



East of England

All Party Parliamentary Group

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Levelling Up Physical Connectivity in the East of England: How can better road infrastructure provide levelling up opportunities and help power the region to growth?

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Levelling Up Digital Connectivity in the East of England: How can better digital connectivity provide levelling up opportunities and help power the region to growth?

**17:00 to 18:00 on Tuesday 12th September, Jubilee Room,
off Westminster Hall, Houses of Parliament**

NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

Welcome and introductions:

- **Peter Aldous MP and Daniel Zeichner MP, Co-Chairs, East of England APPG**
- *The Co-chairs welcomed all speakers and all attendees, including those who are logged on via Zoom, and reminded attendees that in effect there are two meetings rolled into one this afternoon. The connecting theme is connectivity! First, we will look at how well connected – or otherwise - our road network is. Then we will address the issue of digital connectivity*
- *Two business items were then transacted. The [minutes of the last meeting on skills](#) were approved. It was also pointed out they are available on the website as is [the follow up letter to the Minister](#), Robert Halfon, who addressed the meeting. Second, it was noted that Daniel Poulter MP has decided to step down as Treasurer.*
- *It was also noted that Cheryl Davenport, Managing Director at EELGA, is standing down from that post. Thanks were recorded for all her support for the Group in particular over the production of the Levelling Up report which was very much a joint APPG and EELGA initiative and output.*
- *Before the Minister spoke attention was drawn to [the excellent briefing](#) that Transport East and England's Economic Heartland had prepared in advance and been circulated to all attendees.*

PART ONE ROADS - Keynote speaker:

- **Richard Holden MP, Minister for Roads, Department for Transport**
- *Welcomed the opportunity to address the East of England APPG and to discuss roads, the importance of which can be overlooked in discussions about transport but which acutely aware, following discussions with Jo Churchill MP are vital in the East including the A14 and port connectivity.*

- Also very aware of the contribution of the East of England to UK plc, that it hosts two of the country's eight freeports, is one of only three regions that contribute more to the Exchequer than they receive, has some of the UK's largest windfarms, huge investment plans for Sizewell C and academic centres of excellence of global standing.
- Recognise some frustrations including the Written Ministerial statement on Road Investment Strategy which have been affected by global headwinds precipitating difficult decisions. Now need to focus on making every penny count so that most impactful schemes are progressed.
- Some schemes are being progressed for example Lowestoft Gull Wing Bridge and the Third London Crossing. There is also some great partnership working for example in Norfolk.
- Thank you for input into the National Highways route consultation. Freight movement is essential as was highlighted. In fact, £39million is being made available to improve truck stops – £2.3million in the East of England. If MPs have ideas regards how to improve those, or where to site new ones, please contact the Department.
- EEH and TE have taken great strides in terms of capacity and the Department would encourage them to go further, even more collaboration, so that they are an even more cohesive voice for the region. It is also recognised that local connectivity is very important. The A47 improvements present some difficult issues but the DfT is pushing ahead.
- In conclusion, the Department will continue to listen and to visit: our belts are tightened but investment which will create long term sustainable improvement will continue

Questions and contributions:

- **MPs and Peers**

- Questions raised concerned:
 - Progress on the A47 – Answer: this is underway
 - Benefits for Beds and Herts from Freeport East – Answer: Freeport should be integrated with academic and life science sector as well as the road network
 - Blackcat roundabout and Government focus on “pinch points” – Answer: Department still committed to addressing these but inflation is creating problems in funding these
 - Need for infrastructure to support Gove's announcement regards housing in Cambridge – Answer: noted

Panel responses:

- **Andrew Summers, Chief Executive, Transport East**
- Set out the overall role of STBs and their remit on roads, namely for each STB to develop a regional Transport Strategy to which the DfT pay 'due regard' and then use that strategy to advise the Secretary of State on transport investment priorities.
- These are integrated strategies of which road investment forms an important, but connected, part.
- The STBs have worked closely with DfT and National Highways to provide advice on the content of RIS3, but we are keen to work more closely to embed regional priorities and knowledge into the decision-making process, something the Transport Select Committee has also called for.
- Better road connections in the East are essential to meet the region's ambitions – economic, social and indeed environmental, as we move to lower carbon vehicles.

