

# Strategic Transport Leadership Board

20 June 2025

## Item 2: Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor

### *Recommendation:*

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

- a) Welcomes Lord Vallance, ministerial champion of the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor, to the meeting.**
- b) Notes the activities and events which have taken place since the growth corridor was announced by the Chancellor in January, including the Spending Review.**
- c) Discusses the implications of the growth corridor, opportunities and challenges**
- d) Agrees the ambitions behind the hosting of a Regional Leaders' Summit in autumn; provides a steer on the topics to be discussed.**
- e) Notes progress on the East West Rail 'legacy' projects**

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

- 1.1. To provide the Board with context on the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor ahead of its discussion with ministerial champion Lord Patrick Vallance; and to update the Board on EEH's intention to host a regional summit in autumn.

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

- 2.1. Lord Patrick Vallance, ministerial champion for the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor, will address the Board at the start of this item and there will be an opportunity for Leaders, Mayors and other Board members to provide feedback.
- 2.2. Our region is crucial to the future of the UK economy, however, infrastructure improvements are required to realise its potential. While the Spending Review included continued commitment to East West Rail, it is important that we have certainty on the future of other necessary improvements as soon as possible.
- 2.3. As the only regional politically-led body covering the entirety of the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor, EEH has a key convening role.
- 2.4. EEH is looking to organise a Regional Leaders' Summit which puts local leaders at the centre of the conversation – we welcome Board members' input to shape the event.
- 2.5. EEH is taking a leading role on maximising the benefits of East West Rail across the region.

### **3. Context**

- 3.1. Our region is critical to the future of the UK economy. It is powered by world-leading universities and has internationally significant clusters in the sectors highlighted as critical to the UK's future in Government's Industrial Strategy green paper: life sciences, advanced manufacturing, defence, digital, creative and clean energy.

- 3.2. As EEH's own economic research has demonstrated, these strengths are present across the region. For example, Oxfordshire, Milton Keynes, Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire are all home to innovation clusters which are amongst the 10 biggest in the UK for their specialism. Peterborough, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Oxford and Swindon are all identified as 'fast growth cities'. Bedford has been chosen as the site of the Universal theme park. Silverstone, Westcott and Pinewood are amongst several economic jewels in the crown located in rural areas across the region.
- 3.3. In January the Chancellor announced Government's intent to go 'further and faster to unlock the potential of the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor' and 'drive forward investment, innovation and growth'.
- 3.4. The Chancellor appointed Lord Patrick Vallance, Minister of State for Science, as champion for the Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor. A cross-departmental Oxford-Cambridge unit has been established within Treasury, led by Cavendish Elithorn, who previously headed Department for Transport's Rail Infrastructure unit, which included East West Rail amongst its most high-profile projects.
- 3.5. On 20-22 May the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor hosted a pavilion at UKREiiF in Leeds – the UK's biggest property and infrastructure event. This was largely funded by the former Pan-Regional Partnership, and supported by EEH in collaboration with other regional partners such as the Science Supercluster Board and Universities Group. EEH also valued involvement in the highly successful Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority pavilion.
- 3.6. UKREiiF served to demonstrate the very considerable interest in the region amongst investors. A common theme during panel discussions was the significant energy and excitement which has now formed around the Oxford-Cambridge region, and the welcome focus towards science and technology-led economic growth. Several of the discussions focused on how existing communities can benefit from the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor initiative. For example, around improving local access to skills and jobs and enhancing the natural and built environment and overall quality of life.
- 3.7. What has also been noticeable in discussions around the growth corridor is the move away from using 'hard' borders to define its geography.
- 3.8. Earlier this month Lord Vallance spoke at the Oxford-Cambridge Science Supercluster conference in London. He said: *"We want this region to be the trailblazer for the growth mission that's central to our Plan for Change, and an economic engine for the entire country. Achieving that needs all of us – government, academia, local leaders and industry – moving in unison. My message today is: let's work together to seize this unique opportunity. This region has all the ingredients to be Europe's answer to Silicon Valley or the Boston Cluster, but we have to work together to make that happen."*
- 3.9. Having a high-profile ministerial champion and dedicated senior-level Treasury team unlocks significant opportunities for the region. This is particularly important in the context of a constrained fiscal outlook, and Government seeking to rebalance spending towards the Midlands and North.
- 3.10. Lord Vallance will address the Strategic Transport Leadership Board at the start of this agenda item.

