

# England's Economic Heartland Board

29 January 2026

## Item 6: Rail Priorities Update

### *Recommendation:*

**It is recommended that Board:**

- a) Endorse the proposed focus areas for rail**
- b) Note the rail industry updates provided in this briefing**
- c) Agree to write to Network Rail and LNER requesting that impacts of the East Coast Main Line (ECML) December 2025 timetable change be addressed**

### **1. Purpose of paper**

- 1.1. To recommend focus areas for rail in the EEH region this year.

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

- 2.1. The Board is asked to endorse the following as focus areas for rail in the EEH region this year:
  - Representation for EEH and its local authority partners across all relevant NR strategic workstreams
  - Ely Area Capacity Enhancement
  - Northampton-Old Oak Common corridor (including Aylesbury link)
- 2.2. Given the amount of main line routes studies underway, 2026 is seen as a crucial year for the region to include Network Rail priorities.
- 2.3. On 14 January, Government announced its commitment to major rail upgrades in the north as part of Northern Powerhouse Rail, including an aspiration to deliver a new railway line between Birmingham and Manchester. Whilst this does not directly impact the EEH region, indirect impacts are likely to be significant.
- 2.4. Great Western Railway has applied to the Office of Rail and Road for access rights to significantly expand its direct Oxford-Bristol via Swindon service to a regular all day offering Monday-Saturday: this is an EEH priority scheme.
- 2.5. Whilst delivering improvements in some areas, the recent December 2025 East Coast Main Line timetable change did negatively impact the region in some areas, particularly in Peterborough and Stevenage.

### **3. Context**

- 3.1. Rail plays a vital role in supporting ambitions for the EEH region. Improvements in both freight and passenger services can unlock sustainable economic growth, support decarbonisation, reduce congestion and help forge stronger bonds between communities.

- 3.2. The EEH region's geography is unique in that all the radial north-south main line routes from London run through it. This presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, connectivity on these existing radial corridors is – with some exceptions – very good. On the other, the ambition to improve services in the EEH region must compete with demands for improvements from the many other communities these lines serve across Britain when it comes to allocation of scarce network capacity.
- 3.3. Another key challenge for rail in EEH region has been the absence of east-west orbital connectivity. This will be substantially improved with the arrival of East West Rail. Oxford-Milton Keynes services are due to start running later this year. East West Railway Company is also due to apply for a Development Consent Order (DCO) covering the Bletchley-Bedford-Cambridge route sections later this year.
- 3.4. EEH plays a key role in shaping rail for the region, including:
- Providing a vision for the future of rail in EEH, with supporting strategies and analysis;
  - Close working with Network Rail, DfT and rail industry partners to ensure that regional priorities are incorporated into industry long term strategic planning;
  - Close working with local authority partners to ensure that their priorities and ambitions are reflected in both EEH and rail industry strategies;
  - Advocacy for rail improvements in the region, such as new services (eg, Oxford-Bristol via Swindon) and new infrastructure (eg, Aylesbury link and Ely Junction);
  - Close working with other STBs and public sector organisations on rail issues that extend beyond EEH boundaries, such as the Wider South East Rail Partnership.
- 3.5. Ben Feeney-North has recently joined the EEH team as the Rail Technical Lead on secondment from Buckinghamshire Council. He has previously worked in the rail industry for both Network Rail and HS2 Ltd in Project Management and Sponsorship roles.
- 3.6. The Board is asked to endorse the following as focus areas for rail in the EEH region this year:
- Representation for EEH and its local authority partners across all relevant NR strategic workstreams
  - Ely Area Capacity Enhancement
  - Northampton-Old Oak Common corridor (including Aylesbury link)

#### **4. Network Rail strategic workstreams**

- 4.1. There is a significant amount of strategic work currently being undertaken by the rail industry, much of which touches upon the EEH region. The three focus areas for 2026 put forward in this paper aim to:
- Ensure that the priorities and objectives of EEH and its local authority partners are fully incorporated into this work;
  - Provide additional targeted analysis which builds upon and fills gaps in these rail industry work streams in support of EEH and local authority priorities.
- 4.2. The table below summarises the strategic workstreams being undertaken by Network Rail this year. Taken together, they cover the entire EEH geography. This makes 2026 a critical year for ensuring that our ambitions for rail are fully reflected in industry long term strategic thinking.
- 4.3. EEH officers will:
- Provide representation for the region and local authority partners at all relevant Network Rail and industry forums;
  - Support liaison between Network Rail and local authority partners where issues, challenges or opportunities may arise.



