

Maximising East West Rail opportunities and HS2 released capacity



*An action plan supporting the
Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor*

August 2026



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Contents

1. Executive Summary	4
Summary of recommendations	6
2. Released capacity from HS2.....	8
Better journeys for Northampton	11
More fast line calls at Watford Junction and Milton Keynes Central.....	12
North West connectivity challenges	14
Thames Valley-West Midlands opportunities.....	19
Milton Keynes at the heart of the capacity challenge	20
Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR)	22
3. East West Rail opportunities	24
Mitigating capacity constraints at Oxford and Cambridge	24
Focus on Oxford	28
Aylesbury Link	30
Bletchley Chord.....	32
4. Conclusion	34
Image credits	35
Useful links	35

Cover image: West Coast Main Line – Hillmorton looking south, Network Rail

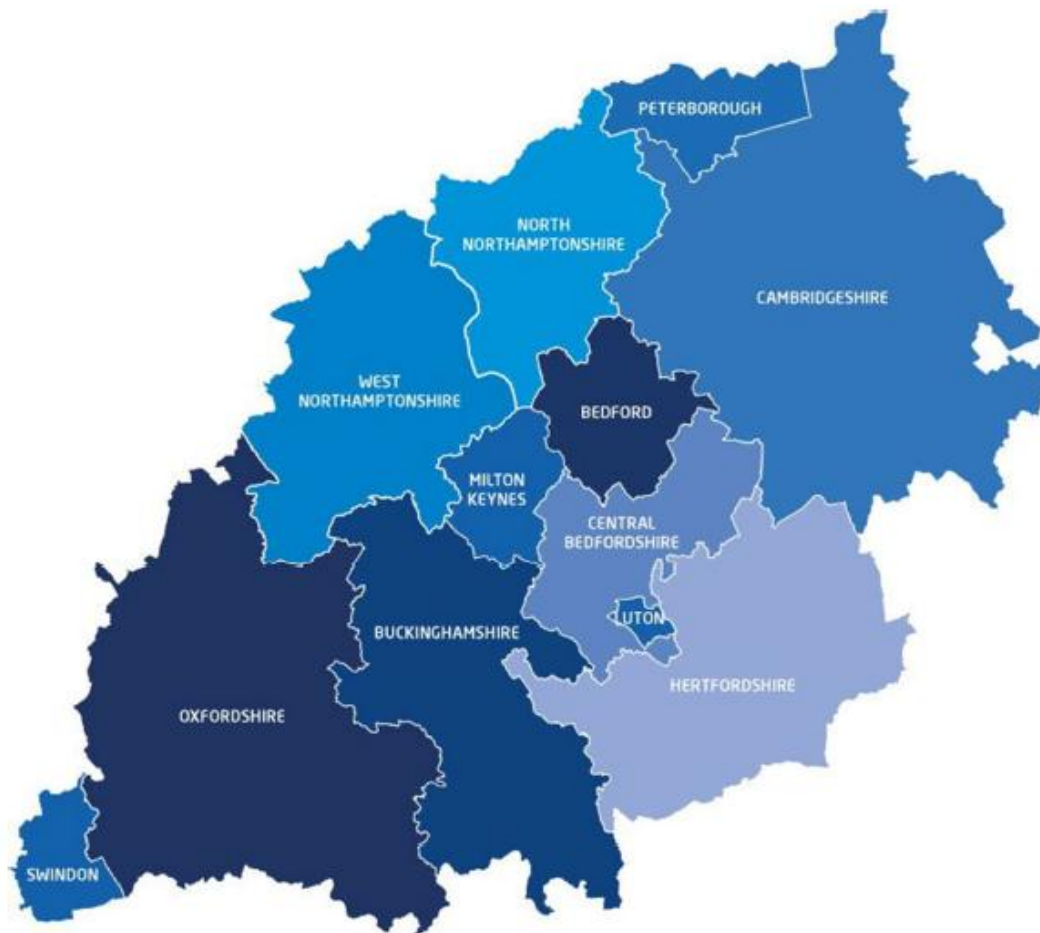
Inside cover image: Cambridge North station, Author

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1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. England's Economic Heartland (EEH) is the sub-national transport body covering the entirety of the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor. The region, shown above, has been made a national economic priority by Government.
- 1.2. The Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor lies at the heart of two major railway infrastructure projects – High Speed 2 (HS2) and East West Rail (EWR).
- 1.3. This report will be used by EEH and its partners to articulate the following to Network Rail, the rail industry and Government:
 - How wider network changes in response to the arrival of HS2 and EWR services can best benefit the region;
 - Positive action that can be taken now to avoid these new railway lines prompting a deterioration in service offering elsewhere on the region's existing network.

This report carries a series of recommendations, summarised below, which encapsulate these two key themes. EEH will work with partners across the rail industry, Local Authorities and the Government to put these recommendations into action.

- 1.4. The potential benefits on offer for EEH differ in nature between the two projects. HS2 is a high-speed railway offering intercity services between London and the West Midlands, a market already served by the West Coast (WCML) and Chiltern Main Lines (CML). With no HS2 stations within the EEH region, potential benefits are centred around capacity released on the existing conventional network enabled by the transfer of some existing intercity services to HS2.

- 1.5. EWR is a new conventional railway offering regional services between settlements where direct rail connections do not currently exist. The focus here is on how access to EWR and the new connectivity it offers could be expanded to more destinations both within and outside the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor.
- 1.6. Now is an opportune time to provide an updated assessment of the released capacity benefits that HS2 and EWR could provide for the EEH region due to the following:
- The 2023 Government decision to cancel HS2 Phase 2;
 - The maturing of infrastructure and service specifications for EWR;
 - The significant amount of wider long-term strategic analysis currently being undertaken in the rail industry;
 - Meaningful progress towards creation of Great British Railways (GBR), with the Railways Bill progressing through Parliament.
- 1.7. This report relates to the opportunities presented by the committed HS2 and EWR schemes. Beyond the potential interventions set out in this note, other proposed additions to schemes (e.g. other new high-speed lines) and any other enhancements elsewhere on the network are not considered nor their potential benefits for the region quantified. The committed schemes are defined as:
- **HS2:** new high-speed railway between London Euston, Old Oak Common, Birmingham Interchange and Birmingham Curzon Street, with a connection to the WCML at Handsacre;
 - **EWR:** new conventional railway between Oxford, Bedford and Cambridge, with a west facing connection to Milton Keynes Central via the WCML.
- 1.8. The potential benefits set out in this report are split into two broad categories:
- Those likely to be achievable with no/minimal interventions beyond existing/committed infrastructure;
 - Those dependent upon more significant infrastructure interventions that are not currently authorised or funded.
- 1.9. It is recognised that a significant amount of work has already been undertaken to understand the potential capacity benefits generated by HS2 and EWR. This report draws on both existing and ongoing strategic work, interpreting it in a region-specific context and offering further insights where necessary.
- 1.10. It is important to stress that this report does not provide:
- Detailed proposals of train service specifications or service patterns for new or amended services – development of such outputs already sits within established industry processes;
 - Cost or engineering assessment of potential additional infrastructure interventions required to enable benefits;
 - Assessment of potential operational implications of new/extended services upon rolling stock, staffing and stabling requirements;
 - An appraisal of potential wider national network impacts of proposed changes to services;

- A longer-term view of future services incorporating uncommitted wider enhancements across the national network – development of such outputs already sits within established industry processes.

1.11. If delivered as set out in the Government's recent announcement, Northern Powerhouse Rail could play a key role in transforming rail connectivity between the EEH region, the Midlands and the North.

1.12. However, the NPR announcement does not obviate any of the points raised in this report in the short or medium term.

1.13. The findings of this report can be summarised as follows:

There are significant opportunities for WCML stations in the EEH region to benefit from better services along the key London-Birmingham rail 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

The Government's commitment to new railway lines in the North and the Midlands could unlock significant connectivity benefits for the EEH region depending on the infrastructure that is ultimately specified and delivered – it also does not obviate the short- or medium-term pressures highlighted in this report



Figure 1 - the first freight train on EWR runs through Winslow on 16th June 2025

Summary of 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

2. Released capacity from HS2

- 2.1. Since its inception in 2010, the shape and size of HS2 has changed a number of times. Originally conceived as a Y-shaped network connecting London, the East & West Midlands, and the North East and North West, since 2023 it is now purely a single rail corridor from London to Birmingham with a connection to the WCML at Handsacre in Staffordshire.
- 2.2. Alongside more trains and faster services on HS2, one of the key arguments for its delivery is the capacity it releases on parts of the existing conventional railway network. All north-south radial intercity routes from London run through the region. The question of released capacity is therefore of crucial importance.
- 2.3. The reduction of HS2's scope through cancellation of Phase 2 north of Birmingham has diminished its released capacity benefits for the East Coast (ECML) and Midland Main Line (MML) corridors in particular. However, locations on the London-Birmingham corridor will still benefit from capacity released by HS2 in its current committed form.
- 2.4. Since NR produced *The Case for New Lines* report in 2009, a significant amount of work has been undertaken by the rail industry to identify and quantify the released capacity benefits that a new north-south high speed railway line would offer to the existing conventional network. The 2009 report itself mentions better services for the likes of Milton Keynes and Northampton and more freight services, amongst other things.
- 2.5. In 2023, NR produced the *West Coast South Strategic Advice* report. It provided an updated assessment of how the WCML south of Crewe could best benefit from capacity released by HS2.
- 2.6. This report builds on existing industry work, placing it in an EEH-specific context that aligns with an infrastructure configuration reflective of current HM Government funding commitments.

