

Annual Report 2024/25



CONTENTS

FOREWORD 3

EEH IN CONTEXT 4

INTRODUCTION 5

PLANNING AND PRIORITISING 6

IMPROVING AND INTEGRATING 9

ANALYSIS AND EXCELLENCE 13

END OF YEAR FINANCIAL STATEMENT 15

FOREWORD

Welcome to EEH's annual report for 2024/25.

It has certainly been a busy year! Transformational developments, including Universal Studios and the expansion of London Luton and Heathrow airports, have been confirmed. Government has renewed its focus on our region, while setting its ambitions for economic growth, devolution, rail and bus reform and housing.

A fundamental requirement - if these ambitions are to be realised - is improved transport infrastructure and services.

That's why, in February, we fed our priorities for investment into the Spending Review. Our submission to the Chancellor really gets to the core of what our region needs to support economic growth - and, equally importantly, to ensure opportunities are unlocked which benefit our local communities and environment.

This means ensuring as many people as possible can access East West Rail stations and progressing associated infrastructure such as the long-promised link between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes. It means improving buses across the region - often the only realistic form of public transport available to people - and seizing quick and affordable opportunities to enhance connectivity, such as new rail services between Oxford, Swindon and Bristol. It means finding solutions to ensure our strategically important roads function as they should, while continuing to make the strongest possible case for Ely Junction which will transform the way freight is moved around the country, and cut road congestion in the process.

These are all things that EEH has worked on over the last year - and will continue to do so. Whether to secure investment in priorities or to work collaboratively to ensure, once committed to, they are developed in a way that maximises their return to the UK: to our economy, our local communities and our environment.

During the last year we have significantly strengthened our analytical capabilities, developed tools to support local transport planning, completed our programme of connectivity studies and published the "Connecting Economies" brochures—evidence-based blueprints for investment. Our collaborative ethos has enabled us to unlock barriers, advocate effectively, and ensure that the region's voice is heard at the highest levels. I am particularly proud of our work around improving bus services - so often the lifeblood of our communities - and the positive feedback this work has had from our local authorities and DfT.

As the only politically-led cross-boundary body, EEH is also convening local leaders with government, academia, and industry to support real-world improvements to our transport system.

Looking ahead, 2025/26 promises to be another landmark year: the opening of East West Rail between Oxford and Milton Keynes will be a powerful symbol of what sustained regional collaboration can achieve. It will also serve as a springboard for further progress—towards a more connected, inclusive, and prosperous Heartland.

