

## CABINET – 13 OCTOBER 2020

### ENGLAND'S ECONOMIC HEARTLAND DRAFT TRANSPORT STRATEGY- OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL RESPONSE

Report by Director for Planning and Place

#### RECOMMENDATION

1. **Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to endorse the Oxfordshire County Council Response to the England's Economic Heartland Draft Transport Strategy as included in Annex 1.**

#### Executive Summary

2. This report gives context to the proposed OCC response to the draft EEH Transport Strategy, set out in Annex 1. It sets out the background to development of the EEH Transport Strategy, and summarises the proposed consultation response. It also considers the proposals for the establishment of EEH as a statutory sub-national transport body and the powers and responsibilities that this would (or could) have. Finally, it covers key points for consideration on corporate policies and priorities, finance, sustainability and equality, and risk management.

#### Introduction and background

3. England's Economic Heartland is the 'emerging' sub-national Transport Body for the area stretching from Swindon to Cambridgeshire (shown in Annex 2). It shares a similar geography to the OxCam Arc area defined by central government, but is not identical as both Swindon and Hertfordshire are part of EEH, but not the OxCam Arc area. One of the areas that needs careful consideration is how the Transport Strategy can both support and influence the emerging OxCam spatial strategy.
4. A *draft Transport Strategy* for the EEH area was produced for consultation this summer, with the consultation period running from mid-July to early October. This follows last year's consultation on an *Outline Transport Strategy for Engagement* document; the County Cabinet agreed a response to this earlier consultation in October 2019. Owing to the earlier consultation deadline (6<sup>th</sup> October), it has been agreed with the EEH business unit that the formal OCC response can wait until Cabinet endorsement, with a draft response to be shared by the consultation deadline.
5. Oxfordshire County Council is a founding member and strategic partner on England's Economic Heartland, which includes Cabinet Member representation

on the EEH Strategic Transport Forum. Alongside other EEH partners, OCC has provided technical and political input and challenge to the development of the draft strategy, alongside other workstreams that have informed its development. However, we now have the opportunity to set out a formal County Council response on the draft strategy.

6. Alongside the draft Transport Strategy, EEH have also published proposals to establish the Sub-national Transport Body on a statutory basis, on which they are also seeking views. As set out below, it is proposed that OCC respond with comments on these proposal from an Oxfordshire perspective. However, it is recognised that these are made in the context of the current central government view that that do not currently support moves towards EEH obtaining statutory powers (Annex 4).

## **Outline of strategy and consultation**

7. In launching the strategy, EEH noted that it “seeks to harness the Heartland’s strengths” and in summary the document sets out how the region will:
  - Use the need to decarbonise our transport system as the opportunity to harness innovation and deliver solutions that in themselves generate economic growth;
  - Champion investment in digital infrastructure as a means of improving connectivity, particularly within our rural communities, in order to reduce the need to travel;
  - Use delivery of East West Rail as the catalyst for the transformation of our strategic public transport networks, investing in those networks to connect our economic assets and communities in a shared endeavour that unlocks added value;
  - Champion increased investment in active travel and shared transport solutions to improve local connectivity and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to realise their potential; and,
  - Ensure that our freight and logistic needs continue to be met whilst lowering the environmental impact of their delivery.
8. As such, the draft strategy is relatively high level and focused on strategic infrastructure and investment priorities. In summary it includes:
  - Context on the EEH area, including a map summarising key issues and opportunities and a list of areas which are seen as significant regional hubs, areas of economic opportunity and areas of significant change;
  - A draft vision and set of key principles, including the aspiration to have a transport network with net-zero carbon emissions by 2050;

- A set of 36 policies, including those on supporting plans for decarbonisation of the rail and road network, outlining a transport hierarchy to support investment decisions, setting out how regional transport and connectivity investment should be taken forward, and outlining ways to better manage the movement of goods and freight across the EEH area;
  - An Investment Pipeline summary table, setting out a list of 'Infrastructure Opportunities' against 'Strategic Issues;' and,
  - A proposed set of indicators against which the transport strategy would be assessed.
9. A short summary document outlining the main principles and approaches of the strategy has been produced and is attached as Annex 3. This also includes a visual depiction of the current 'investment pipeline' (which has a strong focus on rail, notably East West Rail) and the programme of Connectivity Studies EEH is coordinating over the next three years, which includes three with a strong Oxfordshire focus/opportunity (Swindon-Didcot-Oxford, Oxford to M40 and Peterborough-Northampton-Oxford).
10. In addition, an Integrated Impact Assessment has been published alongside the strategy, which includes an Equality Impacts Assessment, Health Impact Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment.