#### **4. Role of EEH**

- 4.1. EEH has formed a strong working relationship with the Oxford-Cambridge Treasury team.
- 4.2. One of the core areas of interest for Lord Vallance and the team is the volume of data and evidence that EEH holds for the region, as well as our analytical capability. We are currently working with the Oxford to Cambridge team in HM Treasury to explore how EEH's knowledge, experience and analytical capability can strengthen or speed up decision making in Whitehall as well as to aid the case for investment in different priority schemes.



- 4.3. At the pan regional level, our influence is greatly strengthened by EEH being part of a regional strategic alliance which also includes the Supercluster Board, Universities Group and East West Railway Company.
- 4.4. The strategic alliance brings together key elements of the public, private, and academic sectors as well as local government in the region not only to champion but make real what is now known as the Growth Corridor.
- 4.5. Learning lessons from the past, the strategic alliance has worked together to develop a vision, align priorities and workplans, share knowledge and, most crucially, move forward towards delivery – based around key enablers for the corridor. We believe that we achieve more by working together than any of our organisations could alone.
- 4.6. An over-arching value of EEH is that decisions about the region at a place level must be steered by local elected leaders, who know their communities best.
- 4.7. Local government reorganisation (in terms of both the formation of strategic authorities and unitarisation) is under discussion in many parts of our region. Following the May elections, EEH welcomes a new Mayor and four new Leaders to its Board. The political geography of the region has never been so diverse. However, there are specific strategic opportunities and challenges for which leadership on a pan-regional basis can unlock solutions.
- 4.8. EEH is the only regional structure covering the entirety of the growth corridor governed by democratically-elected local leaders. With the Board's continued support and direction, we can play a critical role in convening this regional leadership at a strategic scale.
- 4.9. This sits alongside – indeed, complements – our wider work as sub-national transport body: identifying and advocating for regional priorities; maximising the benefits of investment; supporting our partners' capacity and capability through tools and data; and unblocking issues through our extensive network of contacts.
- 4.10. While these functions will always remain true, the focus of EEH is evolving in line with the expectations of this Board. Having established a robust evidence base on which to establish our priorities, we are increasingly looking to make a difference 'on the ground'. For example, working with partners in specific locations to explore how bus services can be improved; or how East West Rail can be integrated into the wider transport system. Alongside this, it has become clear the value that local and national partners place on robust data: we are working to ensure the region has the data with which to make informed decisions.

## **5. Spending Review**

- 5.1. During the recent Spending Review, the Government said there was 'a renewed focus on supporting growth in the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor, including confirming delivery of East West Rail between Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge'.
- 5.2. Continued commitment to East West Rail is warmly welcomed, alongside multi-year transport funding for local authorities, which we have advocated for some time.
- 5.3. However, it is now vital for businesses and local authorities that positive announcements are made at pace on the future of other priorities, including investing in vital projects such as Ely Junction, Cowley Branch Line and the region's key bottlenecks on our roads. We will continue to work with DfT and its agencies to make the strongest case for this investment as part of future rail and roads funding plans.
- 5.4. EEH's Spending Review submission, agreed by this Board, highlighted the necessity of appropriate infrastructure to realise the potential of our region.
- 5.5. Our region presents an outstanding opportunity for Government to demonstrate how it is taking an integrated and innovative approach to unlocking growth. Upgrading Ely Junction not only improves the way goods are transported across the country: it reduces congestion, it cuts emissions, and it significantly improves passenger services. East West Rail isn't just about trains between Oxford and Cambridge – it must be integrated into improvements into the wider transport system across the region, including onward rail connections, enhanced bus services, mass rapid transit and key road upgrades.