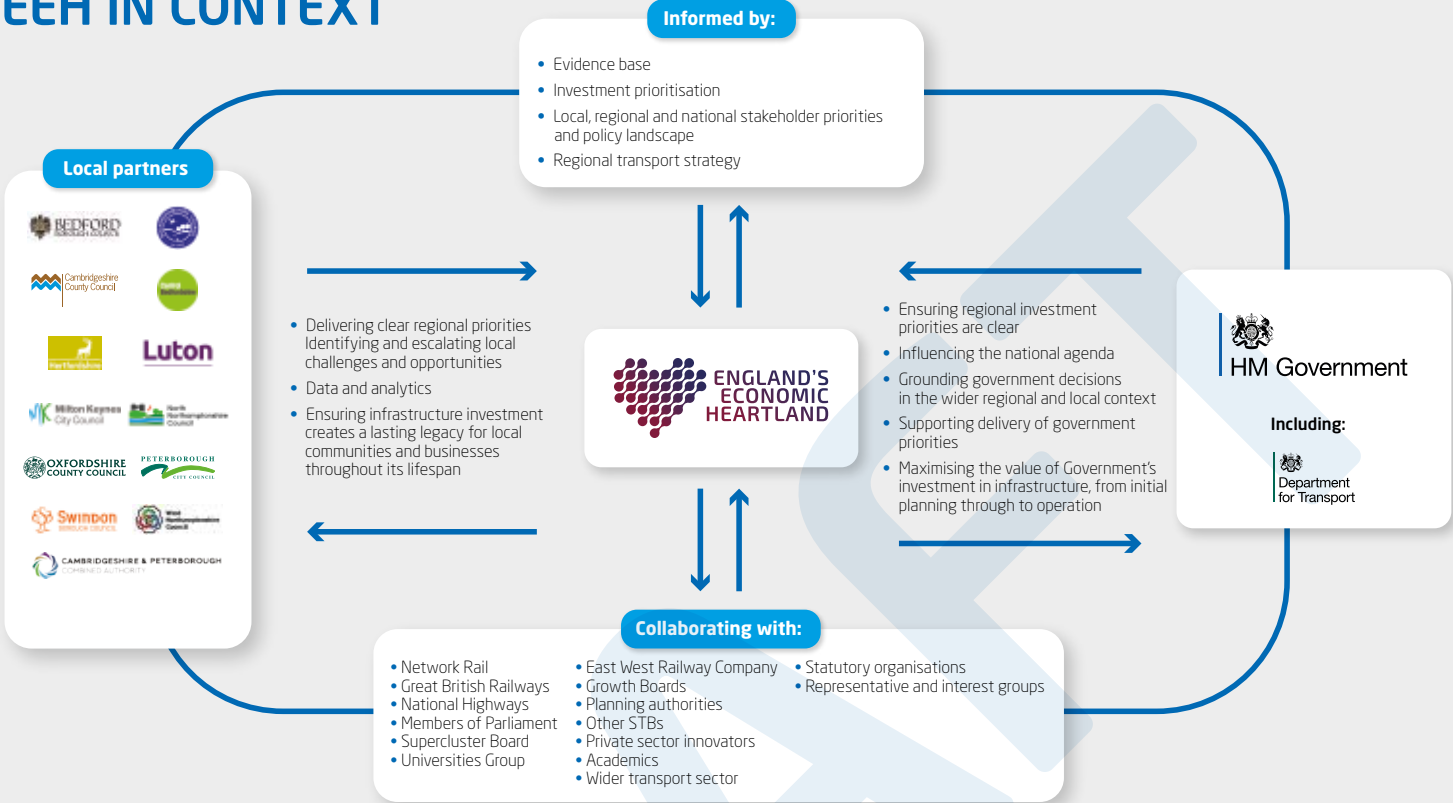
As Chair of EEH, I am proud of the progress we've made and excited for what lies ahead. Together, we will continue to champion the infrastructure and innovation needed to unlock our region's full potential—for the benefit of our communities, our economy, our environment and the country as a whole.

