

EastWestMainLine



Partnership

Championing the ambition for East West Rail

Spending Review 2025 submission

Summary

The East West Main Line Partnership brings together local authorities and sub-national transport bodies from East Anglia through to west of England. Established in 1995 its work played a fundamental role in establishing the basis for the scheme.

Our recommendations for the Spending Review are aimed at maximising the benefits of East West Rail and cover the strategic areas below.

Delivery of Oxford-Cambridge: We welcome the commitment to East West Rail. The Spending Review should provide funding to develop proposals for the Bletchley Northern Connection and North East chord, which would maximise the benefits of East West Rail for Milton Keynes.

Coast to coast connectivity: Revenue funding to develop the Strategic Outline Business Case for the 'Eastern Section' better linking Cambridge to Ipswich, Norwich and Colchester. A commitment to fund (in the single figure millions) new hourly services between Oxford and Bristol, a 'quick win' which could start within 12 months.

North-south connectivity: Funding to progress the ambitions for the Northampton-Old Oak Common rail corridor (including Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link).

Interchange and strategic transport hubs: Dedicated funding for local authorities to deliver high quality 'door to door' connectivity to and from East West stations, widening their catchment areas for communities and businesses.

A 21st century main line: Funding to build East West Rail next stages should include provision for lineside digital infrastructure benefiting passengers and nearby rural communities and businesses.

Freight: Funding to progress Ely and Haughley junctions, benefiting both freight and passenger services, and essential for services east of Cambridge.

Introduction

The East West Main Line Partnership brings together local authorities and sub-national transport bodies from East Anglia through to the west of England. Established in 1995 and formerly known as the East West Rail Consortium, its technical work, including feasibility studies and business cases, has played a fundamental role in establishing the initial basis for the scheme, on which subsequent work has been built.

Today, the East West Main Line Partnership champions the strategic ambition for East West Rail. This covers six areas of interest:

- Delivery of Oxford-Cambridge at the earliest opportunity
- Coast to coast connectivity
- North-south connectivity
- Interchange and strategic transport hubs
- A 21st century main line
- Freight

Our submission below focuses on how the benefits of East West Rail can be maximised, both within the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor itself, and – importantly – beyond it. Integral to this is the concept of East West Rail becoming a coast-to-coast strategic main line, from which other services can feed into. Doing so would transform the UK transport system

The core focus for the East West Main Line is to achieve a step-change in east-west connectivity, linking Ipswich and Norwich with Cambridge, Bedford, Milton Keynes, Oxford and beyond that towards Swindon and onwards to Bristol and South Wales.

However, the benefit of the East West Main Line lies not just in the improved connectivity between those areas it directly serves, but also in the opportunity created where the route crosses the radial main lines centred on London. Removing the need for rail users to travel through London will additionally provide some relief to rail services on the radial main lines to/from the capital.

The East West Main Line also has the potential to improve surface access to airports including Heathrow, Birmingham, Luton, East Midlands, Norwich and Stansted.

However, realising these benefits will require significant strategic planning around capacity allocation, timetabling and investment in new infrastructure. Given the long lead-in time for rail, this planning must begin now.

It will also be essential that the investment in strategic connectivity is complemented by investment in improved local connectivity as part of a co-ordinated package of investment.

Delivery of Oxford-Cambridge at the earliest opportunity

The Partnership strongly welcomed the Chancellor's commitment to the next stages of East West Rail to Bedford (by 2030) and Cambridge (mid 2030s) made in the Autumn Budget. The Chancellor recently reiterated Government's support for East West Rail as part of the Oxford to Cambridge Growth Corridor.

Bletchley North-East chord

Currently, direct East West Rail services east of Milton Keynes to Bedford and Cambridge are not possible. This risks the city centre of one of the UK's most dynamic and fastest growing new cities not being fully integrated within the East West Rail route.

To facilitate a through route for East West Rail to Milton Keynes Central, and alleviate rail capacity constraints between Bletchley and Milton Keynes, a north-east chord is required, with supporting capacity enhancements at Milton Keynes Central Station (integral to the proposal is the addition of a further track of main line between Bletchley and Milton Keynes Central and the creation of new platform capacity at Milton Keynes Central).

