

# **Making the Case for the Wider South East's Railway**

## **A Position Paper for the Wider South East Rail Partnership**

Final Draft Version | February 2025

### **Headlines**

- **The opportunity** - The wider south east (WSE) plays a key role in driving the government's growth mission. With the right investment in infrastructure, including rail, the area is well-placed to attract employers, drive inward investment and deliver productivity increases.
- **The enabler** - An integrated WSE rail network will drive higher economic growth by connecting leading clusters of priority growth sectors with a growing skilled workforce and globally significant institutions. The Wider South East Rail Partnership (WSERP) provides a framework for bringing together strategic partners at the right scale to co-ordinate investment and policy priorities across this significant part of England's rail network.
- **The action** – Working with all partners, the WSERP provides a coherent single voice to government on investment, policy and systems approaches required to enable the wider south east rail network, including London to work as an integrated network. It enables Sub-national Transport Bodies (STBs), existing and future strategic authorities, Transport for London, the Department for Transport, and the rail industry to plan an integrated rail network in the south east.
- **What next** This partnership presents a 'ready-made' framework to lead the strategic debate and coordinate planning for rail across the South East of England, including as new strategic authorities come forward.

### **Introduction**

**The Wider South East (WSE) is the powerhouse of the United Kingdom's economy**, contributing significantly to the national gross value added (GVA) and supporting vital industries that drive innovation and growth. As home to the nation's busiest rail corridors, key international gateways, and globally significant sectors like finance, biosciences, and advanced manufacturing, the WSE's rail network is indispensable—not only for the region but for the entire country. Every day, millions of people and goods rely on these critical connections, yet the network faces increasing challenges from underinvestment, recovering demand, and the urgent need to decarbonise.

**The WSE Rail Partnership brings together three Sub-National Transport Bodies** (STBs) – England’s Economic Heartland, Transport East, and Transport for the South East in collaboration with Department for Transport, GBRTT, Network Rail, and Transport for London. Formed in line with the principles of the Williams-Shapps Review, our collective mission is to champion a transformative vision for the region’s rail network. We aim to ensure the network meets the needs of passengers, freight, and businesses while supporting government priorities for economic growth, net zero, and equitable prosperity.

**This paper sets out the strategic importance of rail in the WSE**, identifies key challenges and opportunities, and defines how the WSE Rail Partnership can deliver tangible improvements that benefit not just the region but the entire UK. Together, we can unlock the full potential of the WSE’s rail network and secure its future as the backbone of a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable transport system for both the WSE and the UK as a whole.

### **The Role of Rail in the WSE**

**The Wider South East (WSE) makes a significant contribution to the UK economy.** In 2022, the WSE area contributed **25%** of the UK’s gross value added (GVA). When the WSE is considered alongside London – which captures GVA added by commuters who live outside the capital – this figure rises to nearly half of the country’s total economic output.

**The railway is a vital enabler of this region’s economic success.** It connects globally significant industries, including finance, biosciences, advanced manufacturing, and creative sectors such as film and media., as well as airports and ports. These industries depend on reliable and efficient rail links between their hubs to foster collaboration, innovation, and growth.

As home to the UK’s largest labour market, **the WSE’s relationship with London is critically important.** Rail facilitates the daily commute of millions, expands labour market catchments, and provides vital links between London and the UK’s busiest ports and airports. This connectivity underpins the UK’s international trade and mobility, cementing the WSE’s role as a gateway for the national economy.

**Rail also offers a sustainable alternative to car and road freight travel**, easing congestion on key roads such as the M25 and A14 while reducing harmful emissions. Rail freight, in particular, plays a pivotal role in removing heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) from motorways, improving air quality and reducing carbon footprints across the region.