### **Proposal to Establish a Statutory Sub-National Transport Body**

11. The political leadership of EEH, together with the Strategic Transport Forum, has agreed in principle to develop a proposal that would make the case for seeking statutory status for the Sub-national Transport Body. This is on the basis that:
- Any proposal to seek statutory status would complement the existing role of Local Transport Authorities and Mayoral Combined Authority;
  - The proposal would only seek the devolution of powers that are proportionate and necessary to deliver the strategic aims and objectives of the Transport Strategy; and,
  - The proposal is developed in parallel with the work to develop the Transport Strategy.
12. Therefore, alongside the publication of the Draft Transport Strategy, EEH is also seeking views on the proposal to establish the Sub-national Transport Body on a statutory basis. This sets out, in a separate consultation document, proposals for EEH to obtain statutory powers over policy and scheme development related to its work.
13. EEH as a statutory Sub-national Transport Body would have a number of general 'core' functions as set out in the Local Transport Act 2008. The added

value of establishing a statutory body is that the Secretary of State must have regard to the Sub-national Transport Body's Transport Strategy, and its advice in respect of its implementation.

14. Based on the Draft Transport Strategy, the EEH Strategic Transport Forum has identified a limited number of additional powers that it feels would be appropriate in order to ensure the implementation of the strategy. The intention would be to request additional powers in a way that means they operate concurrently with the consent of the constituent authorities. In summary the powers identified by the Forum include:
  - The right to be consulted about new rail franchises;
  - The right to have a role in setting the High Level Output Specification (HLOS) for rail;
  - The right to have a role in setting the Road Investment Strategy (RIS) for the Strategic Road Network (SRN) – in Oxfordshire this is the M40, A34 and A43;
  - The ability to enter into agreements to undertake certain works on the SRN, Major Road Network or local roads;
  - The ability to make capital grants for the provision of public transport facilities;
  - The ability to secure the provision of bus services; and,
  - The ability to enter into Quality Bus Partnerships.
  
15. It is also important to be clear that EEH believes the following functions are not felt to be appropriate for the new body:
  - Setting priorities for local authorities for roads that are not part of the Major Road Network (in Oxfordshire the MRN comprises the A40, A420, A41 and A418);
  - Being responsible for any highway maintenance responsibilities;
  - Providing the services of a train operating company;
  - Any consultation function currently the responsibility of a local authority; and,
  - Giving directions to a constituent authority about the exercise of transport functions by that authority in their area.
  
16. It will be for the Local Transport / Combined Authorities to determine the content of the proposal, and to agree to submit it to the Secretary of State for their consideration.
  
17. However, whilst recognising the importance of the work of EEH and the strength of collaborative working developed by the partnership and its members, providing a strategic vision across the area for the benefit of the whole region, the current Government position as set out in a recent letter from Baroness Vere (Annex 4) is that it would not approve any proposals for EEH to have statutory status at this time.
  
18. Given this, views on this aspect of the consultation are perhaps less critical, but it is proposed that the Council does set out its views on the principal of EEH

becoming a statutory body and consideration of what this could mean in terms of additional powers from an Oxfordshire perspective.

## **OCC proposed response on the Draft Transport Strategy**

19. The proposed consultation response on the draft England's Economic Heartland document is given in Annex 1. In overview, the proposed response is broadly positive, with many of the policies supported as giving strategic focus to the required investment priorities at the sub-national level. Particular areas to be commended are:
  - The ambition on achieving a net-zero carbon emission transport network, and complementary work on pathways to de-carbonisation;
  - The inclusion of a hierarchy of transport modes, which will be important in ensuring the right decisions are made on transport investment priorities;
  - Recognition of the central spine of Oxfordshire, linking housing and jobs growth in Bicester, Oxford and Science Vale/Didcot, where improvements to connectivity, particularly for public transport and active travel, should be focused;
  - The importance of Digital Connectivity, which would benefit from being reinforced as an increasingly fundamental component of a resilient network; and,
  - The emphasis on managing the strategic movement of freight and goods at a regional, rather than authority, level given that many of these movements are longer-distance.
  
20. However, there are areas where it is considered that policies can be strengthened or clarified. These are highlighted in the proposed response. The main points noted are the need to:
  - Greater recognise of the role of bus services in supporting strategy outcomes;
  - Put more emphasis on the role that Healthy place-shaping and health outcomes will have in improving quality of life and wellbeing;
  - Highlight that investment in the Strategic Road network should also provide complementary improvements to sustainable travel, particularly active travel;
  - Emphasise in the strategy that complementary demand management measures such as re-allocation of road space and/or charging measures will be needed to achieve policy delivery;
  - Recognise best practice/ design standards on active travel; and,
  - Ensure cross-boundary matters and projects between sub-national transport body areas are recognised in the strategy.

