



## Strategic Transport Leadership Board

24 September 2021

### Agenda Item 8: Oxford to Cambridge Arc Spatial Framework Vision Consultation

#### *Recommendation:*

**It is recommended that the Board comments and agrees on EEH's response to the 'Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc' consultation**

#### **1. Context**

- 1.1. Board members will be aware that, in February 2021, government published its introduction to the spatial framework for the Oxford to Cambridge Arc.
- 1.2. The document sets out the government's ambition to use the spatial framework as the means by which, working with partners, it will take a strategic approach to planning for growth and infrastructure in the area defined as the Oxford to Cambridge Arc.
- 1.3. In doing so, the government aims to realise the transformational opportunities that exist within the region, including supporting a high performing economy; preservation of the environment; and ensuring places and communities are able to grow and flourish.
- 1.4. England's Economic Heartland's geography includes the entirety of the Arc. As the sub-national transport body for the region, our regional transport strategy will form a key component of the spatial framework.
- 1.5. As the regional evidence base underpinning the transport strategy demonstrates, economic linkages beyond the Arc geography (enabled by our transport system) are just as important as those within the Arc. Indeed, a number of the opportunities identified in the Arc economic prospectus have strong linkages with economic clusters in both Swindon and Hertfordshire, and beyond.
- 1.6. The government anticipates that development of the spatial framework will take around two years and will involve three phases of work, with associated external engagement:
  - i) Engaging on a vision for the future of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc: The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) intends to undertake wide public engagement to shape a vision for the area. This consultation is now open.
  - ii) In spring 2022, MHCLG will publish and consult on their proposed policy framework to support delivery of their vision for the Arc
  - iii) In autumn 2022, MHCLG will publish the draft spatial framework for consultation. To inform the development of the draft spatial framework, MHCLG commits to undertaking: spatial analysis, option testing, impact assessments and stakeholder engagement.
- 1.7. The final spatial framework is intended to be rolled out following this final consultation phase.

## **2. Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc**

- 2.1. The 'Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc' document was published by government on 20 July 2021 for consultation.
- 2.2. In its introduction to the document, the government says the spatial framework 'will form national planning policy and transport policy for the Arc and local planning and local transport authorities must have regard to it when preparing local transport and local development plans and policies, and it will be capable of being a material consideration in relevant planning decisions in the area'.
- 2.3. The document covers the four pillars of the environment, economy, connectivity and infrastructure, and place-making.
- 2.4. In the connectivity and infrastructure section, the document says, 'We know we need to do more. Studies tell us that a lack of transport and utilities infrastructure in different towns and cities in the Arc can hold back the area's growth and sustainability'. It then gives as examples the high reliance on private cars and high carbon emissions in the Arc compared to the national average.
- 2.5. There is also recognition that there are 'long-standing concerns about utility supplies - including water, flooding, digital, clean energy and waste recycling - to meet the growing needs of the Arc's communities and businesses, and the challenges of climate change'.
- 2.6. In the document government commits to:
  - identifying and mapping the existing transport, health, education, accessible natural green spaces, utilities, green (land) and blue (water) infrastructure and other infrastructure at an Arc-wide scale
  - identifying the long-term need for new infrastructure and the investment across the Arc to 2050, taking into account climate change, and gaps in existing provision
  - using this work to create an infrastructure plan to support future growth and place-making
  - setting strategic policies for local transport authorities and local planning authorities, building on the England's Economic Heartland transport strategy and evidence base, including the four key principles for transport connectivity in the area (this includes aiming for net zero carbon emissions from transport by 2040)
  - setting strategic climate resilience and air quality policies based on air quality modelling
  - setting strategic policies to support investment in new water, digital, utilities, green and blue infrastructure alongside new development.

## **3. EEH response**

- 3.1. A draft response to the consultation is in Annex 1 for Board members' consideration.
- 3.2. The draft response seeks to welcome recognition of EEH's transport strategy as a building block for future work, while ensuring that duplication is kept to a minimum.
- 3.3. It also makes the important point that regardless of longer-term planning, there remains immediate investment priorities which require funding to support planned growth already set out in local plans.
- 3.4. The response recommends there is a strong linkage between the work of EEH as the sub-national transport body and the growth body proposed by the government to oversee the work on the Arc spatial framework.

**Naomi Green**  
**Interim director**  
**September 2021**



## Annex 1: Draft response to spatial framework vision consultation

### In summary:

- EEH welcomes the commitment within the 'Creating a Vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc' document to build on our transport strategy, including its four key principles. We look forward to working with the Arc team.
- It is essential that the Arc spatial framework adds value, rather than duplicates existing activity. EEH cannot commit to supporting the idea of nationally set transport policy for the area until the need for such policies is tested, justified and backed by appropriate funding.
- The spatial framework has a significant role to play in identifying and unblocking regulatory barriers to delivery, creating join up between different government departments and identifying and streamlining approaches to investment and delivery
- While a commitment to long-term planning is welcomed in the vision document, there are a significant number of immediate investment priorities required to be delivered to enable the delivery of planned growth already set in out in current local plans
- There needs to be a strong linkage between the work of EEH as the sub-national transport body and the growth body proposed by the government to oversee the work on the Arc spatial framework

England's Economic Heartland (EEH) is the sub-national transport body for the region from Swindon across to Cambridgeshire, and from Northamptonshire down to Hertfordshire. Its geography includes the entirety of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc as defined by government<sup>1</sup>.