The delivery of the chord and additional track would likely compound the benefits by providing for a range of additional passenger and freight connections, and contributing to centring Milton Keynes as a focal point for the West Coast South and East West Rail networks.

For the Spending Review, we recommend that Network Rail be given revenue funding to fully develop the Bletchley-Milton Keynes Northern Connection and North-East chord proposal.

Coast to coast connectivity

Delivery of a strategic railway connecting East Anglia, with central, southern and western England has been a strategic priority for the local authorities comprising the East West Main Line Partnership for 30 years.

Indeed, the Consortium was originally established by Ipswich Borough Council in 1995. The ambition for East West Rail to extend to the east of Cambridge to Ipswich and Norwich has therefore always been integral to its members.

'Eastern Section': Services east of Cambridge

Slow and infrequent, or indirect rail services from Cambridge to Norwich, Ipswich and Colchester limit East West Rail's transformative potential to major economic hubs in the East of England.

For the purpose of the Spending Review, the East West Rail Eastern Section Board (a partnership of local authorities with the rail industry and sub-group of the East West Main Line Partnership) is seeking revenue funding to develop the Strategic Outline Business Case for a focused, evidenced pipeline of incremental rail investment to unlock new homes, attract inward investment, enable access to high-skilled jobs and improve productivity across the East of England. This will support the growth ambitions of the fast-growing Cambridge and Peterborough.

It is worth noting that upgrading **Ely Junction** (see below) is key to realising improved connectivity between Cambridge and Norwich (while improvements to Haughley supports Cambridge-Ipswich).

Oxford-Swindon-Bath-Bristol services: A 'quick win' with big benefits

The overall ambition of the East West Main Line is for direct services from Bristol/ South Wales through to East Anglia. We recognise this will be an incremental process.

In this context, a 'quick win' opportunity has arisen to introduce hourly rail services which will link Oxford to Swindon, Bath and Bristol – a corridor with prominent clusters of knowledge-intensive sectors highlighted within the Industrial Strategy.

The new service, which could be introduced within the next 12 months, would deliver journeys between Bristol and Oxford in under an hour and a quarter, and between Swindon and Oxford in just over half an hour.

Onward connectivity from Swindon, Bath and Bristol to Milton Keynes and (eventually) Bedford and Cambridge would be possible via a simple interchange at Oxford. Network Rail analysis shows the proposals have a positive benefit-cost ratio of above four.

No capital investment is required. The anticipated operational cost is in the low (single-figure) millions of pounds per year. For the purposes of the Spending Review, a commitment by DfT to fund this amount is required (with the expectation that the service is likely to generate more revenue than it will cost).

For more information see ['The case for reinstating Oxford-Swindon-Bath-Bristol rail services' booklet](#).

North-south connectivity

Northampton-Milton Keynes-Aylesbury-High Wycombe-Old Oak Common rail corridor:

By harnessing delivery of East West Rail between Oxford and Milton Keynes, a significant opportunity could be unlocked to deliver a new rail corridor between Northampton, Milton Keynes, Aylesbury, High Wycombe and Old Oak Common that better connects important economic centres, and assets (eg, Silverstone, Bletchley

Park and Pinewood) and maximises the investment in the Elizabeth Line to (an expanded) Heathrow Airport, Slough and Reading.

It has been estimated that within catchments of stations along the route between Northampton and south Bucks there is currently a population of 1.3 million, 78,000 businesses generating 678,000 jobs, and an economy worth £50bn. This is only expected to grow further given the dynamic nature of the economy in the corridor and plans for new homes.

Realising this new corridor requires incremental upgrades to existing infrastructure and track paths, rather than wholesale new routes. This includes delivery of the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link (which was part of the Transport and Works Act Order for the initial phase of East West Rail).

