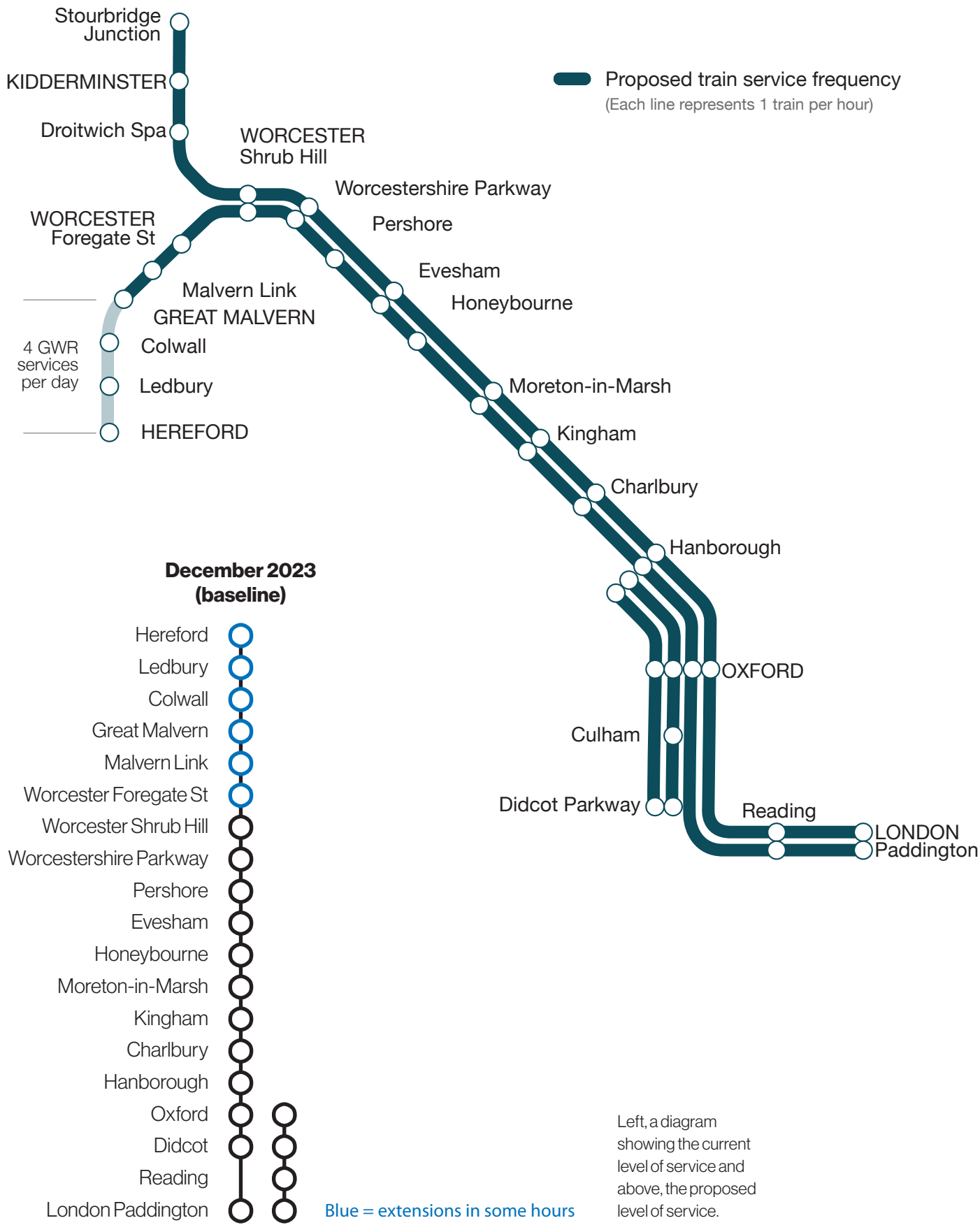


# Improving the North Cotswold Line

Supporting sustainable economic and housing growth while enhancing the strategic value of East West Rail





Mapping/diagrams on pages 1, 2, 4 and 6 courtesy of the North Cotswold Line Task Force

# Introduction

The North Cotswold railway line connects the historic economic centres of Hereford, Worcester and Oxford, with services also calling at Reading and London Paddington.

