

Strategic Transport Leadership Board

2 October 2025

Agenda Item 6: Integration

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Receives a presentation on the East West Rail Legacy Integration Programme Framework (Annex 1) and agrees the proposed approach to further engagement, including that it be brought back to the Board for approval in December**
- b) Agrees EEH's Response to the Transport Select Committee call for evidence on Integration (Annex 2)**
- c) Notes EEH's response to the Universal Entertainment Complex in Bedford consultation**
- d) Notes the update on EEH's work to support better bus services.**

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. To update Board on our major workstream considering how East West Rail can be fully integrated into the wider transport system, for the benefit of local communities, alongside information on responses to the Transport Committee's integration inquiry; Universal Studios consultation; and EEH's bus work.

2. Key Points to Note

- 2.1. EEH is progressing work to maximise the benefits of the East West Rail for local places, the region, and the wider UK – this forms the basis of EEH's EWR Legacy Integration Programme.
- 2.2. In support of EEH's integrated approach to transport provision across the region, we have responded to the Transport Select Committee's call for evidence on integration highlighting its importance in supporting sustainable economic growth.
- 2.3. EEH has responded to the Special Development Order consultation on the proposed Universal Entertainment Complex at Kempston Hardwick in Bedford Borough: highlighting the need for an accessible public transport network to support the park.
- 2.4. Linked to our integrated transport approach this paper also provides an update on EEH's buses work which is key part of an integrated transport network.

3. Context

- 3.1. Integrating transport networks is central to delivering a system that works for people, places and the economy.
- 3.2. By enabling high quality and seamless 'door-to-door' journeys across multiple modes, it ultimately ensures the transport system is more than the sum of its individual parts: maximising the benefits of existing and new infrastructure; making public transport and active travel more attractive; reducing congestion; and improving access to jobs, education and healthcare.

- 3.3. England's Economic Heartland's 2021 Transport Strategy embeds integration throughout its approach. The Government's Integrated National Transport Strategy (INTS) in 2024 set out a unified vision to end fragmentation and champions seamless journeys. We are expecting further announcements about the INTS in the coming months.
- 3.4. The arrival of East West Rail offers the opportunity to realise the ambitions of the INTS and create a regional legacy of integration best practice.

4. EEH's East West Rail Legacy Integration Programme

- 4.1. EEH's East West Rail Legacy Integration Programme, supported by additional DfT funding, is designed to complement existing activities underway in the region and in support of East West Rail. This includes East West Railway Company's station design work; local and regional partners making the case for the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link and coast-to-coast connectivity; and digital connectivity.
- 4.2. For Phase 1 of the Legacy Integration workstream, EEH commissioned consultants Steer to draft a framework for the region, setting the scale of our ambition and the conditions of success.
- 4.3. Phase 1 establishes a framework for defining regional integration interventions. It puts forward a case for the 'need for intervention' and considers the regional scale of ambition for taking action. An Integration Plan framework is designed to help set appropriate interventions. This is based on a place and station typology.
- 4.4. It is important to note that while Phase 1 focuses on opportunities around East West Rail, it is envisaged that the learning and ambitions from it can be applied to the region as a whole.
- 4.5. The draft Phase 1 report included as Annex 1 has been produced through working with local authority officers, bus operators and East West Railway Company. All existing evidence and related work has been considered and has informed the draft report, including previous Board discussions on integration.
- 4.6. The draft Phase 1 report sets out a case for intervention through data-backed opportunity statements and poses questions to help set a collective, regional scale of ambition and supporting conditions for success.
- 4.7. The workstream goes beyond first-mile connectivity around station locations, focusing on ensuring that accessibility is present from door to door, maximising connectivity benefits and ensuring that communities across the region are not left behind.
- 4.8. The scale of the opportunity is clear. There are 1.7m people living within 10 miles of East West Rail stations, and 900,000 jobs: A 10-minute enhancement to connectivity to East West Rail stations brings 210,000 more residents closer to Milton Keynes; 80,000 closer to Bicester Village; 74,000 closer to London Luton Airport; 64,000 closer to Oxford; and 52,000 closer to Cambridge.
- 4.9. Eight opportunity statements have been developed:
 - **Strategic connectivity:** *Seamless integration with the region's strategic transport network can maximise the impact of East West Rail.* Considerations include interchange with radial rail routes and frequency of through services.
 - **Rural connectivity:** *Better integrating rural communities with the railway can significantly improve access and shift more journeys towards sustainable modes.* Considerations include demand responsive transport; level of service based on population, and information provision at rural bus stops
 - **Positive behaviour change:** *Improving multi-modal integration will allow people to access EWR using a range of transport modes.* Considerations include integrated ticketing, marketing and ticket discounts/ incentives.
 - **Connecting growing settlements:** *Improving bus and active travel networks will bring new planned development within convenient reach of East West Rail, supporting sustainable growth.* Considerations include four bus per hour frequencies to EWR stations for conurbations which increase to more than 10,000 population.



- **Preparing for long-term growth:** *Improving integration now will help unlock the long-term connectivity benefits of transformational growth projects taking place along East West Rail.* Considerations include future proofing station facilities and bus routes to evolve as demand grows.
- **Enhancing bus connectivity:** *Enhancing existing bus connectivity will bring more communities within reach of the railway, broadening access to key destinations and expanding access to employment and amenities.* Considerations include 15 minute frequency services to EWR services for populations over 10,000 or significant trip attractors, and for these to operate through majority of day and weekends; and around journey time and reliability of services.
- **Stations fit for bus integration:** *Improvements to facilities at and around stations can enhance accessibility bus – rail integration.* Considerations include real-time information provision and departure boards, accessibility between station and bus; bus charging facilities and facilities for drivers.
- **Station facilities for integration:** *Improvements to facilities at and around stations can enhance accessibility and place-making.* Considerations include mobility hubs, design, staffing, accessibility and safety.
- **Enabling active travel:** *Enhancing integration with active travel networks can make local journeys to EWR stations healthier, easier and more accessible.* Considerations include high quality active travel links for communities within two miles of EWR stations.

