



South East All-Party Parliamentary Group: transport inquiry call for evidence

England's Economic Heartland is the sub-national transport body for the region from Swindon across to Cambridgeshire. This includes Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes within the south east government region.

Jointly funded by the Department for Transport and our local authority partners, EEH advises the government on the strategic transport infrastructure priorities in our region required to realise economic growth while achieving net zero. We are also increasingly supporting our local authority partners with the capabilities, tools and additional capacity to progress their schemes and respond to government policy objectives.

Our transport strategy includes policies to:

- Harness the region's expertise in clean technologies to deliver a greener transport system
- Use investment in East West Rail and mass transit systems as a catalyst for transforming public transport
- Champion digital technologies to make transport smarter
- Improve local and rural connectivity
- Support the freight sector while reducing its environmental impact.

EEH has a strong working relationship with Transport for the South East, including through a number of joint projects covering topics such as supporting bus journeys and a net zero transport system. Together with Transport East (covering Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex), we form the Wider South East sub-national transport bodies grouping.

It is the view of EEH's board that investment in the region's infrastructure has not kept pace with the significant contribution the Heartland makes to the national economy. As a consequence, our transport system is under strain, indicated by high levels of congestion, high carbon emissions from transport and high levels of reliance on the car.

England's Economic Heartland would be delighted to speak at the SEAPPG's inquiry, providing insight on a range of topics including:

Net zero and the future of mobility

EEH coordinated the decarbonisation workstream on behalf of the seven sub-national transport bodies in England.

Our modelling in partnership with the University of Oxford has shown the important role which electric vehicles will play towards achieving net zero in the EEH region. However, the modelling is equally clear that the switch to alternative fuels will not in itself be enough to achieve the legal requirement for net zero.

Our identified pathway to net zero therefore also includes a reduction in the number of overall car trips through both reducing the need to travel and increasing modal share of sustainable modes such as public transport and active travel; combined with a smarter, connected transport system which allows for better, more efficient and integrated management of networks.

The chosen pathway informs our work. For example:

Electric vehicle tool: In collaboration with Transport East, we have developed a tool to help local authorities plan electric vehicle charging infrastructure. It includes robust baseline data, electric vehicle uptake scenarios and a forecast of likely charge point requirements. Based on traffic flow and power grid capacity it points to the likely sites where private sector providers will invest, further quantifying the likely areas of focus of public sector support.

Smart infrastructure: The principle of extracting maximum value from existing assets must become central to the way we design, fund and manage roads. Smart technologies offer a new opportunity to extract maximum value from what already exists. However, the extent to which the transport system is ready to respond to this opportunity is unbalanced, particularly when comparing the major and local road networks to the strategic road network, where National Highways is making progress with its 'digital roads' programme. EEH is currently undertaking a review of smart junction technology, including studies on their impact on traffic flow and congestion, safety, fuel consumption and emissions, and cost-effectiveness. This will inform further work – and develop our understanding of the benefit of deploying this technology across long distance, strategic corridors.

Mobility hubs: Mobility hubs are locations where demand for movement can be concentrated in a way that supports local public transport services, primarily via bus provision, ensuring greater opportunity to run services where they otherwise may not have been viable. EEH has recently produced the most in-depth guidance yet for local authorities preparing business cases for mobility hubs – particularly in more rural areas. The guidance was developed with input from EEH's partner authorities at Milton Keynes Council, Oxfordshire County Council and Hertfordshire County Council.

Investment in strategic roads including the A34

EEH's transport strategy set out the framework for roads investment in the future. The strategy is clear that EEH will continue to support investment in roads where there is a clear justification for them.

The region has a growing evidence base that identifies where the greatest need for roads investment exists, including the Oxford to Cambridge area connectivity: roads study underway by National Highways. Route Strategies and the government's third Roads Investment Strategy (2025 – 2030) are also live opportunities where EEH is working with DfT and National Highways to ensure our regional priorities are captured and committed to.