**The corridor also has core strengths aligned to the new Industrial Strategy – in science and technology, manufacturing, defence and agritech. Higher education is a further strength, with the corridor containing one of world’s leading universities at Oxford, while Oxford Brookes and Worcester are also ranked within the UK top 100. And with around 90 million visitors to its cathedral cities and some of the most beautiful and visited rural locations in the country – including charming Cotswold villages and the World Heritage site of Blenheim Palace – tourism is also a hugely important sector.**

Local authorities along the route have ambitious plans to grow the corridor’s strengths.

Importantly, there is an expectation from Government that the planning authorities along the corridor should very significantly increase their housing numbers.

**Indeed, annual housing targets for these authorities have recently been increased by 80%,** compared to the English average of just over 20%.

The North Cotswold Line’s potential to sustainably support economic and housing growth is severely limited by its current hourly service between Oxford and Worcester (with services extending to Great Malvern and Hereford in some hours).

Increasing this frequency to every 30 minutes between Oxford and Worcester, while also offering new hourly services to Droitwich Spa, Kidderminster and Stourbridge, would be transformational. **It can be achieved relatively simply, requiring less than 10 miles of track doubling together with additional platforms at two stations.**

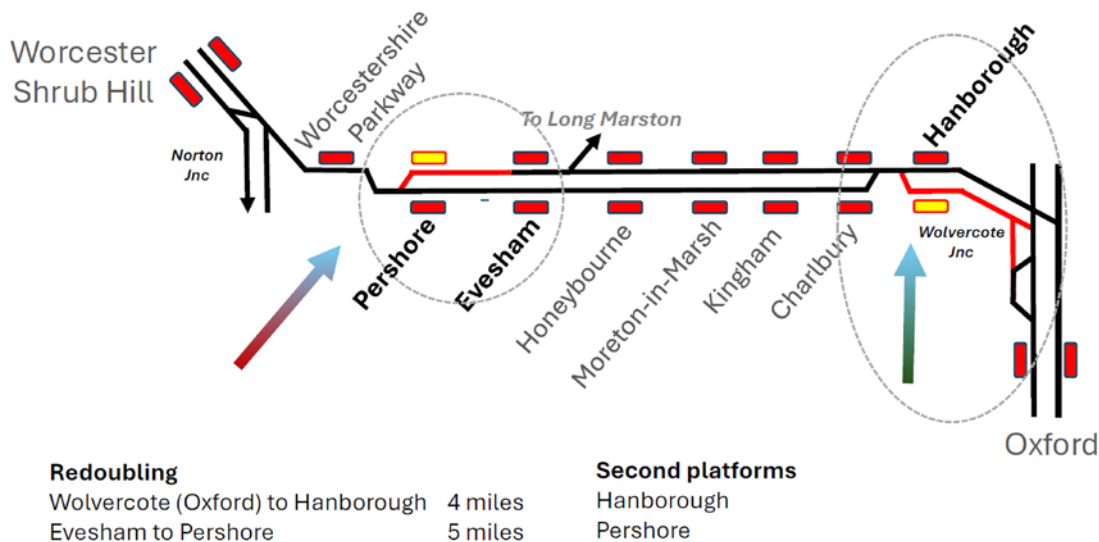
We know there is growing demand for improved services: remarkably, **there are more passengers using the line today than before the pandemic.**

Moreover, improvements to the North Cotswold Line will help Government fully **maximise the value of its investment in East West Rail**, which will see services between Oxford and Milton Keynes running by the end of 2025, and to Cambridge by the mid 2030s. The combination of East West Rail and an improved North Cotswold Line would be a gamechanger for the UK rail network, enabling journeys from the Welsh border right through to the east of England, within just a single, simple interchange at Oxford.



# What is needed

Half-hourly services would be achieved by double tracking four miles of line between Oxford and Hanborough in Oxfordshire, and five miles between Evesham and Pershore in Worcestershire, alongside delivery of additional platforms at Hanborough and Pershore.



These measures would also build on recent investment in the line, in particular delivery of a new Parkway station in Worcestershire in 2020, which has successfully attracted significant numbers of new rail users and will support delivery of 10,000 new homes in a new Garden Town between 2025 and 2040 and beyond.

## Making the case

A Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) for the scheme was submitted to government in 2020 by the 'North Cotswold Line Task Force'. The task force includes or has included local authorities and local enterprise partnerships right across the route, together with the Cotswold Line Promotion Group (of which Lord Faulkner of Worcester is president and vice-presidents include Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton; Lord Adonis, Nigel Huddleston MP and Layla Moran MP).

