

Why is a Sub-national Transport Body being considered for the Heartland?

England's Economic Heartland Strategic Alliance established the Strategic Transport Forum in February 2016. Membership of the Strategic Alliance covers the area from Oxfordshire, through Milton Keynes and across to Cambridgeshire, and from Northamptonshire across to Luton. The Forum's priority is to be the single forum for strategic transport issues in response to the need to improve connectivity as a means of supporting economic growth.

All meetings of the Strategic Transport Forum are held in public: all papers considered by the Forum are public documents unless there are issues which require consideration on a confidential basis due to commercial considerations.

The National Infrastructure Commission in its Interim Report on the potential of the area identified the need for a single overview on strategic transport issues. The Department for Transport in its recently published Transport Investment Strategy identifies the added value that Sub-national Transport Bodies can bring to improving strategic transport planning and implementation.

There are several gaps and inconsistencies in the current structure of strategic transport planning across the Heartland area which potentially hinder the ambitions to improve connectivity across the region, both east-west and north-south. Establishing a Sub-National Transport Body (STB) could help to plug those gaps and to deliver benefits to businesses as well as transport users. It will help ensure the region has greater influence in determining infrastructure priorities and the allocation of future funding.

Options for a Sub-national Transport Body

There is no fixed template as to what form an STB has to take: it is for the Local Transport Authorities putting the proposal forward to determine, and provide the case as to why their proposition is the most appropriate. The Strategic Transport Forum is seeking to begin an engagement with prospective partners and stakeholders on the potential for the STB and to develop a detailed proposal. Once agreement has been arrived, that proposal would then be submitted to the Secretary of State for Transport for their consideration, and Parliament's approval.

Potential functions and powers

The Strategic Transport Forum commissioned an initial piece of advice from independent external advisors on potential options. Following a review of their advice, the Strategic Transport Forum agreed that discussions should be focused around the proposition that initially the current partnership arrangements are strengthened as part of a journey towards establishing a statutory Sub-national Transport Body.

- **Strengthen the existing Strategic Transport Forum (retaining its non-statutory status)**

The Strategic Transport Forum would continue to provide leadership on strategic transport issues across the Heartland area.

The Forum would prepare a non-statutory Transport Strategy for the Heartland area that provides a long-term strategic framework within which more detailed implementation proposals could be prepared.

Existing working relationships with the Department for Transport, Highways England and Network Rail would be strengthened, ensuring that local priorities are fed into the development of national investment programmes.

The current governance framework for the Strategic Transport Forum would be reviewed and refined in light of experience over the first 12 months of its operation, and in particular to ensure that:

- Linkages with local planning authorities might be strengthened;
- Linkages with public transport operators (both rail and road) might be strengthened; and
- Linkages with groups representing users (both individuals and businesses) might be strengthened.

- **Use the Strategic Transport Forum as the foundation for establishing a statutory Sub-national Transport Body**

The Local Transport Authorities would use the experience gained as a non-statutory partnership to develop a detailed proposal that would see a statutory STB established.

The proposed STB would focus on issues of strategic importance, with Local Transport Authorities continuing to be responsible for local transport issues.

As an STB the Transport Strategy would be a statutory document, one that all parties, including Government and its agencies/companies, are required to reflect in their activities.

Whilst it will be for the Local Transport Authorities to develop and submit a proposal to establish an STB, based on experience with the current non-statutory partnership it is envisaged that any such proposal would make provision for the involvement of Local Enterprise Partnerships, local planning authorities, infrastructure owners and service providers.

Some of the potential functions that the STB could seek to have assigned to it include:

- seeking to jointly exercise some functions in relation to roads of more than local significance, to help create a regional major road network;
- seeking to enhance its influence on the decision-making process in relation to roads, for example the STB could be responsible for identifying the major road network in its area, priorities for investment and produce a report to identify the local priorities which would feed into the next Road Investment Strategy;
- requiring the Office of Rail Regulation to have regard to the STB's High Level Output Specification (HLOS), and requiring the STB to be consulted on, or agree with, the Secretary of State's HLOS so far as it relates to cross-boundary activities; and/or
- acting jointly with the Local Transport Authorities to make a ticketing scheme to cover the whole or any part of their combined area.

Incremental approach:

It is entirely possible for a non-statutory partnership to evolve into a detailed proposal to establish an STB and indeed for the roles/responsibilities of the STB to evolve over time. Such an approach is likely to be the preferred way forward allowing local partners to shape their proposal in the light of experience and needs as they are identified.

Changes to an STB (once established) would require the Secretary of State for Transport to lay an appropriate set of regulations before Parliament.

Governance Considerations

There are a series of issues that need to be considered in developing a strengthened Strategic Transport Forum and/or STB proposal. Through this initial engagement prospective partners and stakeholder views on those issues are being sought with a view to ensuring that proposals are developed that meet the ambition of local partners and key organisations.

- Governance Framework

The current governance framework for the Strategic Transport Forum is deliberately 'light touch' but will need to be reviewed and updated to enable robust decision making.

In reviewing the current governance framework there will be a need to review the types of membership that different organisations might have (both within a revised Forum and a potential STB) and their corresponding roles/responsibilities.

The executive arrangements and the functions of any executive body will need to be considered.

- Geographical Focus

England's Economic Heartland Strategic Alliance is providing the leadership in developing the Strategic Transport Forum and STB proposal. Through this engagement the Strategic Alliance is looking to enter into a discussion with adjoining Local Transport Authorities with a view to understanding how such a proposal might help them address issues of strategic significance.

- Collaboration Arrangements

As part of the existing Strategic Transport Forum there is a commitment on the part of the 'delivery partners' to work on a collaborative basis – both amongst themselves as a collective and with the Forum itself. Opportunities to strengthen this collaborative working will need to be explored.

There is a need to ensure that in developing the governance framework for the Strategic Transport Forum and/or STB that account is taken of the need to ensure strong linkages with any other 'regional' collaborative working on broader strategic infrastructure issues and/or strategic land use planning.

As part of the process of developing the governance framework, opportunities to strengthen the working relationships with other emerging STBs and London will need to be considered.

- How to fund the functions of the STB

Whilst there might be opportunities for central Government grant funding, the working presumption within Government is that local partners will secure a contribution towards the costs of establishing and running an STB.

Next Steps

This engagement marks the first stage of what will be an on-going dialogue with prospective partners and stakeholders with an interest in strategic transport issues.

The initial engagement phase runs through to 5:00pm on 8th September 2017. The Strategic Transport Forum on 15th September will have an initial discussion on the issues raised through the engagement.

Consideration of the issues and opportunities will continue through the autumn and into the winter on a timetable to be determined by the Strategic Transport Forum.

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