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Sent by email to GWconsultation@dft.gsi.gov.uk

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Dear Sir

GREAT WESTERN RAIL FRANCHISE – Public Consultation

England's Economic Heartland Strategic Alliance established the Strategic Transport Forum in February 2016. Membership of the Strategic Alliance covers the area from Swindon, through Oxfordshire, Milton Keynes and across to Cambridgeshire, and from Northamptonshire across to Luton and Hertfordshire.

The Strategic Transport Forum is the emerging Sub-national Transport Body for the Heartland region. It is the focus for a single conversation on strategic transport issues and maintains the overview of strategic investment priorities. The Forum works closely with the Department for Transport, Highways England and Network Rail, all of whom are members of the Forum.

As an emerging Sub-national Transport Body, England's Economic Heartland is looking to work more closely with the Department for Transport in the development of the franchise specification prior to the issuing of the Invitation to Tender. In addition, building on experience with the East Midlands franchise, it is looking to develop a proposition that will enable the emerging Sub-national Transport Body to have a 'light touch' involvement in the subsequent management of the franchise.

Franchise Objectives (Question 1)

Overall the strategic objectives seem appropriate for the franchise moving forward, although greater emphasis needs to be given to the role of rail services in acting as an enabler of economic and housing growth.

The National Infrastructure Commission's final report into the Oxford to Cambridge corridor emphasised the critical role of improved connectivity in realising economic potential. In

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developing the specification for future rail franchises there is a need to ensure the importance of this linkage is given greater emphasis.

Linked to this, the explicit recognition that there is a need to improve the environmental performance of the railway is strongly supported. The National Infrastructure Commission advocated the need to embed the principle of 'net gain' in seeking to realise the economic potential of the corridor. The on-going investment in new rolling stock – particularly electric trains – is a positive sign in this regards. The ambition to continue this trajectory through this franchise is welcomed.

The explicit reference to support the development and delivery of other major rail investment schemes is welcomed: the identification of the western rail link to Heathrow, East West Rail and the interface with HS2 at Old Oak Common are all identified by England's Economic Heartland as being of strategic significance.

In addition there should be explicit recognition of the need to develop and deliver proposals that enable the role of Oxford as a rail hub to be realised. The announcement of the Oxfordshire Rail Study in the Budget 2017 reflects the opportunity for rail services in/around Oxford to play a major role in enabling economic and housing growth. This should be reflected in the strategic objectives.

The strategic objectives should also include explicit reference to the need for the franchise operator to work with Network Rail, England's Economic Heartland and local partners to develop proposals that will address the capacity constraints that exist on the Didcot to Oxford section of the network. This is of national significance not just in terms of supporting the economic ambition for the Heartland but also in terms of supporting longer-distance rail movements – both passenger and freight. England's Economic Heartland has identified the need to address this constraint as one of its strategic priorities.

A growing concern for England's Economic Heartland is the urgent need to improve the passenger experience at all stations. Of particular concern to Forum members is the need to ensure that stations are accessible to all users, that ticket facilities are available and that shelter is provided. Making the station environment improvement in seeking to promote rail services as an attractive and viable option. The strategic objectives should ensure that the user experience is at the heart of the franchise moving forward.

As part of its work to develop the overarching Transport Strategy for the Heartland region the Strategic Transport Forum has established a baseline database of information. It is also developing a policy scenario modelling tool that it will use to explore the implications of alternative scenarios on future transport demand. These form part of the evidence base for the overarching Transport Strategy: both are available to the Department for Transport to support their work in developing the future franchise requirements.

Should Great Western be retained as a single franchise? (Question 2)

The consultation document raises the question of whether the franchise should be retained as a single franchise or split in two. The document provides a couple of illustrations as to how the franchise could be split.

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The opening of the Elizabeth line later this year will result in significant changes to suburban and outer-suburban services operating through the Thames Valley and onwards to Oxford. Delivery of East West Rail will also create both the opportunity, and indeed the need, to review the operation of rail services in/around the Oxford area and onwards across the Heartland.

England's Economic Heartland has identified the need to review whether the current rail passenger franchise map is the most appropriate for enabling the step change in the economy identified by the National Infrastructure Commission.

It is highly likely that some form of change to the franchise map, including changes to the scope of the Great Western franchise, is both desirable and appropriate moving forward.