21. Where this strategy fits within and supports the wider Oxford-Cambridge Arc should also be more clearly set out. EEH is effectively overseeing the connectivity workstream of the Arc, so whilst it is a transport document, it would benefit from understanding how it can best fit with and iteratively develop alongside the Spatial Strategy work being undertaken across the Arc.

### **OCC proposed response on the proposed EEH Statutory Powers**

22. It is considered that there could be some strategic benefits if EEH was to secure statutory powers. For example, having direct sub-national partnership input to the policy and investment framework for strategic roads and rail could give OCC (as an EEH partner) greater influence over this policy process.
23. However, as the recent correspondence from Government suggests, EEH already has significant input here and can continue to prioritise transport schemes and provide an overall partnership view. This is evidenced by the recent approval by the Strategic Transport Forum of its programme of Connectivity Studies across the EEH area.
24. If statutory status were to be reconsidered by Government, we would have concerns about some of the areas where EEH is considering securing powers, particularly over the provision of bus services at a local level, as this may confuse and cause duplication with OCC work in this area.
25. Overall, EEH obtaining statutory powers as proposed in the consultation could therefore have some benefits and disbenefits for Oxfordshire, and these considerations are reflected in the proposed response. However, it is recognised that the current central government position (as set out above and in Annex 4) is not supportive of EEH obtaining these powers. Given this, it is proposed that the County Council continue to work positively with EEH partners and government to help realise potential benefits under the current arrangements, as well as ensuring that OCC priorities are reflected in discussion on any updated proposals.

### **Corporate Policies and Priorities**

26. The County Council's corporate plan, 2019-22 includes a vision based on the 3 elements of 'Thriving People,' 'Thriving Communities,' and 'Thriving Economy.' This workstream fits well with the 'Thriving Economy' part of the vision, "We support a thriving local economy by improving transport links to create jobs and homes for the future.' In particular, the draft strategy sets out priorities for securing investment in strategic transport infrastructure, and inputting to the development of key cross authority boundary schemes such as East West Rail. It also fits with elements of the 'Thriving Communities' vision, given the relationship between transport investment, quality of life, health and the environment. Overall, being an EEH core partner helps ensure that Oxfordshire has influence over future priorities and investment in wider and

cross boundary strategic transport networks, thereby helping to deliver the corporate vision.

27. Development and delivery of the strategy also fits well with the County Council Covid recovery strategy, 'Restart-Recover-Renew', in particular the longer-term priorities for post-Covid transport planning. This includes promotion of sustainable modes of transport, better planning for public transport improvements, and achieving net-zero carbon emissions.

## **Financial and Staff Implications**

28. There are no immediate revenue or capital budget implications. The Council is already a partner in EEH, and on-going partnership work on development and delivery of the strategy and associated workstreams is able to be accommodated through existing staff resources within the Growth and Place Directorate. As noted above, the strength of existing and planned collaborate work on strategic transport matters such as the connectivity studies is likely to result in greater influence over further funding opportunities for delivery of transport schemes. However, given the current position by central government on the statutory power proposals, final decisions on such funding is likely to remain with central government for the time-being.

## **Sustainability and Equality Implications**

29. The draft Strategy specifically includes a vision to de-carbonise the transport network across the EEH area, supported by policies that promote investment in measures and schemes to help achieve this. It is considered that this aligns well with OCC plans for Climate Action. EEH have also undertaken an Integrated Sustainability Appraisal (ISA) alongside development of their new Transport Strategy, which includes a Strategic Environmental Assessment, Equality Impact Assessment and a Health Impact Assessment. EEH has used the ISA process to assess and refine the transport strategy policies against the defined sustainability objectives.
30. The assessment of EEH policies undertaken through the ISA process has indicated that there are forecast to be many associated sustainability benefits through their application. However, it has also shown in some areas, such as management of freight, policy delivery will need to be closely aligned if full benefits are to be realised.

## **Risk Management**

31. The main risk is ensuring the best outcomes for Oxfordshire via effective partnership working. As with all partnerships, EEH partners do not all have the same view on strategic priorities, and OCC will need to look for areas of commonality in this work. This would clearly have greater importance if EEH were to secure statutory powers and greater influence over investment

decisions, although as noted above this is very unlikely in the short-term given the current central government position on the statutory proposals.

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**Annexes:**

Annex 1: EEH draft Transport Strategy consultation: OCC proposed response

Annex 2: England's Economic Heartland Area

Annex 3: Draft Transport Strategy Summary

Annex 4: Letter from Baroness Vere

**Background papers:**

EEH Draft Transport Strategy, available at the following link:

<http://www.englandseconomicheartland.com/Pages/transport-strategyconsult.aspx>

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