CLlr Liz Leffman

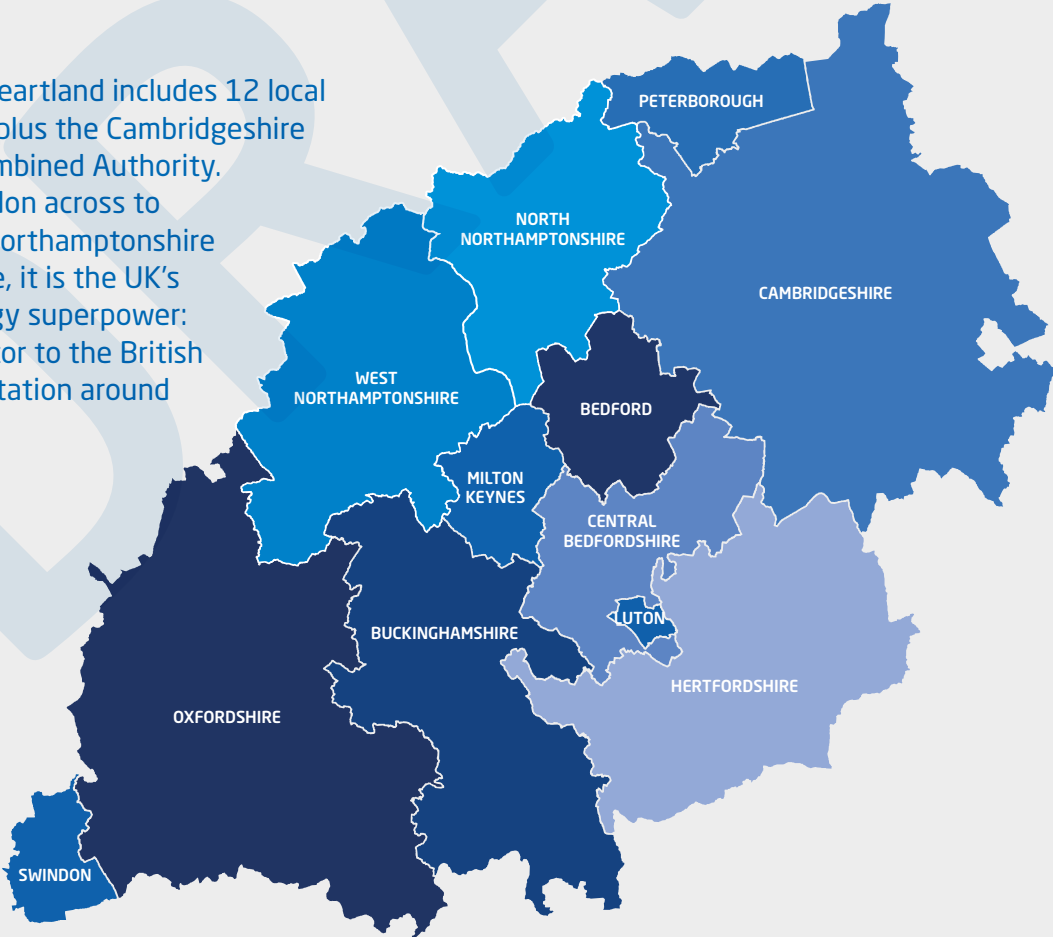
Chair, England's Economic Heartland



EEH IN CONTEXT



England’s Economic Heartland includes 12 local transport authorities plus the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority. Stretching from Swindon across to Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire down to Hertfordshire, it is the UK’s science and technology superpower: a significant contributor to the British economy and its reputation around the world.



INTRODUCTION

England's Economic Heartland is at the forefront of improving connectivity to realise our region's economic potential while benefiting our communities and the environment.

As one of seven sub-national transport bodies covering the entirety of England outside of London, we are jointly funded by the Department for Transport and our local and combined authority partners.

This annual report reviews the progress made on our 2024/25 work programme and looks ahead to our work in the coming year under the three interconnected pillars which guide our work:

- Planning and prioritising.
- Improving and integrating.
- Analysis and excellence.

A commitment to collaboration

Meetings of the Strategic Transport Leadership Board are held in public, its reports and minutes are publicly available on our website. Interested parties have the ability to address the Board on any relevant matter.

Our small core team of dedicated staff – operating as the EEH business unit – continues to provide EEH both capability and expertise that enables the region's ambitions to be realised.

With a strong focus on the power of collaborative working as a means of 'getting things done', the business unit, led by managing director Naomi Green, aims to operate with agility, keeping bureaucracy to a minimum whilst being accountable to the partners for its work.

During 2024/25 we strengthened the business unit's competence further, in particular developing our analytical capabilities to ensure we can provide the tools and data to support our work and that of our national, regional and local partners.

The business unit's work is greatly assisted by the support provided by officers drawn from our partners. Meeting as the Transport Officer Group, they provide advice and guidance on the EEH work, including participation in steering groups overseeing work.

There is a continued commitment of partners to invest in the work of EEH as the sub-national transport body, amounting to £449,627 in local contributions for 2024/25. This unlocks funding from the Department for Transport. For 2024/25, our DfT grant settlement was £1,426,000, an increase of 5.63% over the previous year.

PLANNING AND PRIORITISING

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

Identifying Priorities

EEH has continued to strengthen evidence on the interventions which support the ambitions of our regional transport strategy: realising economic growth and improved outcomes for our residents, businesses and environment.

Work during 2024/25 has included:

- **Completing our final three connectivity studies**, which have identified a range of multimodal interventions along the following corridors: Northampton-Buckinghamshire-Thames Valley; Buckinghamshire-Bedfordshire-Hertfordshire; and Luton-Bedfordshire-Corby.
- **Producing the Rail Main Line Priorities Study**, which provides a comprehensive baseline of rail in the region post-covid, considering not just the network itself, but the quality of door-to-door connectivity and interchange. It highlights nine 'packages for investment' across the network, which EEH is now working with partners to further develop.
- Developing the concept of the **Heartbeat regional bus network**, which connects hubs and key destinations within EEH, while integrating with the existing local bus networks. It is based on analysis of existing service quality and gaps in provision. An action plan which provides tangible recommendations for how the network can be achieved in a phased approach is due to be finished shortly. EEH has also commissioned KPMG to investigate the economic value of bus services to the EEH region and individual local authorities, which evidences the return on investment that improvements to bus services can realise.
- Completing an **investment matrix**, a filterable database of the schemes identified through EEH's evidence work and engagement with partners.