For a town of its size (90,000 population), Aylesbury's connectivity by rail is notably poor – akin to a 'cul de sac' where the only option is to travel southwards into London, with no direct northern, western, or eastern connectivity. This is compounded by it having one of the poorest performing parts of the region's road networks, as highlighted in National Highway's Oxford-Cambridge roads study.

The Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link is vital to support current and future growth in and around Aylesbury and the wider area. The growth of Aylesbury and north Buckinghamshire includes nearly 20,000 new homes planned for delivery by 2033 (including 16,207 new homes in Aylesbury).

Site allocation in the local plan was shaped with the fair expectation that the rail link would be delivered: it was only in 2021, eight years into the local plan, that the link was removed from the first phase of East West Rail construction work. The result of this decision is large scale housing being developed without the infrastructure to support it and a lack of trust from the public that Government can support housing delivery in the way it is needed. The Government's new standard method for Local Housing Need increases Buckinghamshire's annual figure by nearly 50% to 4,319.

For the Spending Review, we recommend that Network Rail be given revenue funding to fully develop a solution for delivering the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link within as a shorter-time period as possible (so that it can be delivered in tandem with the works on the next phases of East West Rail to Bedford and Cambridge). The work should consider this within the context of the wider Northampton-Old Oak Common corridor and the opportunities this presents at a regional and national level.

For more information see the '[Global Britain Rail](#)' booklet.

North Cotswold Line

The North Cotswold Line's potential to sustainably support economic and housing growth (indicative annual housing need along the corridor has increased by 80%) is

limited by its current hourly service between Oxford and Worcester (with services extending to Great Malvern and Hereford in some hours).

Increasing this frequency to every 30 minutes between Oxford and Worcester, while also offering new hourly services to Droitwich Spa, Kidderminster and Stourbridge, would be transformational – and also broaden access into East West Rail with an interchange at Oxford.

For the Spending Review, we recommend that funding is provided to the North Cotswold Task Force (a consortium of local authorities including Oxfordshire and Warwickshire county councils) to progress the scheme to Outline Business Case (OBC). This work will consider how private sector funding can be leveraged for the project.

For more information see [Improving the North Cotswold Line](#).

Interchange and strategic transport hubs

Dedicated funding is required to enable local authorities to plan and deliver improvements to station connectivity outside of the ‘red line’ boundary of East West Rail stations (supporting delivery of the East West Railway Company’s door-to-door strategy).

The Oxford-Cambridge Science Supercluster’s Public First report estimates that through delivery of East West Rail, 374,000 homes will be within 10 minutes of an East West Rail station and adds: “Highlighting the opportunity of excellent first and last mile connectivity, an additional 305,000 homes are within 20 minutes of these stations.”

Dedicated door-to-door funding for local and combined authorities will enable work which ensures that there are high quality connections by public and sustainable transport to and from stations, maximising the catchment of people and businesses who can benefit from East West Rail’s delivery.

Funding for planning and delivery of East West Rail door-to-door connectivity (including bus and active travel) is required urgently for authorities in Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, where East West Rail is due to open this year; for Central Bedfordshire and Bedford, where there is the ambition for the line to be operating by 2030; and for Cambridgeshire, where the ambition for the line to be operating by mid-2030s. A lesson learnt from the opening of the Oxford-Milton Keynes section this year is the earlier planning can commence on door-to-door, the better the outcome.

Our local partners also have ambitious plans for ensuring East West Rail acts as a catalyst for regeneration and station-led economic growth, including with improvements to Oxford, Bletchley (the ‘eastern entrance’) and Bedford stations. These

stations act as important interchange hubs for East West Rail. Similarly, there are stations with strong connectivity into East West Rail, such as Luton, Swindon and Stevenage, for which our partners have ambitious plans to redevelop as a catalyst for regeneration and growth. Funding to advance these projects will again maximise the benefits that East West Rail will realise for the local and regional economy, and provide demonstrable benefits to the communities they serve.

The proposed new station at Tempsford could offer a significant opportunity for station-led place-making. It is vital that the East West Railway Company and national Government work closely with Central Bedfordshire Council and regional partners such as EEH to ensure that delivery of the station and any associated growth opportunities is accompanied by necessary infrastructure and services to enable sustainable access and ensure that the impact on existing communities is mitigated.

