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Councillor Glazier,

## **Transport for the South East Strategic Investment Plan consultation response**

England's Economic Heartland (EEH) welcomes the opportunity to respond to Transport for the South East's (TfSE) consultation on its strategic investment plan (SIP).

We would like to congratulate TfSE on the publication of their SIP as the culmination of development of technical studies over several years.

EEH and TfSE enjoy a strong working relationship, the continuation of which is crucial to allow us to respond strategically and operationally to challenges and opportunities that exist across the boundaries of the two sub-regions.

EEH shares borders with TfSE at the boundaries of Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Swindon with Berkshire and Slough. EEH constituent authorities Oxfordshire County Council, Buckinghamshire Council and Swindon Borough Council are therefore likely to be most closely impacted by interventions in the strategic investment plan.

### **Overview**

EEH is supportive of the development of a strategic investment pipeline which is focussed on multi modal solutions to connectivity, underpinned by an evidence-based approach.

EEH and TfSE already have a strong record of working together on cross boundary issues and items of common interest. Building on this collaborative approach, England's Economic Heartland will be iterating our own investment pipeline, taking outputs of our own technical studies and would welcome engagement with TfSE during the process.

Due the geographic area covered by EEH, this response predominantly focuses on the investment package proposed for the Wessex Thames area.

The level of information about the interventions in the SIP remain at a strategic level. Comments have therefore been drafted based on the information available in the SIP. As schemes develop EEH (and our constituent authorities) would welcome further information about the details of the proposals to provide further comment.

We would welcome consideration of the combined impact of the interventions proposed in the SIP and EEH's own technical work. This will be important to understand strategic, and localised impacts, of the schemes including their phasing and co-ordination for future impacts on communities, including construction impacts.

This consultation response covers the following packages in turn:

- Wessex Thames Rail Package
- Wessex Thames Mass Transit Package
- Wessex Thames Active Travel Package
- Wessex Thames Highways Package

### **Wessex Thames Rail Package**

EEH's location within the UK means that strategic rail infrastructure supports economic activity right across the country, meaning a collaborative approach to achieving rail priorities is important. The benefits of rail on freight do not stop at borders, meaning the benefits are often cross regional or national. The needs of long-distance freight moving between regions and the needs of passengers need to be carefully balanced. Our Passenger Rail Study ([Phase 1](#) and [2](#)) outlines the potential of rail to provide improved connectivity within and between regions, increasing economic capacity of employment hubs and providing greater levels of interaction and integration.

The following interventions are of particular interest to EEH;

- Western Rail Link to Heathrow
- Cross Country Service Enhancements

Our [transport strategy](#) identifies the need to improve surface access by public transport to international airports with Western Rail Link to Heathrow (WRLtH) as an essential scheme for the region. Providing a combined voice on the importance of the delivery of WRLtH is welcomed. WRLtH will provide a west-facing direct rail access from the Great Western Main Line to Heathrow terminal 5 - improving connectivity for large parts of the Thames Valley, Oxfordshire and Swindon as well as an uplift in local connectivity from South Buckinghamshire. However, there would be local impacts of construction associated with the scheme which will need managing, requiring close working with Local Authorities.

The benefits of WRLtH stretch further into the EEH region, providing the key towns of Bicester and Banbury with quicker, cleaner journeys to the airport via interchange at Reading. Substantial journey time savings associated with the scheme create the optimum conditions to attract inward investment to the west of the EEH region. The delivery of WRLtH, coupled with East West Rail and HS2 released capacity provides the opportunity to support new corridors of connectivity, such as Old Oak Common – High Wycombe – Aylesbury – Bletchley/Milton Keynes – Northampton.

The interventions contained within the SIP are high level and further detail on the impacts for the EEH region will need to be understood before providing further comments. This is specifically the case for the intervention for Cross Country Service enhancements. Additionally for understanding the implications of the Thameslink or Crossrail extensions, including any impacts on the Midland Main Line and East Coast Mainline.



