

England's Economic Heartland Board

24 September 2026

Item 5: Bus and Mass transit

It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Notes EEH's response to the Department of Transport Mass Transit Taskforce and the challenges of delivering these in more rural and polycentric economies.**
- b) Notes progress on the Luton Dunstable Busway Extension Study including an update on the phase two work.**
- c) Notes progress on EEH's bus integration programme in support of Universal and Marston Vale Transport Opportunity Plans.**

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. To update the Board on EEH's response to the Mass Rapid Transit Taskforce call for evidence; progress on the Luton Dunstable Busway Extension Study, one of the region's successful MRT schemes; and our bus integration programme to support Universal and Marston Vale Transport Opportunity Plans.

2. Key points to note

- 2.1. EEH worked with local authority partners to submit a joint response to the Department for Transport's Mass Transit Taskforce, setting out the case for investment in mass transit within the region.
- 2.2. The response highlights the role of mass transit in supporting economic growth, housing delivery (especially proposed New Towns) and wider regional productivity.
- 2.3. Luton-Dunstable Busway is an excellent example of the difference mass transit can make – and there are strong opportunities to extend its benefits.
- 2.4. Phase 2 of the Luton Dunstable Busway Extension Study has been completed and is currently being reviewed by partner authority officers.
- 2.5. Development of the bus integration programme supporting the Universal and Marston Vale Transport Opportunity Plans (TOPs) is progressing in partnership with Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire, Luton Borough and Milton Keynes councils and bus operators.

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.
- 3.3. 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.
- 3.4. The scale of housing and economic growth requires, in some parts of the region, dedicated mass transit schemes to be developed.

- 3.5. Examples of existing mass transit in the region include Luton Dunstable Busway, Luton DART and Cambridgeshire Guided Busway.
- 3.6. The region's emerging mass transit schemes includes Milton Keynes MRT, Hertfordshire Essex Rapid Transit (HERT), Oxford Metro and ambitions in Cambridge.

4. EEH Response to DfT Mass Transit Taskforce Call for Evidence

- 4.1. EEH, working with local authority (LA) partners, submitted a joint response to the Department for Transport's Mass Transit (MT) Taskforce call for evidence highlighting the challenges and opportunities and local successes of delivering mass transit schemes in more rural and polycentric economies.
- 4.2. Drawing on examples of MT in the region including: Luton Dunstable Busway, Luton DART, Cambridgeshire Guided Busway, and the region's emerging MT schemes including Milton Keynes MRT, Hertfordshire Essex Rapid Transit (HERT), Oxford Metro and ambitions in Cambridge.
- 4.3. The response reflected the views of authorities that have delivered or are developing mass transit schemes and highlighted the role of mass transit in supporting economic growth, housing delivery (especially proposed New Towns) and wider regional productivity.
- 4.4. EEH's overarching message to Government was that successful MT delivery requires a dedicated team within DfT, long-term funding certainty, streamlined approval processes, and greater devolved powers and funding for local leaders and authorities to plan and deliver schemes.
- 4.5. The response emphasised the need to integrate transport, housing and economic development from the outset, with MT planned as part of a wider integrated transport network and recognised as a catalyst for unlocking the Oxford Cambridge Growth Corridor's economic potential.
- 4.6. We emphasised that one size does not fit all and that MT needs to be relevant to the area that it is serving. MT schemes should be outcome led rather than mode led, focusing on solving transport and growth challenges before selecting technology.
- 4.7. EEH will continue to work with local authority partners to develop the region's mass transit pipeline, promote the recommendations of its response to the DfT Mass Transit Taskforce, and facilitate the sharing of best practice to support the efficient development and delivery of future schemes.
- 4.8. To capture and share lessons from successful mass transit projects across the region, EEH will be facilitating a workshop with local authority partners to identify best practice, improve delivery efficiency and help reduce costs associated with future mass transit schemes.
- 4.9. Fuller details of our response are in the annex below.

