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Dear Thomas,

AVANTI WEST COAST TIMETABLE

England's Economic Heartland (EEH) brings together political and business leaders in a pan-regional strategic partnership, with a focus on the planning, development and delivery of strategic infrastructure. It is the Sub-national Transport Body for the region. Its membership stretches from Swindon to Cambridgeshire and from Northamptonshire to Hertfordshire, and includes the area identified by Government as the Oxford to Cambridge Arc: a nationally significant economic priority.

In February 2021 EEH will publish the region's Transport Strategy. The Strategy is a 30-year blueprint setting out the way the Heartland's transport system must evolve if it is to deliver a green economic recovery, level up parts of the region and achieve net-zero carbon emissions from transport no later than 2050 (with an ambition to reach this by 2040). Investment in rail is of fundamental importance to delivering the region's ambition in respect of both people and freight movements.

The delivery of East West Rail provides the over-riding transformational opportunity for the Heartland. When considered alongside the opportunity created by the delivery of HS2 to reallocate capacity on the West Coast Main Line to improve connectivity across the region, 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. The medium-term timetable recast, expected between December 2022 and the start of HS2 must be integrated with the investment made in east-west connectivity. In particular it needs to take into account the strategic potential of Milton Keynes/Bletchley, a location that has been identified as accommodating transformational levels of growth. The combination of planned growth and investment in East West Rail creates strategic opportunities in this location that need to be supported by the timetable.

EEH welcomes the opportunity to share its views on the existing West Coast Main Line South timetable. The Transport Strategy identifies the West Coast Mainline as one of the busiest and most important strategic rail corridors in our region. It plays a vital role in providing

community, regional and inter-city services to some of the country's highest performing labour markets and regionally significant hubs. It also operates as a key freight artery; carrying the region's largest volumes of intermodal freight from deep-sea ports.

In our response to the West Coast Partnership Development Strategic Market Report – Stakeholder Survey, we listed our regional priorities for the West Coast Mainline that should be considered when integrating high-speed and conventional rail services on this route. As part of that response we stressed that improvements to journey times must not compromise network resilience. The declaration of the fast line section of railway between Camden South Junction and Ledburn Junction as 'congested infrastructure' validates this concern. We are therefore mindful that future service aspirations must not inadvertently worsen performance and reduce timetable resilience. Subsequently, we strongly support the need for timetable recasting to be supported by greater levels of infrastructure investment. Infrastructure investment will not only enable timetable optimisation but will act in support of the delivery of planned growth in a sustainable way.

In this regard, EEH is working in partnership with Network Rail to develop the second phase of the Passenger Rail Study for the Heartland region. Taking an evidence-led approach, the aim of the work is to identify the key journey pairings within and beyond EEH that stand to benefit economically by enhanced rail connectivity. The emerging outputs from this study, informed by the work of our partners, has identified West Coast Main Line service level priorities.

Owing to its size and potential rail market, connectivity from Northampton into London should be more comparable with speeds and journey times observed in key stations nearby, e.g. Milton Keynes, Bletchley or Leighton Buzzard. The absence of the fastest trains to London and the provision of a low service offering (3tph)^[1] is a barrier on the economic competitiveness of Northampton and its links with the capital. The Northampton-Milton Keynes flow is of high economic value and sensitive to an uplift in connectivity but currently constrained by slower than average generalised journey speed. It is reasonable to assume that many residents living in Northamptonshire wanting to travel south by rail will travel to Milton Keynes for reasons of rail-heading; generating additional movements by car. Conversely, the offer of rail travel north from Northampton to Birmingham (operated by West Midlands Trains) is by comparison better, strengthened as it is by interchange potential at Coventry to connect with services via Banbury. Notwithstanding, the potential of these services is limited by having to provide local stopping services on the Coventry-Birmingham corridor. There is value in considering how a fast service, stopping at key stations e.g. Long Buckby, Rugby, Coventry and Birmingham might operate.

The core issue for Northampton is that by being located off the core West Coast Main Line, and with the limited number of inter-city trains that call at Rugby, connectivity to the north-west of England and Scotland is poor. Rail travel to key cities in the north-west is not competitive with road and journeys to Chester, Liverpool, Preston, Lancaster, Carlisle and Glasgow require multiple interchanges that dissuade business and leisure passengers to use rail. EEH argues that the lack of direct connections to the north-west from/to Northampton needs to be addressed. Opportunities should be sought to improve connectivity by reducing the number of connections that need to be made for an individual journey. In addition, the journey time for these pairings must equal, or better, the journey time from those locations to London Euston.

^[1] Analysis uses the December 2019 timetable



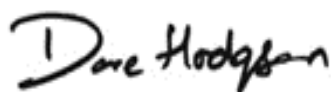
Whilst not the focus of this consultation, the investment in East West Rail combined with the delivery of HS2, the Transport Strategy identifies the need for a regional service linking Northampton-Milton Keynes/Bletchley-Aylesbury-High Wycombe and onwards to Old Oak Common. This would provide a new travel option for movement between these regionally significant hubs and support the delivery of planned growth, as well providing easier access to Heathrow Airport via interchange at Old Oak Common.

Further south on the West Coast Main Line, Watford is regarded as one of the Heartland's major economic assets and one of our fastest growing economies. Watford Junction is a major rail hub served by a mix of intercity, fast and semi-fast services. Its railway station has been unable to keep pace with the town's growth; attracting 8.5 annual passengers per annum. Our Transport Strategy identifies that whilst regional and commuting services to London are good, longer-term, released capacity realised by HS2 could provide additional resilience to reduce overcrowding and strengthen intra-regional connectivity between the key towns of Watford Junction, Milton Keynes and Northampton, particularly in the peak hour. It is important to note that any strengthening of these services should not be at the expense of the need to provide, quality, long-distance services from Watford Junction.

The need for improved long-distance intercity connectivity from Watford Junction should be considered in timetable planning for the medium-longer term. The current offer of 1tph to Birmingham limits opportunities for economic agglomeration. To improve this service offer, EEH support the need for 2tph to Birmingham. There is also a need to address the sparse level of rail connectivity to Manchester and Liverpool, as with limited exception in the peak hour, there are no direct services. Timetable recasting, pre or post HS2, should consider the value of providing direct services to Manchester and Liverpool, provided at 1tph respectively.

In summary, our priority is to provide more frequent and more direct rail connectivity to key cities in the west midlands and north-west of England to better connect regions that benefit from complementary business sectors. We recognise that an increase in the quantum of long-distance trains without investment in infrastructure will require a careful trade-off with other services to maintain current journey times. To this end, England's Economic Heartland encourages Avanti West Coast to work with us to develop its strategic thinking.

Mayor Dave Hodgson



**Chair, Strategic Transport Forum
England's Economic Heartland**

