

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board

12 January 2024

Agenda Item 8: Oxford to Bristol Service Proposal

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Notes the proposed work to progress a business case for an Oxford to Bristol service in the short-term, including the presentation from Network Rail**
- b) Agrees a budget allocation contribution of c.£10,000 to support progress of this business case alongside other partners**

1. Context

- 1.1. A key aspect of the Partnership's work (as articulated in Introducing the East West Main Line Partnership, published 2021) is using delivery of the Oxford-Cambridge railway to realise the ambition for a coast to coast main line towards Bristol and South Wales in the west, and East Anglia in the east.
- 1.2. Western Gateway sub-national transport body joined the Partnership in 2021. It gave a presentation on its rail priorities to members in March 2022, noting that a new Bristol to Oxford rail link had been shown to have significant benefits.
- 1.3. The Partnership's agreed work programme set out in June 2023 included three areas of expected focus, with the first being as follows:
 - **Using investment in the Oxford-Cambridge section as the catalyst for the East West Main Line:** Progressing the case for a coast-to-coast main line to Norfolk and Suffolk (led by Eastern Section Board/ Transport East, contributing the £12,500 ringfenced money as appropriate); and Swindon, Bristol and South Wales (in collaboration with Western Gateway STB and England's Economic Heartland); and continuing to highlight opportunities for integration with nearby stations (for example, Northampton, Stevenage, Wellingborough, Luton, Stansted, Peterborough).
- 1.4. Since this time there have been positive discussions with both the rail industry and Western Gateway STB regarding options to improve western connectivity beyond the core EWR route serving Oxford. A short-term opportunity, developed by Network Rail with support from EEH/ EWMLP and Western Gateway STB officers, has been identified to put the case for a new Oxford to Bristol (via Swindon) service. This could be delivered through an update to the Great Western rail contract using the annual train operator business plan process.
- 1.5. Full details for the proposal are to be developed in a business case over the next few months, but in essence it would initially be for an hourly service between Oxford and Bristol Temple Meads, stopping at core stations including Swindon, Chippenham and Bath Spa, which could potentially start operating from 2025. This timing would also likely align with completion of works at Oxford station, and new EWR services operating between Oxford and Milton Keynes.
- 1.6. It is important to note that at present, it is expected that this base level service could operate without any significant infrastructure measures above those already planned, with the main investment needed being operational, including additional operator rolling stock.

1.7. However, it is recognised that although an important step, this level of service does not fully fit the long-term aspirations of many of the Partnership members, given it would not operate through to stations on the core EWR route, or be able to serve several of the locally proposed stations along the line such as Grove/ Wantage in Oxfordshire. It is therefore seen as a first step to on-ward train connections to the west, helping to build momentum towards the services and infrastructure investment needed to provide the enhancements to meet long-term expectations.

2. Benefits of a new service

2.1. Provision of a direct Oxford to Bristol service would reduce generalised journey times (a measure of the ease and attractiveness of making journeys by rail taking into account on-train time, the frequency of services, and the observed interchange penalty) to c.1 hour 15 mins between Oxford and Bristol, and 30-35 minutes between Oxford to Bristol. This is c. 30% less than existing, a threshold deemed to be 'transformative' in terms of rail services.

2.2. Once new EWR services are in place between Oxford and Milton Keynes, there would also be an opportunity to travel by rail between Milton Keynes and Bristol through one change at Oxford, rather than two changes at both Oxford and Didcot Parkway, or by a longer route via Birmingham as available now.

