

England's Economic Heartland Board

29 January 2026

Item 8: Business Unit Update

Recommendation:

It is recommended that Board notes the action and progress of the following key areas of EEH work:

- a) Integration Programme**
- b) Local Transport Delivery Plan**
- c) National Planning Policy Framework Consultation**

1. Integration Programme

- 1.1. At the EEH Board in December, members agreed the phase one report, which sets out 'opportunity statements' for integration. Phase two will consider these as part of transport opportunity plans for specific locations.
- 1.2. The board also discussed the potential locations for transport opportunity plans and the proposed approach for identifying and sequencing activity.
- 1.3. Each transport opportunity plan will include an evidence-based action plan and shortlist of priorities for interventions that are key to delivering the opportunity statements. Key selected interventions will be developed into tangible propositions, including costings and an evidence and data-driven strategic narrative. The transport opportunity plan will also consider the best route to secure delivery and funding for identified interventions, including developer contributions and private financing.
- 1.4. As a reminder, locations considered to meet criteria (as referenced in the December Board paper) for transport opportunity plans include the following (with a star indicating those locations which have been added or modified due to Board feedback):
- 1.5. Along or in proximity to the line of East West Rail (as currently committed): Universal Studios and Bedford; Bicester; Cambourne*; Marston Vale Line*; Milton Keynes; and Tempsford.
- 1.6. Outside of the immediate route of East West Rail (as currently committed): Aylesbury; Luton and London Luton Airport*; and Stevenage. Further locations may be identified as part of a transport opportunity plan (for example Westcott with Silverstone)
- 1.7. Prioritisation of the transport opportunity plans' delivery and the associated order is not yet confirmed and will be subject to external announcements and the wider changing context to support growth across the region.
- 1.8. An update and engagement session on the EEH integration programme was held with heads of service on 20 January to brief them on the proposed transport opportunity plan programme. This was well received and provided EEH with additional local context regarding local plans, and additional development plans. This will become a quarterly briefing to heads of service and help inform the direction of the project.

- 1.9. An Integration Taskforce is also being established to provide expert advice and input into the programme. The taskforce will comprise key regional and national stakeholders, experts, influencers and innovators. They will report back via the EEH Board.
- 1.10. Potential taskforce members have been sent invitations. A full update on the Taskforce, including its proposed areas of focus will be provided to the Board in March 2026.
- 1.11. **Bedford/ Universal transport opportunity plan:** Following the planning permission announcement for Universal on 16 December 2025, EEH met with officers from Luton, Milton Keynes, Central Bedfordshire and Bedford councils on 17 December 2025 to discuss the transport opportunity plan.
- 1.12. The project will consider opportunities within Bedford and the Universal Site, along with cross boundary flows to identify how bus service provision can be improved to support local and regional connectivity.
- 1.13. It is recognised that the project will be owned by Bedford Borough Council, though commitment and input will be required from Central Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes councils. An update and briefing session was held with the Heads of Service of these four councils in December to establish a way forward and this established a working group which will be central to the delivery of the Universal transport opportunity plan. In addition, it is recognised that the impacts of Universal will be even further reaching and EEH will need to work with officers across the region to capture these wider benefits and implications.
- 1.14. Determining a successful framework within the Universal transport opportunity plan is key as it is a blueprint for future locations.
- 1.15. The statement of work for the project is as follows:
 - Provide a framework for the future integrated transport system to support the Universal site
 - Outline a transport system that supports and enables cross boundary journeys
 - Outlines transport provision for both Universal and the greater Bedford area
 - Passenger cohorts, travel modes and highways capacity are all key elements within the project scope.
- 1.16. Anticipated deliverables for this transport opportunity plan (and informing future ones) are:
 - Design of routes and service principles
 - Assessing the impact and value of active travel and micromobility options
 - Inform future planning on items such as highways and parking strategies
- 1.17. Inform potential funding mechanisms to support intervention delivery

James West

2. Local Transport Delivery Plan

- 2.1. The DfT is taking a new consolidated approach to transport funding. This is being introduced from early 2026. It brings together multiple existing funding streams into integrated transport pots covering buses, highways, active travel and wider integrated transport.
- 2.2. The intention is to simplify national funding arrangements while providing greater flexibility for local authorities. Funding will be allocated over a rolling three to four-year period, with broad discretion within transport categories, enabling authorities to respond more effectively to local priorities and changing conditions.