EEH was established by the region's political and business leadership in 2015 to enable collaborative working that would secure the investment needed to deliver the region's strategic infrastructure priorities, helping to realise what they had identified as the area's significant economic potential. This potential was later the subject of the National Infrastructure Commission's interim report on the 'Cambridge-Milton Keynes-Oxford corridor' in 2016, which informed government's approach to what has become the Oxford-Cambridge Arc.

We therefore welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on 'Creating a vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc'.

As the sub-national transport body for the region, our vision-led, evidence-based transport strategy, 'Connecting People, Transforming Journeys', provides a robust framework on which the spatial framework can consider connectivity in the region, in the context of aligning transport decisions with a range of other decisions, and particularly ensuring that strong economic linkages beyond the Arc are realised.

As our regional evidence base underpinning the transport strategy demonstrates, economic linkages beyond the Arc geography (enabled by our transport system) are just as important as those within the Arc. Indeed, a number of the opportunities identified in the 'Oxford-Cambridge Arc Economic Prospectus' have strong linkages with economic clusters in both Swindon and Hertfordshire, and beyond.

As such it is important the work of the Arc is informed by the work of EEH to ensure that connectivity to neighbouring areas and key gateways are maximised for the benefit of EEH partners and initiatives such as the Arc.

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<sup>1</sup> Buckinghamshire Council and Buckinghamshire Local Enterprise Partnership withdrew from the 'Oxford to Cambridge Arc' Leaders' Group in October 2020



## **Connecting People, Transforming Journeys – the regional transport strategy**

The EEH transport strategy was agreed by our Strategic Transport Forum of elected representatives in February 2021. It is grounded in a robust knowledge of the region (captured by our regional evidence base), informed by a series of technical pieces of work commissioned by EEH and its partners, and shaped by two rounds of public engagement. It was also subject to an integrated sustainability appraisal undertaken in parallel with the technical work.

The transport strategy recognises the region as an economic powerhouse, home to world-leading universities and innovators that is blessed with a natural, historic and built environment that makes it an attractive place to live, work and play. But in recognising and harnessing these strengths for current and future generations, it is also clear that investment in the region's transport system is essential in order to enable sustainable growth.

At the same time, the region must change the way in which we plan, develop and deliver that investment. Lack of capacity within the current transport system acts as a constraint on sustainable growth and reduces resilience and reliability, all of which impacts productivity. Lack of choice in travel options act as a constraint for those seeking access to services and opportunities. And the environmental impact of the transport system is unacceptable, with carbon emissions from transport currently 10% above the national average.

The region has great potential to do better. The EEH transport strategy provides the step-change in approach required to seize the opportunity to deliver transport connectivity in a way that residents and businesses expect. It supports the region's role in a global Britain and sets out an approach to connectivity that will enable sustainable growth, whilst preserving and enhancing the natural, historic and built environment, creating opportunities for residents no matter their individual circumstances, and, crucially, responding harder and faster to climate change.

This ambition for connectivity set out in the EEH transport strategy, for the Arc and wider Heartland region is deliverable. It requires a shared commitment between our partners in the region and national government, and bold decision making that puts people and the environment at its centre. It requires us, and government to realise synergies with other policy areas which have a major impact on the way people travel, including spatial planning and the provision of wider infrastructure and services such as digital, utilities, education and health. And it requires a joined-up, coherent approach to investment.

In May 2021, the EEH Strategic Transport Forum of elected representatives agreed that the EEH transport strategy should form the basis of connectivity in the Oxford to Cambridge Arc project. It is on the back of that decision that EEH welcomes the commitment within the 'Creating a Vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc' document to build on our transport strategy, including its four key principles.

While the proposal to build on EEH's transport strategy is welcome it is essential that the Arc spatial framework adds value, rather than duplicates existing activity. On that basis, EEH cannot commit to supporting the idea of nationally set transport policy for the area until the need for such policies is tested, justified and backed by appropriate funding.

Through their local connectivity and transport plans, local authority partners are best placed to set policy for local transport, including but not limited to: sustainable travel, and reducing the need to travel; place-making; and wider connectivity priorities. Local connectivity and transport plans are already supported and framed within the context of pan-regional strategies and policy ambitions, including EEH's transport strategy.

However, the spatial framework has a significant role to play in identifying and unblocking regulatory barriers to delivery, creating join up between different government departments and identifying and streamlining approaches to investment and delivery. In doing this, the vision and spatial framework have the opportunity to support EEH's policy framework, locally-determined 'infrastructure principles' (currently in development by the Arc Infrastructure Group) and, significantly local partners' connectivity and transport plans.