Table 1 – summary of released capacity benefits for each phase of HS2

HS2 phase	WCML Handsacre South	WCML Handsacre North	MML	ECML
Phase 1 only London-Birmingham + WCML Handsacre connection	✓✓	X	X	X
Phase 2 (pre-2021) cancelled London-Birmingham + WCML Handsacre connection Western Branch: Manchester + WCML Golborne connection Eastern Branch: Toton + Leeds + MML Sheffield connection + ECML York connection	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓
Phase 2A (post-2022) cancelled London-Birmingham-Crewe + MML East Mids connection + WCML Crewe connection	✓✓	✓	✓	X
Phase 2B (post-2022) cancelled London-Birmingham-Crewe-Manchester + MML East Mids connection + WCML Crewe connection	✓✓	✓✓	✓	X

- 2.7. Figures 2 and 3 show current peak hour calling patterns on the WCML south of Rugby based on the May 2025 timetable. They highlight the intercity services likely to switch to HS2 infrastructure following the opening of Phase 1. This is indicative – no definitive industry decisions have yet been made regarding future HS2 and WCML timetables.
- 2.8. Nevertheless, it does provide an indication of the scale of intercity traffic that will no longer be utilising the WCML between London and the West Midlands. This comes with both opportunities and threats for the EEH region.
- 2.9. Most of the benefits and risks for the region associated with HS2 come with the start of a full HS2 Phase 1 service from Euston to Birmingham and Handsacre Junction. If, as previously envisaged, a staged opening strategy is deployed, an initial limited Old Oak Common – Birmingham Curzon Street service will have minimal impact on existing connectivity for the region.
- 2.10. On 19th May 2026, the Secretary of State provided updated timescales for the delivery of HS2 Phase 1 in a statement to Parliament:
- **Old Oak Common – Birmingham Curzon Street:** May 2036 – October 2039
 - **Euston – Handsacre Junction:** May 2040 – December 2043
- 2.11. This means the key considerations relating to HS2 impacts on the EEH region will come into effect by 2040 at the earliest.

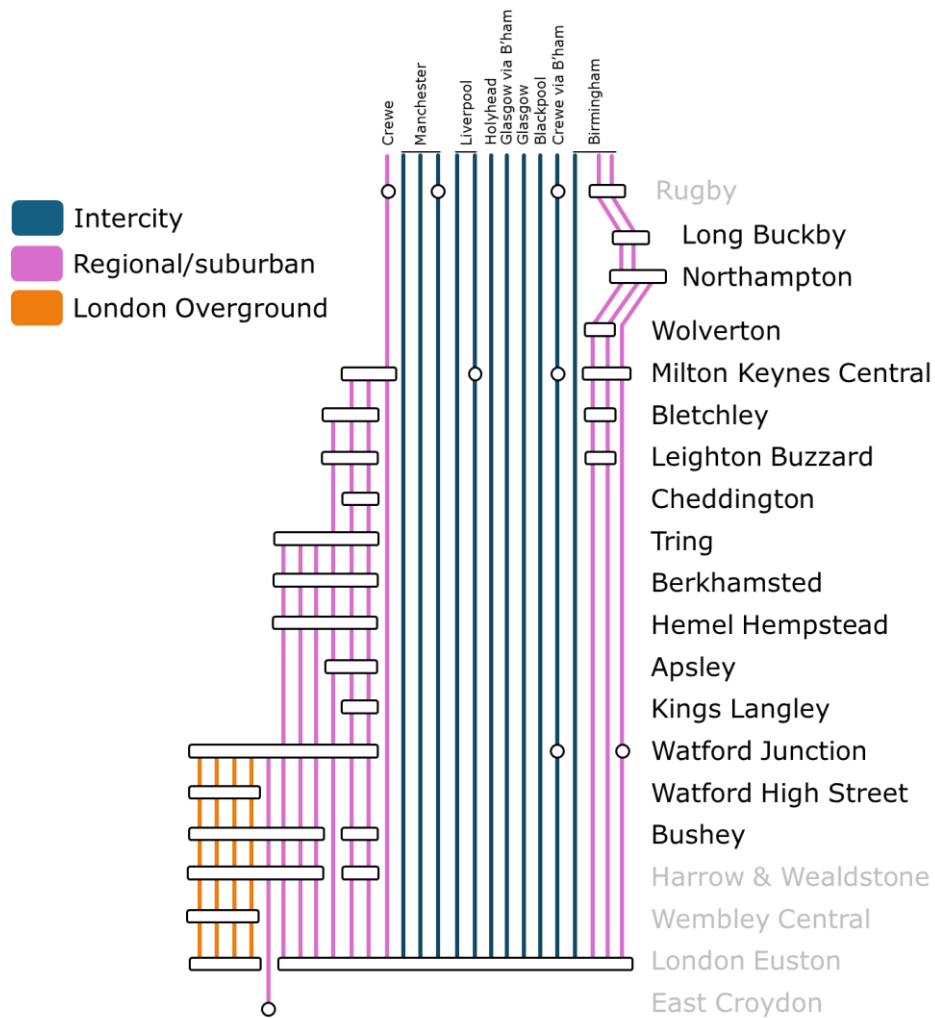


Figure 2 – peak hour WCML South calling pattern based on May 2026 timetable

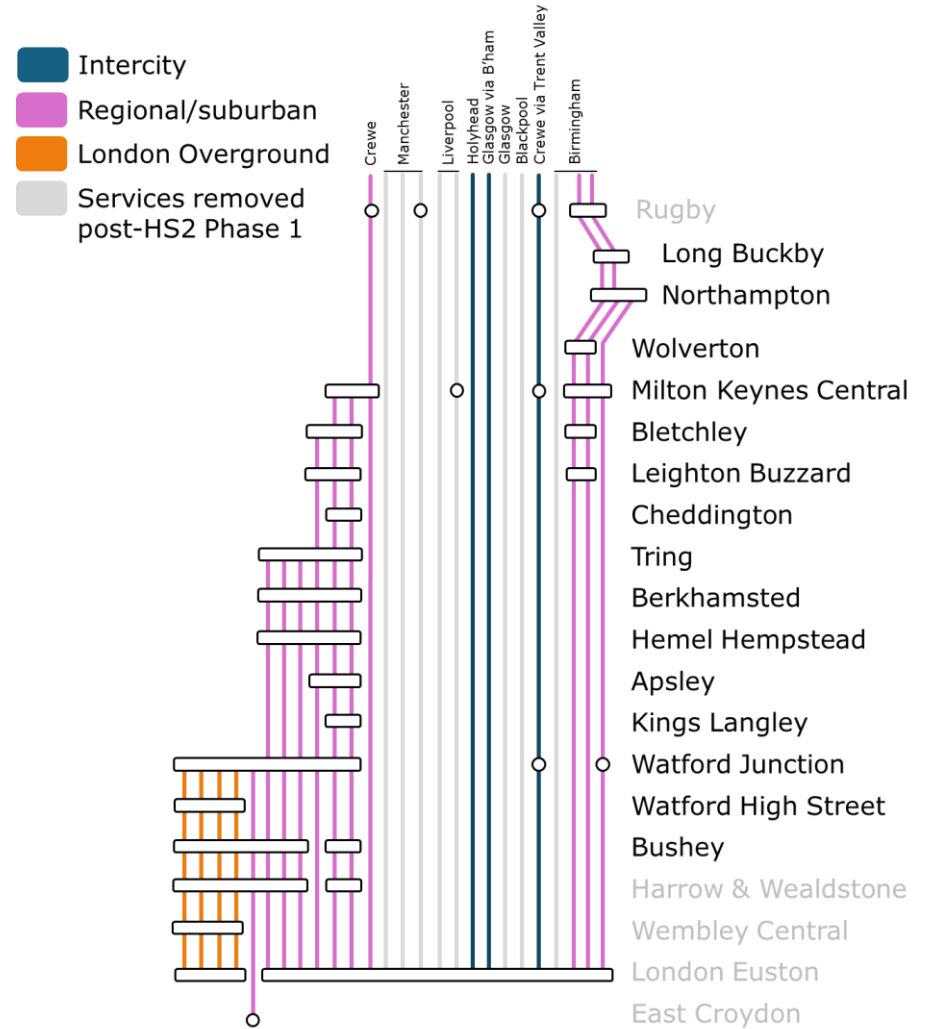


Figure 3 – WCML services removed following opening of HS2 Phase 1

Better journeys for Northampton

- 2.12. Northampton stands to benefit from faster and more frequent journeys both northwards to Birmingham and southwards to London. The ability to run fast trains in both directions has been limited by constrained capacity allocated to other intercity services both on WCML South and the Coventry Corridor.
- 2.13. London-bound traffic is further hamstrung with constraints imposed by the flat crossing at Hanslope Junction, where the Northampton Loop joins the WCML, and capacity on the Northampton Loop. These constraints are alleviated with the switch of some intercity traffic to HS2.

