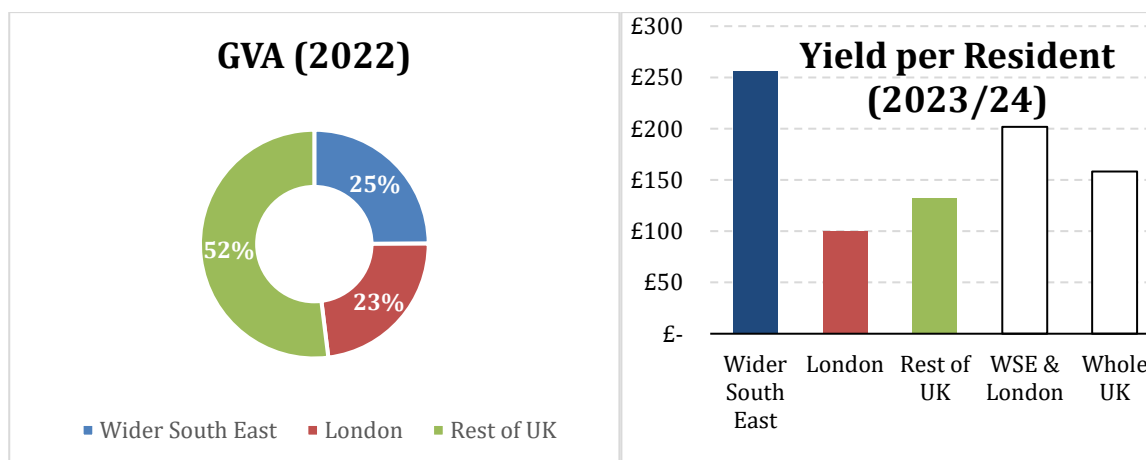
#### **2. Key points to note**

- 2.1. A proposed position paper on the Wider South East Rail Partnership sets out the opportunity for developing priorities for rail in the context of both rail reform and devolution
- 2.2. EEH is proposing to respond to Government's consultation on rail reform, broadly welcoming the plans and highlighting the role of sub-national transport bodies in supporting the ambitions of new mayoral authorities across larger geographies
- 2.3. EEH continues to advocate for key rail projects including the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link (for which an advocacy document was presented at the last meeting of the Board; Oxford-Swindon-Bristol services (for which an advocacy document is presented to this Board); and Ely Junction (for which EEH continues to work with partners to make the urgent case).

#### **3. The Wider South East Rail Partnership**

- 3.1. The Wider South East Rail Partnership was set up by EEH, Transport East and Transport for South East) to work with Transport for London and the rail industry more closely on planning for developing rail across the wider south east of England.

- 3.2. In September 2024 the Board was updated on development of a document setting out the priorities for rail across the wider south-east and how the partnership can positively plan and help deliver these priorities. A final draft position paper has now been produced jointly with Transport East and Transport for South East that sets out the opportunity for rail across the south-east of England to support in particular support economic growth, and how the partners can better work together to deliver an integrated rail network across our areas.
- 3.3. The full final draft document is given in Annex 1, but in summary the following is highlighted:
- The importance of the economy of the wider south east, recognising that the rail network provides a critical role in supporting this: The wider south east area contributes 25% of UK GVA, and nearly half of all GVA if also including London (where many residents of the wider south east work).
  - The importance of the wider south east in supporting the rail network: Train operating companies that serve the wider south east area and London account for approximately half of the nation's farebox revenue, with the yield per resident in the area 53% higher than the rest of the UK.
  - The challenges of planning for developing the rail network and passenger services in the context of changes in usage over the last few years, with more flexible commuting patterns and the rise in demand for leisure travel.
  - The opportunities and wider benefits associated with growing rail freight across the network, for example from ports, should key investment projects (such as Ely Junction) come forward.
  - The opportunity for the rail network to support sustainable growth of both jobs and housing across the wider south east.