The SOBC indicated a strong strategic and value for money case. The Department for Transport and Network Rail recognised the methodology behind the assumptions in the SOBC in 2021. The benefit-cost ratio was updated post-Covid and remained 'high value for money' at 2.97.

**Funding is now needed to progress to the Outline Business Case (OBC). This work should consider how private sector funding can be leveraged for the project.**



# Why improve the North Cotswold line?

Transformed North Cotswold Line connectivity is principally an 'economic growth' scheme rather than a 'railway infrastructure' project and needs to be seen as such.

## Kickstarting economic growth

The Oxford-Worcester-Hereford corridor contains a vibrant, mixed economy with its nine principal district/unitary authorities generating £32 billion of annual Gross Value Added (GVA) in 2022.

Its sectoral strengths include many of the eight 'growth driving sectors' identified in Government's Modern Industrial Strategy green paper, including life sciences, digital, defence, advanced manufacturing and professional services.

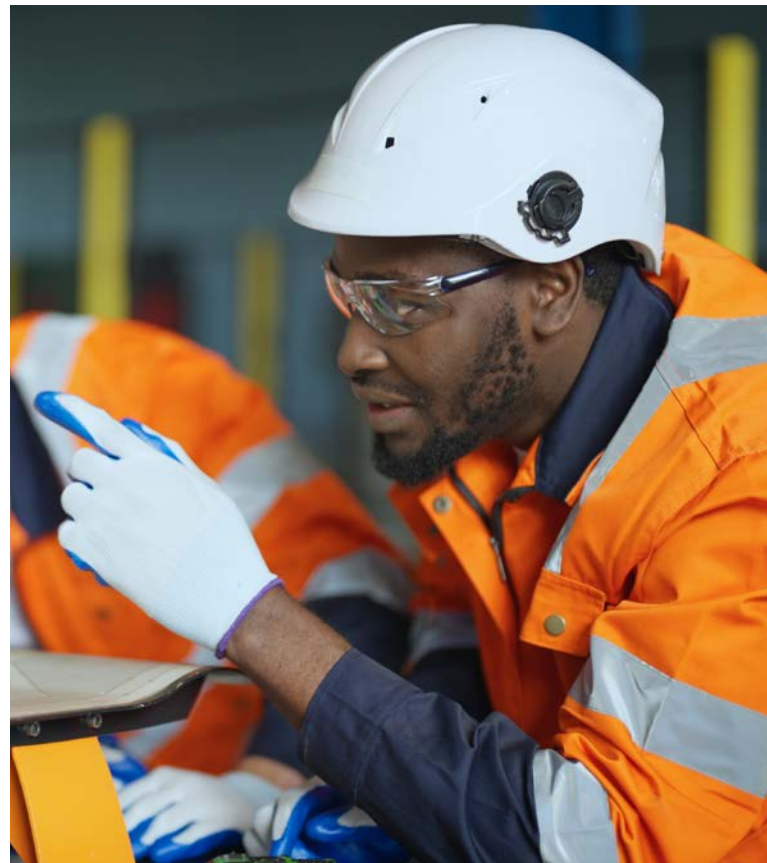
The corridor's strengths include:

- The economic powerhouse of **Oxford**, with its world class knowledge and research-intensive clusters fuelled by one of world's foremost universities. Oxfordshire has world-leading strengths in life sciences and advanced physics and engineering, with many leading innovation clusters including AI, fusion, quantum, space, autonomous transport, energy and biotech.
- **Worcester**, home to nationally and internationally known brands and head offices, with its strong advanced manufacturing base and opportunities around healthcare and professional services, while the Malvern Hills Science Park and a cluster of cyber and technology-led businesses are located nearby.
- **Hereford**, with an outstanding agricultural heritage and home to leading brands, with specialisms today also including advanced manufacturing, defence and security, food and drink production, and tourism.
- Beautiful and **internationally important rural environments and visitor attractions** including the Marches, Malverns and the Cotswolds; the Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site, and a host of attractive market towns such as Great Malvern, Pershore, Evesham, Moreton-in-Marsh, Chipping Norton, Charlbury and Woodstock. There are 90 million visitors to the corridor each year

The corridor currently experiences challenges on its road network. The main route from Oxford to Worcester, the A44 is constrained, with congestion a particular issue in Moreton-in-Marsh, where the road intersects with the A429. Road speeds are low: most Sat Navs instruct drivers travelling between Oxford and Worcester to go via the A344/M40/M42/M5, an 86 mile trip which takes around one hour 40 minutes, whereas the 59 mile journey via the A44 takes around one hour 50 minutes.

