

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board

26 February 2026

Item 7: England's Economic Heartland work update

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Board:

a) Notes updates from EEH on its work, with partners, which involves East West Rail.

1. Purpose

- 1.1. To update members on a range of England's Economic Heartland work priorities which touches upon East West Rail

2. Points to note

- 2.1. Oxford-Swindon-Bristol services could begin in the next few months, following advocacy by East West Main Line Partnership and EEH.
- 2.2. A major aspect of EEH's work is on integration of East West Rail into the wider transport network – in December it released its phase one report into this.
- 2.3. Government has announced that the Bletchley-Cambridge section of East West Rail should have digital infrastructure installed alongside it, subject to third party funding – EEH is working on funding a use case for this.
- 2.4. EEH's work with partners continues to progress the case for Ely Junction and the Aylesbury link.
- 2.5. EEH has commissioned a visitor economy action plan which will look at how East West Rail, alongside Universal, Puy du Fou and national forest, can be the catalyst for a regional tourism offer.

3. Positive news: Oxford-Swindon-Bristol services

- 3.1. A priority for EEH and the East West Main Line Partnership (EWMLP) has been the resumption of frequent rail services between Oxford, Swindon and Bristol. This forms part of the EWMLP's aspirations for a 'coast-to-coast' East West Main Line.
- 3.2. In 2024 EWMLP contributed funding towards Network Rail's economic appraisal of such a service, and in 2025 EEH produced an advocacy brochure and media campaign based on their evidence.
- 3.3. Great Western Railway has applied to the Office of Rail and Road for access rights that would enable a two-hourly Oxford-Bristol via Swindon service on weekdays and Saturdays from May 2026, rising to an hourly service from May 2027. This builds on the success of the ongoing Saturday-only trial service.
- 3.4. Network Rail's formal response to the application supports delivery of a two-hourly service for an extended trial period from May 2026 to December 2027. This is also contingent upon Great Western Railway providing £1.75m to deliver level crossing safety improvements.
- 3.5. It is understood that Rail Minister Lord Hendy has written to local leaders confirming the Government's support for a direct rail service between Swindon and Oxford.

- 3.6. The Office of Road and Rail is due to make a final determination on access, with a decision due by late February at the earliest. Competing requests for services on the Great Western Main Line between Swindon and Didcot mean that the Office of Rail and Road must decide how the limited available capacity can be allocated. It should be noted that Network Rail did not formally endorse any other access requests.
- 3.7. Further updates will be brought to Board following the Office of Rail and Road decision.

4. Integration

- 4.1. Delivery of East West Rail and other significant developments present an outstanding opportunity to embed the principles of the Government's forthcoming Integrated National Transport Strategy within the region.
- 4.2. This forms a major part of EEH's work programme.
- 4.3. At the EEH Board in December, members agreed the phase one report, which sets out 'opportunity statements' for integration. Phase two will consider these as part of transport opportunity plans for specific locations.
- 4.4. The Board also discussed the potential locations for transport opportunity plans and the proposed approach for identifying and sequencing activity.
- 4.5. Each transport opportunity plan will include an evidence-based action plan and shortlist of priorities for interventions that are key to delivering the opportunity statements. Key selected interventions will be developed into tangible propositions, including costings and an evidence and data-driven strategic narrative. The transport opportunity plan will also consider the best route to secure delivery and funding for identified interventions, including developer contributions and private financing.
- 4.6. Locations considered to meet criteria (as referenced in the December EEH Board paper) for transport opportunity plans include the following:
- 4.7. Along or in proximity to the line of East West Rail (as currently committed by Government): Universal Studios and Bedford; Bicester; Cambourne; Marston Vale Line; Milton Keynes; and Tempsford.
- 4.8. Outside of the immediate route of East West Rail (as currently committed by Government): Silverstone and Westcott; Aylesbury; Luton and London Luton Airport; and Stevenage.
- 4.9. Universal Studios will be the first transport opportunity plan undertaken. EEH has liaised with both DfT and Bedford Borough Council to secure funding to enable this project to be developed, given the size, scale and impact that Universal Studios will have across the region.
- 4.10. Prioritisation of the transport opportunity plans' delivery and the associated order is not yet confirmed and will be subject to external announcements and the wider changing context to support growth across the region.
- 4.11. An update and engagement session on the EEH integration programme was held with heads of service on 20 January to brief them on the proposed transport opportunity plan programme. This was well received and provided EEH with additional local context regarding local plans, and additional development plans. This will become a quarterly briefing to heads of service and help inform the direction of the project.
- 4.12. An Integration Taskforce is also being established to provide expert advice and input into the programme. The taskforce will comprise key regional and national stakeholders, experts, influencers and innovators. They will report back via the EEH Board.