**The WSE region heavily relies on and makes a significant contribution to the financial sustainability of the nation’s rail network.** The Train Operating Companies that serve the WSE<sup>1</sup> and London account for approximately **50%** of the nation’s farebox revenue, and the yield per resident in the WSE and London area is **53%** higher than the rest of the UK. The WSE’s residents demonstrate a significantly higher reliance on rail, making **77%** more journeys by train than the UK average outside London, underscoring the region’s exceptional propensity for rail travel compared to most other areas.

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<sup>1</sup> Chiltern; East Anglia; Elizabeth Line; Essex Thameside; London Overground; South Eastern; South Western; and Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern.

## **Strategic Challenges and Opportunities**

The WSE's railway faces significant challenges in a post-pandemic environment, including:

- **Significant fiscal constraints** due to the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and structural changes in passenger demand. Hybrid working patterns have reduced peak travel demand, particularly among commuters, affecting revenue streams. It is unknown how far the observed recovery in peak time travel will continue. Rising operational costs, inflationary pressures, and affordability challenges further strain resources. These pressures highlight the need for targeted investments that deliver high value for money and adapt to evolving passenger and freight needs.
- **Connectivity gaps beyond London are poor.** While corridors between the WSE and London are generally well-served, non-London routes, such as East-West links between Bristol/Swindon, Oxford, Cambridge, Ipswich, Norwich and Stansted, or Brighton and Southampton, remain uncompetitive with car travel. These gaps hinder regional economic integration and exacerbate congestion on major road networks.
- **Outside the Transport for London (TfL) area, the transport system is poorly integrated** across different transport modes, as well as across different political and institutional boundaries. This results in fragmented journeys, inconsistent ticketing, and poor alignment of services. A coordinated approach is essential to create a seamless and user-friendly transport network across the WSE.
- **Concurrent devolution, local government reform and rail reform** raise the possibility of multiple changes to accountabilities and risks in disjointed decision-making during the intervening period. This Partnership provides a consistent framework for government, the rail industry, strategic authorities and STBs to keep the focus on strategic rail priorities and issues will be needed.

However, we also see significant opportunities for the railway in the WSE, including:

- **Leisure travel:** Post-pandemic shifts have boosted demand for leisure travel, presenting opportunities for rail to capture a larger share of this growing market, particularly where network capacity is available and outside of peak times. By offering competitively priced, tailored services, the WSE rail network can support tourism while driving regional economic growth.
- **Freight and logistics:** The demand for sustainable logistics provides a significant opportunity to promote rail freight, particularly from ports such as Felixstowe, Southampton and London Gateway to the Midlands and North. Investment in freight corridors will reduce road congestion and emissions, supporting the UK's decarbonisation goals and targets for rail freight growth.
- **Sustainable growth:** Rail can help unlock opportunities for sustainable economic growth by facilitating the development of residential and employment sites while providing new residents and employees sustainable travel options.

- **The wider landscape of reform**, whilst in some respects a challenge, creates an opportunity for a better-aligned set of accountabilities for strategic rail decisions in the future.

### **Role and Objectives of the Partnership**

**The WSE Rail Partnership aims to provide a unified, pan-regional voice for the rail needs of the WSE.** Through the STB Boards and their constituent Local Transport Authorities (LTAs), STBs represent the interests of passengers and wider economic stakeholders in our area. The WSE Rail Partnership aims to bridge the gap between local, regional, and national priorities, ensuring that the unique characteristics of the WSE are recognised in decision-making and rail reform. We recognise that while LTAs are best placed to address localised needs, a regional body is needed to deliver the strategic oversight required for region wide improvements. As Mayoral Strategic Authorities are formed across the wider south east, the WSERP provides a 'ready-made' framework to co-ordinate their strategy and plan for rail across the WSE. Through membership of the STBs, the partnership also provides current and newly created authorities with a framework to shape strategic rail through a transitional period.

This partnership therefore aims to complement LTAs, TfL, Network Rail, Great British Railways (GBR), and the Department for Transport by offering a strategic and regional perspective that aligns investments with broader economic and environmental goals such as industrial strategy.