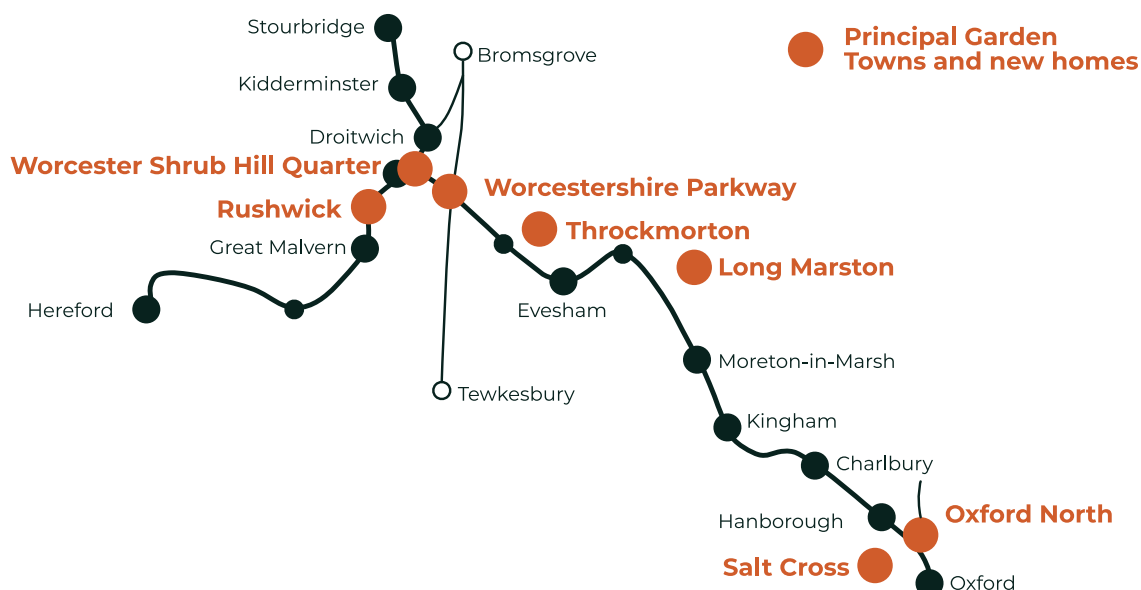
Improved sustainable journeys would grow the local and regional economy by enlarging the labour market along the corridor, encouraging agglomeration benefits and clustering, and providing greater access to markets, supply chains and visitors. It can also remove constraints in Oxford, given the city's high commercial and residential property costs, by providing access from more affordable premises and housing along its route.

In doing so enhancements to the North Cotswold Line can play an important role in the government's economic growth mission.



# Supporting sustainable housing growth

There are a number of significant housing sites planned along the corridor, forecast at the time of the 2020 SOBC to total more than 100,000 homes – a population increase of 250,000 by 2040.



Government's recent revisions to the 'local housing needs' targets have **increased by nearly 80% the amount of housing expected to be delivered across the authorities which have stations** on the route.

This housing can only come forward should it be supported by the right infrastructure at the right time – North Cotswold Line improvements will be a key part of the overall package of improvements needed.

Planning authority	Former indicative annual housing need	New indicative annual housing need	% increase
Oxford	762	1,087	42.6%
West Oxfordshire	549	905	64.71%
Cotswold	504	1,036	105.5%
Wychavon, Malvern Hills, Worcester (joint plan)	1,193	2,174	82.2%
Herefordshire	773	1,363	76.3%
Wyre Forest	211	584	176.7%
<b>Corridor total</b>	<b>3,992</b>	<b>7,149</b>	<b>79%</b>
<b>Estimated 10 year housing growth based on indicative annual housing need (multiplying annual figure by ten)</b>	<b>39,920</b>	<b>71,490</b>	<b>79%</b>
England average			21.3%
Estimated yearly population growth based on annual target (on the basis of 2.36 people per house as per ONS 2024)	9,421	16,871	79%
<b>Estimated 10 year population growth based on annual target</b>	<b>94,211</b>	<b>168,716</b>	<b>79%</b>

# Stimulating and meeting demand

Remarkably, the **North Cotswold Line has increased its patronage since the pandemic** – indicating a strong preference to use rail by communities along the route, which would be very likely to grow following any improvements.