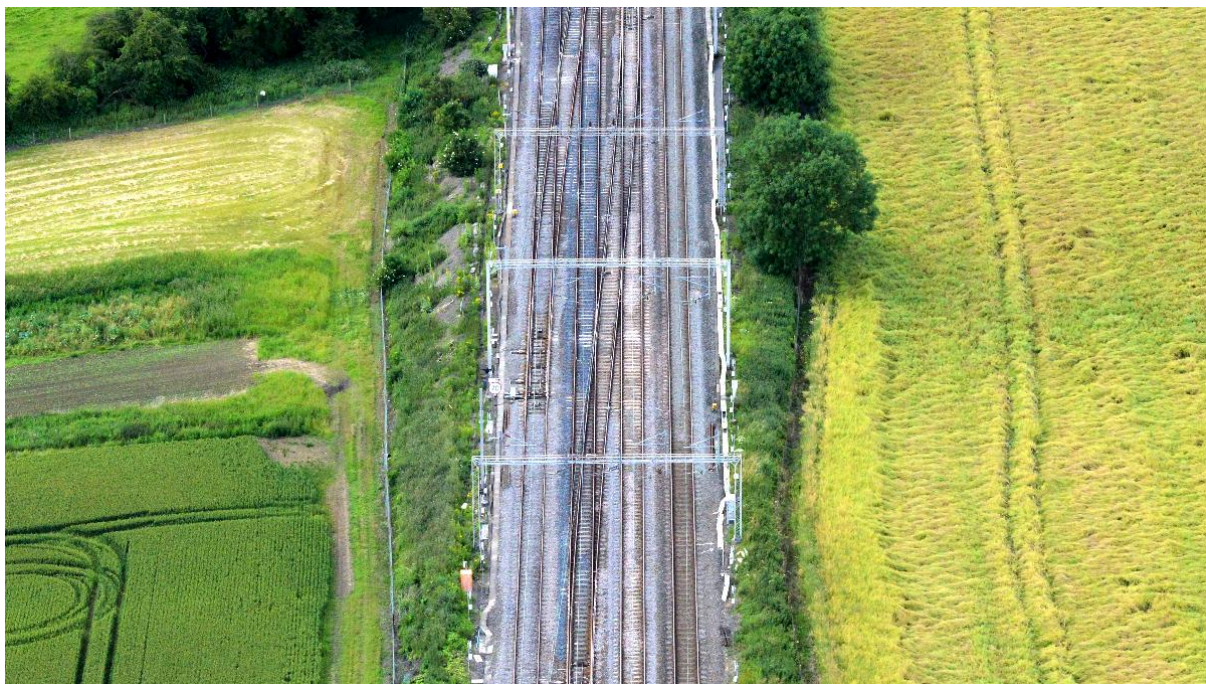


Figure 4 – the flat crossing at Hanslope Junction has historically limited the ability to run fast services between Northampton and London

- 2.14. A frequent, fast London-Northampton-Birmingham service should be deliverable without the need for new infrastructure. EEH will work with industry partners to validate these assumptions and ensure that this new service is secured as part of the future WCML timetable.

Recommendation 1: provide a new frequent, fast London-Northampton-Birmingham service with limited intermediate stops

More fast line calls at Watford Junction and Milton Keynes Central

2.15. Despite their significant population catchments and being major centres of economic activity, Watford and Milton Keynes have historically suffered from limited WCML fast line calls.

Table 2 - May 2026 timetable standard hour intercity calls

Milton Keynes Central	1tph	Birmingham New Street
	1tph	Liverpool Lime Street
	1tph	Manchester Piccadilly
Watford Junction	1tph	Birmingham New Street

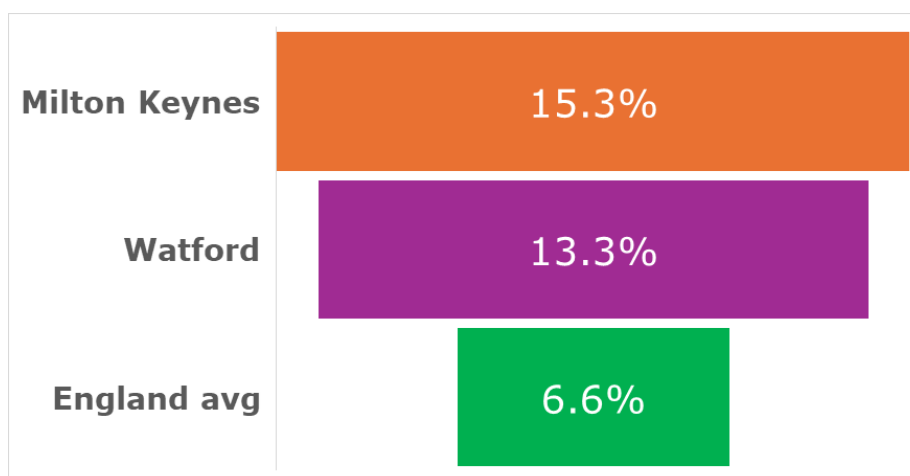


Figure 5 – population growth 2011-2021 shows both Milton Keynes and Watford outstripping the England average by over 100% (Source: ONS Census data, 2011, 2021)

2.16. This pushes up average journey times by rail, suppressing demand and increasing the attractiveness of car travel, as well as holding back economic growth for these key regional centres.

2.17. Milton Keynes sits at the centre of the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor (and EWR). It has been identified by the Government's New Towns Taskforce as a potential location for a new town, aimed at delivering large-scale housing and boosting economic growth. The city exhibits high productivity and has driven some of the fastest jobs and economic growth in the region over the past 50 years.

2.18. Watford is the largest town in Hertfordshire and sits in a critical position in the south of the region, just outside Greater London. This key geography combined with Watford Junction's status as a major railhead for the region underpin the positive economic and demographic trends for the town. Watford is ranked second place in the 2026 UK Vitality Index, an assessment of large towns and cities outside London which considers economic, social and environmental indicators.

- 2.19. Milton Keynes and Watford are already major transport interchange hubs, with patronage at both having recovered strongly since the COVID-19 pandemic. The arrival of EWR services at Milton Keynes Central will only increase interchange demand further.
- 2.20. Existing capacity constraints have not allowed more intermediate fast line stops on the WCML. Figure 3 shows the significant number of fast line paths that will be released by existing intercity services switching to HS2. This released capacity should be used to enable more fast line intercity calls at Watford Junction and Milton Keynes Central on the London-Birmingham corridor. This will:
- Unlock improved connectivity between major urban centres: Watford, Milton Keynes, Northampton, Coventry, Birmingham and London;
 - Offer wider generalised journey time improvements for those on connecting WCML Slow Line services and interchanging from other lines (i.e. EWR, Abbey Line, etc);
 - Provide improved access to Birmingham International station, with connections to the NEC and Birmingham Airport.
- 2.21. More intercity calls at Milton Keynes Central and Watford Junction should be deliverable without the need for new infrastructure. EEH will work with industry partners to validate these assumptions and ensure that this new service is secured as part of the future WCML timetable.
- 2.22. Significant growth is also forecast at other intermediate WCML stations in the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor between Watford and Milton Keynes across Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire. There are no standard hour intercity calls at these stations in the current WCML timetable.
- 2.23. Demand forecasting and economic analysis is required to understand whether any of these stations should potentially benefit from fast line calls. Corresponding timetabling analysis would also be required to determine whether sufficient capacity would exist for this, acknowledging that this could result in journey time impacts for other WCML destinations. EEH will work with industry partners to explore this opportunity.

Recommendation 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

North West connectivity challenges

2.24. The committed HS2 scheme presents a major challenge to retaining intercity connectivity between the region and destinations north of Birmingham. There are significant concerns that the existing 2tph intercity service from Milton Keynes Central to the North West (1tph to Liverpool and Manchester respectively) could be at risk.

2.25. With retention of the existing intercity service offering already under threat, this means any ambition to enhance it further will not be possible without:

- Radically changing timetabling assumptions around the future combined WCML and HS2 service offering, and/or;
- Delivering further as yet undefined and uncommitted infrastructure interventions to increase capacity.

2.26. The truncation of HS2 means that all intercity services using HS2 infrastructure are required to rejoin the WCML at Handsacre Junction (see Figure 6 below). As a result, all capacity released on the WCML between London and Birmingham is lost north of Handsacre Junction, with any 'new' services not able to continue northwards beyond this point.

