

EEH Board

18 June 2026

Agenda Item 5 - Rail

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Endorse the 'Maximising East West Rail opportunities and HS2 released capacity' report and approve its publication.**
- b) Endorse and agree to the submission of a letter to the Secretary of State for Transport regarding a start date for Oxford – Milton Keynes EWR services.**
- c) Note the wider rail updates in this report.**

1. Purpose of the report

1.1. The purpose of this report is to request the Board's endorsement of the recommendations and consequently, publication of the 'Maximising East West Rail opportunities and HS2 released capacity' report, so that it can be used to progress EEH rail priorities with Network Rail. In addition, the Board are requested to agree a letter to the Secretary of State for Transport calling for a start date for rail services between Oxford and Milton Keynes. The report also provides updates and successes of key areas of EEH's wider rail work.

2. Key points of note

- 2.1. The 'Maximising East West Rail opportunities and HS2 released capacity' report sets out the opportunities and challenges for passenger services on the existing rail network in the region associated with EWR and HS2. The report was developed with input from Local Authority and rail industry partners, with a briefing on its outputs provided at March Board. We are now seeking the Board's endorsement for the report and approval to publish it.
- 2.2. Passenger services between Oxford and Milton Keynes remain in abeyance. DfT has still not provided a starting date for services. EEH have drafted a letter on behalf of the Board calling for resolution of this issue. We are seeking endorsement and approval to send to the letter to the Secretary of State for Transport.
- 2.3. EEH, working with CPCA and Transport East, successfully launched the 'Growth Intersection' advocacy brochure at the UK Real Estate Investment & Infrastructure Forum (UKREiIF) in May. This marks a rallying call for a renewed focus on making the case for infrastructure interventions in Ely and East Anglia that can unlock more capacity for passenger and freight services.
- 2.4. On Monday 18 May, Great Western Railway (GWR) commenced a regular two-hourly Monday-Saturday service between Oxford, Swindon and Bristol, the first regular service to run on this corridor since 2003. EEH and the East West Main Line Partnership have played a key role in advocating for this service over a number of years and supporting development of the case for it.

3. Maximising East West Rail opportunities and HS2 released capacity

- 3.1. The Main Line Priorities Rail Study includes packages relating to EWR and 'main line connectivity', stressing the need to maximise both direct and indirect benefits from major rail infrastructure projects, in particular EWR and HS2. This report expands on these study recommendations.
- 3.2. The report seeks to:
 - **Inform** Local Authority partners;
 - **Influence** rail industry long-term strategic workstreams;
 - Set out the region's **key priorities** to major stakeholders;
 - Provide **recommendations** to help secure the best outcomes for the region.
- 3.3. The report's findings can be summarised as follows:
 - There are significant opportunities for West Coast Main Line (WCML) stations in the region to benefit from better services along the London-Birmingham corridor;
 - There is a risk that connectivity from WCML stations in the region to destinations north of Birmingham could deteriorate without additional infrastructure interventions;
 - There are opportunities to expand EWR services beyond the line's core geography between Oxford and Cambridge, but some of these opportunities rely on further uncommitted infrastructure enhancements to be realised;
- 3.4. The Government's commitment to new railway lines in the North and Midlands could unlock significant connectivity benefits for the region depending on the infrastructure that is ultimately specified and delivered – it also does not obviate the short- or medium-term pressures highlighted in the report.
- 3.5. The key recommendations from the study are set out in Annex 1.

4. Oxford – Swindon – Bristol

- 4.1. GWR was successful in securing approval from the Office of Rail & Road (ORR) for a new Oxford-Swindon-Bristol service, which started in May. The service runs every two hours in each direction, Monday-Saturday, calling at Oxford, Swindon, Chippenham, Bath Spa and Bristol Temple Meads.
- 4.2. ORR has granted GWR contingent rights to operate the service until December 2027, at which point an assessment of the service's impact on wider network performance will be undertaken.
- 4.3. GWR have stated their ambition to run an hourly service in the future. In its determination, the ORR stated that such an increase in frequency would depend on further consideration of performance impacts and targeted safety improvements at level crossings on the route.
- 4.4. EEH, working with the East West Main Line Partnership, Western Gateway, Network Rail and GWR, has played a key role in advocating for this service. Its successful introduction is testament to this collaborative effort across local government and the rail industry.

5. EWR Oxford – Milton Keynes

- 5.1. Construction of the Bicester-Bletchley route section of East West Rail was completed in 2024. The first freight service to use the line ran in June 2025. As of June 2026, there are still no passenger services running between Oxford and Milton Keynes Central via Winslow. While EEH welcomes the recent announcement that services will be included in the December timetable we are concerned that this does not guarantee that trains will actually run on the line.