The Task Force reviewed post-Covid passenger numbers in 2023/24, taking account of the addition of the strongly performing Worcestershire Parkway to the route, and adjusting against the lengthy period of rail strikes in 2022/23 and the 2023 Oxford-Didcot (Nuneham Bridge) and Oxford-Hanborough rail closures due to infrastructure problems. This indicated a growth to 1.8m passengers in 2022/23, **with a recovery to 104% of pre-COVID levels, compared to 85% nationally.**

The Task Force similarly reviewed the SOBC’s future demand with the proposed two trains per hour service, ongoing background growth and developments in Local Plan housing volumes.

This indicated that by 2040 there would be a further 1.05 million annual trips on the route, around a 60% increase.

Clearly the increased housing targets noted on the opposite page are likely to add to these passenger growth volumes.

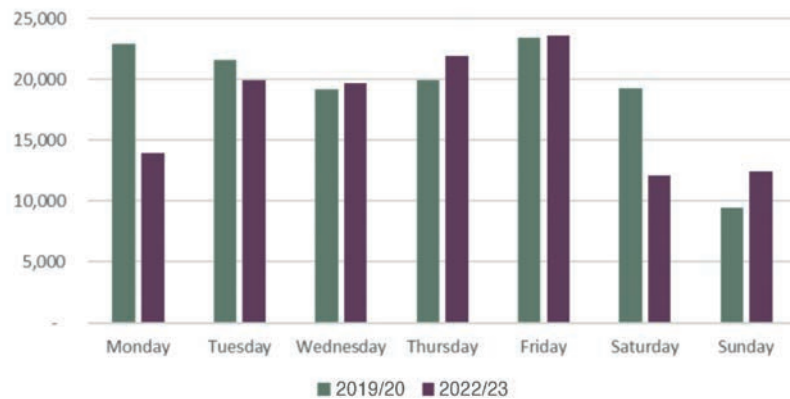
## Cotswold Line Journeys 2019/20 and 2022/23



Absolute journeys on North Cotswold Line for 2019/20 and 2022/23.

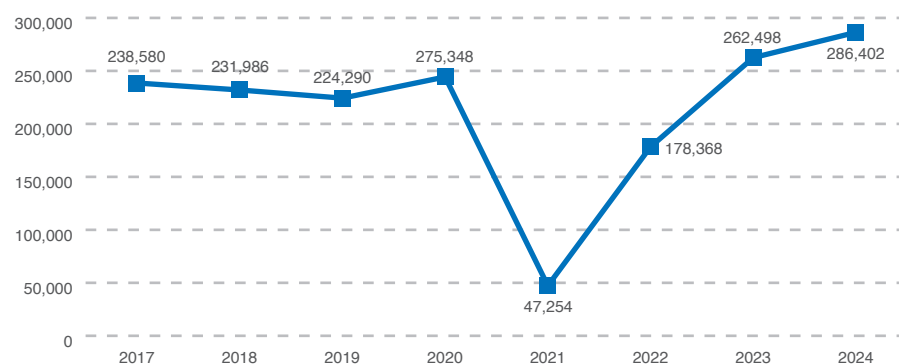
Corrections made for strike days and service disruption.

## By day of the week



Rail usage by day of the week

## Hanborough Station



Hanborough Station exit and entries by year, showing it now exceeds the pre-pandemic levels.