Collaboration

The evidence produced both during 2024/25 and in previous years has enabled EEH – in collaboration with its partners – to advise government on priority schemes for investment.

The **Strategic Transport Leadership Board** has set the direction for this work. Crucially, through meetings of the Board, during 2024/25 members have been able to have direct dialogue with decision-makers, including: senior directors within DfT; the new CEO of the East West Railway Company; and the managing director of Luton Rising, the body which owns London Luton Airport.

Meanwhile, the EEH team has engaged with countless organisations over the last year to ensure the regional voice is heard. This includes national bodies such as DfT, National Highways and Network Rail. In March 2025 our Board agreed the principles which will guide the **Wider South East Rail Partnership**, which will allow EEH, Transport East and Transport for the South East to better engage with the rail sector and articulate investment priorities, enhance integration and promote rail freight growth. Regional collaboration has continued to be greatly strengthened between **East West Railway Company, Oxford-Cambridge Universities Group and Oxford-Cambridge Supercluster**.

Through our **extensive, trusted relationships** with senior figures across Government, national and regional bodies, universities, private sector and local and combined authorities, we have been able to ensure regional priorities are understood and progressed. Moreover, these relationships have allowed us to play a vital '**problem solving role**' for our local partners: finding ways to unblock issues which have previously caused frustration and delay.

Advice and Advocacy

In autumn 2024 EEH released its seven **Connecting Economies brochures**, each an easy-to-digest compendium of priority schemes within a specific part of the region, identified in the investment matrix and through comprehensive engagement with partners. The brochures also contain expert economic analysis and narrative which supports the case for investment along these seven corridors. They continue to be a key way EEH advocates for funding on behalf of its partners.

During 2024/25 we produced (in collaboration with local partners and East West Main Line Partnership) **investment brochures** which set out the case for progressing the **Northampton-Old Oak Common rail corridor** (which includes the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link) and rail services between **Oxford-Swindon-Bath-Bristol** (see case study).

EEH also updated its *Keeping Trade on Track* brochure on the overwhelming case for upgrading **Ely Junction**, to reflect the priorities of the new government and the new intake of MPs. EEH chairs the Ely Taskforce, which includes industry, business, local and combined authorities, train operators and other sub-national transport bodies, to co-ordinate the advocacy for Ely.

The Connecting Economies and investment brochures were a key part of our **communications with MPs** following the 2024 General Election. EEH has been invited to brief a significant number of MPs in the region, which together with ongoing engagement with the East of England All-Party Parliamentary Group and the appearances of managing director Naomi Green as an expert witness on the Transport Select Committee (see below), has resulted in a significant uplift in our engagement with Members of Parliament.

The Connecting Economies and investment brochures also formed a significant part of our evidence into the multiyear **Spending Review** submission, a major chance for the region to set out its most pressing priorities for investment. Our submission had five main strands:

- Maximising East West Rail, including through world class integration, delivery of Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link, and connectivity west of Oxford and east of Cambridge (see page 10).
- Upgrading Ely Junction.
- Improving buses and progressing mass rapid transit (see page 11).
- Progressing road priorities, including those identified in the Oxford-Cambridge roads study.
- Ensuring appropriate funding for local transport authorities, ahead of any devolution arrangements.

Alongside the Spending Review submission, EEH has responded on behalf of the region to **consultations** by local, regional and national bodies. This has ensured the region's experience has helped shape policy at the national level.

These have included:

- East West Railway Company's non-statutory consultation (producing responses agreed by the respective boards of the East West Main Line Partnership and EEH).
- DfT's consultations on bus franchising powers and rail reform.
- Transport Committee inquiries on 'rail investment pipelines: ending boom and bust' and 'buses connecting communities'. In March 2025, our managing director, Naomi Green, was called to give evidence to the committee on enhanced bus partnerships.
- Office for Zero Emission Vehicle's consultations on the transition to electric vehicles.
- Office of Road and Rail's consultation on 'holding National Highways to account'.
- National Energy System Operator's consultation on the Regional Energy Strategic Planner role.
- MHCLG's consultation on the National Planning Policy Framework.
- Department for Business and Trade's consultation on the industrial strategy.