By supporting partners to address these issues, the spatial framework will support local partners to deliver their own, ambitious plans for a decarbonised transport system while also supporting the region's economic growth ambitions.

### **Delivery and investment**

Realising the Arc's economic potential while achieving net zero emissions requires significant investment from government in both the short and longer-term. As a net contributor to the Exchequer, investment in infrastructure to support and accelerate economic recovery in the region, and support the delivery of planned housing growth, is fundamental to supporting the UK economy as a whole.

The success of the Arc vision and our collective ability to consider and plan for the region's long term ambitions is predicated on ensuring we are making a difference with delivery in the short term. And, while a commitment to long-term planning is welcomed in the vision document, there are a significant number of immediate investment priorities required to be delivered to enable the delivery of planned growth already set in out in current local plans.

In this regard maintaining momentum on the delivery in full of East West Rail – critical to the success of the Arc as a whole – is essential. East West Rail provides the overriding transformational opportunity for our region. Its delivery in full is critical for the future of the Oxford-Cambridge Arc, unlocking economic growth while being the catalyst for improvements to the region's strategic public transport networks and the decarbonisation of the transport system. Though each section of East West Rail brings with it benefits to the communities it serves, the transformational benefit will only to be realised through the delivery of East West Rail in full, as a digitally enabled railway.

East West Rail has a leading role in effecting change in travel demand and behaviours, an important element of our transport strategy, which also recognises the need to improve the integration of land use and transport planning.

But East West Rail alone will not achieve the connectivity required to support the ambitions of the region, and the proposed spatial framework vision for the Arc. A significant number of investment priorities are required to be urgently delivered to enable the delivery of planned growth as set in out in current local plans. These are set out in EEH transport strategy's investment pipeline, and will continue to be developed as the conclusions of the EEH's programme of connectivity studies are drawn.

### **Capacity and capability to deliver**

EEH is recognised within the region for the added value that it brings, both in terms of ambition, capacity and capability. Whilst its primary focus is delivery of the transport strategy, its knowledge and expertise extends beyond transport. Achieving a net zero carbon transport system requires issues relating to digital connectivity and energy systems to be considered. EEH is working closely with the Arc infrastructure group to ensure those linkages are enabled and progressed through to delivery and investment.

As a body, EEH continues to make significant progress: through its work with Network Rail on long-term opportunities for rail; through our work with bus operators on a long-term plan for mass transit; through our decarbonisation roadmap which will set indicative carbon reduction targets towards net zero; and through our programme of connectivity studies which will identify the investment requirements along our region's strategic corridors.

It is on the back of this activity, all of which has been shaped and developed with local partners, that the Arc spatial framework should continue to work alongside EEH.

A further example of where EEH and the Arc team can work is through the sharing of data. We welcome the information provided within the consultation document on data, evidence and digital tools.



Our regional evidence base represents a significant investment by both EEH partners and DfT and is freely available to local authorities, partners and government departments (and their agencies and companies) for their own use. It provides a consistent baseline upon which individual pieces of work can be subsequently built. As you will be aware, the EEH business unit has been working closely with officials from MHCLG and DfT to ensure that the regional evidence base is understood and utilised in support of the work on the Arc spatial framework.

We look forward to continuing this work, and supporting government as it develops its open source, digital platform for data and evidence, for which our regional evidence base can be the foundation.

### **Transport and place-making**

EEH welcomes the ambition of the spatial framework vision for the Oxford-Cambridge Arc to be a great place to live and work – now and in the future. The ambition for the region to be better connected – by making it easier for walking, cycling, and public transport to become first choice for everyone in the Arc aligns entirely with the ambitions of the regional transport strategy.

EEH particularly welcomes acknowledgment that for places to succeed in this, including reducing the need to travel in the first place, it is essential that communities have much better access to the services they need – including a good quality, sustainable water supply and broadband, schools, cycle lanes and healthcare, as part of a holistic approach to place-making. This is entirely in line with the regional transport strategy.

COVID-19 has shown how the acceleration of trends within society is changing the nature and scale of travel demand. There is growing recognition that our current business model for investing in the transport system and paying for our use of it will not be sufficient going forwards. We've seen existing trends in e-commerce accelerated, even more use of e-services to maintain access to services and facilities and a dramatic shift in attitudes towards flexible/hybrid working. Many of these changes are helpful – creating the opportunity for local places to reflect on repurposing their town centres and encouraging the design of '15-minute town centres'.

EEH is continuing to invest in pilot studies to ensure first last mile connectivity in the region is enabled, and embedded from the outset of delivery of new infrastructure, such as East West Rail. It is only through adopting a holistic approach that we can be certain that the success of the region's ambitions can be achieved.

This all serves to emphasise the importance of a strong linkage between the work of EEH as the sub-national transport body and the growth body proposed by the government to oversee the work on the Arc spatial framework.

We look forward to working alongside the Arc team to strengthen the collective approach to connectivity in the region, while reducing risk of duplication.

Yours sincerely

[EEH Chair]