- 3.4. The position paper further sets out that the Wider South East Partnership can provide a unified, pan-regional voice for the rail needs of the wider south-east area. In essence, it provides a 'ready-made' framework for key regional and rail partners to come together to provide strategic oversight to rail planning, including mayoral strategic authorities as they are formed. The following key objectives are identified to steer partnership work:
- **Articulate investment priorities and secure funding for the area**, including bringing together relevant evidence base and plans.
  - **Enhance integration across modes and political boundaries**
  - **Help passenger demand recover and strengthen the industry's finances**



- **Promote rail freight growth and modal shift**
- **Advance net zero and wider environmental goals**
- **Unlock the economic potential of the wider south-east**

3.5. Finally, and importantly, the position paper outlines the key activities that the partnership can undertake to further develop the rail network across the wider south east. These are:

- Collaborating amongst the partners on producing **data and insights** that will help plan for delivery of improvements.
- Working to drive forward **policy alignment and impact** across local, regional and national levels, with appropriate evidence used to help develop and influence policy and plans.
- Supporting the development and delivery of the **Integrated National Transport Strategy**, recognising rail's role in helping deliver multi-modal transport connectivity.
- Continuing to lead **collaborative working** between the sub-national transport bodies, other devolved authorities as they are formed and the rail industry and central government to plan and take forward national and cross-boundary travel opportunities, including as the rail industry consolidates under the planned set up of Great British Railways.
- Ensuring that **Government and industry engagement and advocacy** is enabled to allow key priorities to be planned and delivered.
- Progressing priority areas of work through appropriate, timely and **transparent communication**.

3.6. In summary, the Wider South East Rail Partnership is expected to be a key mechanism to strengthen dialogue and collaborative working with government, industry, and stakeholders to influence future funding and policy decisions on rail.

3.7. Given the current focus on development of an Integrated National Transport Strategy, a key priority will be advancing initiatives that integrate rail with other transport modes, ensuring seamless and sustainable journeys for passengers and freight.

3.8. The Board is asked to agree the position paper as the basis for EEH input to the partnership work going forward.



#### 4. Rail Reform

- 4.1. The Wider South East Rail Partnership will provide a consistent framework, alongside other forums, for EEH to engage with the rail industry as reforms come forward, particularly in relation to the planned set up of Great British Railways.
- 4.2. Central government has recently launched a consultation, 'A Railway Fit for Britain's Future' which sets out more details of what is proposed to be included in the Railways Bill. This will enable the establishment of Great British Railways, planned to be 'a single directing mind that will run our rail infrastructure and passenger services in the public interest.'<sup>1</sup> It would be the biggest change to the way railways are run since the introduction of privatisation over 30 years ago.
- 4.3. The consultation document sets out a number of proposed changes to the way that the railway will be governed, managed and overseen, including:
  - The establishment of Great British Railways, who will manage the rail network and most passenger services, taking over roles and responsibilities undertaken by several existing organisations including Network Rail, the Office of Road and Rail, Department for Transport and Train Operators.
  - The setting up of a new passenger watchdog to advocate for passengers and ensure their interests are prioritised, building on the existing functions of Transport Focus to ensure there is a multi-modal focus from the start.
  - A new access, charging and financial framework for running the railways to be led by Great British Railways, with 5 year funding settlements to be agreed with government for delivery of business plans.
  - Reform to the management of fares, with GBR given a role to sell fares through one central system, with the Secretary of State's role 'in securing the overall affordability of fares' remaining in place.
  - Confirmation that freight will continue to be operated by the private sector under the new access regime, with opportunities for open access operators to operate passenger train services retained.

#### *Great British Railways and devolution*

- 4.4. An important section in the consultation document sets out the opportunities associated with devolution, and how it is expected that regional and local areas can have more of a say on how the rail network is managed and developed.
- 4.5. It specifically notes that it is proposed to create '*a statutory role for devolved governments and Mayoral Strategic Authorities in governing, managing, planning and developing the network.*'
- 4.6. Whilst the document acknowledges that the extent of the role of Mayors in directly managing train services will vary depending on their '*ambitions and institutional capability,*' the document sets out that there will be clear expectation that GBR local business units will work closely in partnership with local and regional partners on priorities such as those set out in Local Transport Plans. The document summarises the proposed engagement framework for GBR in the diagram set out overleaf.
- 4.7. Importantly, the document also makes clear that '*this will include working with sub-national transport bodies on matters of regional interest.*' During the intervening period, while Great British Railways is being set up and strategic authorities are becoming established across the region, there will continue to be an important role for EEH. The wider SE Rail Partnership complements this, adding leverage and removes artificial boundaries from our approach to rail planning.