5. Luton Dunstable Busway (LDB) Extension Study Phase Two

- 5.1. Working jointly with partner authorities, AECOM was commissioned to examine, through a two-phase study, opportunities to extend and enhance the Luton Dunstable Busway. Improving connectivity between Luton, Dunstable, Houghton Regis, Leighton Buzzard, Milton Keynes, Hitchin and Stevenage.
- 5.2. The phase one work, a summary of which was presented to the June Board, established the strategic case for extending and enhancing the Luton Dunstable Busway and identified three priority corridors for further development.
- 5.3. The key findings included:
 - The Busway is a highly successful rapid transit corridor, but journey time benefits reduce once services leave segregated infrastructure. Significant planned housing and employment growth strengthens the case for enhanced Busway-style provision.



- Strong travel demand exists between Luton and Leighton Buzzard, Milton Keynes, Hitchin and Stevenage, with evidence of latent demand for higher-quality public transport.
 - Key development areas north of Houghton Regis and east of Luton would benefit from improved rapid transit connections.
- 5.4. Comparator studies showed successful busways combine segregation, high-quality interchanges, mobility hubs and express services to maximise demand and mode shift.
 - 5.5. Three priority corridors were identified in phase 1 to be studied in more detail in phase 2:
 - Corridor 1: Leighton Buzzard – Luton – Dunstable – Houghton Regis
 - Corridor 2: Milton Keynes – Luton/Dunstable/Houghton Regis
 - Corridor 3: Luton – Hitchin – Stevenage.
 - 5.6. The phase two report has now been drafted and provides a more detailed assessment of the identified route options that consider: infrastructure requirements, operational impacts, costs, journey time benefits, deliverability and value for money. The key findings from the work are summarised below:
 - 5.7. Corridor 1 (Leighton Buzzard) offers a strong opportunity for a traditional Busway extension, potentially using the former railway corridor between Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard. Options range from a higher-cost segregated route delivering significant journey time savings, to a lower-cost highway-based option offering more modest improvements.
 - 5.8. Corridor 2 (Houghton Regis) focuses on targeted bus priority measures, junction upgrades and links to major growth areas. This option provides a strong short-term opportunity to improve public transport reliability and support wider growth north Houghton Regis.
 - 5.9. Corridor 3 (Stevenage) includes options via Hitchin, rural corridors and a potential segregated Busway linking London Luton Airport and Stevenage. While a segregated route could significantly improve journey times and reliability, it would be complex and costly to deliver.
 - 5.10. Journey time improvements are greatest where segregation is provided, but many lower-cost highway interventions can still improve reliability and passenger experience.
 - 5.11. Future growth, Local Plan allocations, London Luton Airport expansion, devolution and the creation of a Strategic Authority could all strengthen the case and funding opportunities for Busway enhancements.
 - 5.12. The phase two report currently is being reviewed by Central Bedfordshire and Luton Borough Council officers. EEH is also engaging with Hertfordshire and Milton Keynes officers to discuss the findings.
 - 5.13. Subject to local authority agreement to publication, the final Phase 1 and Phase 2 reports will be submitted to the December Board for approval.
 - 5.14. The findings will provide an evidence base to support partner authorities in considering future corridor development priorities, including further feasibility work, business case development and potential funding opportunities, with ongoing support from EEH.

6. Bus connectivity and integration for the Universal and Marston Vale Transport Opportunity Areas

- 6.1. Building on its role in enhancing interurban and cross-boundary connectivity, EEH continues to develop a bus integration programme in support of Universal UK Resort TOP and future Marston Vale Transport Opportunity Plan.
- 6.2. Work is progressing in partnership with Central Bedfordshire, Luton and Bedford borough councils, Milton Keynes City Council and local bus operators, while aligning with planned housing and employment growth, East West Rail, London Luton Airport expansion and other major transport investments.



