

England's Economic Heartland Board

24 September 2026

Item 7: Progressing priorities with Network Rail

It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Note EEH's progress on delivering rail priorities across the region, including through our work with Network Rail**
- b) Note the implications of the National Planning Policy Framework on station-led growth**

1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1. To inform the Board of ongoing engagement with Network Rail to progress regional priorities, and update Board on the National Planning Policy Framework.

2. Key points of note

- 2.1. Network Rail (NR) is currently undertaking a significant amount of strategic work that covers the region's mainlines.
- 2.2. The most advanced of these studies is the Chiltern Strategic Advice report, which has been completed and is awaiting publication.
- 2.3. The 'MK Hub' workstream is key to unlocking services from Milton Keynes and Cambridge and ambitions for a Northampton via Aylesbury Link to Old Oak Common.
- 2.4. The 'Handsacre-Manchester' work could unlock capacity for more services from Milton Keynes to Manchester and the North West.
- 2.5. The recently published NPPF is focused on station led growth and how this links with EEH's integration work that is focused on maximising the benefits of East West Rail by ensuring that more people are able to benefit from the new railway and new stations.

3. Context

- 3.1. Rail plays a vital role in supporting ambitions for the Oxford-Cambridge Growth Corridor.
- 3.2. Improvements in both freight and passenger services can unlock sustainable economic growth, reduce congestion and help forge stronger bonds between communities.
- 3.3. The 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.
- 3.4. On the other, the ambition to improve services in the 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.
- 3.5. 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. However, the section between Oxford and Milton Keynes remains unopened.



- 3.6. EEH plays a key role in shaping rail for the region, including close working with Network Rail, DfT and rail industry partners to ensure that regional priorities are incorporated into industry long term strategic planning.
- 3.7. At the previous Board, members agreed the 'Maximising East West Rail opportunities and HS2 released capacity' which provides an action plan for rail work going forwards.

4. Network Rail route studies

- 4.1. As owner and operator of the bulk of Britain's railway infrastructure, Network Rail (NR) is obliged to develop a long-term strategy for the railway network such that it can accommodate future demand and meet Government priorities across both passenger and freight services.
- 4.2. The studies being undertaken are listed below, along with key rail corridors and EEH destinations:
- **Chiltern Strategic Advice** (Chiltern Main Line) – Amersham, Aylesbury, Banbury, Bicester, High Wycombe, (London Marylebone), Oxford;
 - **East Coast Main Line Route Study** – Cambridge, Hitchin (London King's Cross), Peterborough, Stevenage, Tempsford New Town
 - **Midland Main Line & East Midlands Route Study** – Bedford, Corby, Kettering, (London St Pancras), Luton, St Albans, Wixams for Universal
 - **North West & Central Long Term Study** (WCML) – Milton Keynes, Hemel Hempstead, Leighton Buzzard, (London Euston), Northampton, Watford
 - **West Anglia Main Line Strategic Advice** – Broxbourne, Cambridge, (London Liverpool Street)
- 4.3. Work on the Chiltern Strategic Advice is complete with publication due to follow once Government approval is secured.
- 4.4. A separate briefing note summarising the content of this report has been prepared and is appended to this paper.
- 4.5. Work is continuing on the other four studies, with completion due later in 2027.
- 4.6. 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.
- 4.7. EEH's role in relation to these strategic work streams includes:
- Providing representation for the region and local authority partners at all relevant working and steering groups for each study
 - Delivering feedback, evidence and data to NR to ensure that their strategy is fully reflective of the needs, ambitions and challenges in our region
 - Co-ordinating liaison between NR and local authority partners where issues, challenges or opportunities may arise.
- 4.8. Further briefings will be provided to the Board as and when NR share study outputs.
- 4.9. Certain key common themes are already emerging across these work streams:
- Demand for rail travel is robust and is only set to grow into the future
 - This demand growth is further exacerbated by major developments in the region, e.g. Tempsford, Universal
 - Accommodating this demand is likely to require significant sustained investment in rail infrastructure – in many areas, the railway as configured today will no longer be able to cope