2.3. The benefits of improving rail connectivity to the west have also been set out in several regional evidence base documents produced over the last few years. This includes:

- The EEH Transport Strategy from 2021, with policy 13 specifically noting the opportunity to 'work with Western Gateway and Network Rail, Highways England and public transport operators to develop proposals that strengthen connectivity between Swindon/ Oxford and the South West and South Wales in support of economic activity and planned growth.'
- The EEH Passenger Rail study from 2021, which forecast the economic potential of new rail connectivity links and which identified Oxford to Bristol and Oxford to Cambridge as the top 2 potential high value service opportunities, particularly if journey times could be reduced through a reduction in interchange time penalties.
- The EEH Oxford to Swindon connectivity study from 2023, which includes proposed interventions related to new train services from Oxford and East West Rail to Swindon and Bristol.
- The EEH strategic objectives report from 2023, which includes the following relevant strategic objective for the Great Western Main line: 'Improve connectivity for local people between Oxfordshire/Buckinghamshire and the South/South West and South Wales enabling improved journeys to and from the region.'
- The Western Gateway STB Rail Strategy from 2020, which sets out a Bristol to Oxford service as one of the high priority new direct rail links to be considered for further development.
- The Swindon and Wiltshire Rail Strategy from 2019, which identified that a Bristol-Swindon-Oxford to Cambridge service could add £27m GVA per year to the economy.

2.4. In addition, Network Rail have identified the potential of more direct western links following delivery of the core EWR route within strategic policy publications recently produced. The Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study from 2020, led by Network Rail in collaboration with EEH, Oxfordshire County Council, and rail industry partners, recommended a direct Bristol to Oxford service, potentially extended on to East West Rail.

- 2.5. Network Rail's East West Main Line Strategic Statement published in 2022 identified that more direct services to the west (towards Swindon, Bristol and South Wales) were needed if journey times from locations along the EWR route were to become competitive with alternative rail and road routes. In the case of the Oxford to Bristol route, the specific issue of needing to reduce interchange time penalties was flagged. In particular, without new services to the west, passengers from the EWR core route would still need to change at both Oxford and Didcot or Reading if wanting to travel westwards. As noted above, an Oxford to Bristol service would be the first step in breaking down these interchange penalties, and providing an attractive on-ward service.

3. Next steps

- 3.1. Network Rail plans to develop a business case for a new Oxford to Bristol service over the next few months, so that it can be submitted to the Department for Transport in the new financial year, for potential delivery in 2025. This is a tight timescale, but Network Rail already have a project team in place, supported by Great Western and both EEH and Western Gateway STB officers.
- 3.2. Much of the work can be undertaken 'in house' by staff within Network Rail and Great Western, particularly the operational aspects of the business case. STB officers are also supporting through provision of evidence base and available data, such as on planned growth.
- 3.3. However, it has been identified that part of the case around the wider economic benefits of the service, in particular demand forecasting, would be better done externally through a specialised consultant. This will allow better considerations of mode shift to rail, as well as links to planned growth not normally fully covered in traditional rail modelling.
- 3.4. The case for investment between Oxford and Bristol has been developed through previous work completed (and funded), including the recent Swindon-Didcot-Oxford Connectivity Study and the previously completed Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study (ORCS). The connectivity study was funded by EEH, with the ORCS co-funded by EEH alongside Department for Transport, the Oxfordshire Growth Board and the East West Mainline Partnership.
- 3.5. Reflecting previous investment made by EEH and other partners, and the significant links with East West Rail and the EWMLP that the proposition enables, the Partnership Board is likely to want to secure the opportunity through to its next phase of delivery. The cost for doing so is estimated at £25,000, which will cover the specialist support needed make a comprehensive business case. It is proposed that the Partnership makes a contribution of around £10,000 (currently subject to procurement processes at Network Rail).
- 3.6. Other match funding to complete the work is expected from Western Gateway STB, and the rail industry (which is also contributing significant in-kind staff time for other aspects of the business case). It is also important to note that this work will build on the already extensive evidence base work undertaken by the sub-national transport bodies to date as set out in overview in paragraph 2.3.
- 3.7. Should the business case be progressed, it will then need to be submitted to Department for Transport to consider as part of the next Train Operator Business Plan update. A further update to the Board will be made on the outcomes and conclusions of the business case work, as well as any subsequent decisions on progressing service changes and the timescale for these.

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