

Speech: £625,000 for England's Economic Heartland to help shape its future transport priorities

It's a pleasure to join you this afternoon, at the end of a packed day of discussion on the future for England's Economic Heartland.

And how apt it is that we are meeting in Silverstone.

It reminds me of something I've been repeatedly telling my friends and family ever since I became a transport minister.

That transport can be fun.

In seriousness, it's great to see so many people here from a broad range of organisations.

Local Authorities, Highways England, Network Rail, National Infrastructure Commission and so many businesses from the supply chain that supports it all.

All here, and all demonstrating a commitment to improving this region's transport.

Significance of England's Economic Heartland

It's entirely right that this region is getting the attention it deserves.

It contains some of the fastest growing cities in the UK; Oxford, Milton Keynes, Cambridge.

Over 175,000 businesses.

1.6 million jobs.

And three and a half million people.

It's a region of world-leading universities.

And I am delighted that this region is gaining a reputation as a centre of excellence for the science, technology and innovation of transport.

As part of the government's Intelligent Mobility Fund, Milton Keynes is trialling autonomous vehicles that will revolutionise travel.

Yet none of this success can be taken for granted.

Many of you will have seen the National Infrastructure Commission's interim report which came out in the autumn.

The report highlighted the housing and connectivity challenges your area faces.

This region has some of the most expensive housing of anywhere in the UK outside London – driven up by the university towns of Cambridge and Oxford.

Yet thanks to a legacy of underinvestment by successive governments, its transport connectivity leaves something to be desired.

Getting across the region is time consuming; it's often quicker to travel in and out of London than to travel between east and west.

For example, the distance from Aylesbury to Milton Keynes is 21 miles, but can take up to 2 and a half hours by train.

Cambridge to Luton are 41 miles apart but a train journey takes almost 2 hours.

Transport for growth

When transport isn't all it should be, there's an economic and social toll to pay.

Yes, effective transport is essential for prosperity

But transport isn't just about getting people from A to B.

Transport helps people get on.

It provides access to education and to jobs; it connects businesses with customers, patients to healthcare, friends to friends and family to family.

So I am glad that in the Autumn Statement we were able to announce that we would press ahead with plans for a new road expressway from Oxford to Cambridge via Bedford and Milton Keynes.

And we're also looking into making improvements to the A1 between the M25 and Peterborough.

We're working to include these projects and more in our next Road Investment Strategy, and you will continue to be included in that work.

We are investing in East to West Rail, and we anticipate that train services will be operational between 2022 to 2024.

Late last year, the Secretary of State asked Rob Brighouse, former chief executive of Chiltern Rail, to look at how the project could be delivered more quickly.

And in the Autumn Statement, the Chancellor provided £10m to continue the development of the central section between Bedford and Cambridge.

All this is a good start.

It means we've got 2 important ingredients for investment – long-term planning and money.

But there's a third ingredient that's just as vital.

And that's the right governance.

After all, the government can find the money and make plans but the plans need to be turned into concrete reality, and the money spent in the right way.

This is where organisations such as England's Economic Heartland can have such an important role to play.

By taking local knowledge of needs and opportunities, and thinking strategically.

About how money is best allocated, on what schemes, and in what order.

You know your economy better than anyone.

You know what's needed to drive growth.

Yet currently decision-making over strategic transport schemes, for example, is often centralised at a national level.

So over the year ahead, we want to work with you, to support you in making a real difference to the region.

We want England's Economic Heartland to shape its future.

We want to see the region speak with one voice.

To have a shared vision for trains and buses, taking into account what passengers want.

We want to see your plans for reducing road congestion, and speeding up links the region's airports.

And we want to see a vision that links this thinking on transport to thinking on housing and economic growth.

We're seeing the early evidence that when local areas come together to plan long-term infrastructure, they can deliver outputs greater than the sum of their parts.

I'm pleased too that you're giving consideration to becoming a sub-national transport body.

It might offer significant benefits to the region.

But by definition, it's not something that should be imposed, or decided on before the hard work of analysis has been done.

The region must put forward its proposal and make the case for the benefits.

The government door will be open, and to help you have asked for £625,000 match fund to get moving. I am happy to confirm that central government is willing to confirm that funding today.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, my message is this.

We know the transport infrastructure across the region isn't good enough for a region with such incredible potential.

Now we have the chance to put it right.

Not by sitting in London and telling you what to do.

But by giving you the chance to shape your own future.

So thank you for listening, and thank you, Martin Tett, the Strategic Alliance, and Highways England for organising a brilliant event.

And thank you for bringing everyone together.