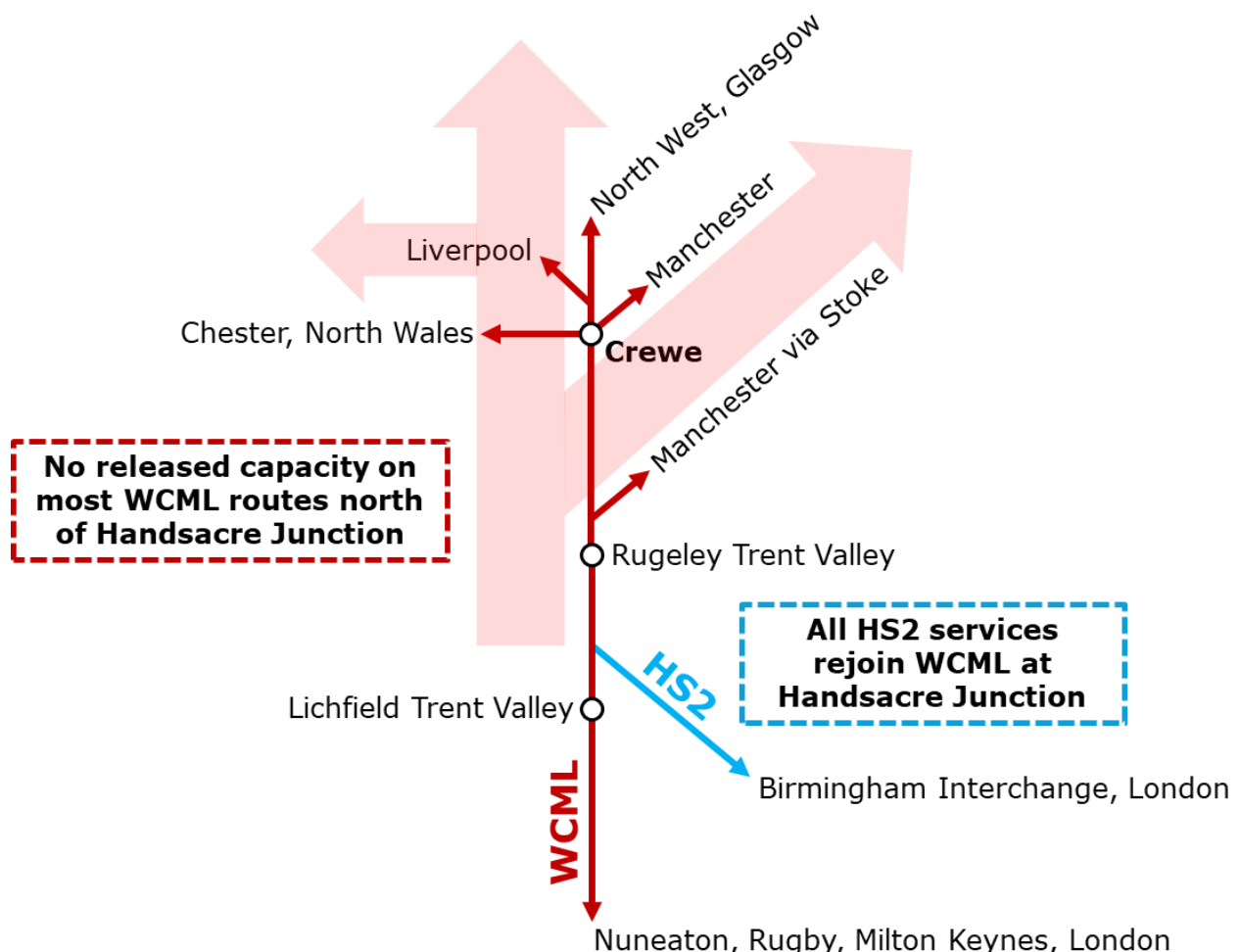


Figure 6 – with HS2 services joining the WCML at Handsacre Junction, existing capacity constraints remain north of this point

2.27. Long standing capacity constraints will continue to place severe restrictions on the ability to run more services to the North West and Scotland. There are many competing demands for use of this constrained finite capacity, including:

- Retention of existing local, regional and intercity timetabled services, and freight;
- Provision for future HS2 services between London, Birmingham and the North West;
- Provision for new services associated with other committed schemes, such as Transpennine Route Upgrade;
- Ambitions for service improvements in other parts of the country that potentially require capacity on the WCML.

2.28. Whilst no firm decisions have yet been made regarding future service patterns for HS2 and West Coast Intercity (WCIC) services, a consistent industry assumption has been that all existing WCIC services to Liverpool (2tph) and Manchester (3tph) would switch to HS2. With no corresponding service changes on WCML South, this means that Milton Keynes could be at risk of losing its regular, fast and direct services to Liverpool and Manchester (see Figure 7 below).

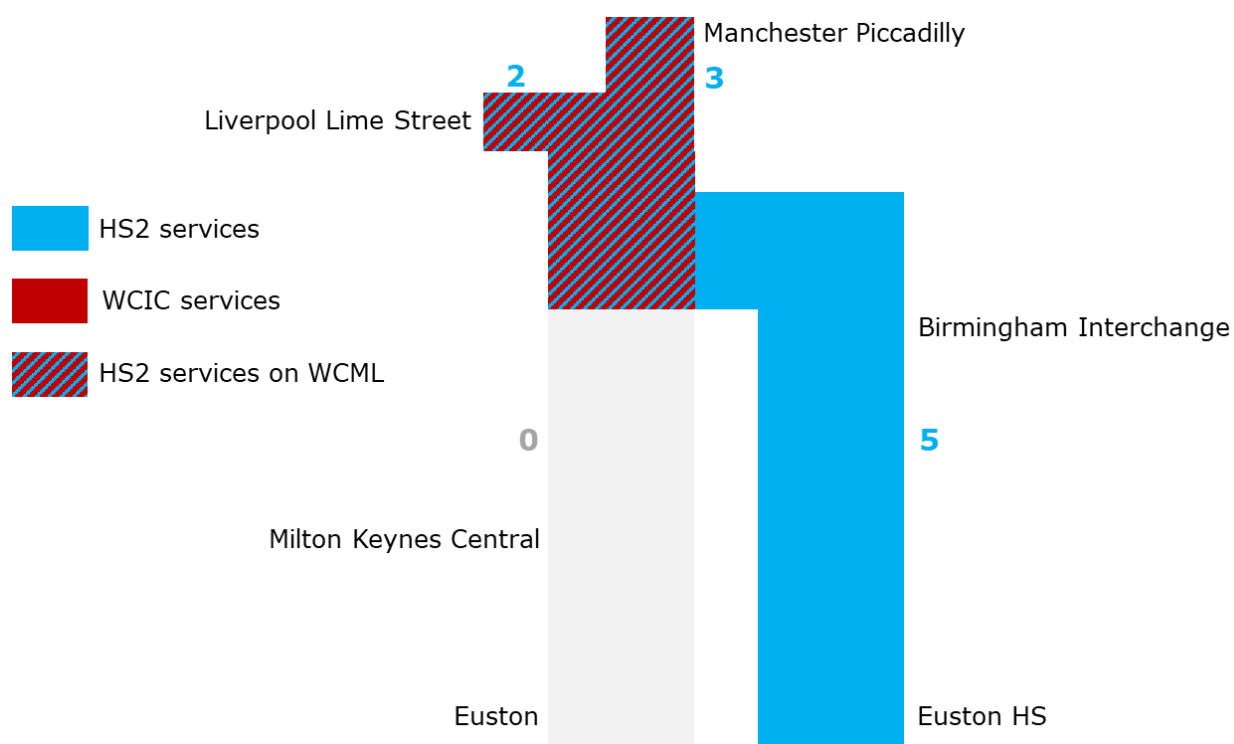


Figure 7 – unmitigated impact on WCIC services from Milton Keynes Central to Liverpool and Manchester upon opening of HS2 Phase 1

2.29. Decisions regarding allocation of any remaining capacity on routes between Handsacre Junction, Liverpool and Manchester will have a critical bearing on whether Milton Keynes will be able to retain the connectivity that it enjoys today. However, there are likely to be many calls on use for this capacity as noted above.

2.30. A residual WCIC service should be provided to retain the connectivity for Milton Keynes and other WCML South destinations towards the North West, retaining existing service patterns as a minimum (as per Figure 8 below).

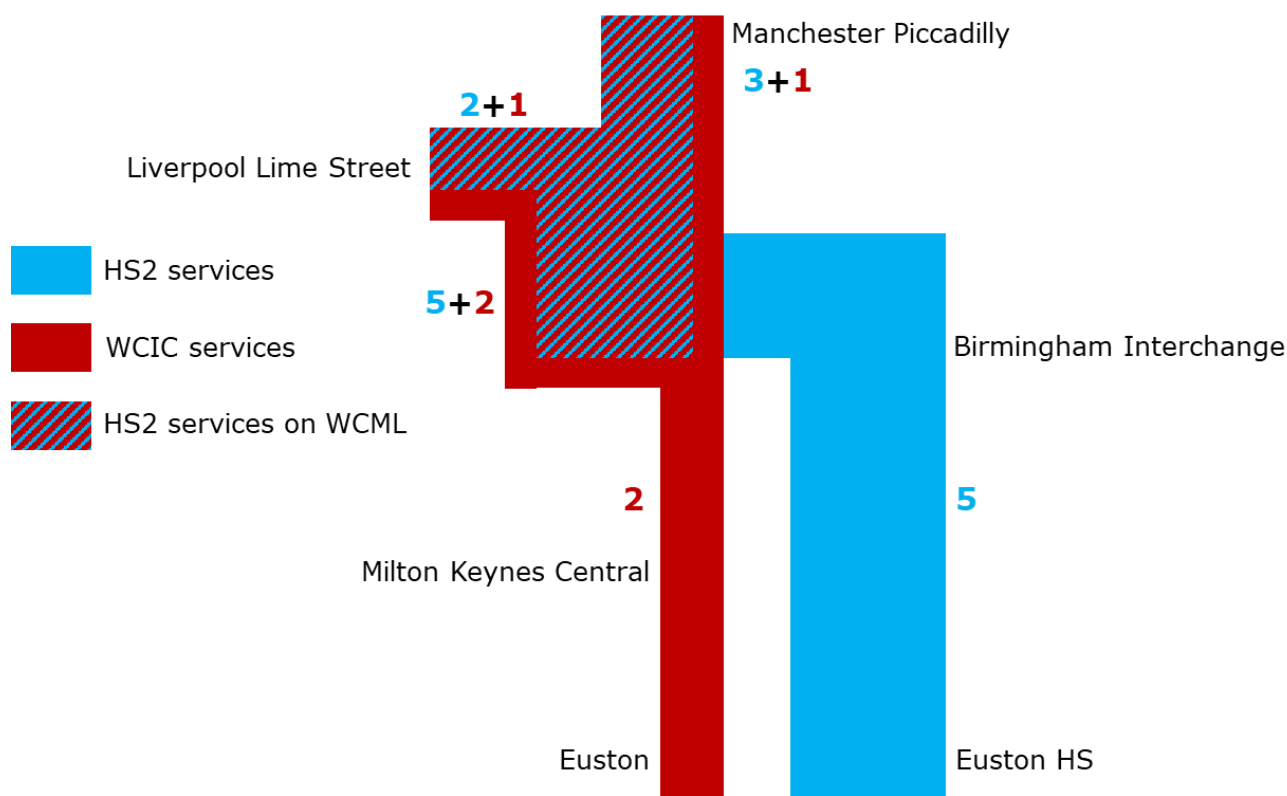


Figure 8 – notional retention of a residual WCIC service between WCML South, Liverpool and Manchester upon opening of HS2 Phase 1 (assumes available capacity)

2.31. Both NR and the West Coast Partner Development (WCPD) are progressing work to determine a future service proposition for the WCML and HS2, which should incorporate:

- An agreed infrastructure specification (existing infrastructure + HS2 Phase 1 + any other committed interventions that will be commissioned prior to HS2 opening);
- A proposed HS2 service specification, highlighting where existing WCIC paths on WCML South are surrendered;
- A residual WCML specification based on today's timetable, net of changes in relation to HS2;
- Any other service proposals.

