

Rt Hon Chris Grayling MP
Secretary of State
Department for Transport
Great Minster House
LONDON
SW1P 4DR

Programme Office
c/o Buckinghamshire County Council
County Hall
Walton Street
Aylesbury
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26th March 2018

Dear Secretary of State,

MIDLAND MAIN LINE AND EAST MIDLANDS FRANCHISE

England's Economic Heartland welcomed the recognition by the UK Government of the national importance of the region's economy and of the need to invest in our infrastructure and services if our economy to realise its economic potential.

As the emerging Sub-national Transport Body for the Oxford – Milton Keynes – Cambridge corridor our focus is on identifying investment in infrastructure and services that will improve levels of productivity, provide capacity for economic growth and support delivery of planned housing. Through our overarching Transport and Connectivity Strategy we are committed to setting the long-term framework through which a prioritised pipeline of investment projects can be identified.

The priority given by the Government to delivering the 'multi-modal spine' that will transform east-west connectivity is welcomed and supported by England's Economic Heartland.

However, important though improved east-west connectivity is, of equal importance is the need to ensure that connectivity across the whole region is improved: including north-south.

The Midland Main Line is therefore a corridor of strategic significance for England's Economic Heartland. Luton (including the Airport – one of Europe's key business aviation hubs and a focus for an Enterprise Zone) and Bedford (with its potential for further growth) are major urban hubs in the region. Rail services through Northamptonshire are central to providing the connectivity that supports growth.

Whilst the investment in the Thameslink infrastructure and services is welcome, the consequential implication for current East Midland train services undermines our shared ambition to deliver planned growth (housing and economic).

The withdrawal from May of peak time calls at Bedford and Luton and reliance on Thameslink services will see an appreciable increase in journey times. Even then the related changes to Thameslink services have consequences for passengers between Bedford and Luton. A key consideration for both businesses and individuals when looking at investment locations is journey time to London. The change in journey time from May will reduce our attractiveness due to the extended journey times from Bedford and Luton Airport.

At the same time, the loss of the link from Bedford and Luton to Wellingborough and beyond will cause real hardship for existing passengers and their families. There is already anecdotal evidence to show how the withdrawal of the rail link will make it difficult if not impossible for people to continue to get to work or access services in the East Midlands due to the replacement coach

service taking significantly longer the rail service and being less reliable due to congestion on the road network.

Whilst the desire to improve journey times from the East Midlands to London is understood, it appears to be perverse that a direct consequence of this is to take away services that support the Government's ambition to rebalance the economy away from London.

We appreciate that the timetable changes now required are a consequence of dropping the commitment to electrify the Midland Main Line, a decision which means that the infrastructure and rolling stock simply do not have the capacity to accommodate the original ambitions for the corridor.

In this context we welcome the work now beginning – led by Network Rail – to review the route strategy. As the emerging Sub-national Transport Body we welcome our involvement in this work and our officer team will work with Network Rail moving forward. In particular we will ensure that our regional evidence base of planned growth (developed using funding provided by your Department) feeds into their work.

We would welcome your commitment to make it a requirement of Network Rail's work that it takes proper account of the economic and housing needs of England's Economic Heartland.

We would also welcome your commitment to make it a requirement of the forthcoming Invitation to Tender for the new East Midlands franchise for prospective bidders to work with England's Economic Heartland to ensure that their proposals better reflect the need to support delivery of planned growth across the franchise. A key issue in this regard is the need for the franchisee to prioritise improvements to the provision of services at, and access to stations for all rail users.

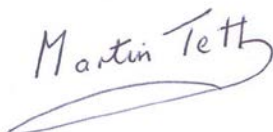
In October 2017 we provided detailed comments in respect of the priorities we need the franchise to address. Whilst our officers have had a number of discussions with your franchising team we are increasingly concerned that those comments are not reflected in the franchise specification.

This is deeply concerning.

Our detailed comments set out the region's needs if the new franchise is to support the delivery of planned growth. Our detailed comments also emphasised the critical importance of ensuring that the new franchisee is required to work with the region to plan for the opening of East West Rail. Although beyond the planned scope for the new franchise, the opening of East West Rail will result in Bedford becoming a key interchange across the corridor, increasing its significance to realising the wider ambition to the corridor as a whole.

We are concerned that the franchising team has not updated their requirements to reflect the Government's identification of the corridor as a national economic priority. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you in person how we might address this particular issue.

Yours sincerely,



Cllr Martin Tett

Chair England's Economic Heartland
Leader Buckinghamshire County Council