- *Specific priorities for the East of the East – Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock - have been referenced in the briefing, and include:*
 - *Schemes yet to be delivered from RIS1 and RIS2 including those along the A47 and on the A12*
 - *RIS3 (2025-2030) has three priority schemes in, which have all been moved to RIS4 period (2030-2035) following the SoS's announcement early this year.*
 - *The A14 Copdock Junction 55 – multiple benefits. Major North – South / East-West intersection on the Network. Supporting the UK economy – through facilitating freight movements, and local housing growth. Crucial timing issue to align with Sizewell C construction – which is why our partners want to see it delivered sooner rather than later.*
 - *The A120 scheme – support East-West connectivity, access to Stansted, unlock local growth, and provide long distance strategic resilience. Vital missing link in the region's network.*
 - *The A11 Fiveways - a major pinch point on the strategic network. Norwich – Cambridge Tech Corridor. Along with the Thetford junctions further up, support significant growth.*
- *We have also identified several Major Road Network (MRN) schemes that support local housing and jobs growth, and which have supporting sustainable transport elements included.*

- **Naomi Green, Managing Director, England's Economic Heartland**

- *Set out the role of roads within the region, and the importance of road connections in day-to-day journeys for accessing work, skills, education, training and for the movement of goods.*
- *The have a role in the economy, of course but also in supporting the UK's logistic sector, in levelling up, in enabling all sorts of journeys and in planning a net zero future.*
- *Funding pressures in the sector mean that securing investment in major infrastructure improvements on roads is becoming harder, certainly for the foreseeable future. We need to be creative and bold in the way we look at roads investment in the future*
- *Some key things I would encourage the APPG to reflect on:*
 - *Small scale interventions and roads maintenance are as important as major new infrastructure. A47 Guyhirn Junction, one such example but also pressing for parity of investment in roads maintenance on local, MRN and SRN roads.*
 - *That modes of transport are all trying to make the most of the same, limited space on roads. We need the right traffic on the right roads, and it to be as well managed as possible*
 - *Need sustainable transport improvements alongside road upgrades*
 - *We investment for supporting infrastructure to enable alternative fuels and*
 - *we need to think outside our modal silos - rail priorities like Ely to relieve pressure on roads*
- *Clear priorities within the EEH region*
 - *MRN schemes delivered, including A10 Broxbourne*
 - *Committed schemes delivered, and delivered well – A428 Black Cat to Caxton Gibbet and A47 Wansford to Sutton*
 - *We know we have some problems – notably A1 Biggleswade to Huntingdon but also schemes like A505*
 - *Plan for freight – on the A14, on the A47*
- *And some bigger challenges for Parliamentarians to consider:*
 - *Engage with the RIS3 process, really important to challenge throughout the autumn, HMT as well as DfT.*

- *Funding needs to be more integrated, we need to see funding in the round, for small scale interventions, for maintenance, renewals and for the SRN, MRN and more local roads. Plus longer-term more integration with rail.*

- **[POST MEETING NOTE: The Government announced funding for outstanding MRN schemes in the 'Network North' plan announced on 4 October 2023]**

- **Matt Palmer, National Highways and Executive Director, Lower Thames Crossing**

- *Introduced himself as having both National Highways and Lower Thames Crossing roles. Then thanked the East of England APPG for the invitation to join the panel and congratulated Transport East and England's Economic Heartland, who play a key role and are key partners of both National Highways and the Lower Thames Crossing, for their work on prioritisation*
- *Remarked that the East of England is an international gateway for the UK and is hugely significant for the wider UK in terms of freight and connectivity, as it is for innovation in science, engineering, agri-tech, energy production and contribution to the national economy.*
- *Pointed out these gateways are critical for the movements of goods that support the national economy, providing international supply chains to thousands of businesses across the UK but particularly in the Midlands and North.*
- *Highlighted that 9 out of 10 trips are made on road / by car and 8 out of 10 households own a car. National Highways priorities for the third road investment period are:*
 - *Improving safety for all.*
 - *Making the most of our network - "sweating the assets".*
 - *Evolving our customer and community services.*
 - *Taking a targeted approach to enhancing our network including addressing "pinch points".*
 - *Driving decarbonisation and environment sustainability.*
- *The Lower Thames Crossing is a scheme which addresses these priorities. Important to note that Dartford was designed for 135,000 crossings a day, yet it regularly carries 180,000 and therefore almost 2 in 3 journeys take more than double the time they should (and 1 in 7 journeys take more than five times longer than they should!)*
- *Without the Lower Thames Crossing (LTC) 2,671 HGVs per hour will be attempting to use Dartford by 2051. 37% of traffic using Dartford is goods vehicles – twice the national average. It represents a single point of failure for the UK's internal and external trade flows as Dartford has become a barrier to growth*
- *The LTC is therefore the right route in the right place. It will mean almost all HGVs going to Dover will use the LTC instead of Dartford; a 10% reduction in travel time between M2 and M25 J29; and a strong and reliable connection from the channel ports to the Midlands and the North.*
- *In conclusion money is tight and we will have to prioritise small schemes. However Lower Thames Crossing should move forward as soon as it can.*