- 2.3. In return for this flexibility, local authorities will be required to produce a Transport Delivery Plan setting out proposed investment across modes, priority schemes and planned interventions, and how these align with local transport strategies. The first plan, covering the 2026/27 financial year, must be submitted in March 2026, with a more detailed four-year plan due by September 2026. Reporting will be streamlined through a single national data portal, replacing multiple existing returns and reducing administrative burden, while still requiring clear evidence of delivery progress, investment by mode and overall value for money.
- 2.4. The funding model operates on principles of flexibility and continuous improvement rather than strict compliance thresholds. Authorities may move funding between budget lines within transport categories, with annual plan updates expected and Chief Financial Officers providing assurance on financial viability.
- 2.5. Performance will be monitored through an outcomes-focused framework, with an emphasis on gradual improvement and some incentives linked to enhanced capability, particularly in areas such as active travel. The Department for Transport has acknowledged the challenges posed by local government reorganisation, allowing for plan revisions during transition periods, and is actively encouraging feedback as the new model is refined ahead of implementation from April 2026.
- 2.6. EEH has offered to provide a forum for authority officers to discuss the challenges and opportunities that the new approach presents.

Trevor Brennan

3. National Planning Policy Framework Consultation

- 3.1. The proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) represent a comprehensive reform to the planning system. Given the implications of planning on the provision of infrastructure, and the emphasis on connectivity of new developments, it is recommended that EEH submit a response to the relevant parts of the ongoing consultation.
- 3.2. The biggest single change in the draft NPPF proposed is the new presumption in favour of sustainable development. There is a clear emphasis throughout the NPPF in support of higher-density development in locations with sustainable transport mode choices. This is further supported through embedding a vision-led approach to transport.
- 3.3. For developments within settlements, there is a 'tilt' in favour of granting permission with development in settlements being supported in principle. Suitable land within urban areas is expected to be maximised in its use through intensification and densification, such as to widen catchment populations of services.
- 3.4. It is recommended that EEH's response draws on the need for an effective multimodal integrated transport system to avoid the creation or deterioration of transport deserts – with urban areas expected to densify, there is a need to avoid the paradox of high population density but lack of infrastructure/services.
- 3.5. For developments outside settlements, the presumption applies to certain forms of development. This includes housing and mixed-use development where this is "within reasonable walking distance of a railway station which provides a high level of connectivity to jobs and services". A definition for "reasonable walking distance" is not provided, and the definition of railway stations is broadened to also include stops on the underground, tram and other light rail.
- 3.6. In addition, in the Green Belt, housing and mixed-use development which would "be within reasonable walking distance of a railway station capable of providing a high level of connectivity to services and employment" is deemed not inappropriate.

- 3.7. The NPPF sets out expected minimum densities for development proposals for housing and mixed-use schemes within a reasonable walking distance of a railway station, which differentiates between a railway station (minimum density of 40 dwellings per hectare in net developable area of the site) and a well-connected railway station (50 dwellings per hectare).
- 3.8. Well-connected stations are defined as “those in a top 60 travel to work area located partially or fully within England by Gross Value Added (GVA) and which, in the normal weekday timetable, are served (or have a reasonable prospect of being served due to planned upgrades or through agreement with the rail operator) throughout the daytime by four trains or trams per hour overall, or two trains or trams per hour in any one direction.”
- 3.9. EEH analysis shows this definition could potentially cover 68% of the stations in the Heartland region.
- 3.10. Members may wish to consider whether the service requirements are too low a threshold for a station to be considered “well-connected”. For context, ‘turn up and go’ metro services are generally 10-15 minute frequency. In addition, the current definition does not take into account interchanges or other journey time penalties.
- 3.11. In addition, members may have a view on whether GVA Transport to Work Areas are an appropriate proxy for functional geographies and employment catchment areas in a polycentric region. It is worth noting that travel to work areas do not match to local authority boundaries and are an attempt to approximate labour market areas (1).
- 3.12. In responding to consultation questions, it is recommended that EEH emphasises the need for well-integrated multimodal transport systems to achieve national policies such as wider economic growth and transition to net zero. This should include considerations of freight and logistics. EEH does not propose answering questions related to spatial development strategies unless there is a specific reference to connectivity or strategic infrastructure within the policy.

Fiona Foulkes

EEH Technical Team Members
January 2026

¹ [Travel to work area analysis in Great Britain - Office for National Statistics](#)