5. 'MK Hub' and Handsacre business cases

- 5.1. NR's North West & Central region is progressing two strategic outline business case (SOBC) assessments, work on both of which will continue into 2027.
- 5.2. The first, the 'MK Hub' study, is assessing interventions in the Bletchley and Milton Keynes areas, including a north-east Bletchley Chord between the West Coast Main Line (WCML) and EWR.
- 5.3. This is key to unlocking services from Milton Keynes and Cambridge and ambitions for a Northampton via Aylesbury Link to Old Oak Common.
- 5.4. It is assessing the following:
 - Delivery of a north-east chord between the WCML and EWR north of Bletchley WCML station;
 - WCML capacity improvements between Bletchley and Milton Keynes Central;
 - Upgrades at Milton Keynes Central, including new platforms and station improvements.
 - Taken together, these interventions would deliver key EEH rail priorities:
 - Enable direct services from WCML destinations to Cambridge, including a putative half-hourly Birmingham New Street-Northampton-Cambridge service envisaged in the NW&C Long Term Study
 - Unlock more capacity for freight services to the Midlands and the North
 - Partially deliver the 'Northampton-Old Oak Common Corridor', including providing sufficient capacity at Milton Keynes for future services to Aylesbury (also dependent upon Aylesbury Rail Link interventions between Aylesbury and EWR).
- 5.5. The 'Handsacre-Manchester' study is assessing the following:
 - Delivery of a limited additional section of high-speed railway line along the HS2 Phase 2A alignment
 - Station capacity improvements at Stockport and Manchester Piccadilly
 - Upgrades unlocking greater capacity on the Manchester Corridor
- 5.6. Taken together, these interventions would:
 - Remove some bottlenecks and deliver increased capacity on key rail corridors between the West Midlands and the North West (short of the transformational uplifts in capacity that would come with entirely new high-speed lines)
 - Enable continued operation of direct conventional InterCity services from our region to Manchester and other destinations in the North West, which are currently at risk upon commencement of new services via HS2
 - Should these studies generate robust business cases, NR will seek further development funding to progress outline business cases (OBCs) for each.
 - EEH is supporting NR in this work, ensuring that it is fully appreciative of the benefits that these interventions would deliver for the region. In the event that NR do look to secure further development funding for these schemes, EEH will also provide advocacy support in making the case to Government and other key stakeholders.

6. NPPF and rail-led growth

- 6.1. The new NPPF 2026 was published in August, aimed at boosting housing supply, unlocking economic growth and supporting the delivery of new homes and infrastructure.



- 6.2. The new NPPF embeds policy supporting higher-density development around “well-connected stations” based on the top 80 Travel to Work Areas (TTWAs) in England, by Gross Value Added (GVA). This scope is much wider than the original consultation, which proposed using the top 60 TTWAs and could potentially cover 68% of the stations in the Heartland region. This widening could mean that Kettering and Wellingborough stations in North Northamptonshire also come under the definition.
- 6.3. Some LTAs have expressed concern that the density requirements maybe totally out of character with existing scale of development especially more rural stations. The new policy links directly with EEH’s integration work that is focused on ensuring better connectivity to stations so that existing residents and any new development is linked to and able to access stations by more sustainable modes.
- 6.4. The NPPF also now attempts to define “reasonable walking distance” within policy contexts. For policies related to land around well-connected stations, this is taken as “around 800 metres, or around 10 minutes’ walk time if topography, route availability and quality or physical barriers would prevent or discourage walking from up to 800 metres away”. It is also clarified where only part of a site falls within the reasonable walking distance, the policies only apply to that portion of the site e.g. minimum densities and development outside settlements/in the Green Belt.
- 6.5. It is welcomed that freight is now considered under a dedicated freight and logistics policy, which makes specific reference to “good access to transport networks (including via sustainable transport modes where possible) appropriate to the type of development”.
- 6.6. The NPPF is also supported by secondary legislation for the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 has been laid, bringing key reforms into effect on 24 July 2026, alongside supporting guidance. To help streamline and shorten the time to approve major National Strategic Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs). One of the reforms is the removal of statutory consultation previously required under the Planning Act 2008. EWR is a case to this new approach.

**Ben Feeney- North
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