In the short to medium term, the partnership's objectives are to:

- **Articulate investment priorities and secure funding for the area:** Over the last seven years each STB has worked to develop a comprehensive evidence base, strategies, and plans that set out how investing in rail scheme schemes in the area can contribute to government priorities including housing, net zero, and the industrial strategy. We recognise that this complements work undertaken by TfL, and we want the wider rail industry to have due regard to this and work with us to deliver our ambitions. While we recognise resources are highly constrained, encouraging announcements regarding fiscal rule changes from the 2024 Autumn Budget may present an opportunity to progress many priorities over the next parliament.
- **Enhance integration across modes and political boundaries:** We want to develop seamless connections between rail, bus, and active travel options, creating a genuinely integrated transport network. This can also include integrated planning with road networks given the multi-modal accountabilities of STBs.
- **Help passenger demand recover and strengthen the industry's finances:** We want to help the industry recover demand and revenue by delivering a more reliable, accessible, and integrated rail network that supports passengers' diverse needs, from commuting to leisure travel. We also see a role for sustainable development as a way of generating new demand for rail.
- **Promote rail freight growth and modal shift:** We are keen to relieve pressure on our congested roads and help government deliver its ambitions to increase rail freight to reduce HGV traffic and support cleaner, more efficient logistics.

- **Advance Net Zero and wider environmental goals:** We support rail decarbonisation and interventions that promote modal shift to rail and will work with partners to ensure the rail network plays a leading role in decarbonising transport across the WSE.
- **Unlock the economic potential of the Wider South East:** We believe rail can drive economic growth, enabling new housing developments, expanding labour markets, and supporting high-growth industries.

## **Delivery**

We will deliver the WSE Rail Partnership's Objectives – as well as wider Government Goals – through the following activities:

- **Data and insights:** We will collaborate to align evidence bases from STBs, TfL, and Network Rail to identify and plan for strategic priorities and interventions. This will ensure investments are targeted where they will deliver the greatest impact.
- **Policy alignment and impact:** We will ensure STB strategies complement local, regional and national initiatives, including the Government's Missions, and Secretary of State's Priorities, as well as longer term pipelines and planning frameworks such as the Rail Network Enhancements Pipeline (RNEP) and the High-Level Output Specification (HLOS). We will aim to influence policy and investment decisions through robust evidence and strategic alignment, rather than lobbying. This approach will ensure the WSE acts with credibility and maximises its impact on national priorities.
- **Integrated National Transport Strategy:** Supporting the development and delivery of the future Integrated National Transport Strategy - the long term, people centred strategy for integrating transport. The organisations in the Wider South East Rail Partnership take a holistic multi modal approach to planning connectivity, meaning that connectivity on rail should be complemented by connectivity to the rail network by all modes, including public transport and active travel, to provide seamless door to door travel. Advice and data supplied by the partnership will support this approach.
- **Collaborative working:** We recognise that the WSE plays a key role in the national economy and shares strong economic and transport links with London. We will therefore work with DfT, Network Rail, GBR, TfL, operator representatives and existing and emerging strategic authorities to address national and cross-boundary travel opportunities. As the rail industry reforms and the role of GBR is strengthened, we look forward to working with evolving industry and devolved structures to secure the best outcomes for the WSE's residents and businesses, recognising that the South East STBs currently represent 34 local transport authority partners.
- **Government and industry engagement and advocacy:** We will regularly collaborate with all industry partners to promote our priorities and local insights and work with these partners to shape the future of the railways. Through this partnership, the STBs will discharge their role set out in the LGCDA2016 to provide formal advice to the Secretary of State on WSE rail priorities in a co-ordinated way.

- **Transparent communication:** We will provide regular updates to stakeholders including DfT, the rail industry and existing and emerging devolved authorities, including quarterly reviews during active planning phases, and we will work to ensure our partnership remains transparent and accountable.

