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Dear Sir/Madam

'Making the right choices: Issues and opportunities for the Strategic Transport Plan 2025-2050' – consultation response.

England's Economic Heartland (EEH) is the Sub-national Transport Body (STB) for the region stretching from Swindon across to Cambridgeshire, and Northamptonshire down to Hertfordshire.

EEH shares borders with Western Gateway at the boundaries of Oxfordshire and Swindon. As a neighbouring STB, we welcome the opportunity to feedback to help the development of your Strategic Transport Plan. We have shared economic, environmental, and spatial characteristics, including large rural populations, high congestion and car dependence and emissions. There are many opportunities for us to continue to share learning and adopt common approaches across these areas of interest.

EEH and Western Gateway 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 published its transport strategy in 2021. The strategy set out our expectations for a transport system that can support and enable the region to reach net zero while realising its economic potential.

Shared priorities

EEH and Western Gateway have shared transport priorities and challenges. EEH's Transport Strategy recognised the importance of decarbonisation to reach net zero, the crucial role of freight, significance of connectivity for communities especially those in rural and deprived areas.

Net Zero



Western Gateway's vision of a net zero carbon transport system through targeted investment aligns with EEH's Transport Strategy. EEH's Strategy sets out the aim to focus on decarbonising the transport system by harnessing innovation and supporting investment particularly in digital infrastructure to promote green economic opportunities.

Reliance on private cars and the need to cut emissions is a shared challenge. Investment in strategic public transport infrastructure and promotion of active travel measures will provide the opportunity to meet this challenge. We therefore support the need to incentivise local active travel mode shifts as articulated in Western Gateway's in Making The Right Choices.

Freight

EEH and Western Gateway both face the challenges of significant road freight movements across our regions, which, while essential to the functioning of our economies, impacts our communities and contributes to congestion and carbon emissions. Your ambition to move more freight to rail aligns with our Transport Strategy which also supports the need for electrification of the network, with priority given to the early electrification of key rail corridors that are essential for strategic rail freight movements.

Our study of the freight and logistics sector (2019) identified that a high proportion of road-based freight involves trips over 200-300km. Many of these movements are prime candidates for a shift to rail for the trunk haulage, with the final stage of the journey being delivered by vehicles powered by electricity or other low carbon fuel.

We would like to continue working with Western Gateway on specific proposals and interventions for HGVs to use appropriate routes, minimising the impact on local communities. Encapsulated in this is the growing need for HGV parking facilities, alternative fuel charging and welfare facilities for drivers. We support your work with Peninsula Transport on Alternative Fuels for Freight Strategy.

Rural Connectivity

EEH welcomes Western Gateway's work on making the case for investment in rural places. In both regions there are rural populations which lack any alternative to car travel. The resultant outcome is high levels of car dependence and emissions. However the challenges of rural behaviour change are recognised with frequent and conventional bus services in our rural areas, becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. We recently produced guidance for local authorities preparing business cases for mobility hubs in more rural areas which may be of interest to your partners.

Regional Connectivity

We note and support the identification of the South East to South Wales strategic transport corridor, which includes Swindon and Oxfordshire. Strengthening connectivity in this corridor will create economic opportunities, bringing together the workforces, economic centres, and universities in both our regions.

EEH has a programme of connectivity studies which work to understand the connectivity opportunities in strategic corridors across the region. Our Swindon to Didcot connectivity study neighbours Western Gateway's region and highlights the importance of the A420 and the Great Western Railway and the benefits of direct rail connections between Bristol, Swindon and Oxford. Additionally, it showed the lack of strategic routes connecting to Poole and Bournemouth area from Swindon area. We have concerns over the capacity of the existing rail infrastructure and the balance between the importance of local connectivity and strategic



connectivity as government plans to improve connectivity between Wales and London using the same line.

East West Rail provides a unique opportunity to connect communities between Oxford and Cambridge. It unlocks the potential for an East West Main Line stretching from Norfolk and Suffolk through to Swindon, Bristol, and South Wales. We are delighted that Western Gateway is now represented at the East West Main Line Partnership meetings.

Additionally, we welcome engagement with Western Gateway in cross border ambitions which relate to sustainable modes such as active travel and public transport. EEH's Bus Study identifies potential for cross boundary opportunity in public transport, such as between Swindon – Marlborough.

We commend the ambitions set out in the Making the Right Choices document. We are aligned in the focus of reaching net zero whilst facilitating an accessible, connected transport system. However, a further opportunity that could be considered in the role of digital infrastructure in decreasing the demand for travel.

We look forward to working with Western Gateway as you develop your Strategic Transport Plan.