2.32. As a minimum these workstreams need to clarify:

- The maximum available capacity for services north of Handsacre Junction following the opening of HS2 Phase 1;

- Where the quantum of service proposals exceeds available capacity, an appraisal of the trade-offs available for decision makers – this could include changes to service calling patterns, frequencies and journey times.

Recommendation 3: work with NR and WCPD to ensure the capacity trade-offs underpinning options for the 'HS2 Phase 1 Day 1' WCML & HS2 TSS are clearly articulated

2.33. Table 3 offers a comparison of today's WCIC calls at Watford and Milton Keynes for services to the North West and Scotland against those in the Summer 2008 timetable. The subsequent December 2008 timetable change was a radical recast with the introduction of the WCIC very-high frequency (VHF) service structure. This was further enhanced at the December 2022 timetable.

Table 3 – comparison of Mon-Fri WCIC calls at Watford and Milton Keynes						
Service group	<u>Watford Junction</u>			<u>Milton Keynes Central</u>		
	Summer 2008	December 2025		Summer 2008	December 2025	
Liverpool Lime Street	8	2	↓	7	17	↑
Manchester Piccadilly	10	1	↓	9	19	↑
North West/Scotland	5	5*	–	6	5*	↓
Watford Junction net change					-15	
Milton Keynes Central net change					+19	
EEH region net change					+4	

Data based on weekday departures from London Euston

North West service group incorporates services terminating at Crewe, Preston, Lancaster and Carlisle

Scotland service group incorporates services terminating at Glasgow Central and Edinburgh Waverley

**Most of these services are now routed via Birmingham New Street which means that whilst frequencies are largely constant, average journey times are slower*

2.34. The 2008 and 2022 timetable changes have produced mixed results for the region, with Watford Junction losing most services and Milton Keynes Central gaining many more.

2.35. The opening of HS2 will prompt the biggest WCML timetable change since 2008. There is a risk that this next major change could see WCIC connectivity for the EEH region wiped out entirely.

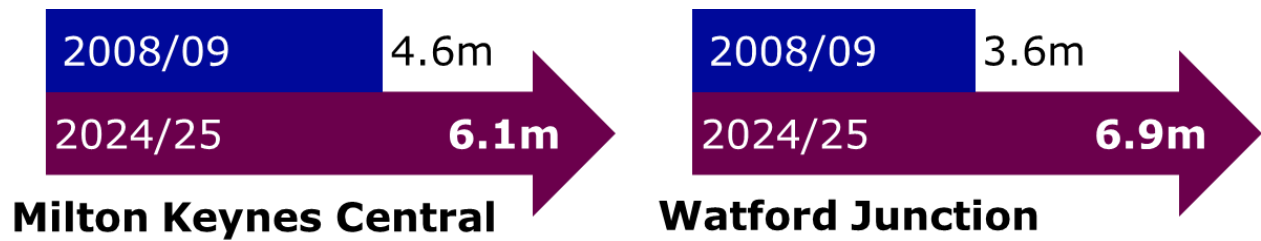


Figure 9 – changes in passenger journeys, 2008-2025 (Source: ORR)

2.36. As noted above, Milton Keynes and Watford both have growing populations, growing economies and are well established major transport hubs. Any future timetable change should, at worst, retain the existing WCIC service offering for the EEH region and ideally enhance it. EEH will work closely with local government and industry partners to advocate for this as service proposals are developed.

Recommendation 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

Thames Valley-West Midlands opportunities

- 2.37. A further area of opportunity for rail services in the EEH region that could be partially unlocked by HS2 lies in better connectivity between the Thames Valley and the West Midlands.
- 2.38. Two Cross Country Intercity service groups run via Oxford and Birmingham New Street: Bournemouth to Manchester Piccadilly (1tph) and Reading to York/Newcastle (1tp2h, rising to 1tph from May/December 2026). Currently only the Manchester service runs on the Coventry Corridor with the York/Newcastle running to Birmingham via the Chiltern Main Line.
- 2.39. This means that access from Oxford to Coventry and Birmingham International is limited to a 1tph frequency. Running both Cross Country Intercity service groups via Coventry unlocks the following benefits:
- Increased 2tph frequency between Oxford, Coventry and Birmingham International;
 - A new 1tph Thames Valley-Birmingham Moor Street/Snow Hill service.
- 2.40. The new service would take up the existing paths on the Chiltern Main Line surrendered by the Cross Country service switch to the Coventry Corridor.
- 2.41. Extending the service southwards beyond Oxford would:
- Spread West Midlands connectivity benefits to more locations in the EEH region, including Didcot Parkway, which is currently not served by Cross Country Intercity services;
 - Avoid further pressure on platform capacity at Oxford;
 - Provide better interchange to HS2 services from Birmingham Curzon Street, which is closer to Moor Street than it is to New Street.
- 2.42. Unlocking these benefits will rely on infrastructure interventions on the Coventry-Leamington Line. Formerly double track for most of its length, it is now a mixture of single and double track sections. Further work would be required to understand the extent of new double tracking and signalling alterations needed to enable the anticipated uplift in service frequency.
- 2.43. NR is undertaking work to determine infrastructure changes required in the Oxford area needed to support future services from EWR, the Cowley Branch and more. This work should also consider provision for an improved Thames Valley-West Midlands service offering via the Cherwell Valley and Chiltern Main Line.

Recommendation 5: work with partners to advocate for Thames Valley-West Midlands service improvements and define infrastructure interventions needed to unlock them alongside HS2

Milton Keynes at the heart of the capacity challenge

- 2.44. This paper seeks to articulate the opportunities and challenges posed by capacity either released or created by EWR and HS2. The two are brought together when it comes to proposals to deliver more services to Milton Keynes via EWR.
- 2.45. Whilst EWR itself may be a new railway, between Bletchley and Milton Keynes Central stations, EWR services will run on the existing WCML (see figure 19). This means that any EWR-Milton Keynes service offering must compete for constrained capacity on the WCML alongside existing services and other new service proposals. As noted above, this capacity will remain very constrained even following opening of HS2 Phase 1, particularly on the Slow Lines.
- 2.46. A 2tph Oxford-Bletchley-Milton Keynes Central service is due to start later in 2026. NR have confirmed that this can be accommodated within the WCML timetable.
- 2.47. Proposals for the Aylesbury Link and Bletchley Chord are both predicated on an ability to provide more services to Milton Keynes. NR interrogated this in 2023 as part of its *West Coast South Strategic Advice* report. It determined that to fully accommodate passenger and freight service ambitions from EWR to the WCML without impacting upon existing WCML services, the following would be required:
- Creation of a 6-track corridor on the WCML between Bletchley and Milton Keynes Central, enabling full segregation between EWR and WCML services (see figure 10);
 - New platforms and station upgrades at Milton Keynes Central.
- 2.48. NR's ongoing *North West & Central Long Term Study* builds on the outputs of existing work and will provide a holistic view of how enhanced EWR services could be accommodated alongside future WCML services.
- 2.49. Any proposal to enhance EWR services to Milton Keynes at the expense of WCML services would be unacceptable. This would improve connectivity for some parts of the EEH region but result in a degraded service for others.
- 2.50. Delivery of more services to Milton Keynes via EWR must be contingent upon infrastructure interventions on the WCML, as already indicated by NR analysis. Further work should be undertaken to:
- Establish the forecast demand and attendant economic benefits of an enhanced service to Milton Keynes from other destinations, i.e. Aylesbury, Cambridge;
 - Deliver a feasibility study detailing the infrastructure interventions required to unlock these service aspirations, building on previous work undertaken by NR.

