



Strategic Transport Forum

11th September 2020

Agenda Item 4: Strategic Rail Priorities for the West Coast Main Line and Midland Main Line

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Forum:

- a) Considers the region's priorities for the West Coast Main Line and Midland Main Line**
- b) Note, in that context, presentations provided from Avanti West Coast Partnership and East Midlands Railway setting out their current franchise priorities**
- c) Reinforce, subject to amendments agreed by the Group, the Heartland's long-term rail needs must be along both of these corridors to deliver on the ambitions set out in the Draft Transport Strategy**

1. Strategic Context

- 1.1. The Draft Transport Strategy identifies the West Coast Main Line and Midland Main Line as two of the busiest and most important strategic rail corridors in the Heartland. Today, both play a vital role in providing commuting, inter-urban and inter-city services to some of the country's highest performing labour markets and regionally significant hubs. Both operate as key rail freight arteries; with the West Coast Main Line carrying the region's largest volumes of intermodal freight from deep-sea ports in the south east and the Midland Main Line moving significant flows of construction materials originating from Leicester and the Peak District.
- 1.2. Both networks require greater levels of infrastructure investment if they are to deliver on the ambitions of the Transport Strategy: delivering growth in a way that is both sustainable and achieves environmental net gain. The Strategy's policy framework recognises that investment in these strategic rail corridors will act as a catalyst for sustainable change in our region and must be used to shape our partners' future economic and housing growth proposals brought through the local plan process.
- 1.3. Encouraging public transport in favour of private car use is a philosophy that acted as the genesis behind the first phase of our Passenger Rail Study, the policies within the Draft Strategy and the Investment Pipeline that flows from the two. The Investment Pipeline forms a cycle of infrastructure opportunities that must be acted on if both the West Coast Main Line and the Midland Main Line seize the opportunity of HS2 and their potential to deliver economic and housing growth.

2. Summary of Existing West Coast Main Line Strategic Priorities

- 2.1. In December 2019 Avanti West Coast took responsibility for providing existing long-distance train services along the West Coast Main Line until 2029. As well as needing to deliver these services, the West Coast Partnership will also assume the role of 'shadow operator' for future HS2 services in late 2020. It has accountability for designing, developing and mobilising operations for the new line with HS2 Ltd. and the DfT. As part of the operator's role as a critical friend in developing new services, a Strategic Market Report is being developed to provide a fresh assessment of the passenger market for high speed and conventional services.
- 2.2. The awarding of this franchise and its need to produce a programme of research into emerging markets signals a new era for both the operator and industry; providing as it does an opportunity for EEH to engage with the operator to ensure the region's rail priorities are taken into account in franchise delivery. The released capacity provided by HS2 provides the basis on which to work with Avanti West Coast, Network Rail System Operator and the DfT to develop a train service specification on the conventional network that meets the requirements of the region beyond HS2 and maximises the benefits of the new East-West Main Line.
- 2.3. In spring of 2020, the EEH Business Unit has sought to exploit opportunities to shape the Operators' and industries' wider thinking on the long-term planning needs of the West Coast Main Line. Our response to the Strategic Market Report Stakeholder Survey offered the first mechanism to do this along with ongoing participation with an industry working group overseen by Network Rail System Operator. Our written response to the market research exercise and meetings with Network Rail System Operator and Avanti West Coast has served to highlight the key strategic priorities for the West Coast Main Line as listed below:
- 2.4. **East West Rail** – This scheme will provide the over-riding transformational opportunity for the Heartland. When considered alongside the opportunity created by the delivery of HS2 for reallocating capacity on the West Coast Main Line, the investment in the rail network will be at the heart of transforming what is currently a series of discrete functional economic areas and housing markets into a better connected region to the benefit of businesses and residents alike. It is key that post-HS2 released capacity and East-West Rail are integrated in such a way that maximises east-west connectivity and the interchange potential of Milton Keynes/Bletchley with both the Chiltern Main Line and Midland Main Line.
- 2.5. **HS2 (Phase 1/2a)** - The investment in East West Rail and HS2 creates opportunities to develop a new regional service linking Northampton-Milton Keynes/Bletchley – Aylesbury – High Wycombe and onwards to the HS2 station at Old Oak Common. In providing a new travel option for movement between these regionally significant hubs, this new service will support the delivery of planned growth as well as providing easier access to Heathrow Airport and HS2 services via a one-stop interchange at Old Oak Common.
- 2.6. **EEH - The Midlands** - HS2 released capacity must become a catalyst for enhanced regional connectivity. Currently, travel into Birmingham and via the Trent Valley line for interchange with destinations in the East Midlands is slow from many of the Heartland's key stations. This becomes progressively more acute for stations south of Northampton, despite being located a broadly similar distance away from London. The Northampton corridor is disproportionately affected by slower speeds into Birmingham, exacerbated by the need to call at stations between Coventry and Birmingham. Journeys from Northampton that wish to bypass Birmingham are constrained by interchange at Rugby, before connecting with slow, infrequent services along the Trent Valley Line.



