

## **East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board**

**26 February 2026**

### **Item 6: Opening of Oxford-Milton Keynes section**

**Recommendation: It is recommended that the Board:**

- a) Agrees to write to the Secretary of State for Transport urging that services on the Oxford-Milton Keynes section of East West Rail commence as soon as possible**

#### **1. Purpose**

- 1.1. To update members on the delay to opening the Oxford-Milton Keynes section of East West Rail.

#### **2. Key points to note**

- 2.1. The Oxford-Milton Keynes section of East West Rail was completed in 2024, and passenger services were expected to commence in 2025.
- 2.2. A delay has been caused, understood to be partly due to negotiations between the operator and unions.
- 2.3. It is suggested a letter is sent from this Board urging that services start as soon as possible.

#### **3. Context**

- 3.1. Construction of major East West Rail infrastructure between Oxford and Milton Keynes completed in 2024 and passenger services were expected to commence in late 2025.
- 3.2. Chiltern Railways was announced as the operator in March 2025.
- 3.3. While freight and test trains have been running for some time (the first test run took place in October 2024) in autumn 2025 it was confirmed that the commencement of passenger services had been delayed.
- 3.4. In November 2025 the Secretary of State for Transport told Parliament: "The Department is supporting Chiltern Railways as it works closely with unions and other industry partners to get services on the first phase of East West Rail up and running as soon as possible."
- 3.5. As of mid-February, no updates have been made on when services may begin.

#### **4. Letter**

- 4.1. At its extraordinary Board meeting on the 'You Said We Did' announcement in November, members raised concerns about the delay.
- 4.2. It is suggested that a letter is written from the Partnership to Chiltern Railways and the Secretary of State for Transport, expressing serious concerns over the delay:

Dear Secretary of State

I am writing on behalf of the East West Main Line Partnership to raise significant concerns about the continuing delay to the start of passenger services on the Oxford–

Milton Keynes section of East West Rail. As you will be aware, the line infrastructure was completed and handed over in 2024, with passenger services expected to start in 2025. However, while freight services are utilising the line, passenger services have been postponed– with no indication for when they may commence.

This delay is concerning for local authorities, residents, businesses, and regional partners who have long anticipated the economic, sustainable transport, and growth benefits promised by this nationally significant project.

The opportunities unlocked by the Oxford-Milton Keynes section of East West Rail are vital in their own right. These include supporting sustainable housing growth; unlocking GVA and productivity growth; attracting private investment; expanding jobs markets; and enhancing access to services and leisure which boosts local economies and improves overall quality of life. Yet the continuing delay is postponing delivery of these benefits, while undermining the case for why infrastructure must be delivered at pace.

The delay also undermines opportunities to embed use of public transport in growing communities along the route, particularly for those new to the area. Uncertainty over the start impacts attempts by local authorities and transport operators to plan better transport integration. Indeed, Oxford-Milton Keynes section could provide an important testbed for the ambitions of the Integrated National Transport Strategy.

Moreover, the delay is eroding the trust of local communities in proximity to the line. Many residents were seriously impacted by East West Rail's construction and, as of today, the only services they currently see on it are for freight.

The Oxford-Milton Keynes section will also improve opportunities for interchange onto other main lines, unlocking benefits for the wider rail network. For example, it is very positive that new Bristol-Swindon-Oxford services are likely to soon commence – having Oxford-Milton Keynes services running will only maximise the value of this service.

The sooner passenger services commence, the sooner their benefits can be quantified to inform future decisions on rail infrastructure and its integration.

I understand that industrial relations issues are a key barrier. Given the strategic importance of East West Rail, we urge the Government to:

- Provide a clear timeline for the commencement of passenger services.
- Intensify its role in mediating any dispute between the parties involved
- Ensure all station and operational readiness work is completed at pace, with transparent reporting to local authorities and stakeholders.

The East West Rail project has enormous potential to transform local communities, strengthen our regional economy, and embed sustainable transport at the heart of future growth. To realise these benefits, it is vital that services between Oxford and Milton Keynes begin as soon as possible. Continued uncertainty risks eroding public trust, delaying investment, and undermining the very objectives the Government has set out in Parliament.

I would welcome further dialogue with your department and stand ready to support efforts to expedite the opening of this critical rail link.

Yours sincerely,

Katie Thornburrow  
Chair, East West Main Line Partnership

**Adam King**  
**Head of Policy and Partnerships, England's Economic Heartland**

**February 2026**