Recommendation 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

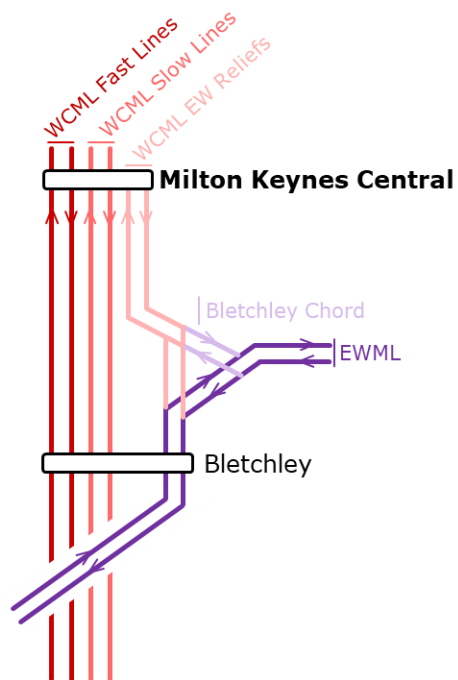


Figure 10 – simplified schematic illustrating infrastructure that would enable an enhanced service offering from EWR destinations to Milton Keynes as set out in NR's West Coast South Strategic Advice report (full track layout not shown)



Figure 11 – platforming changes and station upgrades could see Milton Keynes Central transformed into a major regional transport hub

Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR)

2.51. On 14th January 2026, Government announced a decades-long commitment to investment in rail infrastructure upgrades in the North of England as part of NPR. The announcement does not envisage any new infrastructure being delivered in the EEH region. However, indirect impacts are likely to be significant.

2.52. The announcement sets out three phases of work:

1. Electrification and upgrades of Leeds-Bradford, Leeds-Sheffield and Leeds-York corridors;
2. Construction of a new line between Manchester and Liverpool;
3. Further cross-Pennine improvements beyond what is currently being delivered as part of the Transpennine Route Upgrade scheme.

2.53. Depending on how this new infrastructure and the services using it are ultimately specified, this could provide some benefits for better connectivity between the EEH region and the North of England. The Government announcement itself notes, in relation to the first phase of work, 'this package should also improve links from the Yorkshire cities to the Midlands, London and the North East'.

2.54. The NPR announcement does not address existing major capacity constraints on the southern reaches of radial north-south routes from London (ECML, MML and WCML). The extent of improved connectivity benefits for the EEH region that these NPR packages can themselves unlock is likely to be limited.

Recommendation 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

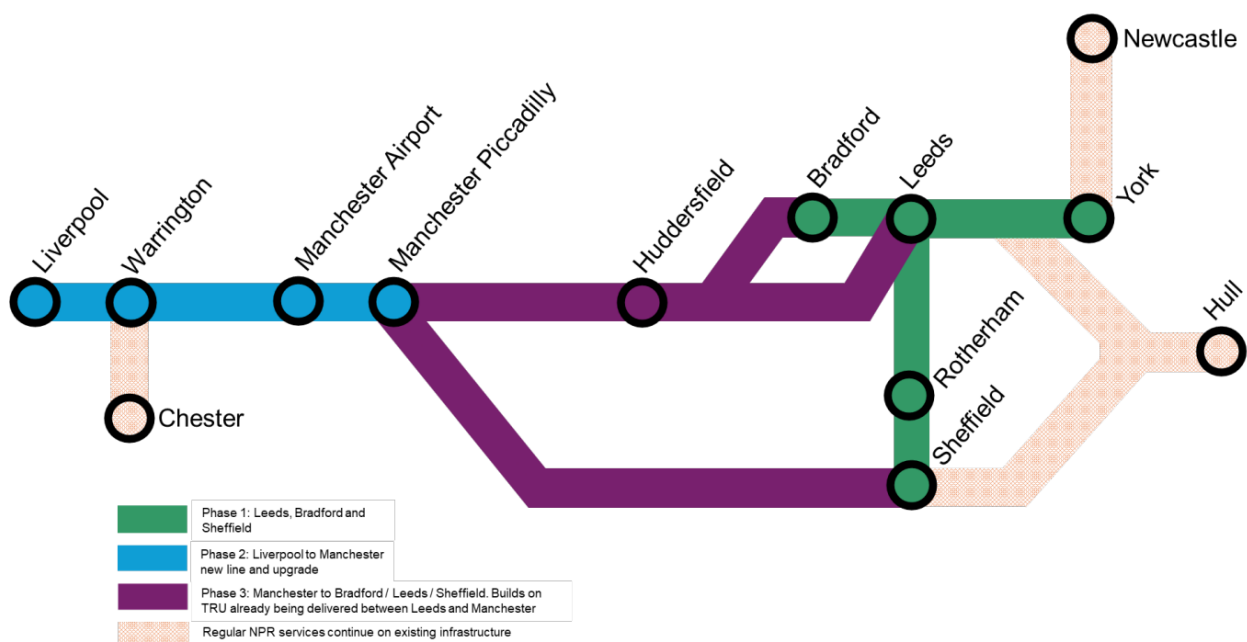


Figure 12 – NPR schematic depicting each phase and its extent

- 2.55. Most critically for the EEH region, the announcement confirms the Government's intention to 'ultimately deliver a full North-South new line between Birmingham and Manchester, which can also support capacity and connectivity for the wider North-West and Scotland connections'.
- 2.56. HM Government has stressed that no element of the announcement represents a reinstatement of cancelled HS2 phases. However, land secured under the High Speed Rail (West Midlands-Crewe) Act 2021 is to be retained. The High Speed Rail (Crewe-Manchester) Bill is also to be adapted in support of NPR proposals rather than a new bill being deposited in Parliament.
- 2.57. As noted in this report, it is severe capacity constraints on the WCML between the West Midlands and the North West that place a major brake upon better services between the EEH region and the North. HM Government's recognition of this and commitment to a new line as the way to tackle it are welcomed. However:
- The line will not be delivered until 'the 2040s at the earliest' following completion of HS2 Phase 1 and all three phases of NPR;
 - Nothing is yet known about the alignment of the line, its specification and where it will connect to the conventional network.
- 2.58. This means that the major capacity constraints highlighted in this report will persist for several decades, including the challenges posed by introduction of intercity services running via HS2 Phase 1. The extent to which they will eventually be relieved by a new Birmingham-Manchester line relies on as yet unspecified details.
- 2.59. It is essential that HM Government and the rail industry work to develop and fund interim infrastructure solutions that can tackle these challenges in advance of the transformational changes that will come with delivery of new lines in the Midlands and the North in the longer term.

Recommendation 8: advocate for interim infrastructure interventions that protect and, where possible, enhance connectivity between EEH and the North before delivery of new lines

3. East West Rail opportunities

3.1. EWR will provide new journeys between destinations which do not currently have direct rail connections. It will not 'release' capacity elsewhere on the network in the manner that HS2 will for the WCML. However, there are opportunities that could:

- Mitigate existing capacity constraints at Oxford and Cambridge stations;
- Improve connectivity to EWR services beyond the core Oxford-Cambridge corridor.

These opportunities are expanded upon below and illustrated in Figure 13.

Mitigating capacity constraints at Oxford and Cambridge

3.2. Both Oxford and Cambridge are busy stations with a wide variety of through and terminating services, connected to numerous railway lines and with limited platform capacity. This results in constrained capacity and particular vulnerability during periods of perturbation.

3.3. The proposed EWR train service specification envisages services running as far as Oxford in the west, with 2tph terminating at Cambridge East and remaining services terminating at Cambridge in the east. This is likely to exacerbate existing performance and capacity challenges at both major stations.

3.4. Terminating trains consume significantly more platform and track capacity than a station call on a through service, due to:

- Extended dwell times on platforms due to minimum turnaround times;
- Shunting moves to sidings, especially where this involves crossing other running lines;
- Crossing moves in the station throat for terminating services returning to their original destination.

3.5. Extending EWR services beyond Oxford and Cambridge would help to mitigate these challenges. Table 5 outlines this opportunity.

Recommendation 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

Table 5 – EWR extensions beyond Oxford and Cambridge

Extension options	
OXFORD	Cowley Branch Funding has been confirmed for reinstatement of passenger services on the Cowley Branch Line, with two new stations at Littlemore and Cowley. An initial 2tph service to Oxford is proposed, which could instead be run as a through service on to EWR, reducing pressure on Oxford station capacity. It is also likely to be more efficient from rolling stock utilisation and crewing perspectives. NR have determined that committed infrastructure under the Cowley Branch scheme will enable existing Oxford-London Marylebone services to be extended to Cowley. This would release capacity on the bay platforms (1 & 2) at Oxford to be used for terminating EWR services. Choosing to extend EWR services to Cowley either instead of or in addition to London Marylebone services will trigger the need for further enhancements beyond existing or committed infrastructure.
	Oxford-Bristol via Swindon service extension In May 2026, GWR started running a 2-hourly service from Oxford to Bristol via Swindon, with a longer-term ambition to increase services to an hourly frequency. EEH has worked with rail industry and regional partners to advocate for the reinstatement of this service, which last ran regularly in 2003. This service will play a key role in better connecting the Oxford-Cambridge Corridor with the Bristol region, both areas seeing sustained economic growth. To this end, the service could be extended to run on to EWR, expanding the regional connectivity benefits of EWR further westwards to Swindon and Bristol whilst also reducing pressure on Oxford station capacity.
CAMBRIDGE	Cambridge North Cambridge North station has been a success since opening in 2017, with sustained growth in passenger numbers. EWR services could be extended to terminate here rather than at Cambridge. However, most West Anglia Main Line services from London Liverpool Street already terminate at Cambridge North. There may not be sufficient terminating capacity at the station to accommodate EWR services without further infrastructure interventions.
	Cambridge East Cambridgeshire County Council (CCC) and the Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA) have long supported the delivery of a new 'Cambridge East' station, which could unlock significant new housing and commercial development. EWR services could be extended to terminate here, thereby reducing pressure on capacity at Cambridge. It would also further



reinforce EWR's role in generating growth and development. EWR have since confirmed that services to a new Cambridge East station will be provided for as part of the core EWR scheme, subject to third party funding for delivery of the station itself. Further work is required to determine how many EWR services will call at the station.