Questions and contributions:

- **All**

- *What is the state of play regards Ely Junction – Answer: we all await NREP announcement*
- *A47 from Peterborough to Wisbech is single file for up to 15 miles: can it be dualled? A47 to Lowestoft could play same beneficial role as A14 has done in south – Answer: there are problems with*

progressing A47 including legal challenges and the western link road at Norwich but accepted this is an absolute priority not least due to high number of fatalities.

- *Have we turned our backs on toll roads? – Answer: Government policy has been to turn its back on PFI but most of Europe uses private sector finance to some extent, and transport (unlike schools and hospitals) is a simple and mature product that has a long track record of success. DfT and HMT may be interested in exploring this in future models that can deliver for the East.*
- *What is the definition of a “small scheme”? – Answer: EEH and TE will answer this in due course*

PART TWO DIGITAL:

- *The second part of the meeting began with reference to [the excellent briefing](#) on digital connectivity prepared by the Secretariat with input from CityFibre and EELGA*
- *Alex Blowers, Director of Regulatory Affairs, CityFibre*
 - *He began his address by explaining that Full Fibre is an entirely new and different infrastructure. Total investment is in the order of £35billion and this is mostly from private capital.*
 - *He highlighted that this is a sector that will benefit customers, both the public and businesses. It is also a sector that has pre-empted the disparity issue thanks to the Government’s Project Gigabit programme. CityFibre has recently won contracts to ensure roll-out to Cambridge, Suffolk and Norfolk.*
 - *CityFibre is trying to speed up the processes by which planning approval is granted – although it is also committed to the process of local authority control.*
 - *CityFibre has found that securing planning permission for their fibre exchanges, roughly the size of a shipping container, is quite often difficult.*
 - *Also explained the issue faced with street works permitting, which adds a significant administrative burden to both utilities companies and local authorities.*
 - *He said there is a problem with public awareness of the opportunities of full fibre. Because consumers have been sold better and better systems and often been told they have the fastest and best there are now issues regarding take-up rather than roll-out.*
 - *He said there was a need for a Government-sponsored information campaign to raise awareness of the new technology being made available to them.*
 - *Explained how although the emphasis on roll out of better broadband has been a good measurement, the emphasis now needs to be measuring take-up. These technologies need to be used in order to unlock further investment and reach more premises.*
- *Simon Fell MP, the Government’s Rural Digital Connectivity Champion*
 - *Welcomed the opportunity to address the APPG and commented that he is familiar with the problem of lack of access to broadband and mobile as it on occasions hampers the mountain rescue service in the neighbouring Lake district.*
 - *Explained that there has been excellent progress but his focus as Rural Champion is on the “the final few homes”. He therefore wants to reduce barriers so that there are flexible permits and in that respect he recognises that planning authorities’ capacity is a key issue.*
 - *He explained that he is in the throes of finalising his first report for the Secretary of State which will make a number of recommendations including about the regulatory environment and be sent next week.*

- Explained that his report will include three ‘buckets’:
 - Bucket 1 – short-term, straightforward fixes Government can make immediately
 - Bucket 2 – mid-term, less straightforward and may be difficult to achieve this close to an election.
 - Bucket 3 – long-term, what Government should be doing to lay the groundwork for legal and regulatory changes after the election.
- He confirmed that within the first bucket will be a recommendation to implement a ‘flexi-permit’ street works regime, wider use of local government Digital Champions and recommendations to crack down on misleading fibre broadband advertising.