- 5.2. Whilst a number of factors have been cited as causes for this delay, it appears that a long-running dispute with the National Union of Rail, Maritime & Transport Workers (RMT) regarding the presence and role of guards on trains is serving as the key stumbling block.
- 5.3. The operating assumption for services on the line is driver-only operation (DOO), whereby drivers are solely responsible for opening and closing passenger doors at stations, a well-established practice across large parts of the railway network. The RMT is demanding that all trains on the line carry a mandatory guard with safety-critical responsibility for opening and closing passenger doors.
- 5.4. While EEH welcome the inclusion of Oxford to Milton Keynes services in the December timetable it is not understood if this means that there is a resolution that would allow services to actually operate.
- 5.5. Therefore, EEH has prepared a letter on behalf of the Board, calling on the Secretary of State for Transport to do all in her power to ensure that services will run between Oxford and Milton Keynes as part of the December timetable update. A draft letter is included at Annex 3.

6. The Growth Intersection – Ely Area Capacity Enhancement

- 6.1. The Growth Intersection proposition was launched at UKREiiF in May. This seeks to reignite momentum to secure funding for the Ely Area Capacity Enhancement and wider interventions across East Anglia, following HM Government’s decision not to commit funding in the previous Spending Review.
- 6.2. Whereas previous advocacy has focussed on the schemes’ significant freight benefits, this latest work seeks to shine a greater light on how these interventions can unlock better passenger services and the subsequent opportunities for economic growth.
- 6.3. This initial work has been largely based on existing work from rail industry and Local Authority partners. Following the successful launch at UKREiiF, EEH will work with CPCA, Transport East, Local Government East and Network Rail to determine what additional work is required to strengthen the case for the scheme.
- 6.4. It is anticipated that a refreshed, strengthened case could be submitted to Government in the next Spending Review, with a view to unlocking funding for delivery.
- 6.5. The graphic set out in Annex 2 outlines the potential benefits across freight and passenger services that the Growth Intersection proposition could unlock.

7. Public ownership of the railways

- 7.1. The table below provides a summary of the latest status of train operating companies transferring into public ownership in The EEH region. Govia Thameslink Railway (Great Northern, Thameslink & Southern) was returned to public ownership on 31st May. Transfer dates later this year for both Chiltern Railways and Great Western Railway have been confirmed by the DfT.
- 7.2. The Railways and Passenger Benefits bill, the means by which Great British Railways will be formally incorporated as the public body responsible for running the railway, was included in the King’s Speech legislative programme for this Parliament. It is anticipated that the Bill will be passed in time to enable the formal creation of GBR in 2027.

Operators in public ownership	Operator transfer date confirmed	Remaining operators (date not yet
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		confirmed)
LNER (06/2018)	Chiltern Railways (20/09/2026)	Avanti West Coast
Greater Anglia (10/2025)		CrossCountry
West Midlands Trains / London Northwestern Railway (02/2026)	Great Western Railway (13/12/2026)	East Midlands Railway
Govia Thameslink Railway (Great Northern & Thameslink) (05/2026)		