EWR East

EEH and Transport East strongly support the extension of EWR services into East Anglia to destinations such as Norwich and Ipswich. This would unleash a step change in regional connectivity.

It should be noted that major infrastructure interventions elsewhere on the network are likely to be required to facilitate such service extensions, including upgrades of Ely and Haughley Junctions. EEH is working closely with Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority, Transport East and other partners to progress the case for these schemes in their own right, as the potential for EWR service extensions is just one of many benefits that these schemes could unlock.



Figure 14 – the Cowley Branch line running through Blackbird Leys in Oxford – funding to reinstate passenger services on the line has been secured

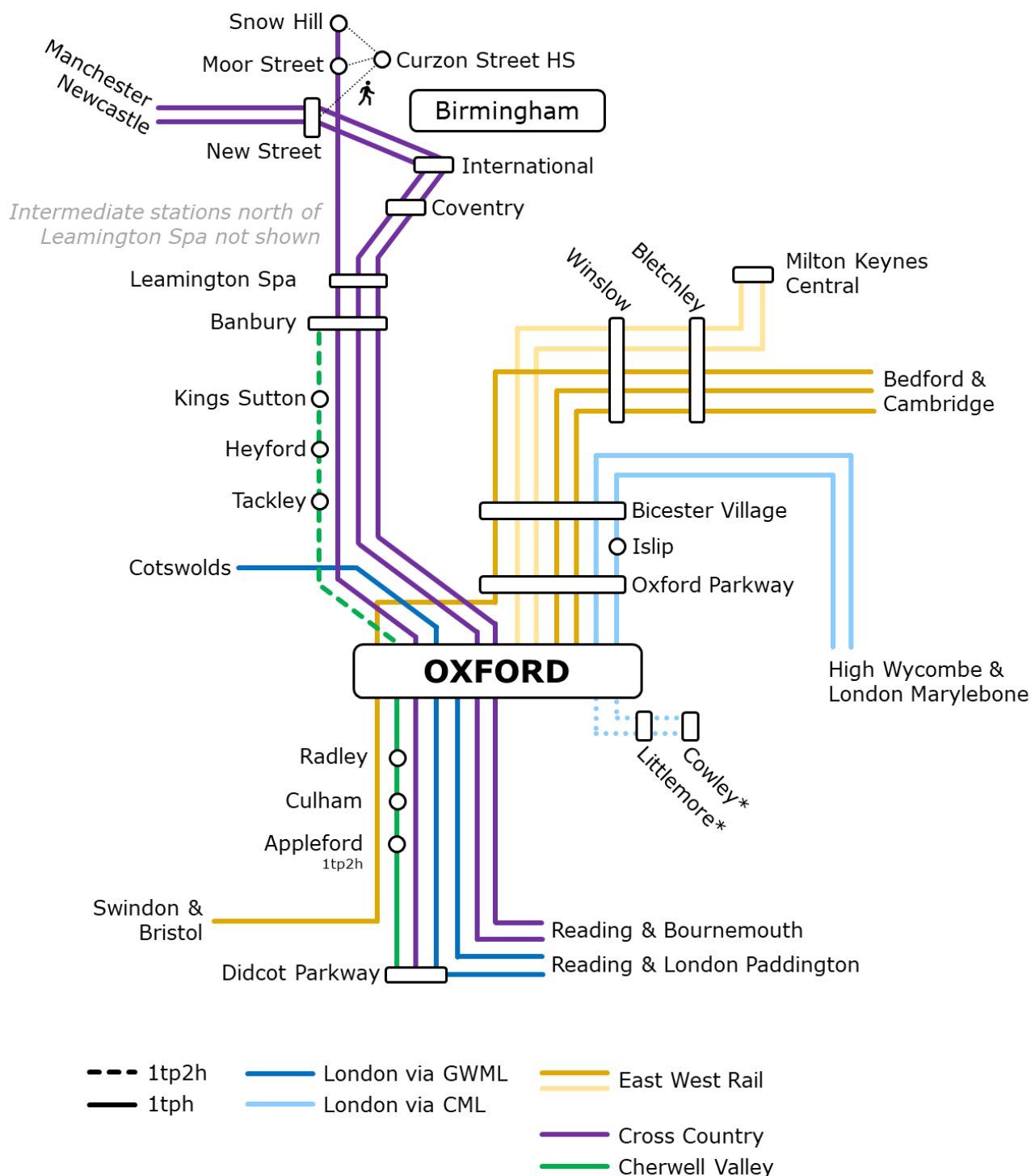


Figure 15 – Cambridge station attracted over 10.5 million passengers in 2024-25

Focus on Oxford

- 3.6. Figure 16 brings together the combined opportunities offered by EWR and HS2 for better services in Oxford. This would represent a step change in connectivity for the city.
- 3.7. Ambitions for service improvements in Oxford and the Thames Valley extend beyond the offering set out here. Oxfordshire County Council's (OCC) recently published *OxRAIL 2040: Plan for Rail* puts forward a compelling case for a transformative 'Oxfordshire Metro' service for the county.
- 3.8. The services set out here seek to maximise the opportunities offered by existing and committed infrastructure and minimise any dependency on additional, as yet unfunded, infrastructure interventions. It is envisaged that this service offering depends only on capacity improvements on the Coventry-Leamington line as uncommitted infrastructure. This is dependent on further timetabling analysis and feasibility development.
- 3.9. Further work is also required to understand the relative costs and benefits between the options for future new services:
- Terminating at Oxford;
 - Running through Oxford:
 - as EWR services towards Milton Keynes and/or other EWR destinations further east;
 - as an extension to existing Oxford-London Marylebone services;
 - to other destinations on the Cherwell Valley Line or GWML.
- 3.10. This work should consider:
- Likely demand profiles for putative services to best map service proposals to forecast passenger demand;
 - Timetabling and capacity impacts for each option;
 - Platform capacity relief at Oxford that each through service option offers;
 - Extent of infrastructure interventions required for each service option.

Recommendation 10: develop options for delivery of new services to Oxford including trade-offs between terminating and through service patterns



*Proposed Cowley Branch service frequency is 2tph. Current industry working assumption is that Oxford-London Marylebone services will be extended to Cowley, with committed infrastructure able to accommodate this service aspiration. Extension of EWR services would drive additional uncommitted infrastructure enhancements (see above).

Figure 16 – potential service improvements in Oxford unlocked by EWR and HS2

Aylesbury Link

- 3.11. The link between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes was always an integral part of East West Rail's delivery and was included in the Transport and Works Act for the first phase of work. EEH, Buckinghamshire Council and partners on the East West Main Line Partnership Board (EWMLPB) continue to advocate strongly for its delivery.
- 3.12. The Aylesbury Link plays a major role in improving connectivity and spreading the benefits of EWR further. Aylesbury and north Buckinghamshire currently suffer from poor rail connectivity – the Link would ameliorate this considerably, supporting economic growth and modal shift.
- 3.13. Before its removal from the EWR scheme, the Link was envisaged as a 1tph service between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes Central, calling at Aylesbury Vale Parkway, Winslow and Bletchley. This specification should be revisited to confirm its suitability in light of subsequent changes to the wider EWR scheme and Buckinghamshire Council's growth ambitions for the area.
- 3.14. NR are undertaking strategic work to determine future service patterns and the infrastructure required to support them on the Chiltern route and WCML, both of which are straddled by the Aylesbury Link. It is crucial that the envisaged Link service specification is fully incorporated into this and all other relevant strategic analysis by the rail industry.

Recommendation 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

- 3.15. A single-track freight-only line already exists between Aylesbury Vale Parkway and Calvert where it meets EWR. This is a surviving fragment of the former Great Central Main Line, which used to connect Aylesbury directly to the Midlands and the North. It is this line that can be utilised to provide the Aylesbury Link, albeit in an upgraded form.
- 3.16. The line is currently closed north of Aylesbury Vale Parkway station. The HS2 route alignment runs in very close proximity to the line between Quainton and Calvert. HS2 Ltd are constructing a corridor that will accommodate both the new high-speed railway and a two-track conventional railway alongside it, thereby enabling delivery of the Aylesbury Link.
- 3.17. Once HS2 civils works are complete, the conventional rail footprint will be handed back to Network Rail (NR), who are responsible for providing rail systems infrastructure. NR will reinstate:
- Access to Greatmoor Sidings, enabling rail freight services carrying waste to the adjacent energy from waste (EfW) plant to resume;
 - The connection to EWR at Claydon West Junction.
- 3.18. Beyond these high-level outputs, further scope details and outputs of what NR are to deliver are not currently known, including:
- Whether the line will be one or two tracks (HS2 are providing space for two);

- What signalling infrastructure is being provided, and the capability and capacity that it will provide;
- Any changes at Claydon West Junction.

3.19. These details are crucial in understanding the extent to which infrastructure delivered as part of the reinstatement works will support delivery of a future Aylesbury Link. This will establish a clear infrastructure baseline which can be used to determine the additional interventions that will be needed to enable the Link and how much they might cost.