## **Conclusion**

The WSE is fundamental to the UK's economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and transport connectivity. As a region that generates nearly half of the country's economic output when combined with London, and as a region that demonstrates exceptional reliance on rail, it is clear that the WSE's transport network is crucial to securing long-term prosperity for the wider UK. By addressing connectivity gaps, supporting decarbonisation, and enhancing rail's role in freight and passenger travel, the WSE can continue to drive national growth and deliver on key government priorities.

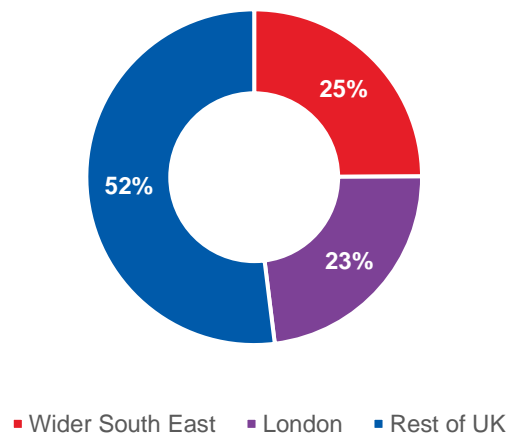
Looking ahead, the WSE Rail Partnership will focus on strengthening dialogue with government, industry, and stakeholders to influence future funding and policy decisions. A priority will be advancing initiatives that integrate rail with other transport modes, ensuring seamless and sustainable journeys for passengers and freight. By fostering innovative collaboration and aligning with national objectives, the partnership will secure the rail network's position as the backbone of a resilient, inclusive, and sustainable transport system for the WSE and beyond.

## **Map of the Wider South East Rail Partnership area:**

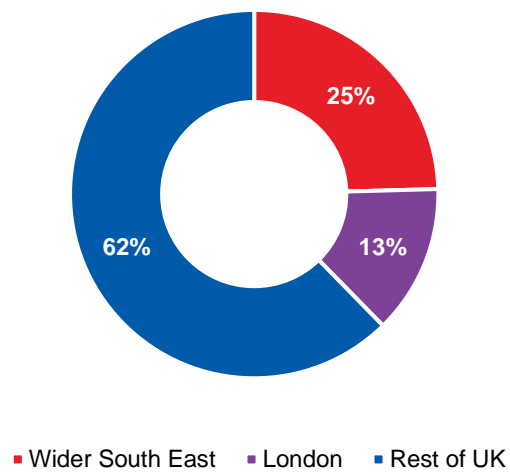


## Appendix – Key Statistics

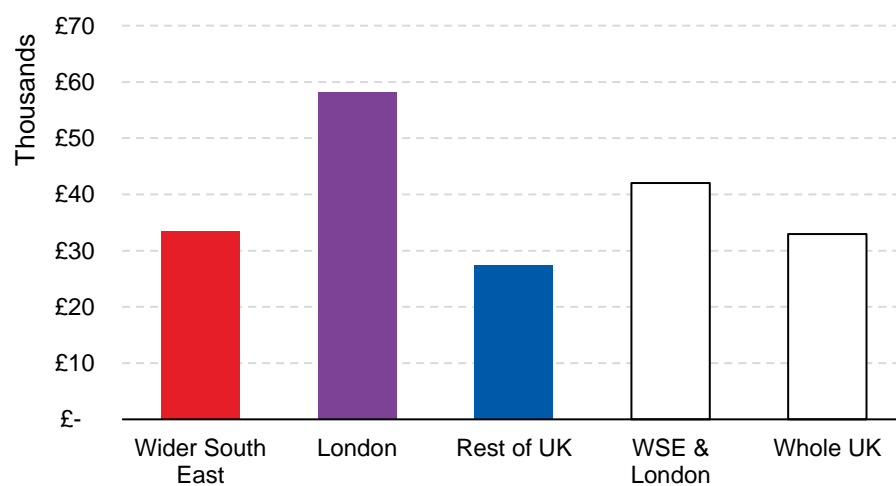
### GVA (2022)