EEH worked with DfT to organise its workshop on the **Integrated National Transport Strategy** in Milton Keynes, which was attended by senior-level stakeholders from across the region. We also provided a detailed response to its call for evidence.

Case study: Oxford-Swindon-Bath-Bristol Rail Services

The need for improved connectivity between Oxford and Swindon (and onto Bristol) has been a recognised EEH and East West Main Line Partnership priority for many years.

It features in our regional transport strategy and has been highlighted within various rail studies and our Swindon-Didcot-Oxford connectivity study.

Our rail officer's strong working relationship with Network Rail helped ensure this priority was widely known and progressed. During 2024, Network Rail identified a potential to reinstate services between Oxford, Swindon, Bath and Bristol.

The East West Main Line Partnership (EWMLP) Board (for which EEH is secretariat) agreed to part-fund Network Rail's economic appraisal of this opportunity, which demonstrated a positive business case for hourly services. EEH and EWMLP worked with colleagues including at Western Gateway STB, GWR, Oxfordshire County Council and Swindon Borough Council to produce an investment brochure highlighting the case for the intervention, which would require a financial commitment of less than £10m per year (and is likely to pay for itself) and would enable greater access to East West Rail services at Oxford.

This report, which included new information and mapping on the knowledge-intensive sectors along the corridor, was shared with Rail Minister Lord Hendy. This was also picked up by local and trade media and gained support from MPs. The proposal was a key part of our Spending Review submission, and subject to commitment by Government, new services could be running as early as next year.



Case study: Northampton-Old Oak Common

By harnessing delivery of the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link, a new rail corridor between Northampton, Milton Keynes, Aylesbury and Old Oak Common can be unlocked, offering rapid interchange to the expanding Heathrow Airport.

The Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link has always been an integral part of East West Rail, included within Network Rail's Transport and Works Act Order application in 2020. Major housing development has been planned on the fair assumption that it would be delivered.

The case for the corridor (and the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link) is set out in an advocacy brochure, Global Britain: Rail, produced by EEH and EWMLP. It formed a key part of our Spending Review submission.

IMPROVING AND INTEGRATING

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

EEH is playing an increasingly important role in maximising the value of existing and upcoming transport infrastructure and services, ensuring it progresses towards a more integrated transport system.

East West Rail

During 2024/25 EEH acquired **dedicated expert resource** to support region-wide and local partner engagement with East West Railway Company and DfT, ensuring lines of communication are clear and that opportunities to leverage enhanced outcomes from the scheme are understood and actioned.

“East West Rail is a priority transport project for the Government. It is a crucial programme for unlocking opportunities across the OxCam corridor and delivering the Government’s growth mission. EEH has a key role to play in ensuring East West Rail is part of an integrated transport network and that the benefits of investment in the new line are fully realised.”

Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander

We have been working with government, local partners, East West Railway Company, the Pan Regional Partnership, Science Supercluster Board and Oxford to Cambridge Universities Group to explore how East West Rail can supercharge the ambitions of the region. This works across sectors, focusing on specific and high impact initiatives.

The programme was formulated through 2024/25, and in spring 2024 EEH published a prospectus, **‘Maximising East West Rail’** which sets out its different elements using a ‘corridor of corridors’ approach (see case study). The programme has initial support from HM Treasury, with some funding already available through the East West Rail ‘legacy’ fund, though with scope for further investment to multiply its impact. These will be further progressed during 2025, with projects led by EEH including:

