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6<sup>th</sup> October 2020

Sent via email to: [aking@englandseconomicheartland.com](mailto:aking@englandseconomicheartland.com)>

Dear Mr King,

## England's Economic Heartland Draft Transport Strategy - Consultation Response

On behalf of the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce (TVCC), we thank you for your email (17<sup>th</sup> August) and invitation to review the Transport Strategy for England's Economic Heartland (EEH). Herewith we provide our initial response to the consultation in this letter, prior to its closing on 6<sup>th</sup> October 2020. We also refer you back to our earlier comments on this plan from October 2019 available to download [HERE](#).

TVCC is the only accredited Chamber of Commerce for Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Swindon – much of the EEH area. Whilst the Strategy covers a wider geographical, we have focused our response by writing from the perspective of the business community across Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Swindon. Nevertheless, the surrounding areas are also of strategic importance to TVCC as part of the wider connectivity of and economic geography of the region (notably Berkshire).

### Introduction

#### About the Chamber and our Business Manifesto

[TVCC](#) is one of the largest accredited Chambers within the UK and the only accredited Chamber of Commerce for the Thames Valley region. We represent over 4,000 companies in our membership. The region is home to the [UK's top two performing cities](#) (Oxford and Reading), 2<sup>nd</sup> largest trading city in the UK (Slough), the fastest growing city (Reading), the [number one university in the world](#) for the 4<sup>th</sup> consecutive year (University of Oxford). We are consistently one of the highest performing regions for attracting [inward investment](#) in the UK, and are one of the [UK's most active trading locations](#), with the Chamber itself delivering over 14% of the UK's overall trade documentation. The GDP of the Thames Valley is estimated at around £83,848 million with an expected 1.9% GVA growth rate until 2021 – outstripping the UK average. The Thames Valley is the UK's true turbo-economy and as the US Ambassador the UK has most recently stated at our Windsor Debate ... *"the Thames Valley is the Silicon Valley of Europe..."*.

TVCC is committed to supporting the futureproofing and delivery of a resilient infrastructure network (including water, digital, telecommunications, air, road and rail) for the region. This is clearly demonstrated by focus of the Chamber's key policy statement document, the [2020 Business Manifesto](#) which includes a commitment to help secure the delivery of the [Western Rail Link to Heathrow](#) (WRLtH) – a project that will benefit businesses (including those within freight and logistics), residents and the economy in the Thames Valley (incl. EEH) and far beyond (see our website).

### Local Policy Priorities relevant and England's Economic Heartland

We also refer you to our [Local Policy Priority Statements](#) for the respective areas covered by EEH's in [Buckinghamshire](#), [Oxfordshire](#) and [Swindon](#). We commend your attention these business-led and developed priorities in developing your Transport Strategy. In addition to WRLtH, these priorities advocate for the strengthening of regional infrastructure networks *include*:

- Calling for investment along the Great Western railway (GWR) line to free capacity and maximise the benefits to Swindon (and Oxford) of being within 'the golden hour' of London;
- Reigniting discussions around the strategic road improvement of the A420 – including its re-trunking to a motorway standard.
- Continue our calls for a long-term 'Vision' that aligns economic and land-use/spatial planning to help maximise impact and most effectively shape the area's future. Why therefore is Swindon not one of your 'areas of economic opportunity'?
- Ensuring a more impactful foreign direct investment activity (less Strategy more 'doing' to drive FDI projects into the region).
- Promote the need to encourage modal shift to more sustainable modes of transport and reduce carbon emissions more generally.
- Encouraging investment into the Enterprise Zone sites and OxCam Arc growth corridor.
- Ensure our regional town centres have the appropriate financial injection to manage, maintain and improve services and associated infrastructure.
- Promote the sector and market strengths of the area to help ensure the Thames Valley remains an investment destination of choice (you describe these as 'areas of economic opportunity'.

The Business Manifesto (2021) – which is in preparation and the review of these local priorities – will reaffirm our commitment to WRLtH. We are also reflecting on the challenges and opportunities resulting from COVID-19, and having engaged our own membership throughout 2020, the importance of delivering a resilient (inc. digital) and connected infrastructure network; decarbonising transport (inc. aviation sector) and the future of work. These priorities are reflected in some of our comments below.