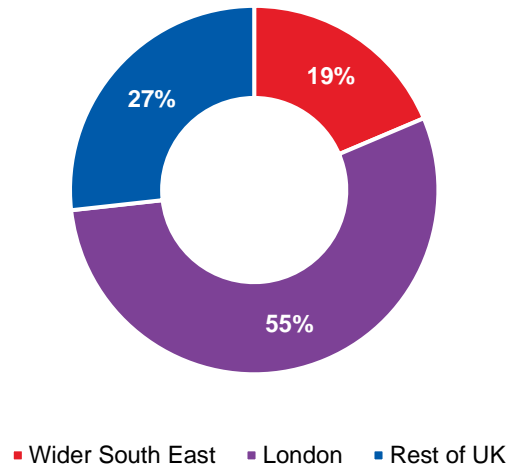
### Population (2023)



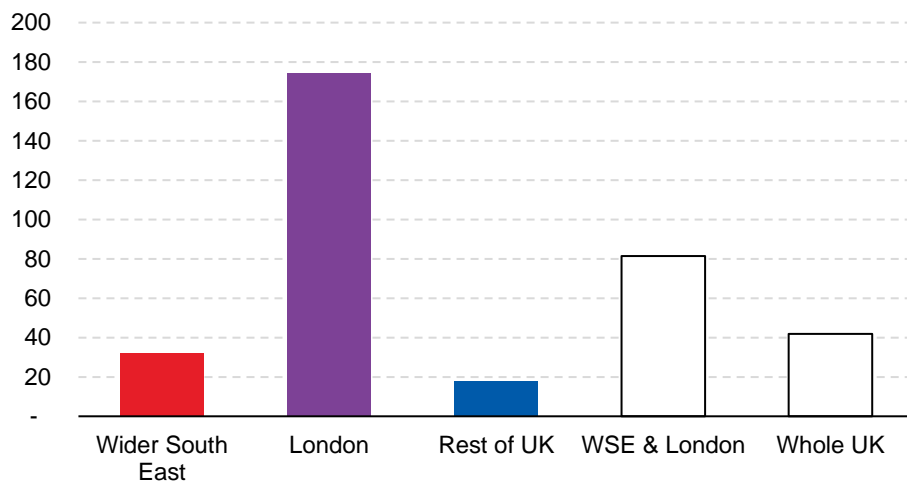
### GVA Per Capita (2022/23)



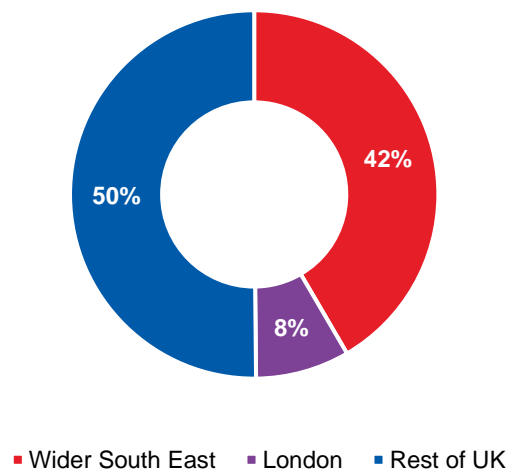
### Station Exits and Entries (2023)



### Rail Trips Per Capita (2022/23)



### Revenue (2023/24)





Please note the following regarding the revenue split shown above:

- The revenue is only able to be split between operators, most of which operate across the different geographic areas shown
- The chart therefore gives a guide to revenue split, based on where particular operators mostly run trains as follows:
  - London: Elizabeth Line and Overground franchises only
  - South East: Chiltern; East Anglia; Essex Thameside; South Eastern; South Western; Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern.
  - Rest of UK: remainder of operators, including Long Distance operators that service some places within the South East- e.g. GWR, GNER etc'
- The same applies to the yield (revenue) per resident chart below.