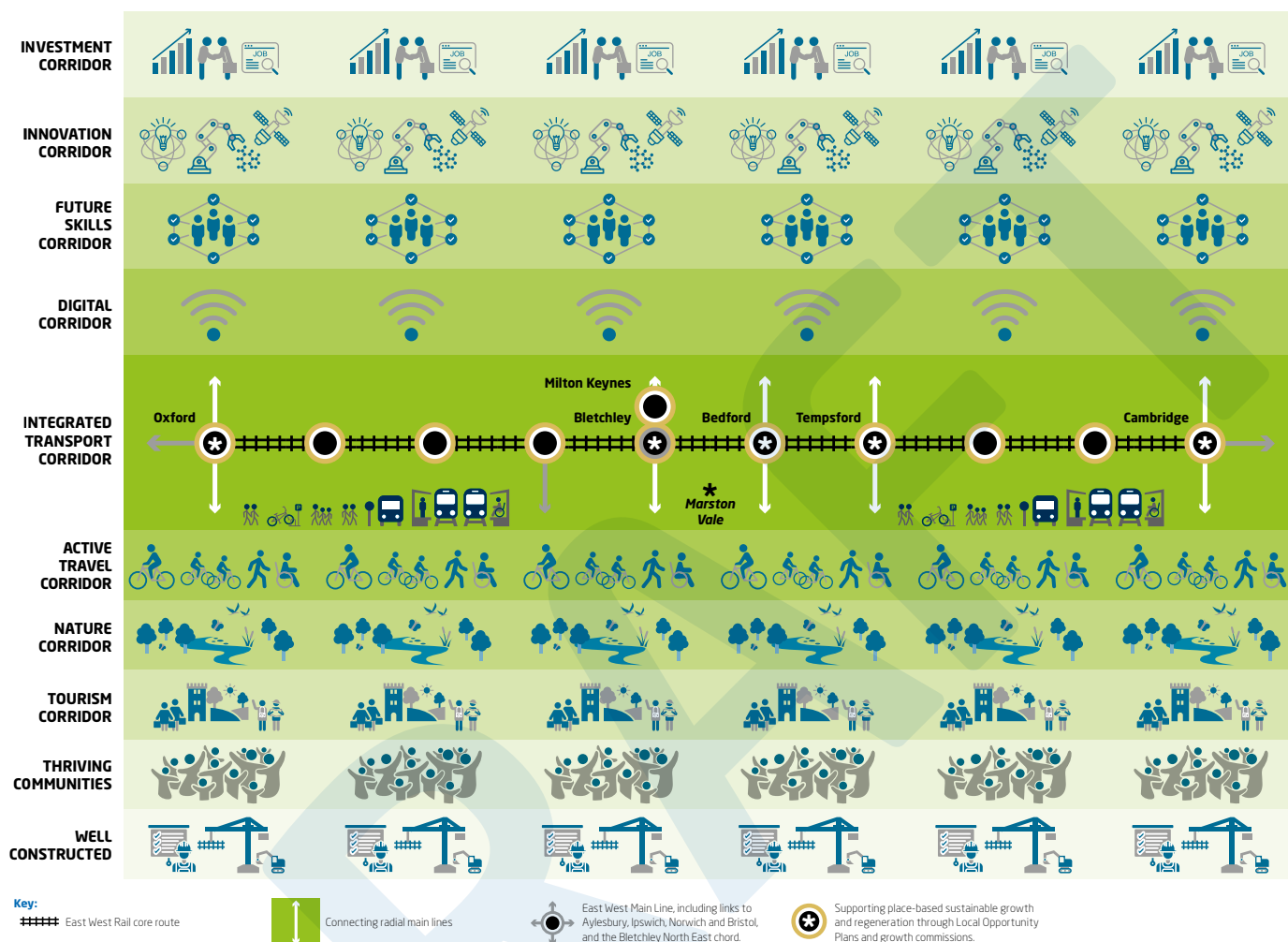
- East West Rail as the catalyst for a better integrated regional transport system, including improved door-to-door journeys from stations by bus and active travel to increase the number of people and businesses able to benefit from it.
- Maximising East West Rail’s contribution to the visitor economy and access to green space.
- Identifying opportunities for enhancing biodiversity along the broad East West Rail corridor.
- Understanding the potential benefits of East West Rail for communities not directly on the route.

During 2024/25 EEH has continued to make the case for delivering East West Rail as a **digital corridor**, in collaboration with England’s Connected Heartland.

We have also progressed our proposals for the **Varsity Way** – a landmark active travel corridor between Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge.

England’s Economic Heartland continues to provide the secretariat and officer support for the **East West Main Line Partnership**, which brings together local authorities and STBs from the east coast through to western England to champion the wider ambition for East West Rail and hold the East West Railway Company to account. The Partnership’s Board, which in October 2024 elected Cllr Katie Thornburrow as its new chair, has agreed to undertake a **‘lessons learnt’** report due for completion later this year. Based on interviews with stakeholders who were involved or affected by the planning and construction of the Oxford-Milton Keynes section (including local authority officers and members), this report will provide recommendations and advice for both councils and the East West Railway Company ahead of the sections to Bedford and Cambridge being delivered.