### **Transport Strategy Vision and Principles**

We compliment you on the breadth and comprehensiveness of the document, commending you on the vision of the Transport Strategy "to realise sustainable growth opportunities and quality of life and well-being for residents *and businesses* by harnessing *the region's* globally renowned centres of innovation to unlock a world class, de-carbonised transport system".

We emphasise the vision, and therefore the wider Strategy, needs to ensure we are focused on actions that also improve productivity (see below) and attract (foreign direct) investment (inc. access to markets and international gateways) to continue the economic growth and therefore improving wellbeing, inclusion and quality of life and protecting and enhancing the Thames Valley's and South East's unique, natural and historic environment.

We would welcome a timely addition to the Transport Strategy, consistent with the core messages of connectivity and strategic gateways, of reference to the stimulus to the hard-hit aviation sector (see also our response to Decarbonising Transport – referenced below). Expansion of Heathrow may be sensitive but sustaining Heathrow at its present capacity is essential to UK plc's and the region's future well-being and productivity.

## **Improve productivity and attracting investment to grow out the economy and better compete in the global marketplace**

TVCC has proven expertise in helping co-ordinate and deliver inward investment activity across the region, adding to its position as a leading international business location and consistently one of the highest performing regions for inward investment outside of London.

- The Chamber is focused on strengthening partnerships, helping to attract and retain investment, trade, jobs and people. Therefore, we agree that a key priority for the Transport Strategy should be to ensure that the network continues to facilitate and enable trade, improve business connectivity and provide access to international gateways in order to make certain that these areas continue to develop as independent economic hubs.
- We welcome the ambition of a 'step change' in approach particularly as plans and proposals look to help futureproof and deliver resilient infrastructure networks. We recognise the associated challenges (of predictions into the future), but suggest the Thames Valley region is ideally placed to be part of this assessment – as the acknowledged home of the UK's digital technologies sector, many of the Chamber's, and wider businesses community's members, are at the forefront of innovation in future technologies and their applications.
- With Crossrail imminent and benefitting the wider region (inc. access via the GWR mainline into Oxfordshire to London), we support initiatives/developments that connect, such as smart ticketing, and integrate journeys across the widest area and improve the experience of passengers and efficiency of travel in/around the Thames Valley and EEH area.
- We would like to see a stronger reference to the need for road improvements on the A404 at the Bisham roundabout. This junction has been a longstanding 'bottle-neck' for the safe and free flow of traffic along this route connecting M40 with the M4).
- It is disappointing the Strategy does not reference / identify the A420 for greater attention and investment. Reliance solely on A34/M4 is not the answer to all the communities involved in Swindon and Oxford or those in between. Much of Swindon's current proposed development land (and therefore economic opportunity) is at the end of the A420 as well and localised improvements around east Swindon need further reinforcement along the whole route.

## **We would like to see a stronger focus and emphasis on the following:**

### Western Rail Link to Heathrow (WRLtH)

WRLtH must be given greater emphasis as a strategically important project to EEH because it, delivers on more of the challenges and priorities of the Transport Strategy than is being presented and perhaps first understood. We need the Transport Strategy to be bold in (i) support for this scheme; (ii) stressing the need for accelerating development and decision making on the investment and delivery; (iii) engaging Government to adopt a less cautious approach to creative investment opportunities, e.g. a more open approach to private investment models and a less defensive approach to interpretation of state aid rules. In addition:

- Connectivity (p. 17): The scheme inherently delivers on this challenge, but also complements and multiplies the benefits of East West Rail. More generally, we do agree there has been and will continue to be a shift in the way we work and the dynamics of work. However, there is evidence that some international business travel, e.g. for new relationships and maintaining existing relationships, will remain essential and therefore 'getting the aviation' sector moving again is of vital importance to EEH and the UK-economy.
- Access to international gateways: WRLtH will bring any part of the EEH area, which can reach Reading or Slough stations, swifter rail access to Heathrow. This includes bringing Oxford and Swindon within the golden hour of Heathrow and for FDI and, when East West Rail is developed may bring many locations access via Reading rather than via London stations and the tube. The wider multiples / benefits also include

strengthening the: (i) regional proposition to FDI's (70% of all UK FDI is located within 1 hour of Heathrow); (ii) attractiveness to inbound tourism and visitors; (iii) Universities through research partnerships and access for students; (iv) stimulus to existing business across the Thames Valley to invest; (v) travel to work areas and supply chains. Your current statement (e.g. Policy 28 misses the real impact and ambition).