5. Digital connectivity

- 5.1. EEH previously secured funding for fibre to be installed from Bicester-Bletchley.
- 5.2. It subsequently supported England's Connected Heartland's (ECH) successful bid to make this section 5G.

- 5.3. EEH is now working with ECH to make case for digital connectivity from Bletchley to Cambridge (and Oxford-Bicester).
- 5.4. In November 2025 the Government confirmed that: "East West Rail Company (EWR Co) will install high-capacity fibre along the line of route including the Marston Vale Line, which has spare capacity designated for third-party telecommunications such as to provide 5G mobile signal for passenger use. EWR Co are currently exploring options for how 5G data connectivity could be provided including through third party funding."
- 5.5. EEH is currently discussing with ECH on the feasibility of a study to demonstrate benefits of the trackside 5G project, along with understanding the impact it could have on existing and future EWR sections.
- 5.6. It is currently reviewing their project brief and anticipate that a summary paper will be presented before the EEH board in March 2026.

6. Ely Junction

- 6.1. Despite a compelling business case and strong support across the rail industry, multiple sub-national transport bodies and local authorities, no funding has yet been committed for delivery of the Ely Area Capacity Enhancement scheme.
- 6.2. The benefits for freight flows from Felixstowe are already well understood.
- 6.3. The scheme also unlocks significant benefits for improved passenger services and more can be done to bring these out within a refreshed narrative for the scheme, in terms of its role in economic and housing growth in the region.
- 6.4. In addition, Ely could also play a key role in unlocking more capacity for freight from Thameside ports too, where major growth in freight volumes is forecast. This potential benefit has already been highlighted by Network Rail in its London Rail Freight Study and Essex Thameside Strategic Advice reports.
- 6.5. EEH is working with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, Transport East as well as other local and regional partners to ensure the case for investment in Ely Area Capacity Enhancements remains current and urgent.

7. Northampton-Old Oak Common Corridor (including Aylesbury link)

- 7.1. This corridor incorporates several discrete schemes, including:
 - Old Oak Common-Chiltern link
 - Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link (an integral part of the East West Rail proposals which was part of the original TWAO).
 - Bletchley Chord
- 7.2. Network Rail workstreams, including ongoing route studies, will work to support development of these schemes. However, the relevant outputs will be spread across different reports and strategies.
- 7.3. EEH will work to bring these outputs into a single strategy focussed on the Northampton-Milton Keynes-Aylesbury-Bucks-Old Oak Common corridor.
- 7.4. There is also more work to be done to understand strength and patterns of demand which will underpin any future business case for these schemes.
- 7.5. EEH will work with:
 - Buckinghamshire Council to explore how the Milton Keynes-Aylesbury link maps across to ambitions in its emerging local plan.
 - Transport for London (TfL) to develop a greater understanding of the connectivity benefits provided by direct access to Old Oak Common and the extent to which this could generate additional passenger demand;
 - TfL and Heathrow Airport Ltd to understand how major expansion plans for Heathrow could have a further bearing for future demand on this corridor.

8. Visitor economy action plan

- 8.1. East West Rail will connect a remarkable number of significant, existing visitor destinations as well as new arrivals such as Universal and Puy Du Fou bringing people to the region in unprecedented numbers.
- 8.2. This presents significant economic opportunities. Crucially, the connectivity offered by East West Rail in creating a regional visitor economy offer which will enhance the regional lifestyle offer: improving quality of life for existing communities and helping to attract and retain the talent and skills required to support the ambitions of the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor.
- 8.3. As part of the East West Rail legacy funding received from Government, it was agreed that EEH undertake work to understand how East West Rail can be a catalyst for tourism.
- 8.4. Following discussions with stakeholders, we are proposing to commission an action plan from sector specialists which addresses: 'How can East West Rail and major new visitor attractions such as Universal, Puy du Fou and the National Forest provide a catalyst for a regional visitor economy and enhanced lifestyle offer?'
- 8.5. Following a thorough procurement process, an organisation has been appointed to lead work on the action plan, which will involve engagement with, amongst others, local visitor economy partnerships and destination management organisations; local authorities and East West Rail.

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