We would be interested in any assumptions surrounding released capacity from future commuting patterns (SIP Page 30).

More broadly, in seeking to deliver the transport strategies for EEH and TfSE, we would welcome the development of an ongoing collaboration and relationship around rail. This approach would address joint priorities and help shape the future of rail services in both the TfSE and EEH region.

By example, the Great Western Main Line (GWML), which runs through both the EEH and TfSE region is an important shared interest. EEH is supportive of the provision of new direct services from Oxford to Swindon/Bristol, linking the region to the West (also outlined as a conditional output of the Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study). Working together, the STBs will be able to review key priorities and provide a shared position on the preferred way forward.

### **Wessex Thames Mass Transit Package**

A key point of action in our transport strategy are the use of strategic public transport, underpinned by local access to help transform connectivity. The importance of investment in prioritisation of public transport-based solutions when improving the intra and inter urban connectivity is critical in the shift towards a sustainable transport system. In some this will be supported by improved rail services or new rail connections, however, in most cases, significant improvements to bus connectivity will be required.

The Wessex Thames Mass Transit package includes the following which is of importance to the EEH region:

- London Heathrow bus service access improvements
- Slough, Windsor, Maidenhead bus service improvements
- Reading MRT

EEH's transport strategy encourages investment in improved, decarbonised surface access connectivity that addresses and reduces the environmental impact of international gateways, with a need to work with infrastructure owners/operators, Network Rail, Highways England and government.

Sitting within the TfSE region, but with close proximity to EEH, London Heathrow Airport is a major international gateway. Heathrow Airport's importance as a global gateway has a key role to play in enabling the region to gain access to global markets and opportunities, but there must be viable public transport options to access the airport. We are, therefore, supportive of the intervention for improved bus access enhancements which could service public transport to the airport. Local public transport access to Heathrow from South Buckinghamshire, including High Wycombe, will be of importance from the EEH region.

[EEH's Regional Bus Strategy](#) (July 2022), sets out the principles for EEH's bus and coach strategy. With the key aims and ambitions for more frequent and reliable services as well as improved integration, fares and tickets and specification of buses, the strategy complements work being undertaken by Local Authorities across the region.

The strategy also sought to identify high level of cross boundary daily flows and competitiveness of public transport to car. Specific to the TfSE and EEH borders, the study showed a daily flow of 9,000 between Pinewood and Slough, but a poor level of journey time competitiveness of public transport to car, with public transport taking over 2.5 times as long as a car trip. To improve the attractiveness of public transport we would welcome engagement on high potential public transport cross boundary movements.

We would be interested to understand details about the Reading Mass Rapid Transit and any planned linkages with the EEH region.



## **Wessex Thames Active Travel Package**

Our [Active Travel Strategy Phase 1](#) (February 2022) sets the ambition 'To create an exemplar active travel network and culture that encourages mode shift for both shorter journeys and for the first and last mile of longer journeys'. EEH's transport hierarchy (policy 4 of our transport strategy) highlights the importance of active travel in the transport system, placing active travel at the top of the hierarchy.

We are supportive of the inclusion of the inter urban cycleways as outlined in the SIP. We would like to stress the importance of collaboration between Local Authorities on the borders of EEH and TfSE to ensure a joined up active travel network, which allows residents and visitors the opportunity to make journeys on continuous, high-quality networks.

There are already successful examples of cross boundary collaboration such as the A4 Taplow Station sustainable travel scheme linking to Slough, with Buckinghamshire Council aspiring to improve links to Uxbridge, Slough and Heathrow Airport.

## **Wessex Thames Highways Package**

EEH's transport strategy outlines a need to 'do things differently, in order to and to cut carbon emissions to meet 2050 legal requirements. It is through this backdrop, we must consider future highway intervention, including how the network is used.