- **Sophie James, Head of Telecoms and Spectrum Policy, techUK**

- Sophie began her remarks by pointing out that the public understand the ‘language’ of roads – interchange/highway/etc – but know very little about digital infrastructure.
- She pointed out that techUK has produced a Local Digital Index for the last three years – the Index measures the strength of the tech sector across the UK’s nations and regions. The good news from our 2023 Local Digital Index is that connectivity scores are improving, and improving in rural areas too. The East of England scores are as follows:
 - Skills – 5th
 - Adoption – 3rd
 - Infrastructure – 8th
 - Finance and Investment – 8th
 - R&D – 2nd
 - Trade – 3rd
 - Data Ecosystems – 6th
 - Overall score – 3rd (after Greater London and South East)
- She then outlined the remaining challenge to the rollout and take-up of new digital infrastructure in the East of England: the rurality of area which bluntly means higher costs for connecting premises.
- Sophie said mobile “Not-spots” will be addressed through the rollout of the Shared Rural Network. The “sunsetting” of 3G will also help with the region’s mobile connectivity, in that the spectrum used for 3G will be repurposed for 4G – so there will be an immediate improvement. Full Fibre roll out is being addressed by another Government Programme being delivered by BroadbandUK: Project Gigabit
- She said it was important that the business opportunities regarding levelling up and economic growth that a world class digital infrastructure can deliver are maximised for the region's residents. Take up has become the number one priority issue.
- techUK highly recommend that – like Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority – the UK’s regions should have a signed off and regularly updated digital strategy These strategies should engage with and have the support of the private sector, including SMEs, innovators including universities and incubators, and local cluster groups.
- techUK would also argue for a National Digital Inclusion Strategy, specific funding to support digital inclusion projects allied to data shared and a specified need for tech and business engagement in digital inclusion strategies. These agile strategies and visions for local digital ecosystems would have advanced connectivity as the most important enabler in helping local digital economies grow, become more productive, attract talent and more.

- *It is now important for the region's private and public sector partners to make sure that consumers can access new technologies like full fibre and 5G. it's not straightforward, and labelling/advertising practices have been mentioned. Targeted engagement with communities really helps. The public sector also has a role to play in terms of improving access to day-to-day digital services, digital skills and "confidence"*
- *The UK Tech Plan that we published in June 2023 – setting out 18 opportunities to build a better Britain through technological innovation. These include improving access to day-to-day digital services; plugging the digital skills gap to boost pay, opportunity and our national resilience; digital transformation for the NHS and social care systems; growing tech clusters; digitise the day-to-day economy helping businesses get ready for the AI revolution; innovation economy.*
- *One of the challenges identified in the Tech Plan was the Skills and Adoption Challenge, including the fact that by 2030, 7 million workers could be under-skilled for their job requirement (around 20% of the total UK workforce). A quarter of UK SMEs do not use basic digital tools such as e-commerce, accounting and HR software which have been proven to boost growth and resilience.*

- **Cllr Thomas Fitzpatrick, Member, Infrastructure and Growth Panel, EELGA**

- *Cllr Fitzpatrick began by pointing out that 74% of East of England premises have gigabit-capable connections, while 51% have access to full fibre coverage. This is a considerable increase over the last few years – up from roughly 20% each only 2 years ago.*
- *Mobile connectivity continues to be rolled out in the East of England: Consistently-available 4G coverage available at 79% of premises – second lowest in England; and 5G is available for 77% of East of England premises- again the second lowest regional figure in England.*
- *These averages conceal large divergences within the East, with some areas having considerably lower coverage. He went on to highlight four current delivery issues*
 - a. **Rural Connectivity:** *There has been considerable progress in connectivity figures over the past few years, and this is to be welcomed. However, more must be done – the pandemic has highlighted the importance of digital connectivity as an important utility, and the rural nature of the East of England means that digital connectivity is all the more important due to its ability to reduce social isolation, boost commerce and homogenise service delivery with urban areas.*
 - b. **Funding:** *Has become increasingly centralised and removed from Local Authority influence. In addition, some key streams of funding have done remarkably little for the East of England – for example, we would greatly like to see more funding from the Shared Rural Network to help connect our hardest-to-reach premises. Demand-led funding, such as the Gigabit Broadband Vouchers, have been highlighted as a strong approach to delivering connectivity, and identifying unmet need in each area.*
 - c. **Reporting, Terminology, and provider accountability:** *There are concerns about the wider variety of different terms being used in the sector, and their reliability as key metrics. Research by several authorities has identified that connectivity figures are not necessarily accurate. Accurate reporting is important for accountability, and we welcome the Government's commitment to ensure accurate figures in the Wireless Strategy published earlier this year.*
 - d. **The "Big Switch Off":** *With 3G and the copper networks scheduled for closure in 2025, there is now a sense of urgency in preparing our communities for this transition. The Government should work with local authorities to identify the kinds of places and services that could be affected and take action to minimise the potential impact.*
- *Cllr FitzPatrick then identified four ways to encourage stronger connectivity:*

