

East West Rail Eastern Section Rail Prospectus

Background

The East West Rail Link is a new rail link that will connect Suffolk and Norfolk (known as the Eastern Section) via Cambridge and Bedford (known as the Central Section) with Oxford (known as the Western Section).

Work has already commenced on the Western Section: Phase 1 (the link between Oxford and Bicester – including the development of two new railway stations) has been completed, and work on Phase 2 (the rail link between Bicester, Bletchley, Aylesbury and Milton Keynes) is moving forward. Work on the Central Section is also progressing with a consultation launched by the East West Rail Company in January on the possible new rail routes between Cambridge and Sandy.

Eastern Section

The Eastern Section already exists but rail frequencies between Norfolk and Suffolk to Cambridge remain hourly. Both Norfolk and Suffolk county councils have expressed the need for a half-hourly service and improved journey times to Cambridge, as well as a secondary route for rail freight to remove pressure on the Great Eastern Main Line and at Ely.

At the 2018 April Annual General meeting of the East West Rail Consortium Strategic Board, it was agreed by the Consortium that an East West Rail Eastern Section Group be established to identify the business case for improving rail connectivity between Suffolk/Norfolk and Cambridge and Oxford. A group was formed and has councillor and officer membership from Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire county councils; West Suffolk councils; East Suffolk Council; Ipswich Borough Council; Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils, Norwich City Council; South Cambridgeshire District Council and New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership.

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The East West Rail Eastern Section Rail Prospectus was approved at the December meeting of the East West Rail Consortium Strategic Board. The Prospectus clearly sets out the housing and economic growth anticipated in Suffolk, Norfolk and Cambridge, and how improving rail connectivity can support and enable higher growth potential. This is important for areas such as Cambridge, Milton Keynes and Oxford, which are predicted to see high levels of economic growth, that can be brought closer to the thriving economies of Suffolk and Norfolk. West Suffolk, in particular, has a key role in the Cambridge economy as it provides a housing sub-region for the Cambridge workforce. A study commissioned by the East West Rail Consortium demonstrates that high value economic links exist between Norwich, Cambridge, Milton Keynes, Aylesbury, Oxford and Reading, and between Felixstowe, Ipswich, Bury St Edmunds, Newmarket, Milton Keynes, Oxford and Reading.

In addition to the economic benefits, providing a direct rail link from Suffolk/Norfolk to Bedford, Milton Keynes, Oxford and beyond will provide opportunities to remove more cars and lorries from local and strategic highway networks. It will also improve rail journey times between counties and to the south west (where rail travel requires a change at London), as well as provide the potential for new rail opportunities. Enhancement of the Eastern Section could alleviate congestion on the Great Eastern Main Line and at Ely.

The rail prospectus supports a range of policies such as the Economic Strategy for Norfolk and Suffolk; Local Industrial Strategy; local plans; transport strategies including the Integrated Transport Strategy and New Anglia LEP's Rail Prospectus, and transport campaigns such as 'No more A14 Delays in Suffolk' and 'Norwich in 90, Ipswich in 60 Great Eastern Main Line Campaign'.

Next Step

There is a need to gain national interest in the Eastern Section and to educate about the need for improved rail connectivity. The prospectus only identifies the economic possibilities of improving rail connectivity to Cambridge and Oxford and beyond. It does not identify the rail infrastructure required to achieve improved connectivity or faster journey times. This work still needs to be developed (and funded), following the Rail Network Enhancement Pipeline process.

The focus is for the East West Rail Eastern Section Group to work with a range of partners, including the East West Rail Consortium, to develop a communications plan and gain support and funding. The funding will enable the development of an Outline Business Case, which will set out the infrastructure requirements and business case for improving rail services between Ipswich/Norwich to Cambridge. A communications plan will be shared with the East West Rail Consortium Strategic Board at their meeting in March.