EEH supports investment in the strategically important highway network where interventions protect and enhance existing infrastructure, delivers a solution to an identified problem on the existing infrastructure asset, enables access to new economic opportunities and/or housing growth and/or enables delivery of sustainable transport linkages such as public transport and active travel improvements (policy 24 of our transport strategy).

The Wessex Thames package includes a number of interventions of interest in the EEH region;

- New Thames Crossing (East of Reading) Large Local Major
- A404 Bisham Junction
- A34 improvements
- Interventions listed on the M4

A new Thames Crossing (East of Reading), promoted by Berkshire authorities, would be located in both the TfSE and EEH region - Wokingham and South Oxfordshire respectively. It is in the context of our transport strategy principles, including in the context of decarbonisation and policy 24 of our transport strategy (criteria for supporting investment in the MRN and SRN - listed earlier) that EEH believes any proposal for a new Thames Crossing cannot be supported without a clearer plan for collaboration between the STBs and the relevant local authorities. Oxfordshire County Council will set out their own position on the proposal and it is within this context that EEH will need to understand further the justification for the intervention and TfSE's analysis of the impacts of the proposal on the EEH region. This includes the important question of how the interventions would contribute to the wider transport system, providing the confidence that active and sustainable modes measures would be included in a core scheme, as well as needing to understand in more detail the forecast user and embodied carbon emissions associated with any intervention. EEH (in collaboration with OCC) will also need to understand any implications for routing of freight, and any associated measures that may be needed to ensure large freight vehicles do not use inappropriate roads.

We are also aware that there are local concerns, including the impact on local communities and environment, both to impact on traffic locally as well as it's physical impact.

EEH supports the inclusion of the A404 Bisham improvements which is a RIS2 pipeline scheme, which could deliver a solution to a known issue on existing infrastructure. The A404 provides a crucial link between the Thames Valley and Buckinghamshire, linking populations to employment. Improvements to the nearby Handy Cross roundabout (A404/Junction 4 M40), another RIS2 pipeline scheme is recognised as an area for targeted investment in our transport strategy. Any improvements at Bisham should not negatively impact Handy Cross roundabout or Marlow access.

Our transport strategy recognises that the Swindon/Didcot – Oxford – Bicester/Banbury corridor forms part of the wider Southampton – Oxford – West Midlands corridor movements, with pressures placed on both the rail corridor and the A34 corridor. We recognise that a long – term solution is required to the existing challenges which support the economic opportunities within Oxfordshire and also accommodates longer-distance movements. Any solution on the A34 must consider improvements to safety, provision for electric vehicle charging facilities, incorporation of sustainable travel, freight parking and servicing as well as improving operational matters.

In principle, EEH supports the opportunity for a shift of freight from road to rail, whilst requiring understanding of the overall network impact. EEH's Transport Strategy outlines support for the development of proposals that increase freight on the rail network, including the Southampton to the West Midlands corridor, where containerised freight from Southampton, serving Daventry and the West Midlands, is constrained by capacity issues between Didcot and Oxford, and along the West Coast Main Line. A [joint study by Network Rail and Highways England](#) highlighted one of the key findings was an opportunity for shift from road to rail, especially for journeys greater than 50 miles for bulky goods and 100 miles for consumer goods.

Construction materials moved into the region from the Mendips and Wales make the Great Western Main Line a strategic rail freight corridor for the region, meaning that interventions should take into account freight movements through EEH.

We support targeted junction improvements listed for the M4 but would like to understand any implications on the M4 near Swindon.

### **Combined package**

We welcome the development of packages of interventions which are multi-modal in nature, including consideration for active and sustainable modes. To think differently about the transport system and meet legal net zero requirements, we support TfSE's approach to integration and a whole system approach.

May I again congratulate you on your strategic investment plan. We look forward to continuing our work with you as further details of interventions become available and as EEH seeks to iterative our own investment pipeline, with outputs of our emerging studies.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Richard Wenham  
Chair

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