- 2.7. **Milton Keynes – East Midlands** - Industry long-term planning on the corridor should be cognisant of regional aspirations to reinstate a new axis of connectivity between the West Coast Main Line and Midland Main Line, over and above that provided by East West Rail services. Released capacity presents an opportunity to provide additional paths on West Coast Main Line south that could be used to support new railway services that improve connectivity between Milton Keynes and the East Midlands.
- 2.8. **Northampton** - Owing to its size and potential rail market, connectivity from Northampton into London Euston must also become more comparable with frequency and journey times observed in key stations nearby. Rail service improvements must recognise the disparity of Northampton's poor journey times and frequencies otherwise risking the town being severed economically from the rest of the Heartland.
- 2.9. **Maximising Rail Freight** - Recasting the timetable coupled with greater levels of infrastructure investment along the West Coast Main Line presents an opportunity to increase the volume of freight moved by road to rail, a key policy priority for the draft Transport Strategy. Understanding the nature of capacity constraints between Bletchley and Milton Keynes and finding the optimum speed mix between freight and passenger services along the Northampton corridor (fast line via Weedon and the Northampton Loop) will help ensure freight requirements are taken fully into consideration.
- 2.10. **User-Centred Focus**- More broadly, EEH continues to make the case that proposed improvements and refurbishments to rolling stock should be matched by a high-quality station experience that can accommodate the deployment of sustainable first/last mile mobility. Greater levels of accessibility and simplified fare structures will encourage greater rail use by improving value for money and reliability.

3. Summary of Existing Midland Main Line Strategic Priorities

- 3.1. In April 2019, the Government announced that Abellio had been successful in its bid to run the East Midlands franchise. East Midlands Railway started in August 2019 and will operate this strategically important rail corridor for eight years. The franchise prospectus was heavily influenced by Government's aspiration to make the Midlands region an engine for economic growth. Bidders were had to demonstrate improved connectivity within and outside the Midlands whilst addressing increased demand into London St. Pancras. In the Heartland, improvements in inter-urban performance are predicated on major line upgrades and electrification between Bedford and Kettering to Corby that is targeting completion by the end of this year.
- 3.2. Forum members will recall the extensive engagement EEH has had during the franchise consultation process. Representation was made to the franchise team in 2017 and 2018 as Government sought views on the future of the railway and the invitation to tender document respectively. Our correspondence expressed deep concern with the proposed reduction in direct services to/from Bedford, Luton and Wellingborough with cities in the East Midlands, failing as it has to recognise the importance of connectivity between the two regional economies. The Forum also called for the opportunities presented by East West Rail to become a fundamental consideration baked into franchise plans. This is due to the role Bedford and Luton Airport Parkway will play as a catalyst in enabling north/south and east /west journeys and providing access to international gateways.
- 3.3. Following the awarding of the franchise, significant timetable changes have been consulted on by the operator that were originally anticipated to take effect from December 2020. The Strategic Transport Forum's response to the initial consultation welcomed the increase in frequency and capacity as part of the EMR Electrics Services between London and Corby and Thames Link peak services reverting to their original calling patterns south of Bedford. However, the response also set-out the Forum's deep concern about the proposed reduction of inter-city connectivity northbound to Leicester and beyond. The Forum's position was that, despite Kettering receiving two northbound services per hour to Leicester and Nottingham, this would not mitigate the inconvenience



caused by needing to change trains, regardless if this change is on the same side of the platform and supported by integrated timetabling.