Work stream	Key EEH locations & commentary
<b><u>Chiltern</u></b> Strategic Advice	Aylesbury, Banbury, High Wycombe, Oxford – study progressing
<b><u>East Coast Main Line</u></b> Route Study	Cambridge, Hitchin, Peterborough, Stevenage, Tempsford, Welwyn – study progressing
<b><u>Midland Main Line &amp; East Midlands</u></b> Study	Bedford, Luton, St Albans – study commencing Q1 26
<b><u>West Anglia Main Line</u></b> Route Study	Broxbourne, Cambridge – study commencing Q1 26
<b><u>West Coast Main Line</u></b> Long Term Strategy	Hemel Hempstead, Milton Keynes, Northampton, Watford – study progressing

4.4. These strategies provide two key outputs:

- A 'train service specification' (TSS): a high-level view of services that should run in the future, including frequencies and calling patterns
- A high-level view of infrastructure interventions required to enable delivery of the TSS.

4.5. These workstreams, whilst thorough, will inevitably leave some questions unanswered when it comes to key rail ambitions for the EEH region. This is where the remaining two focus areas come into play, further detail on which is provided below.

## 5. Ely Junction

- 5.1. 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.
- 5.2. The benefits for freight flows from Felixstowe are already well understood. However, the Ely scheme could also play a 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.
- 5.3. EEH and partners will look to expand on this potential benefit and how it could further strengthen the case for the scheme.
- 5.4. The scheme also unlocks significant benefits for improved passenger services in the EEH region and beyond. These benefits have been quantified in a WebTAG environment as part of the previous strategic outline business case for the scheme.
- 5.5. More can be done to link improved passenger services to economic growth in the region – new housing and better-connected business. EEH is working with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority as well as other local and regional partners to ensure the case for investment in Ely Area Capacity Enhancements remains current and urgent.
- 5.6. The outline business case was produced five years ago. During a recent adjournment debate on Ely, Minister Lillian Greenwood suggested the business case should be updated. It is believed that a refreshed business case (taking into account the above) would need to be produced next year so that it could be considered for the next Spending Review round.
- 5.7. EEH currently chairs the Ely Taskforce, which includes a number of authority, business and industry partners. We are considering with partners how the taskforce could potentially be relaunched to ensure it creates a stronger, unified voice in advocating for Ely and securing – as appropriate – the production of a refreshed business case.
- 5.8. In addition, with partners, we are considering a discrete piece of work which will consider the potential routes and options for Ely attracting private investment.

## **6. Northampton – Old Oak Common Corridor**

- 6.1. This corridor incorporates several discrete schemes, including:
  - Old Oak Common-Chiltern link
  - Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link
  - Bletchley Chord.
- 6.2. Network Rail workstreams, including some noted in the table above, will work to support development of these schemes. However, the relevant outputs will be spread across different reports and strategies. We will work to bring these outputs into a single strategy focussed on the Northampton-Milton Keynes-Aylesbury-Bucks-Old Oak Common corridor.
- 6.3. 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. We 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.

## **7. Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR)**

- 7.1. On 14 January, the Government announced commitments to major new rail infrastructure in the Midlands and north of England. This will not entail delivery of any new infrastructure within the EEH region. However, indirect impacts are likely to be significant.
- 7.2. Bottlenecks elsewhere on the network which constrain connectivity between the EEH region and the north are likely to be removed, potentially paving the way for substantial service improvements. However, this must be balanced against potential risks.
- 7.3. The Government has made it clear that the new Birmingham-Manchester line, the element of the Northern Powerhouse Rail announcement likely to be of greatest benefit for the EEH region, is to be delivered after the rest of Northern Powerhouse Rail, implying delivery in the 2040s at the earliest.
- 7.4. This means that, without other interim infrastructure interventions, constraints on connectivity between the EEH region and the North could persist for decades to come.
- 7.5. The Northern Powerhouse Rail proposals are likely to have a major impact on availability of capital funding and rail industry resources. The Government has stated that £45bn will be made available for delivery of Northern Powerhouse Rail. This could reduce the likelihood of securing funding for rail schemes in the EEH region.
- 7.6. Further updates on Northern Powerhouse Rail will be brought to the Board as and when potential impacts for the EEH region are identified.

## **8. Oxford-Swindon-Bristol services**

- 8.1. 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. 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.
- 8.2. 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.



- 8.3. 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.
- 8.4. 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.
- 8.5. Further updates will be brought to Board following the Office of Rail and Road decision.

## **9. ECML December 2025 timetable change**

- 9.1. The recent timetable change saw significant service improvements on the East Coast Main Line, including for the EEH region. However, there were also some adverse impacts, in particular on two key urban centres within the region:
  - **Peterborough:** reduction in weekday AM peak LNER services to London King's Cross;
  - **Stevenage:** LNER services switching to northbound boarding/southbound alighting only, meaning that London-bound passengers can no longer use LNER services.
- 9.2. The Board is asked to endorse issuing of a joint communication from EEH and relevant local authority partners to Network Rail and London North Eastern Railway highlighting the impacts and requesting that they are addressed at the earliest possible opportunity.

**Ben Feeney-North**  
**Rail Technical Lead**  
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