

England's Economic Heartland Board

18 June 2026

Item 8: Bus Integration

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Receives an update on EEH's 'Total Transport' Toolkit and receives a demonstration of the toolkit.**
- b) Notes progress on the Luton Dunstable Busway Extension Study including the completion of phase one of and progress to phase two.**
- c) Receives an update on the Buses in Bedfordshire Plan.**
- d) Notes progress on EEH's integrated bus programme, including the key priorities identified following the EEH Bus and Integration Symposium 2025.**

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. To provide Board Members with an update on the development of EEH's Total Transport Toolkit work and to receive a demonstration of how the Total Transport Tool kit works. That the Board notes that phase one of the Luton-Dunstable Busway Extension Study has been completed and that the project is moving to phase two. For the Board to receive an update on the Buses Bedfordshire Plan and that the Board notes the progress being made against the actions arising from the EEH Bus Symposium 2025.

2. Key points to note.

- 2.1. The EEH Total Transport Toolkit has been developed and is now being piloted with participating authorities of Cambridge, West Northants and Swindon.
- 2.2. Phase one of the Luton-Dunstable Busway Extension Study has been completed, and phase two is underway.
- 2.3. Development of the Buses in Bedfordshire Plan is progressing in partnership with Bedford Borough Council, Central Bedfordshire Council and Luton Borough Council. EEH is also engaging with Milton Keynes Council on the proposals.
- 2.4. Progress is being made on the priorities identified through the EEH Bus and Integration symposium 2025, including bus data integration, journey time monitoring, ticketing, franchising and community transport.

3. Context

- 3.1. Members of the EEH Board have consistently emphasised the importance of improved bus services for better transport integration.

- 3.2. Bus services are essential to the region's economy, connectivity, and sustainability. In a predominantly polycentric area, a high-quality, accessible, and integrated bus network is vital for linking people to key services and employment, while reducing congestion, cutting emissions, and promoting social inclusion.
- 3.3. The region is experiencing a period of significant and transformative growth. This includes major new destinations such as the Universal United Kingdom Resort and Puy du Fou; two locations identified within the Government's New Town Programme at Milton Keynes and Tempsford; the delivery of East West Rail and the planned expansion of London Luton Airport. These developments sit alongside substantial housing and economic growth emerging through local plans. Together, they present a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fully integrate transport.
- 3.4. To support EEH's integration ambitions and delivery of the Transport Opportunity Plans (TOPs), a programme of bus-focused measures is being progressed. This includes developing a Total Transport Toolkit; completing phase one of the Luton–Dunstable Busway Extension Study and local authority agreement to move this to phase two; continuing to deliver the Buses in Bedfordshire Plan; and advancing priorities from the EEH Bus and Integration Symposium that was held in 2025.

4. Total Transport Toolkit

- 4.1. Total Transport is a holistic approach to transport provision, bringing together services from multiple operators to meet multiple demand cohorts, including local authority home-to-school transport, healthcare transport, and commercial bus services.
- 4.2. Progressing towards a Total Transport model offers the potential for significant service improvements and cost efficiencies by maximising the use of existing resources. However, the complexity of integrating these services is often perceived as a key barrier to implementation.
- 4.3. EEH's initial work, presented to the Board in December 2024, identified high-level challenges and opportunities for local authorities across the region.
- 4.4. Following Board agreement, further analysis was undertaken to examine 'real-world' journeys made by local authority service users. Three authorities—West Northamptonshire Council, Cambridgeshire County Council, and Swindon Borough Council participated in this phase.
- 4.5. In collaboration with these authorities, EEH commissioned the development of a Total Transport data platform and toolkit, known as Unity.
- 4.6. The platform has enabled the secure collation and analysis of passenger data from pilot authorities, in full compliance with GDPR and UK data hosting requirements.
- 4.7. This capability has supported a robust assessment of how a Total Transport approach can be effectively coordinated. It also provides participating authorities with practical tools to visualise, integrate, and manage transport demand across multiple service areas and diverse user groups.
- 4.8. The EEH funding has supported the development of Unity - now a proven, scalable solution. This has significantly reduced the risks that would otherwise be associated with development of this service by a single authority in the region. EEH's involvement has also enabled delivery at a substantially lower cost than would have been achievable through individual authority investment alone.



4.9. Subject to successful outcomes and demonstrated service improvements and cost savings, there is potential to expand the availability of the toolkit across the region. This will, however, depend on local authority funding and the quality of individual authorities' transport data.

4.10. As part of the platform and toolkit's further development, EEH will be monitoring its use, over the next 12 months, to understand its effectiveness, usability and capture any impacts on cost-of-service provision.

4.11. A demonstration of the platform and toolkit will be provided to Board Members by Rob Hale and Verity Quinn.

5. Luton Dunstable Busway (LDB) Extension Study

5.1. Working jointly with partner authorities, consultants AECOM were commissioned to explore options to extend busway services and routes, for example to Leighton Buzzard, Milton Keynes, and Stevenage, to further enhance inter-urban and cross-boundary bus services.