Varsity Way

There is an opportunity for a landmark active travel corridor between Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge, following a significant portion of the East West Rail route. The 'Varsity Way' would act as a catalyst for active travel improvements elsewhere in the region, provide access to green spaces (including in areas likely to undergo significant housing growth) and support becoming an iconic tourist destination in its own right.

The Varsity Way is largely based on an existing National Cycle Network routes, parts of which require upgrading. EEH is working with Sustrans on progressing proposals for the Varsity Way.

A commitment within the Spending Review to fund development of the scheme (and its phased delivery) would complement Government concurrent investment in East West Rail. For more information see EEH's report '[Introducing the Varsity Way](#)' on the EEH website.

A 21st Century Main Line

Digital connectivity

England's Economic Heartland secured funding to enable digital fibre to be installed along the Bicester-Bletchley section of East West Rail while it was under construction – considerably cheaper than retrofitting.

Following this, the England's Connected Heartland consortium won funding to trial 5G connectivity along this section of the route, significantly enhancing onboard and lineside digital connectivity (including within rural locations and to farms, unlocking opportunities for the use of 5G-enabled agri-tech).

For the Spending Review, we recommend that the overall budget for future phases of East West Rail to Bedford and Cambridge includes provision for appropriate digital

infrastructure to ensure passengers receive a consistent, high quality and productive onboard experience, and to enable additional rural businesses and communities to access high quality digital services. For more information see

<https://englandsconnectedheartland.co.uk/>

“Legacy” funding

Releasing the first wave of the £15 million in East West Rail “legacy” funding first announced at the 2023 Spring Budget, will allow the region to start to plan for maximising the scheme’s benefits.

This includes opportunities around wider door-to-door connectivity, enhancing the environment, tourism (led by EEH as secretariat for the East West Main Line Partnership), alongside economic (Supercluster Board) and skills (Universities Group). The Spending Review should protect this funding stream, as small future allocations to this work will progress activity and unlock far greater benefits from East West Rail than just delivering the infrastructure itself.

Freight

Ely and Haughley Junctions

Limited capacity at Ely and Haughley junctions is a constraint on the UK rail freight system and economic growth, acting as a barrier to meeting increased demand for freight paths on routes to and from the UK’s industrial heartlands in the Midlands and North.

According to Network Rail, upgrading Ely would facilitate 2,900 extra freight services operating to and from Felixstowe p.a: removing 98,000 HGV journeys; reducing road congestion by 5.6 million hours (making Ely an integrated, rail-based solution to improving road capacity), and cutting carbon emissions by 1.7 million tonnes over 60 years.

It would improve passenger connectivity with new hourly services between Ipswich and Peterborough (one of the UK’s fastest growing cities) and new half-hourly King’s Cross-Ely-King’s Lynn services.

In doing so, it improves rail services and reduces road congestion in Cambridgeshire – one of the government’s key focuses for growth – and beyond. Ely is fundamental to helping address the disparity in provision between the north and south of Cambridgeshire: passenger service enhancements at Whittlesea, March and Manea cannot happen without these improvements.

Ely and Haughley are also key for enabling improved rail services from Cambridge to Norwich and Ipswich, maximising the strategic value of East West Rail.

Ely has a high BCR of 4.89. The scheme is pivotal to Department for Transport meeting its targets for increasing mode shift to rail freight. Rail freight can lever private investment, but for this to happen certainty is required on infrastructure delivery. Both schemes have high levels of support from MPs, local and combined authorities, freight industry, freeports, business, and the public. Four of England's seven sub-national transport bodies reference Ely's importance in their strategies.

For the Spending Review, we recommend that funding is released now to Network Rail, so that detailed planning for Ely's delivery can commence. Haughley is a 'quick win' requiring capital funding of around £20-£30 million: construction could start within this Spending Review period and is important for fully realising Ely's benefits.

See information booklet [Keeping Trade on Track](#).