Case study: East West Rail: An Integrated 'Corridor of Corridors'



East West Rail's greatest potential is how it can connect and enhance the region's biggest strengths. EEH will work with partners to ensure East West Rail is catalyst for a far wider integrated, connected transport corridor.

At the same time, there are opportunities to use delivery of East West Rail to supercharge a regional investment corridor, innovation corridor, skills corridor, nature corridor, digital corridor, active travel corridor, and so on. Creating a fully integrated corridor of corridors: much more than the sum of their individual parts. Realising the ambitions for the region for the benefit of our communities, businesses and the wider UK economy.





Buses and mobility hubs

Improving bus travel is a continuous priority for England's Economic Heartland. Our work for 2024/25 was set by our Board following our inaugural bus symposium in late 2023.

This work included:

- **Total transport:** This considered how opportunities could be unlocked through a holistic approach to transport provision from multiple organisations, including home to school transport and patient transport. EEH is now working with local authorities in the region on a real-world 'deep-dive' into the implications of 'total transport'.
- **Bus Service Improvement Plan refresh:** EEH supported local partners on their BSIP refresh. This included providing evidence on the Heartbeat regional bus network, an action for which is currently being produced.
- **Bus market reform and network models:** Expert advice notes were produced for our partners on franchising and enhanced partnerships – particularly timely given the Government's intention to allow all local authorities to franchise. The advice on network models specifically looked at this in the context of the region's geography of small cities, market towns and large rural areas.

EEH held its second **Bus Symposium** in Northampton in September 2024. Delegates and speakers included local leaders and officers, operators, innovators and industry experts. The Department for Transport's director for buses and inclusion, Stephen Fidler, provided valuable insights into the government's approach to bus travel, and commented that EEH is 'really up there' for its continued focus on improving bus journeys across the region.

From this, a further programme of work was agreed which EEH is now progressing. This includes calculating the economic value of bus per local authority; progressing the Heartbeat regional bus network; and trialling the use of innovative passenger information solutions. During spring 2025 EEH, Luton Council and Central Bedfordshire Council agreed to a joint-study on the potential to **extend the Luton-Dunstable busway**. This followed extensive engagement during 2024/25 with local authority partners and local MPs. The opportunity was also identified in our connectivity study and Connecting Economies brochure.

In autumn 2025, EEH was delighted to be jointly awarded funding from the Rees Jeffreys Road Fund alongside Greater Cambridge Partnership (GCP). This project is focused on extending GCP's initiative on improving transport safety for everyday journeys for women and girls through focus groups and safety impact assessments for regional applicability.

During 2024/25 EEH progressed work to help accelerate the deployment of **mobility hubs** within the region. This includes exploring mobility hubs as an investable proposition. To support this, a draft **prospectus** was developed to help authorities in the region and the private investment sector to understand the opportunities for mobility hubs and help shape and showcase investment examples and potential sites.

To further support engagement with the private and public sector on mobility hubs, EEH facilitated a '**triage investment**' workshop on 6 February with KPMG to bring together both EEH authority partners, commercial mobility hub developers and private capital partners to explore opportunities for investment.

Freight Action Plan

In March 2025 EEH's Board agreed the freight action plan which builds upon our major freight study of 2019. The action plan contains new data and evidence about freight and logistics in the region. Priorities for action include addressing 'freight blindness'; future infrastructure; logistics planning; net zero; and innovation. An action plan 'matrix' is now being developed to support freight priorities in the region, this will be presented to a future Board. EEH continues to engage with the sector at a regional level through the **Wider South East Freight Partnership**, in conjunction with Transport East and Transport for the South East.

Innovation

EEH continues to work with university and private sector partners to harness innovation which improves the performance of the transport system.

As part of Connected Places Catapult's '**Local Authority Transport Decarbonisation Accelerator**', launched in 2024, we are working with two SMEs as they develop innovative solutions to better understand travel behaviours.

In spring 2025 we published our interim study into the potential of **smart junctions**, to improve and integrate journeys. This will be completed later this year.