5.2. The study is being split over two phases, and phase one of this work is now complete. Phase one of the study assessed the strategic case for extending the LDB and whether sufficient demand existed to support enhanced or extended Busway services or route improvements. Key points from phase one of the study are summarised below:

- *Strategic Context* - The LDB is a highly successful rapid transit corridor, delivering strong journey time reliability and carrying a significant proportion of local bus demand. However, its benefits reduce once services leave segregated infrastructure. With substantial housing and employment growth planned across the study area, improved Busway-style provision is important to support sustainable growth and reduce reliance on private car travel.
- *Travel Demand and Priority Corridors* - Analysis shows particularly strong travel demand between Luton, Dunstable and Houghton Regis, and between Luton and Milton Keynes, Leighton Buzzard, Hitchin and Stevenage. In several corridors, road-based demand exceeds existing bus capacity, indicating latent demand for higher-quality provision. Three priority corridors are identified for further consideration: Luton–Leighton Buzzard, Luton–Houghton Regis (including northern growth areas), and Luton–Hitchin–Stevenage.
- *Busway Performance and Constraints* - The existing Busway offers competitive journey times, particularly in congested conditions, but advantages are eroded on non-segregated sections. The guided section cannot accommodate overtaking, resulting in bus stacking at busy stops. Any extension must therefore consider both the provision of new infrastructure and the operational resilience of the existing Busway.
- *Growth and Connectivity* - Many planned housing and employment sites, particularly north of Houghton Regis and east of Luton, are not well served by Busway-standard infrastructure. Development sites closest to the Busway demonstrate the highest potential bus use, reinforcing the importance of aligning extensions with growth locations to maximise mode shift and support Local Plan delivery.

- *Learning from Comparator Schemes* - Case studies highlight that successful busways combine segregation, high-quality stops and interchanges, and integration with Park & Ride or mobility hubs. Evidence from London and other UK schemes shows that express and stopping services can operate together successfully, increasing overall corridor demand. This supports a flexible approach to Busway extensions rather than reliance on guided infrastructure alone.
 - *Conclusions and Next Steps* - The Phase One work sets out high-level route options (for further consideration in Phase Two) the three priority corridors, these include: - Corridor 1: *Leighton Buzzard–Luton–Dunstable–Houghton Regis*, Corridor 2: *Milton Keynes–Luton/Dunstable/Houghton Regis* and Corridor 3: *Luton–Hitchin–Stevenage*.
- 5.3. Building on the high-level route options developed in phase one, phase two of the study will consider in more detail how demand in the identified corridors can be met. This will include the development of route and service design options, such as the level of segregation, indicative and high-level costs, value for money, and potential timetable improvements for the suggested corridors or route improvements.
- 5.4. Phase Two is now underway. A summary of its findings will be presented to the September Board for noting, with the full technical notes for phases one and two submitted for consideration and approval at the December Board.

6. Buses in Bedfordshire Plan

- 6.1. Building on its role in enhancing interurban and cross-boundary connectivity, EEH will continue to support the development of the Buses in Bedfordshire Plan in partnership with Central Bedfordshire, Luton and Bedford Borough council. EEH is also engaging with Milton Keynes Council on the proposals.
- 6.2. The plan will focus on delivering bus interventions linked to supporting the Universal United Kingdom Resort and a future Marston Vale integrated transport activity, while also aligning service improvements with authorities' own existing bus programmes for planned housing and employment growth and major infrastructure investments such as East West Rail and the expansion of London Luton Airport.
- 6.3. Acting as a bus intervention delivery mechanism for transport integration, the plan will help establish a coordinated, cross-boundary approach to bus provision, identifying and prioritising interventions required to ensure sustainable access to key growth locations across the Bedfordshire and wider region.
- 6.4. The plan aims to deliver a high-quality, frequent and well-connected bus network aligned with national and regional policy, supporting growth and improving access. It focuses on network coverage, reliability, affordability, integration, passenger experience and decarbonisation, with phased, evidence-led delivery through strengthened governance, a core inter-urban network, improved journey times, integrated ticketing, and enhanced infrastructure, building on existing partnerships and requiring close collaboration across authorities and operators.



6.5. The plan remains in development, with further work underway to fully define priority interventions, including setting out the costs and funding required for delivery, agreeing governance arrangements and delivery mechanisms, and ensuring alignment with, and support for, the authorities' existing bus programmes. Based on initial local authority feedback, EEH's early focus will be on exploring multi-operator ticketing and bus governance models as part of the transport integration programme in collaboration with the local authorities and operators.