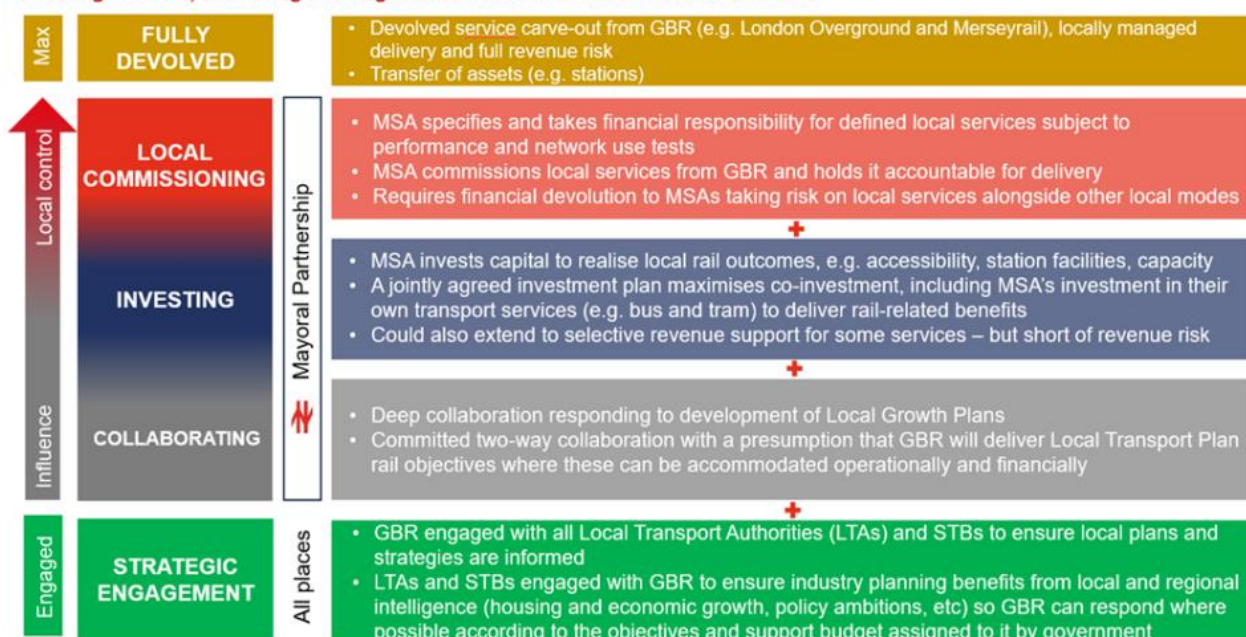
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<sup>1</sup> [A railway fit for Britain's future - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/a-railway-fit-for-britains-future)



# GBR Mayoral Partnership Framework

In practice, MSAs may take a range of these options in their area, e.g. having a local commissioning relationship on some rail lines, investing in others, and having a strategic collaboration in all rail services for their area



## Response to consultation

4.8. It is proposed that EEH responds to the consultation by the deadline of 15 April, including focusing on the following the key areas:

- Welcoming the overall plans for rail reform, recognising the significant opportunities that the setting up of GBR brings to better manage and develop the rail network for the long-term
- The importance of STBs having a continued key role in advising and representing the interests of local partners in relation to planning for the rail network, as well as bringing new Mayoral areas over wider geographies together to work on common areas of interest
- The importance of GBR strategies and plans to take into account all local and regional policies, plans and evidence base, including that produced by sub-national transport bodies and local authorities. This will be particularly important over the next few years given that the level and pace of devolution will vary across the country.
- The opportunity for new partnerships and forums to drive and inform planning for improvements and changes, particularly the Wider South East Rail Partnership.
- The opportunity that rail reform could have to maximise the benefits of planned rail projects such as East West Rail, recognising that GBR, in engagement with regional and local partners, will be able to take more of a strategic view on how services across the country can be planned to obtain wider benefits

## 5. Update on rail investment priorities

5.1. At the Board meeting in September 2024 a number of workstream areas were agreed that would progress further development of the key priorities identified in the Main Line Priorities study. This including continuing to make the case for key strategic rail investment across EEH, including new Oxford to Swindon/ west of England rail links and the case for Ely Junction improvements.