Recommendation 12: establish a clear infrastructure baseline for the railway between Aylesbury and Claydon West Jcn to enable future scheme development for the Aylesbury Link

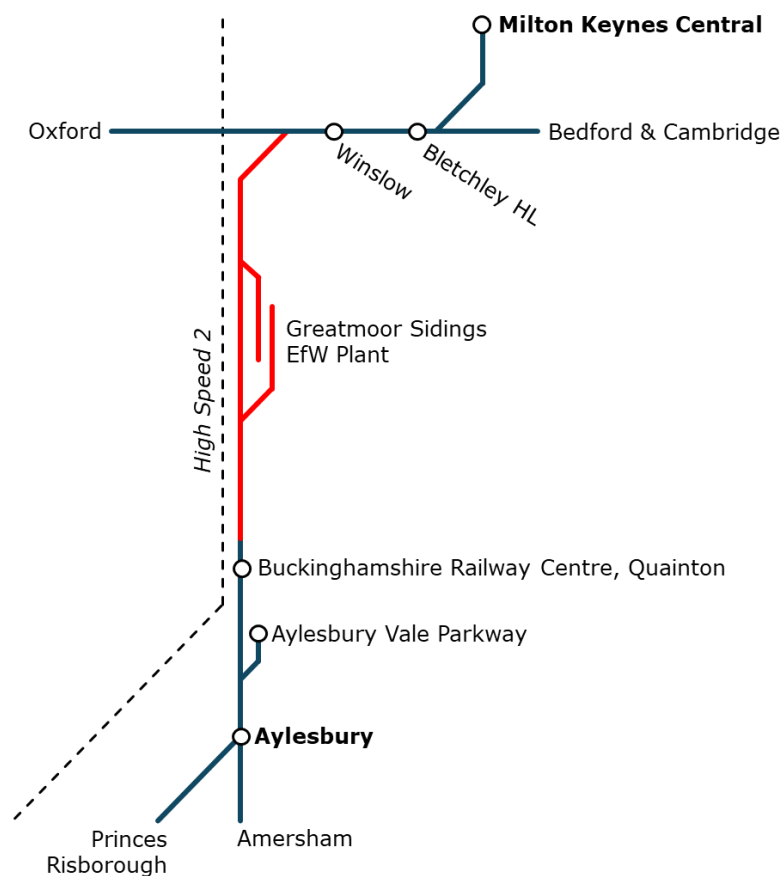


Figure 17 – schematic showing rail infrastructure between Aylesbury and EWR. Sections in red are currently closed in support of HS2 construction.

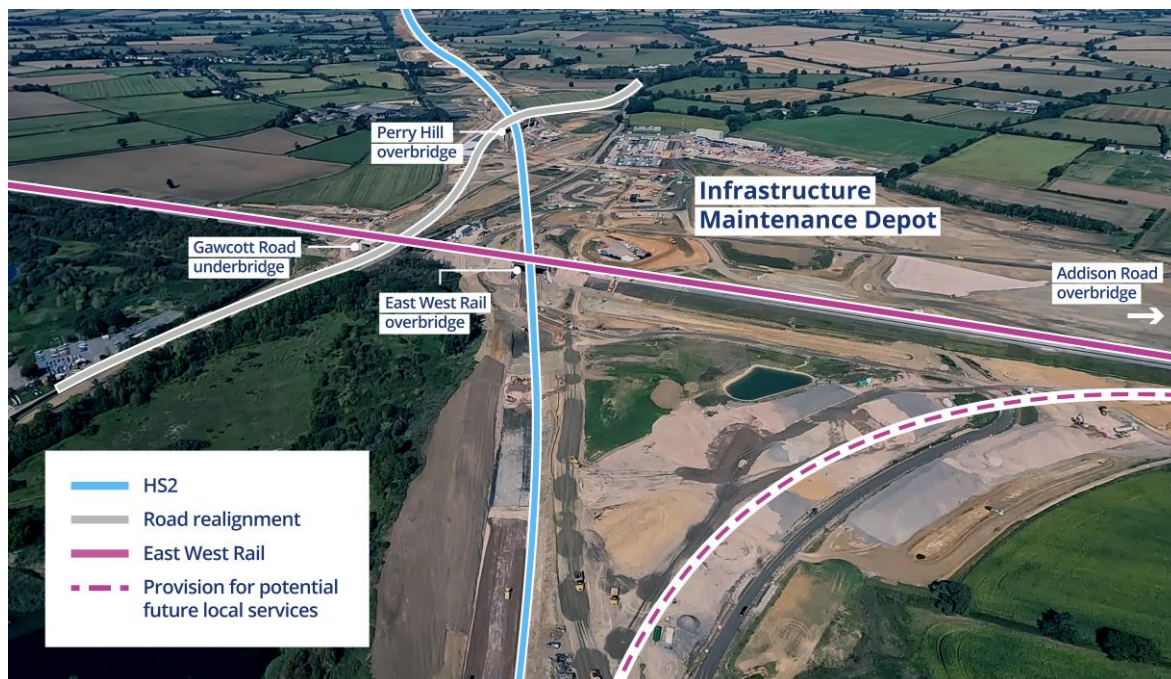


Figure 18 – plan showing the interface between HS2, EWR and the Aylesbury Link at Calvert (Link shown in dashed purple)

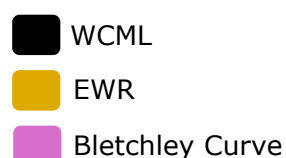
Bletchley Chord

3.20. Milton Keynes is an integral part of the EWR service proposition. EWR services from the west will enjoy direct services to the city via a west-north facing connection to the WCML. However, infrastructure to enable direct services from the east (Bedford, Cambridge) is not included in EWR Company's scope. This means that access to Milton Keynes from the east will require an interchange at Bletchley.

3.21. The extended journey time and inconvenience associated with the need to change trains constrains opportunities and diminishes the benefits of EWR.



Figure 19 – plan showing EWR services to Milton Keynes with addition of Bletchley Curve enabling access from the east



- 3.22. Delivery of a short new line providing an east-north facing connection between the WCML and EWR would unlock direct connectivity between Milton Keynes and destinations in the east (including Universal Studios). It also provides an additional route for freight from Felixstowe and other locations in the east to access the Midlands and the North via EWR and the WCML.
- 3.23. It should be noted that none of these benefits can be unlocked without the aforementioned wider interventions on the WCML between Bletchley and Milton Keynes, and at Milton Keynes Central station, in addition to the Bletchley Curve. This is set out in NR's *West Coast South Strategic Advice* report.
- 3.24. Further work on Bletchley Chord should be undertaken to:
- Determine infrastructure requirements and design feasibility;
 - Assess likely costs;
 - Quantify benefits.

Recommendation 13: progress feasibility and business case development work for the Bletchley Chord with a view to enabling its future delivery

- 3.25. EWR also crosses the Chiltern (CML), East Coast (ECML) and Midland (MML) main lines. The following connections between EWR and these main lines either already exist or are planned:
- **CML**: west-south connection enabling services from Oxford to High Wycombe and London Marylebone (in operation);
 - **MML**: west-north connection that could enable services from Oxford and Bletchley towards Leicester, Nottingham and Derby (planned);
 - **MML**: east-south connection that could enable services from Cambridge towards Luton, Luton Airport Parkway and St Albans (planned).
- 3.26. It should be noted that the existence of these connections does not guarantee that services could be provided. Timetabling and capacity analysis is needed to determine sufficient space in the timetable and whether further infrastructure interventions elsewhere on the network would be required.
- 3.27. Beyond the Bletchley Chord and the other connections mentioned above, there remain other EWR-main line intersection points where no proposals for a connection are currently being progressed. Further work should be undertaken to understand:
- Passenger and/or freight demand that could drive the need for such connections;
 - Where a possible need for a connection is identified, determining high-level feasibility, i.e. spatial constraints, potential third-party impacts, etc.

Recommendation 14: undertake demand analysis for other connections between EWR and intersecting main lines and determine high-level feasibility where appropriate

4. Conclusion

4.1. Both EWR and HS2 will have a transformative impact on the region. In particular:

- The opening of HS2 Phase 1 will enable a step change for services and connectivity on the WCML South corridor between London and Birmingham, much of which sits within EEH;
- The already significant benefits of the core EWR scheme can be amplified by service extensions, some of which are likely dependent on little or no additional uncommitted infrastructure interventions (subject to further work).

4.2. Other infrastructure interventions could take these benefits even further, including:

- Improved connectivity between the Thames Valley and the West Midlands;
- Direct services from Milton Keynes to Aylesbury, Bedford and Cambridge.

4.3. Any degradation in connectivity for the region resulting from the commencement of HS2 Phase 1 services is unacceptable. At the very least, today's level of service should be maintained. The arrival of EWR alongside economic and demographic trends in the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor mean that even maintaining the status quo is likely to be untenable in the medium to long term.

4.4. The industry needs to develop a service proposition that incorporates new services via HS2 whilst maintaining connectivity for EEH via the conventional network. Timetabling and infrastructure interventions required to enable this should be clearly defined.

4.5. EEH will work with Local Authority and rail industry partners to put this report's recommendations into action, maximising the benefits that EWR and HS2 can bring to the region whilst ensuring that existing connectivity is maintained.

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Figure 15	Charlotte Gaskell (CC0)
Figure 18	HS2 Ltd

Useful links

[East West Rail Consultation](#), EWR Co, 2026

[HS2 reset \(oral statement to Parliament\)](#), Rt Hon Heidi Alexander MP, 19 May 2026

[Northern Powerhouse Rail to drive biggest travel upgrade in the North in a generation](#), HM Government, 14 January 2026

[Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study](#), Network Rail (Wales & Western), 2021

[OxRail 2040: A Plan for Rail](#), Oxfordshire County Council, 2025

[West Coast South Strategic Advice](#), Network Rail (North West & Central), 2023



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