During 2024 EEH worked with partners including Hertfordshire County Council and City Science to secure funding from the Centre for Connected and Autonomous Vehicles for a study to understand the potential to run '**dedicated, driverless**' articulated buses. This would use specific sections of the proposed Hertfordshire-Essex mass rapid transit (HERT) scheme. The findings of the study have been shared with stakeholders to improve understanding of the opportunities and challenges of using autonomous vehicles as part of MRT.

In summer 2024 EEH commissioned CENEX to review the status of electric vehicle adoption and **electric vehicle infrastructure** (EVI) installation across local transport authorities in the region. This exercise is a component of the Regional Electric Vehicle (strategy) Evaluations, Action Plans and Learnings (REVEAL) project, which aims to evaluate EV strategies, action plans and progress to support local authorities to effectively progress with EVI rollout.



ANALYSIS AND EXCELLENCE

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

At EEH we recognise the challenging fiscal environment in which our local and combined authorities – and Government departments – operate. That's why our fundamental objective is to add value to the work of our local and national partners: generating economies of scale, reducing duplication and realising additional benefits which more than pays back the investment they put into our organisation.

Centre of Excellence

Over the last six months EEH has accelerated development of the 'Centre of Excellence', building on our collaborative ethos as a locally-led partnership.

It consists of five, cross-cutting areas:

- **Cross-Regional Community** – bringing people together to form cross-regional communities based on a common interest
- **Information Provision and Tools** – improving access and usage of available information, tools and data
- **Thought Leader** – supporting EEH partners by working with academics/universities, and sharing insights through our own masterclass programme
- **Better Outcomes** – offering more intensive support to our local and combined authorities, including business case development and maximising the benefits of major schemes
- **Skills & Development** – tackling the skills and capability needs of the region in transport strategy and planning

Our **Early Careers Network** also offers officers opportunities to meet colleagues in the first five years of their transport careers on a quarterly basis, with the aim of building a peer community.

In addition, guidance, forum papers, tools and EEH research is available through our new **Knowledge Hub** – a digital library available to all officers. We are working with DfT to use the Knowledge Hub as part of their engagement with local authorities around analytical capability.

As part of the 2025 Green Book review, EEH discussed with HM Treasury the capacity and capability conditions needed for successful major infrastructure scheme development by local government. We emphasised the need for funding certainty; collaboration; acceptance/funding criteria stability; and challenges around resourcing for very early development (i.e. before capital funds can be drawn down).

Data and tools

EEH's regional evidence base is formed of data, tools and research, which are available to our local and combined authority partners and DfT. We have made it a key requirement that the regional evidence base is easily accessible and does not require specialist knowledge, to provide a consistent evidence baseline.

EEH's analytical and modelling team has grown during 2024/25, meaning that we can offer a greater level of bespoke support to our partners. We encourage partners to get in touch with us to understand how we can support them.

Our tools allow users to interrogate specific data and understand the implication of potential policies. For example, we have a tool which maps optimum locations for public EV charging points, while our Bus Bid Booster calculates the high-level monetary benefits of an intervention.

We are currently in the process of developing a web-based data hub to better visualise relevant datasets for the Heartland region. The data hub will be publicly accessible through EEH's website.

We are planning to launch our tools catalogue this summer, which will detail to partners all the EEH tools – and those further afield – available to support officers and members.

Tools in development include the next iteration of the EEH Land Use model, enhancing the accessibility of the intelligence derived from mobile network data and refreshing the data we hold on housing and employment sites as well as planned infrastructure.

Case study: Local Transport Summit

In December 2024 EEH hosted the Local Transport Summit in Bedford. This national-level conference, organised by Local Transport Today, attracted high-calibre speakers (including the local transport minister) and delegates from across the country. Our sponsorship ensured board members and officers from our local partners were able to attend the two-day event free of charge, unlocking a significant opportunity for learning, career development and networking, as well as showcasing the work of our local authorities to a wider audience.



END OF YEAR FINANCIAL STATEMENT

EEH 2024/25 - End of Year Budget

The end of year financial statement will be updated in due course.

DRAFT

Get in touch

📍 England's Economic Heartland
EEH Business Unit
c/o Buckinghamshire Council
Walton Street
Aylesbury
HP20 1UA

For general enquiries please contact 01296 382703
or email businessunit@englandseconomicheartland.com

🌐 www.englandseconomicheartland.com

Sign up for our newsletter – just scroll to the bottom of our homepage

✉️ @EconomicHeart