7. Bus Symposium 2025: themes of work

7.1. To support EEH's integration work, a programme of bus-specific integration measures is being progressed, including taking forward the Board-agreed priorities identified at the EEH Bus and Integration Symposium 2025. An update on progress is set out below:

7.2. Data integration: EEH is developing a data dashboard to consolidate and present available bus data (see Figure 1). The dashboard will display annual and real-time bus performance data collated by local authorities and DfT. It will also act as a regional repository for bus data, which can support LTAs in meeting their statutory reporting duties for monitoring Local Transport Plans outcomes. The full dashboard will be available for demonstration at EEH Board meeting in September.

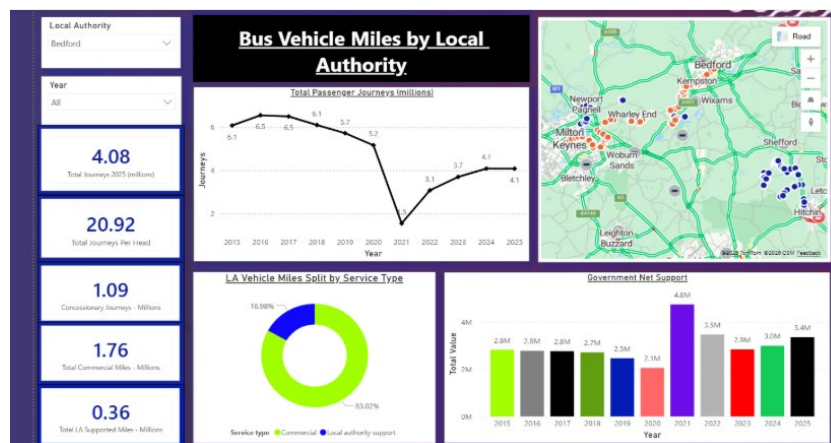


Figure 1: Bus Data Dashboard concept (Bedford Borough Area as an example)

7.3. Journey time improvements: EEH is working with Journey Alerts—previously supported through the Bedford Borough Council QR code journey planning pilot—on a proof-of-concept product in partnership with Google. This initiative will combine Google and Journey Alerts' traffic data with DfT bus location data to show congestion hotspots and their impact on bus routes, the data will be available to LTAs, operators and passengers through the Journey Alerts platform. Subject to successful outcomes and the availability of funding and data, there is potential to scale this approach regionally to support all LTAs in identifying where targeted interventions could improve bus reliability.

- 7.4. Integration initiatives: To support greater alignment of bus ticketing across the region, EEH will undertake an audit of existing bus ticketing offers by LTA and bus operators to establish a clear baseline of ticket types, coverage and interoperability, the audit will consist of an online survey and analysis and is due to be completed by July 2026. This evidence will be used for the national Project CORAL1 ticketing programme.
- 7.5. Franchising pilots: EEH is working with Hertfordshire County Council (a participant in a DfT-funded pilot programme) to create a best practice note and capture key lessons learned. These insights will be shared with LTAs across the EEH region.
- 7.6. Addressing operational challenges: As part of the on-going work on Total Transport, EEH has been exploring opportunities with local partners to understand demand for shared transport services, this includes the development of the Total Transport Toolkit.
- 7.7. Building public confidence: Positive marketing of bus travel, alongside the promotion of good news stories about new services and service improvements, is essential to encouraging greater use of public transport. EEH continues to use social media, press activity, newsletters and events to showcase these positive stories, including those from local authorities and transport operators, wherever opportunities arise.
- 7.8. Planning and provision of contracts: Through the EEH Regional Bus Forum, local authority officers, are being asked to share best practice on 'de minimis' contract arrangements to support LTAs in optimising these agreements.
- 7.9. Community partnerships: EEH will work with Community Transport Association (CTA) to identify better collaboration opportunities in delivery of on-demand services through CTA members and third sector providers in the region.

8. Next Steps

- 8.1. Phase Two of the Luton–Dunstable Busway Extension Study is underway, and a summary of the outputs will be presented to the EEH Board in September, with the full study (phase One and Two) due at December Board for consideration and agreement.
- 8.2. Collaborative development of the Buses in Bedfordshire Plan continues and a further update to EEH Board will be provided once the plan has been further considered by the local authorities and operators.
- 8.3. The Total Transport Toolkit will continue to be refined ahead of a final 'lessons learnt' and next steps report to the EEH Board in September. EEH will monitor use across pilot authorities. This will be supported by a workshop session with the EEH Transport Officer Group, bringing together public transport and Home to School officers to share best practice and showcase the Toolkit.
- 8.4. Alongside this, EEH will continue to progress its Bus Integration programme, including bus data integration, journey visualisation initiatives, and shared learning on franchising and operational models, to support more integrated and effective bus services across the region.

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¹ Project Coral is the governments national tap and cap fares initiative, which seeks to provide a secure mechanism for reconciling customer journeys when payments are made using contactless cards or mobile devices across multiple public transport operators and payment systems.