### *Oxford-Swindon-Bristol services*

- 5.2. For Oxford to Swindon/ west of England rail links EEH officers have continued to work collaboratively with the rail industry and the Western Gateway sub-national transport body to make the case for a regular direct train service between Oxford- Swindon-Bath and Bristol. Using funding secured from the East West Main Line Partnership, officers have brought together key elements from the project business case work with economic data along the corridor in a new narrative/ advocacy document.
- 5.3. The document, attached as **Annex 2** to this paper is called 'The Case for reinstating Oxford-Swindon-Bath-Bristol rail services,' and sets out the case for delivering a new daily hourly service between Oxford to Bristol via Swindon, Chippenham and Bath Spa.
- 5.4. The service represents a 'quick-win', which could be delivered within 12 months at very little Government expense.
- 5.5. There is no additional capital investment needed for this scheme to come forward. Indeed, a Saturday service using existing train rolling stock is currently being trailed by Great Western Railway. As additional train rolling stock is able to be freed up from wider fleet decisions, a daily direct service could then also come forward, if needed incrementally to build up to once per hour.
- 5.6. As set out in the document, the additional operational cost for the new service is in the single-figure millions, and would need to be underwritten by central government. However, based on the business case work to date its expected that this would more than be offset by increased revenue as new passengers are attracted to the enhanced service.
- 5.7. The document will continue to be used to make the case for this additional service to central government and others making decisions on development of the future rail network. In summary the document highlights that a new Oxford- Swindon to Bristol direct services would:
  - Reduce overall rail journey times on the route by c. 30%, with new journey times between Oxford and Swindon of just 30 mins.
  - Enable passengers using East West Rail from Milton Keynes in the short-term, and Bedford/ Cambridge in the longer-term access to major destinations in the west with just one single (and simple) change at Oxford
  - Support a high growth economy along the corridor, worth £75.6 billion in 2022, and including extensive research and knowledge intensive jobs such as in the life sciences
  - Help support sustainable housing growth along the corridor, alongside supporting development of a net-zero transport network by providing a better alternative to private car usage
- 5.8. Recently an Open Access rail service proposal came forward for a new service between London and Paignton from First Rail Wales and Western which would use capacity on a section of the Great Western Main Line where the proposed Oxford to Bristol service would also operate.
- 5.9. Along with partners Western Gateway STB, Swindon and Oxfordshire, EEH was able to write to the Office of the Rail and Road outlining concerns that this proposal would impact on the ability of the Oxford to Bristol service to come forward, using the narrative document to highlight its benefits. This letter also referenced the points regarding the potential impact of open access proposals raised by the Secretary of State in her letter in January 2025.<sup>2</sup> It is understood that the impacts of this proposal on capacity and performance are currently being further considered by Network Rail and the ORR.

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<sup>2</sup> [Secretary of State for Transport's expectations for how open access will operate alongside a publicly owned railway - GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/secretary-of-state-for-transport-s-expectations-for-how-open-access-will-operate-alongside-a-publicly-owned-railway)



### *Ely Junction*

- 5.10. EEH continues to collaborate with stakeholders in the east of England on making the case for improvements to Ely rail junction (Ely Area Capacity Enhancements).
- 5.11. Building off the updated 'Keeping Trade on Track' document published in autumn 2024, EEH and the Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough joined MPs on the East of England All Party Parliamentary Group to write to the new Transport secretary at the end of 2024 urging that improvements to Ely junction go ahead as part of the forthcoming spending decisions. EEH have followed this up in our response to the upcoming Spending Review call for evidence, highlighting the need for funding to be released to progress the detailed planning and next stage of development for Ely.
- 5.12. More recently, EEH, alongside business representatives, have again supported the East of England all party parliamentary group in writing to the Secretary of State for Transport and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury (annex 3) to set out the case for releasing funding for Network Rail to progress Ely Junction improvements to the full business case stage, as well as allocate funding to delivery the smaller Haughley junction improvement scheme.<sup>3</sup> This letter highlights in particular how this rail improvement scheme ties with the government mission to deliver economic growth given it would:
- **Enable businesses from Land's End to John O'Groats** through increasing capacity for rail freight to key ports, thereby unlocking international trade opportunities.
  - **Unlock sustainable homes growth** through enabling improved passenger services for residents across a wide area.
  - **Relieve pressure on our stretched road network** through taking HGVs off key strategic road routes.
  - **Payback the investment 5-fold** given its high calculated benefit to cost ratio.
  - **Align with, and unlock, private sector investment**, including investment at Ports such as Felixstowe, and in rail freight rolling stock.
  - **Deliver greener transport**, reducing carbon emissions as freight switches from road to rail.
- 5.13. EEH will continue to work with other partners, including local and combined authorities, rail industry, neighbouring sub-national transport bodies and the East West Main Line Partnership to make the case for rail investment priorities identified in our evidence base work, in particular those identified in the Main Line Priorities Study.
- 5.14. In this regard, EEH also supported Oxfordshire County Council and Worcestershire County Council in the production of an advocacy document for improving the North Cotswold Line (see annex 4). This intervention was highlighted within the Main Line Priorities Study.

**James Gagg**  
**Project Lead**  
**March 2024**

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<sup>3</sup> [Urgent-Letter-to-Transport-Secretary-Heidi-Alexander-and-Chief-Secretary-to-the-Treasury-Darren-Jones-1.pdf](#)