- 6.3. The bus integration programme aims to deliver a high-quality, frequent and well-connected network based upon a reliable, affordability, integration, offering an excellent passenger experience, with phased delivery through strengthened governance, a core inter-urban network, improved journey times, integrated ticketing and enhanced infrastructure.
- 6.4. Currently, work is underway to define bus and integration priority interventions, establish delivery costs and funding requirements, delivery arrangements, and ensure alignment with local authority bus improvement programmes.
- 6.5. In parallel, EEH is supporting priorities within the Department for Transport's Universal programme, including integrated ticketing. Through the wider EEH Integration Programme, within which the Universal UK Resort TOP sits, EEH is also working with the four local authorities to explore future bus governance models that support enhanced integration and the development of coordinated bus networks across the Universal and Marston Vale TOP area.

Trevor Brennan
Project Lead
September 2026

Annex 1: Mass transit consultation response

One size does not fit all

One of the key messages is that MRT should be designed as part of an integrated transport network, connecting rail, bus, active travel and emerging mobility services.

There are many different types of MT schemes from bus based with dedicated infrastructure, road based buses, light rail and heavy rail schemes with examples of all of these being progressed or implemented across the region.

The message is that one size does not fit all that MT Schemes should be outcome led rather than mode led, focusing on solving transport and growth challenges before selecting technology.

Governance and Delivery

One of the challenges with MRT being so diverse is that current arrangements are fragmented, with multiple approval and funding gateways creating delays and increasing costs. EEH recommended a dedicated MT function within the DfT with dedicated funding to support the development and delivery of different types of MT schemes.

This should be supported by clearer accountability, greater devolution of funding and decision making to local leaders. Lessons from the Luton Dunstable Busway, Luton DART and Cambridgeshire Guided Busway demonstrate the importance of strong local sponsorship, governance and client-side capability in successful scheme delivery.

Skills and Capability

As there is no dedicated workstream or funding to support MT there is a shortage and also lots of unknowns around the skills required to deliver MT schemes. Current schemes are led by the most relevant teams within councils that could include bus or rail teams; infrastructure delivery teams or a combination.

The lack of dedicated support means that skills required to deliver MT schemes is a significant constraint. Stop-start funding makes it difficult for authorities to recruit, retain and develop expertise, limiting institutional capacity and increasing delivery risks. EEH highlighted the need for dedicated longer term funding, DfT support, knowledge sharing and regional collaboration to build and sustain capability across LA partners.

Business Case and Approvals

Existing business case process does not favour MT schemes and approval processes are often lengthy, resource intensive and disproportionately complex. EEH argued that greater emphasis should be placed on outcomes and the strategic business case with less focus on journey time savings with key focus on supporting: growth, regeneration, housing delivery and productivity outcomes, alongside transport benefits.

- A more proportionate, risk based and programme-led approach would help accelerate delivery, reduce development costs and improve scheme certainty.
- Schemes should be outcome led rather than mode led, focusing on solving transport and growth challenges before selecting technology.
- Appraisal should give greater weight to strategic outcomes including quality of life as well as housing, regeneration, productivity and labour market impacts.
- MRT should be designed as part of an integrated transport network, connecting rail, bus, active travel and emerging mobility services.

Funding and Finance



Funding uncertainty remains one of the greatest barriers to mass transit delivery. EEH called for a dedicated national MT funding programme, like the Major Road Network (MRN) funding scheme, supported by early-stage development funding and multi-year settlements. The response also highlighted the potential role of innovative funding mechanisms, including Regulated Asset Base models, and noted the persistent challenge whereby growth often depends on transport investment, while transport funding requires evidence of committed growth.

Delivery and Procurement

Procurement, consenting and construction processes can be lengthy and costly, increasing delivery timescales and project risk. EEH recommended greater standardisation, more collaborative procurement approaches, earlier engagement with utilities and stronger knowledge sharing between authorities and schemes.

Growth and Housing Delivery

MT is critical to the delivery of the New Towns and wider growth in the region especially in areas where road capacity is constrained. Experience across the region demonstrates that well-designed schemes can improve connectivity, expand access to labour markets, support housing delivery and regeneration, and enhance economic productivity. To maximise these benefits, transport investment should be planned alongside housing, economic development and wider infrastructure provision from the outset, rather than being introduced in response to growth after key development decisions have already been made.