Of particular strategic relevance to the South East is the performance of the A34, particularly for freight and logistics travelling to the Midlands from the ports on the south coast and as a key part of the local transport network in Oxfordshire included as part of Oxfordshire County Council's Local Transport and Delivery Plan.

National Highways' A34 study focused on congestion and safety to the north and south of Oxford and public consultation on options was expected in summer 2022. However, in June 2022 it was confirmed that work had 'slowed down' and would be considered further in 'due course.' EEH continues to impress upon National Highways the need for an acceptable solution to be found on the A34 – one which balances its use as a strategic route with the needs of local residents, achieving net zero and improving air quality.



Priorities for rail

Given our comprehensive understanding of the region through our evidence base, combined with our strong political leadership and engagement, it is vital that EEH as sub-national transport body has a formal, significant and ongoing role co-designing levels of service with the newly-formed Great British Railways.

EEH welcomed the Chancellor's commitment to delivering East West Rail between Oxford and Cambridge. It is essential that a link connecting Aylesbury to East West Rail is delivered as soon as possible. The link was originally intended to be delivered as part of the current phase of East West Rail's construction between Oxford and Milton Keynes, due to complete by late 2024.

As detailed in Network Rail's Strategic Statement published March 2022, East West Rail between Oxford and Cambridge unlocks the potential for a coast-to-coast main line with direct services from Norfolk and Suffolk through to Reading and Southampton; and Swindon, Bristol and South Wales. This would transform the way people travel across the country, with fewer east-west journeys needing to be made via London. This opportunity can only be realised with investment in capacity along the Oxford-Didcot rail corridor. The East West Main Line Partnership (for which EEH provides administrative support) is currently promoting this strategic opportunity to the government.

Improving rail (and road) connectivity between the Oxfordshire and the South-West will unlock significant economic growth opportunities. However, it is important that improved connectivity with the south-west does not come at the expense of connectivity with London and the south-east. In this regard, the Midland Main Line serves as an example of where a policy objective to improve frequencies and journey times between London and the Midlands resulted in the unacceptable downgrading of services at Bedford – in the most extreme cases, commuters' jobs were put at risk because they could no longer get to work on time.

Increasing modal share of rail freight is a priority in EEH's transport strategy, reducing needless long-distance trips by HGVs which contribute to emissions and congestion. Increasing capacity at Ely in Cambridgeshire is the number one rail freight priority in the country, allowing more freight movements from Felixstowe to the Midlands and North. Doing so would potentially increase rail freight capacity in and around London and the ports on the south coast.

Connectivity studies

EEH is carrying out multimodal connectivity studies which identify potential interventions to improve the transport system. The first two of these looked at the Oxford-Milton Keynes and Peterborough-Northampton-Oxford corridors, while a third, based on the Oxford-Didcot-Swindon corridor, will be published shortly.

They include measures to ensure the right traffic is on the right roads, support the uptake of EV vehicles, boost rail connectivity and increase use of active travel and public transport, while reducing the impact of freight on the environment and communities.

The recommendations in the Milton Keynes-Oxford study include:

- Bus-based mass rapid transit systems in Oxford and Milton Keynes combined with inter-urban bus priority measures connecting places such as Aylesbury, Banbury, Bicester, Buckingham, Silverstone and Winslow.
- Infrastructure to realise the full potential of East West Rail such as the Aylesbury link, the Oxford North junction upgrade and the Bletchley north-east chord, together with investment in the stations which it will serve.



- Work to improve safety and resilience on strategic highways together with targeted improvements on key east-west links such as A421, A41 and A418.

Funding

The current nature of infrastructure funding is a source of frustration for our local authority partners. Of particular concern is the competitive funding process, which can often result in significant officer time being diverted to prepare bids or strategies which do not result in funding. It is the view of EEH that government should provide regions with a clearer indicative funding allocation so that a realistic pipeline of infrastructure priorities can be agreed and planned for delivery with much greater certainty than the current framework allows.

EEH Business Unit
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