## **6. Regional Leaders' Summit**

- 6.1. At the final meeting of the Pan-Regional Partnership, which formally closed in May 2025, its Board agreed the transfer of £50,000 of unused monies to EEH to lead on regional engagement and strategic collaboration.
- 6.2. As part of this, EEH is currently organising a Regional Leader's Summit, to be held in the autumn. It is intended that this will become an at-least annual event, complementing other set-piece events such as UKREiIF.
- 6.3. The summit will be a major event which puts the region's leaders at the centre of the conversation. It will enable you to set the direction, collaborate on shared challenges, and speak with a powerful, collective voice on issues of shared interest.
- 6.4. Below are high level intended outcomes for the summit, however we would very much welcome the Board's views on these:
  - Local leaders' dialogue at a regional scale with ministers, government officials, business and university leaders, with the collective power to reinforce and strengthen messages
  - Opportunity to work through pre-agreed 'wicked challenges' and identify solutions with other leaders, government and invited experts. From these discussions it may be possible to agree high-level ambitions on various topic-areas, if deemed appropriate.
  - Dinner with wider selection of additional high profile stakeholders from businesses, academia, and infrastructure.
- 6.5. We are keen to understand the views of the Board regarding the ambitions for the summit. This includes which 'wicked challenges' could be explored. We envisage three topics being discussed on the day, and these could include:
  - Connecting economic opportunities with the right skills
  - Enhancing the region's natural environment
  - Addressing pan regional infrastructure challenges
  - Integrating transport and connectivity for people
- 6.6. Separately, EEH is also in discussion with partners about the establishment of a regional all-party parliamentary group. This has the potential to facilitate greater dialogue between MPs, ministers, local government, universities and businesses; share updates, celebrate our places; and strengthen collaboration and advocacy. However, there are costs involved in the establishment and maintenance of an APPG, which would need to be covered through sponsorship. The EEH business unit will carefully consider the implications of being involved in the APPG before coming back to the Board for final approval, should any additional funding be required.

## **7. East West Rail legacy**

- 7.1. The East West Rail Legacy Programme, supported by the Department for Transport, has four themes: Business Investment and Knowledge; Skills and Learning; Quality of Life, Place, Heritage and Culture; and Integration.
- 7.2. This Board received an update in the previous meeting. Since then, all themes have progressed, including those EEH is leading on: Quality of Life and Integration.
- 7.3. The Integration project is built on the recognised potential that EWR has to unlock and catalyse integrated transport for the region. Three key priorities have been identified: bus/rail integration, behaviour change and place making. Establishing effective first/last mile integrated travel with EWR at its core, provides the region with an unprecedented economic opportunity.
- 7.4. Local and combined authority partners and EEH are already mobilised across the region, providing the foundation and evidence for integration – from local interventions such as mobility hubs, through to the regional buses work on the Heartbeat network. This project provides the impetus for unlocking the potential and maximising spend for the best impact.
- 7.5. EEH is leading on creating a long-term Integration Legacy for EWR, bringing EWR's Door to Door Connectivity work together with our existing regional foundation.



- 7.6. The project outputs are all being developed in partnership with local authorities, EWR Company and other key stakeholders:
- Phase 1 by August 2025: Baseline where the region is at with Integration; Establish the scale of our ambition and the conditions of success needed to realise it
  - Phase 2 by November 2025: Co-create a programme of high impact activity to achieve integration, catalysed by the EWR scheme; Explore funding and delivery mechanisms
- 7.7. We have sessions planned with local authorities and other stakeholders during June and July.
- 7.8. The Quality of Life theme has been divided into three workstreams: Tourism, Biodiversity and Thriving Communities:
- Tourism: The region has a strong tourism sector and the EWR scheme presents a significant opportunity to improve access to destinations by public transport and sustainable travel modes.
  - Biodiversity: EWR can support biodiversity net gain and enhance the natural environment, progressing the pan-regional environmental principles.
  - Thriving Communities: This universities-led project will explore how communities that are not directly on the EWR line have the potential to benefit from the scheme. The outputs from this project will be an academic research project, with Anglia Ruskin University and Oxford Brookes Universities delivering the work, focusing on four towns. EEH has contacted the authorities covering these four places to ensure members have sight of the work which is planned.
- 7.9. The outputs for both of the first two projects will be to establish the baseline and plan high impact activity to maximise the value of EWR on tourism and biodiversity. We expect the Thriving Communities project to provide valuable, independent quantitative and qualitative information on the role EWR can play in the wider region.
- 7.10. The Science Supercluster and Universities Group are leading other EWR workstreams. These are:
- Business Investment and Knowledge (led by Science Supercluster) – using a spatial understanding of the innovation ecosystem in the region, identifying where investment will be most useful and where knowledge clusters or gaps exist.
  - Skills and Learning (led by Universities Group) – ensuring East West Rail is part of the solution to enable better collaboration so the region has the talent pipeline and upskilling needs to meet future regional and industry needs.
- 7.11. We will bring further updates and outputs back to this Board.

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