At this stage England's Economic Heartland does not believe it is possible to take a view as to whether any of the proposals to split the franchise put forward in the consultation document are the most appropriate. As the emerging Sub-national Transport Body we are looking to work with the Department for Transport on this particular issue to ensure that any change proposed is consistent with the requirements of the emerging overarching Transport Strategy.

Future Train Service and Timetable Development (Question 6)

The consultation document identifies the work of the North Cotswold Line Task Force as an example of the work underway to develop and deliver improvements in rail services through collaborative working. England's Economic Heartland supports the ambition of the North Cotswold Line Task Force and the need for that ambition to be reflected in the development of the future franchise.

In taking the franchise forward there is also a need to be explicit about the work being taken forward through the Oxfordshire Rail Study, and in particular the opportunity to develop local rail services in/around Oxford in support of economic and housing growth identified by the Oxfordshire Growth Board.

Direct Links and Connections (Question 8)

Membership of the Strategic Transport Forum extends to Swindon, reflecting the strong economic linkages that already exist between Swindon and the rest of the Heartland.

England's Economic Heartland has already identified the need to address capacity constraints on the Didcot to Oxford section of the rail network. In addition it has identified the opportunity created by the delivery of EWR to review the operation of local rail services.

This should also be used as the opportunity to consider the potential to restore direct rail links between Swindon and the wider Heartland area. Opportunities to improve or restore rail connectivity with other communities to the west of Didcot should also be explored as part of that conversation.

Seasonal Train Services (Question 9)

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Experience with the Chiltern franchise, which provides a limited Boxing Day service, shows that the demand exists for rail services over the Christmas period. In taking the franchise forward there is a strong need to consider the need to provide services on Boxing Day.

Freight (Question 11)

The London Mayor's draft Transport Strategy identifies his desire to see rail freight movements that currently use the London rail network redirected onto alternative routes in order to provide additional capacity for passenger services. His draft Transport Strategy specifically identifies the opportunity to make use of East West Rail as an alternative.

The current proposals for the Western Section of East West Rail only make provision for existing rail freight services. However, the ability to provide additional capacity for rail freight is not precluded in the design being taken forward.

The need to address the capacity constraints on the Didcot to Oxford section of the network have already been identified – not just to the benefit of the Heartland economy but also the wider UK economy. This need is in part driven by the demand for rail freight, whose option as an alternative to road haulage along the A34 corridor should be improved.

Taken in combination, the delivery of East West Rail and improvements to the Didcot to Oxford section offer opportunities for rail freight that need to be actively pursued due to their strategic importance. In taking this franchise forward greater attention should be given to ensuring that opportunities to cater for additional rail freight services are allowed for.

Stations (Question 14)

The consultation document identifies the need to develop proposals for better co-ordination with other transport modes. This is strongly supported by England's Economic Heartland.

Provisions under the Bus Services Act 2017 enable local transport authorities to work with public transport providers to improve the integration of services. In taking the franchise forward there should be a requirement on the franchisee to actively seek out opportunities to work with local transport authorities and other public transport providers, with the specific aim of improved integration of services. The initial focus for such an approach should be the largest stations and those identified through the overarching Transport Strategy as 'hubs'.

Priority should be given to making a requirement for such co-ordination at Oxford Station and at Didcot Parkway. The latter is a key rail-head for a number of important locations in the southern half of Oxfordshire, in particular Wallingford, Wantage, Abingdon, Milton Park and Harwell. Whilst bus services are already well developed in many instances, the need is to improve the co-ordination of bus and rail services, and to make it a requirement to provide through ticketing, to the benefit of the user.

Fares and Ticketing (Question 15)

The future franchise should include an explicit requirement to develop and promote the use of smart ticketing solutions. England's Economic Heartland is looking to build on the experience of the GLA/TfL on smart ticketing with a view to extending this convenience more

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widely across the Heartland area. The franchisee should be required to work with England's Economic Heartland in achieving this ambition.

England's Economic Heartland – as an emerging Sub-national Transport Body – looks forward to working closely with the Department for Transport as its work on this franchise is taken forward.

Our work to develop the overarching Transport Strategy looks to have an initial framework available for wider engagement by the end of 2018, presenting an opportunity to ensure that the work on the renewal of this franchise is shaped by that wider strategic context. That is essential to ensuring that investment in rail services supports delivery of the economic potential of the Heartland area, an identified national priority.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr Heather Smith
Chairman, Strategic Transport Forum