4.10. Following any comments from Board members and further engagement with local authority officers, it is planned that a final draft version of the Phase 1 report be brought back to this Board for approval in December 2025.

4.11. Next steps are planned to include working with local authorities, EWR Co, and bus operators to identify the priorities which meet the ambition and conditions of success established in Phase 1. This is currently being scoped, and clarity on next steps will be provided at the December meeting. The next phases will continue to be a collaboration with local partners, and EWR Co, alongside core stakeholders including bus and rail operators.

5. Transport Select Committee call for evidence on integration

- 5.1. The Transport Select Committee's inquiry, "Joined-up journeys: achieving and measuring transport integration", seeks evidence on how to deliver a more seamless, user-focused transport system across the UK.
- 5.2. It comes in the context of the Government's emerging Integrated National Transport Strategy.
- 5.3. England's Economic Heartland's draft response (see Annex 2) highlights many of the opportunities highlighted above, including with regards to our work on East West Rail.
- 5.4. It also makes the point that comparatively 'simple' yet hugely impactful action and interventions such as accessible access to stations, simple public transport timetables and integration of services should not be underestimated (alongside addressing even more fundamental issues such as real-time journey information available in physical or digital form at bus stations/ stops, which is still not ubiquitous in many urban and rural areas). Users will notice these improvements and they should be automatically considered in planning of transport systems.

6. EEH response to Universal consultation

- 6.1. The proposed Universal theme park is a uniquely significant economic opportunity for Bedford and the wider region. It will be one of the largest single trip attractors in Europe, and therefore there is a major opportunity to plan for how this can be used to realise a step change in the provision of integrated, sustainable transport.



- 6.2. The project is seeking consent via a Special Development Order (SDO), which will be determined directly by the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.
- 6.3. MHCLG invited comments on the request for planning permission from Universal Destinations & Experiences to develop the theme park and accompanying entertainment resort complex near Kempston Hardwick, Bedford.
- 6.4. The consultation timing (3 July –31 August) meant it was not possible to have the response endorsed by the full Board prior to submission so it was approved by the EEH Chair.
- 6.5. EEH's response:
 - Focused on surface access provision in both the construction and operational phases. The development is expected to attract 8.5 million visitors in its first year, with plans to increase to 12 million over a 20-year period, with 8,500 to 10,000 staff.
 - Responded supportively to this application noting that this is an opportunity for Universal to be an exemplar development focused on sustainable transport as it will have direct access from a new station at Wixams and could be served in the future by a new station on East West Rail.
 - Drew on feedback from our partners around the need for appropriate measures to realise the economic benefits for the region and mitigation to minimise the impact on local residents and businesses through both construction and operational stages.
 - Highlighted the need for consideration of the strategic importance of local buses, which are key to ensure that the economic value of the new complex will be realised locally and to ensure that local residents will be able to access the resort for both leisure and employment opportunities. This is considered core to the region's approach to the delivery of a fully integrated transport network.
 - Highlighted the need for Bedford Borough Council to be adequately supported with capability and capacity during the construction phase.
- 6.6. EEH is working with Bedford Borough Council to develop an integrated transport offer, focused on local and regional sustainable access to the proposed development in addition to rail-based transport.

7. Buses Update

Bus Symposium

- 7.1. The EEH Bus and Integration Symposium 2025 will take place on Friday 14 November at the Waterside Theatre, Aylesbury. It is attended by Board members, officers and invited guests.
- 7.2. The event will bring together national leaders, local authorities, and transport innovators to explore how buses can anchor a truly integrated transport system. Contributors include the Department for Transport, Campaign for Better Transport, Go-Ahead, Via, and EEH.

Heartbeat network

- 7.3. Key to delivering an integrated transport network across the EEH region is an effective local and regional bus network.
- 7.4. EEH continues to advance the case for the Heartbeat regional bus network. The Heartbeat network concept proposes a region-wide network built around 36 local routes, combining existing services, upgrades to existing services, and new links. Emerging analysis, which will be presented to Board members shortly, provides a 'high level' estimated annual operating cost of the Heartbeat.
- 7.5. The emerging results of Heartbeat network work outlines clear benefits including reduced congestion, lower emissions, and improved integration across the region but especially with East West Rail and proposed Universal Studios.



- 7.6. The work will set out delivery options. Potential next steps include further modelling to prioritise services and assess costs and revenue models, alongside collaboration with bus operators to optimise routes. A coordinated delivery strategy aligned with individual partners' Bus Service Improvement Plans, and coordinated through EEH's existing Regional Bus Forum, could also be developed.

Luton-Dunstable busway

- 7.7. Progress continues on the jointly funded study into extending the Luton–Dunstable Busway, with Central Bedfordshire and Luton councils. An update on the work will be shared at the Bus Symposium.

Bedfordshire buses

- 7.8. EEH is also supporting Central Bedfordshire, Luton Borough, and Bedford Borough councils in developing a Bedfordshire Bus Plan. This will assess current and future demand, including links to East West Rail, Universal Studios, London Luton Airport, and planned growth. A further update will be provided at the Bus Symposium.

Naomi Green
England's Economic Heartland
October 2025