**Ben Feeney- North
Rail Lead
June 2026**

Annex 1

Maximising East West Rail opportunities and HS2 released capacity

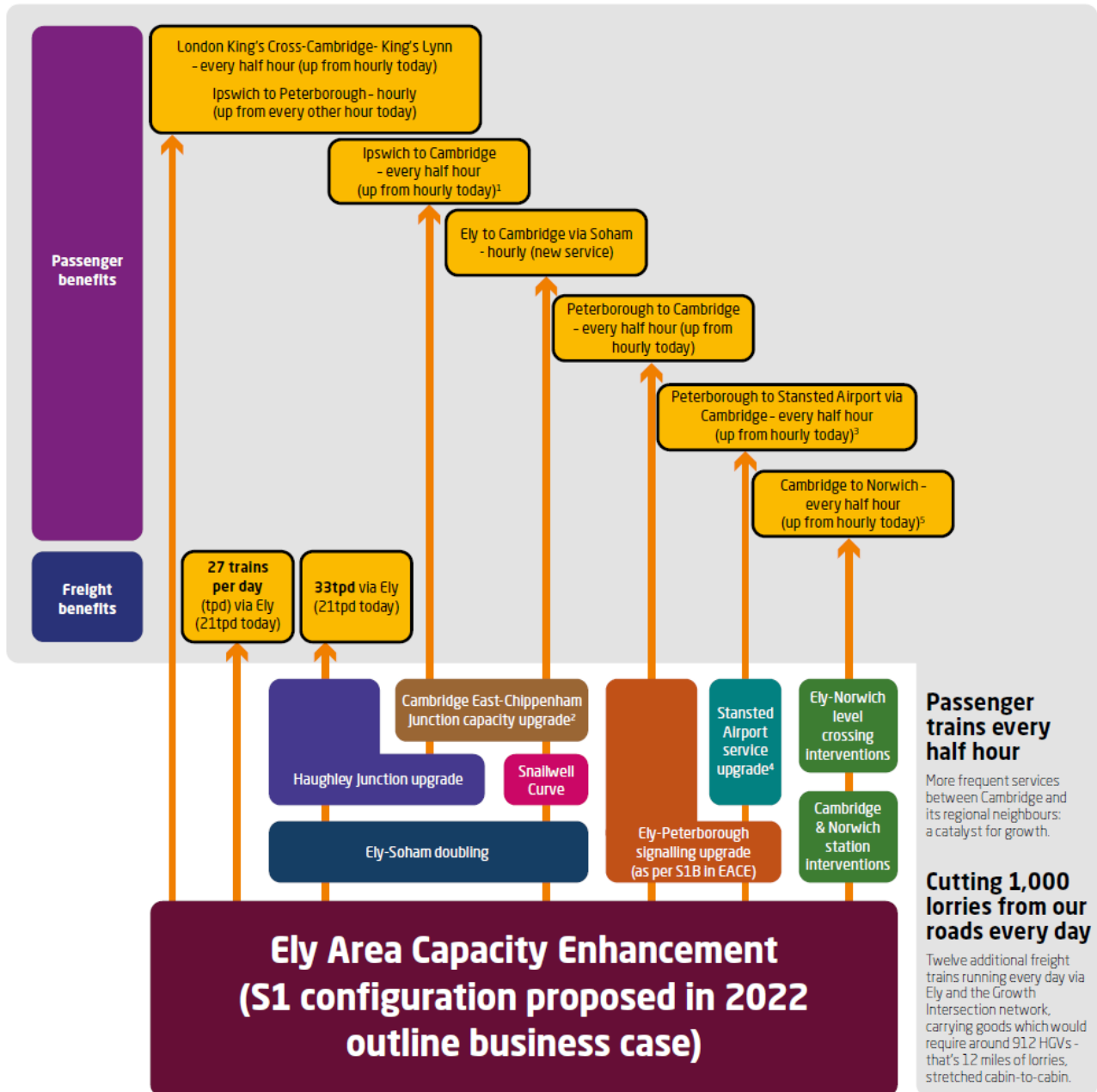
Summary of report recommendations

- 1 Provide a new frequent, fast London-Northampton-Birmingham service with limited intermediate stops
- 2 Determine potential future demand for more fast line service calls at Milton Keynes, Watford and stations between them, and explore feasibility to incorporate within the timetable
- 3 Work with industry to ensure the capacity trade-offs underpinning options for the 'HS2 Phase 1 Day 1' WCML & HS2 timetable are clearly articulated
- 4 EEH should play a key advocacy role to support protection and enhancement of the WCIC service offering at Watford Junction and Milton Keynes Central, including direct services to Liverpool and Manchester
- 5 Work with partners to advocate for Thames Valley-West Midlands service improvements and define infrastructure interventions needed to unlock them alongside HS2
- 6 Undertake further work on determining benefits of additional EWR services to Milton Keynes and a feasibility assessment of the infrastructure interventions needed to unlock them
- 7 Work with rail industry partners to determine connectivity benefits that NPR could offer for the EEH region and maximise them as far as possible
- 8 Undertake demand analysis for other connections between EWR and intersecting main lines and determine high-level feasibility where appropriate
- 9 Develop proposals for extensions of EWR services beyond Oxford and Cambridge to alleviate capacity and performance challenges at these already congested stations, and extend the benefits of EWR further across the EEH region and beyond
- 10 Develop options for delivery of new services to Oxford including trade-offs between terminating and through service patterns
- 11 Revisit the Aylesbury Link service specification to ensure it aligns with wider EWR proposals and local growth ambitions, and ensure this specification is incorporated into all relevant rail industry strategic outputs
- 12 Establish a clear infrastructure baseline for the railway between Aylesbury and Claydon West Jcn to enable future scheme development for the Aylesbury Link
- 13 Progress feasibility and business case development work for the Bletchley Chord with a view to enabling its future delivery
- 14 Advocate for interim infrastructure interventions that protect and, where possible, enhance connectivity between EEH and the North before delivery of new lines

Annex 2

The Growth Intersection

Summary of freight and passenger benefits unlocked by the Ely Area Capacity Enhancement scheme and other interventions.



¹ Potential for additional Ipswich path to be an extension of an EWR service, subject to timetabling and capacity analysis.

² It is assumed that EWR will be delivering upgrades to Coldham Lane Junction and the Newmarket line up to the new station at Cambridge East.

³ Extension of Peterborough-Cambridge path unlocked by EACE.

⁴ Current Stansted Airport branch capacity not currently fully understood, further work required to understand whether any unused capacity exists.

⁵ Potential for additional Norwich path to be an extension of an EWR service, subject to timetabling and capacity analysis.