- 3.4. The global pandemic has resulted in a delay to the timetable changes, with East Midlands Railway is now preparing to submit its proposals to Network Rail and Office of Rail and Road in October 2020, to take effect in May 2021. Longer timescales has allowed for further refining of the timetable, which subject to industry approval should result in a number of contra-peak services away from London in the morning and towards London in the evening reintroduced. The view of the operator is that these contra-peak concessions are demonstrable evidence of the way consultation feedback has been acted on within the confinements of needing to deliver franchise requirements coupled with capacity constraints at Bedford Station.
- 3.5. However, the effects of COVID-19 also have the potential to embed a long-lasting move away from commuting patterns that have traditionally centred on London. The move to more agile working presents an opportunity to reimagine the role of rail for business-business and leisure travel and plan for the provision of rail services that would enable this to happen. It is thus essential that EEH continues to closely with East Midlands Railway, beyond the May 2021 timetable changes to set out requirements that must be taken into account in future franchise planning. The strategic priorities for the Midland Main Line are listed below:
- 3.6. **Bedfordshire & Northamptonshire to the East Midlands** – A key policy of the draft Transport Strategy, supported by the findings of the Rail Study, is the need to improve connectivity between Luton-Bedford-Wellingborough/Kettering – with Leicester, Nottingham and Derby and links to High Speed 2 at East Midlands Hub. The need to change trains for these regionally important north/south connections is a barrier to travel and should be rectified, be that through revisions to timetable and/or infrastructure provision. Enhanced connectivity along this corridor also provides greater access to London Luton Airport also.
- 3.7. **Maximising HS2 Phase 2b** - The ability to connect with HS2 at East Midlands Hub for faster services to Sheffield, Leeds and York may negate the need for existing long distance intercity services on the Midland Main Line to provide the fastest journey times. This would create the opportunity to adjust the calling patterns of services on the conventional network to the benefit of the strategically important hubs of Luton, Bedford, Kettering, Corby, and Wellingborough. Developing the detail associated with a new Bedford-Leeds direct service that utilises both the conventional and HS2 network through interchange at East Midlands Hub, as an attractive alternative to longer distance movements, is considered strategically significant.
- 3.8. **Bedford Midland Station** - a long-term solution is required to realise the potential of Bedford Midland Station that arises from the investment in East West Rail and the town's role as a regionally significant hub. Addressing capacity constraints at the railway station must be resolved to enable more journey's by rail to all sides of the compass.
- 3.9. **Wixams Station** - As discussed, Bedford is as a regionally significant economic and population hub, but requires further intervention to increase access to opportunities in its town and expanding conurbations. Plans to expand the new settlement at Wixams will make it one of the Heartland's largest new growth areas. Expanding the coverage of local services through a new station would enable interchange at Bedford for journeys into key economic centres in the East Midlands, East Anglia and West of England. With the right integration of services, this could lever the investment already made in East West Rail to further enhance the socio-economic geography of the area.
- 3.10. **Electrification** – support for the extension of electrification through Market Harborough north to the East Midlands to provide quicker, cleaner passenger and freight movements.

3.11. **Leicester Area Improvements** - Leicester is an important gateway for freight and passenger flows through our region and along the Midland Main Line and Felixstowe to West Midlands route. Resolving the capacity constraints at Leicester and Wigston Junction (south of Leicester) will enable contiguous regional economies to flourish and could free-up path availability between the West Coast Mainline and Midland Mainline. Additional paths could be used to support aspirations for connectivity between Northampton and Market Harborough (as part of a wider Milton Keynes to East Midlands project).

4. Long-term rail Priorities

- 4.1. It is essential that infrastructure measures and calling patterns along both of these corridors reflect the regional priorities cited above. The Forum is encouraged to consider the priorities and identify any further requirements may be necessary to develop a long-term plan for both rail corridors that meets the needs of partner's aspirations for economic and planned growth.
- 4.2. In taking this opportunity, to think more widely on our needs for the West-Coast and Midland Main Line, it is useful to reflect on what barriers currently exist that might constrain our ability to deliver on the ambitions discussed. Close working arrangements at the regional level with Avanti West Coast Partnership, East Midlands Railway and Network Rail System Operator allows EEH to influence decisions on long-term planning beyond immediate timetable cycles.
- 4.3. Receiving views on both of these corridors from Forum members will enable EEH to lobby for a train service specifications that maximise opportunities to influence the distribution of growth on the conventional network realised by HS2 infrastructure and other timetable changes.

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