- a. **Digital Inclusion:** *There is a pressing need to ensure that residents of all walks of life benefit from increased connectivity and ensure that the productivity gains available from strong connectivity access are shared as far as possible. Furthermore, as local and central Government increasingly use digital means to deliver services, it is important to ensure that no community is left behind.*
- b. **An holistic approach to digital:** *There is a need to fight the instinct to silo-off digital matters. It is increasingly impossible to divide digital matters from the delivery of key services – be it making use of digital means to issue growth grants, to the use of mobile connectivity by carers to access and update records while on their rounds.*
- c. **Education:** *There is work that can be done by all stakeholders to help residents obtain as much benefit as possible from digital connectivity. Some of this is about helping residents make the most of their existing connectivity such as through better router placement or making them aware of better and faster tariffs. But it is also about helping residents understand how they can use this increased connectivity to do more.*
- d. **Collaboration across the region:** *Many areas within the East are facing these issues and would benefit from the same solutions. Therefore, it's important that we speak with one voice, which is why events like this are so important.*

- He ended by detailing six East of England Digital "Asks":

- 1) Accelerating the national Gigabit procurement programme and including Essex at the earliest opportunity.
- 2) Exploration of new locally driven funding mechanisms under Project Gigabit to deliver connectivity to areas not currently in scope.
- 3) Consideration of the potential for local Government to have a greater role in ensuring digital connectivity especially in hard-to-reach areas.
- 4) A Government-led information campaign to educate consumers about next-generation technologies, the impacts they could have on their lives and businesses, and to support them to switch on to such services.
- 5) Introduction of clear and consistent terminology around the advertising of broadband products to allow people to make informed decisions about their connections.
- 6) The Government to work with the provider-led Shared Rural Network programme and local government to identify areas outside of the original scope and which have now been identified as in need of intervention.

- **Contributions:**

- *There are some who have never switched from analogue – although as was pointed out many public services are now digital and digital is now part of everyday life (for most)*
- *Education is really important and the Government should consider the adoption of an information campaign*
- *The Voucher system was helpful as allowed communities to help themselves – needs to be retained in some form or another.*
- *There is a live debate currently regarding social tariffs – certainly no-one should be digitally excluded*
- *It is very important that we remember that digital networks must be protected from risk*
- *DLUHC should work with DSIT on capacity issues*
- *Simon Fell MP would like to hear from people about good ideas as well as rural digital connectivity problems*

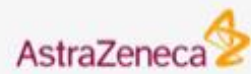
Concluding comments:

- **Peter Aldous MP, Co-Chair, East of England APPG**
- *Peter Aldous MP thanked all attendees, the Secretariat and the many partners of the APPG without whom these meetings would not be able to take place*
- *He informed those present that follow up letters highlighting the main points that have emerged and the region's 'asks' would be sent to both Richard Holden and Simon Fell*

ATTENDEES (OTHER THAN SPEAKERS & SECRETARIAT)

Peter Aldous MP	MP for Waveney and Chair East of England APPG
Daniel Zeichner MP	MP for Cambridge and Chair East of England APPG
Lord Stewart Jackson	Vice Chair East of England APPG
Lord Alan Haselhurst	Vice Chair East of England APPG
Mohammad Yasin MP	MP for Bedford
Richard Fuller MP	MP for North East Bedfordshire (in attendance until 6pm only)
Clr Anna Smith	Deputy Mayor, Cambridge & Peterborough Combined Authority (On-line)
Annette Nott	Post-16 East of England Manager, DfT (On-line)
Cheryl Davenport	EELGA
Adam Thorp	EELGA
John McGill	UK Innovation Corridor
Esme Yuill	Transport East
Adam King	England's Economic Heartland
Simon Papworth	Freeport East (On-line)
Aodha O'Carroll	CityFibre
Patrick Hall	London Stansted Airport
Dominic O'Donnell	Lower Thames Crossing
James Palmer	Eastern Powerhouse
Tim Bellamy	Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority
Constance Anker	Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority
Rob Bush	EEEGR (On-line)
Ceren Clulow	Programme Director, Connecting Cambridgeshire
Colin Crawford	More Rails for Hertfordshire
Colin Boyd	Bouygues
Toby Warren	Suffolk Chamber of Commerce (On-line)
Sarah Hughes	Cambridgeshire Sustainable Travel Alliance (On-line)
Mike Rigby	Eastern Promise – the Podcast (Online)
Prashant Shah	O2h
Matthew Wright	G&W UK
Tony Houghton	Keystone Law
Andrew Williams	Doctor
Julian Munson	New England LEP
Anne Bailey	Form the Future
Esther Blaine	Historic England (Online)
Will Fletcher	Historic England (Online)

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The academic partners of the East of England APPG are the Centre for Public and Policy Engagement at the University of Essex, The University of Cambridge, Anglia Ruskin University and the University of East Anglia.