- De-carbonisation, air quality and environmental net gain: WRLtH is predicted to reduce carbon emissions by the equivalent of 30 million fewer road miles. It will reduce congestion and pollution on major roads including M40, M4, M25 and A34.
- Addressing social inequalities (p.19): WRLtH will bring 14m people swifter access to Heathrow. This figure includes Oxfordshire, Swindon and south Buckinghamshire but has not factored in the further benefits to a wider EEH area to be derived from East West Rail which will improve direct access. The benefits set out above will also support the less advantaged areas in the EEH set out in the draft strategy.
- Levelling-up Agenda: Support to WRLtH and its multi-regional benefits (Wales, south west etc) will address the theme of Making the Heartland work for the UK and demonstrate the EEH's support to UK plc and further offset a perception of its relative prosperity.
- Residents and Business (p.19/20): Satisfies many of the expectations that were expressed by residents and businesses, including most notable on the need to: *'be bold: not business as usual'*, recognise *'the importance of placing greater emphasis on wider strategic linkages'*, *'increase the emphasis on sustainable modes'* and the *'importance of implementation'* – our business community and regional MP's are with one voice – get this project built.

In terms of areas to strength the reference to WRLtH within the Strategy:

- Freight and logistics (p.17): we want to see stronger emphasis of Heathrow's importance to freight and therefore improved access to Heathrow by road and rail is vital. e.g. WRLtH will alleviate demands on motorway network so enabling freight and may offer rail opportunities. Note, Heathrow is UK's biggest port by value and in terms of connectivity – 95% of the world's GDP is a single flight away – there is nowhere better connected.
- Chapters: reflect WRLtH more strongly in the following (i) A Transport System for the Future; (ii) Transforming Journeys; (iii) Connecting People with Opportunities, and; (iv) Implementation.
- Investment Pipeline: We would strongly support the WRLtH's inclusion as one of the investment pipeline of projects. Currently it doesn't appear as a distinct priority and is somewhat of a tertiary matter.

TVCC is fully committed to supporting this project, which will aim to remove passengers from major roads, reducing congestion and pollution – see consultation response to [Improving Rail Links to Heathrow from the West & Beyond](#). Not only this, but it will contribute to the UK's climate change targets (reducing carbon emissions) and to Heathrow's environmental mitigation targets and freight journey challenges.

### Decarbonising Transport

We commend proposals within the Plan to support this agenda and refer you directly, for example, to our most recent consultation response on [Decarbonising Transport](#), submitted to Government 28<sup>th</sup>/08/2020. We would see the Strategy being strengthened further with more details and projects supported in/around on what bus and coach operators can achieve, and are achieving, as part of an integrated transport mix. Examples may include the ['All Electric Bus Town'](#) or even [Towns](#) and the Oxford Bus Company [fully electric bus trials](#).

### Making the Heartland Work for the UK

In addition to the comments outlined elsewhere, the Chamber is actively engaged and contributes to trade and inward investment activities that support the region. The region's sector strengths are agnostic of political and/or 'transport'

boundaries. We should reflect this opportunity in the Transport Strategy and remain 'fluid' to the benefits of cross-regional collaboration and connects that deliver this ambition and support our contribution to the levelling up agenda for the UK. In addition and by way of example, we refer you to the Chamber's inward investment portal <https://www.thamesvalley.co.uk/> that from a sector/market perspective helps drive FDI into the region and promotes the region to our international audience.

#### Implementation and Forward Partnership

We welcome the opportunity to building stronger and closer relationships with the EEH team and our members in areas of mutual benefit and interest, inc. relevant Corridor/Connectivity Studies ( notably those for the Swindon – Didcot – Oxford; Watford – Aylesbury – Bicester – M40; Oxford – M40 junctions) and representation on appropriate Groups / investment pipeline initiatives, etc), and where, you will value an independent voice of business.

We thank you once again for the opportunity to comment on this Strategy and we welcome every opportunity to not only be consulted, but to be involved as a key stakeholder in future work, helping to further shape and frame the region's infrastructure priorities.

Yours sincerely,



**Paul Britton**  
**Chief Executive**