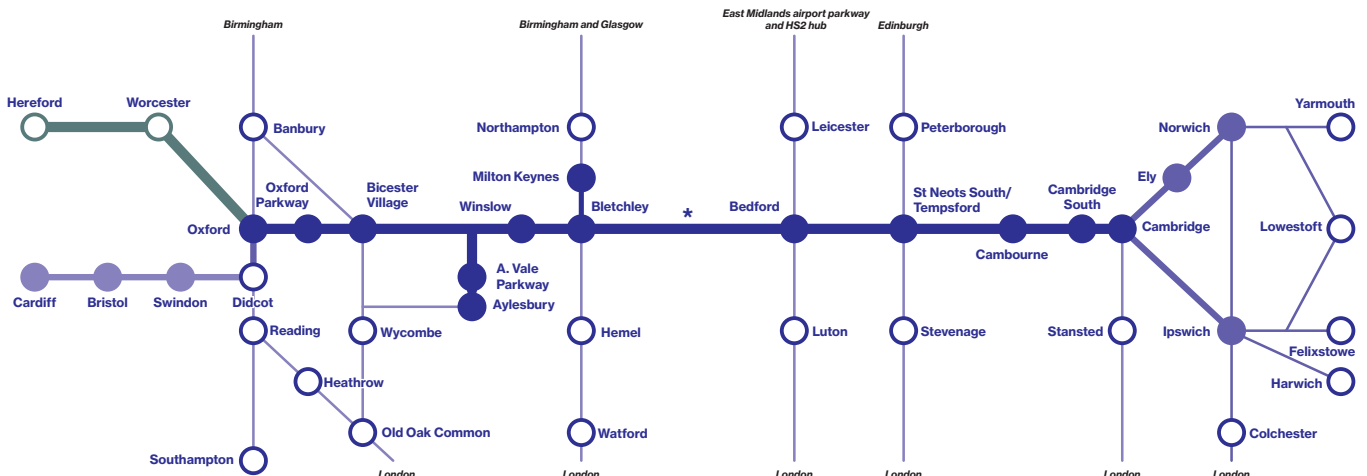
# How the enhancements meet DfT's strategic priorities

## Improving the performance of the railways

The North Cotswold Line enhancements will result in quicker, more frequent journeys and more passengers using the railway. And we know that the demand is there – unlike many areas of the country, with the North Cotswold Line's increase in passenger numbers since the pandemic as noted previously.

But this isn't just about the North Cotswold Line in isolation. The enhancements will connect people to East West Rail via interchange at Oxford – helping to maximise the number of people who can benefit from what will be a transformational improvement in east-west connectivity by rail. This includes giving an attractive alternative for people to travel towards East Anglia using East West Rail, rather than existing routes via Birmingham. East West Rail intersects with major lines including West Coast, Midland, East Coast and Greater Anglia, unlocking extensive UK-wide travel options without the need to travel into London.

In its response to the East West Railway Company's 2025 consultation, the East West Main Line Partnership (a grouping of local authorities, sub-national transport bodies and business leaders across the East West Rail route), highlighted the importance of improving onward rail connectivity to and from East West Rail stations, including via the North Cotswold Line.



### Key:

- East West Rail core scheme between Oxford, Milton Keynes and Cambridge
- Proposed East Main Line extension to Ipswich and Norwich (the 'Eastern Section')
- Proposed East West Main Line extension to Swindon, Bristol and potentially Cardiff

[\*] The configuration of stations between Bletchley and Bedford is to be confirmed by East West Railway Company following a public consultation.

Map produced by the East West Main Line Partnership (EWMLP) showing its vision for a coast-to-coast main line from Bristol/South Wales through to Norwich and Ipswich.

## Improving bus services

Proposals have been developed to improve facilities further at a number of railway stations in West Oxfordshire, including Hanborough and Charlbury.

Land at Hanborough Station has been set aside for a new station building, parking facilities and mobility hub improvements. The vision is for a modern and efficient mobility hub that is safe and accessible for all, with dedicated walking and cycling connections and frequent, integrated and reliable bus services, making sustainable transport the natural choice for those accessing the station.



## **Social mobility and tackling regional inequality**

The North Cotswold Line contains towns and cities which have significant areas of deprivation. Indeed, Worcester, Great Malvern, Kidderminster, Hereford and Oxford all contain neighbourhoods that are identified as being amongst the 10% most deprived in the country (2019 indices of deprivation).

Improvements to connectivity will break down barriers to accessing employment, skills and housing.

Housing affordability remains a significant problem throughout the corridor. In 2023 in the Cotswold district, the housing affordability ratio (average earnings in relation to house prices) was 14.9, compared to the English average of 8.3. It was 11.7 in Oxford; 10 in Wychavon; and 9.8 in Herefordshire. Conversely, housing was more affordable in Worcester (7.4) and Wyre Forest (7.3), indicating that greater connectivity in the corridor may unlock a more dynamic housing market, while unlocking greater access to job and training opportunities.

## **Greener transport**

The enhancements will give existing and future residents located within the catchment areas of existing North Cotswold Line stations an attractive rail alternative to compete with other transport modes, particularly road, to make work, leisure and retail trips.

In doing so, it will contribute towards reducing carbon emissions from transport and achieving the UK's net zero requirements.

Importantly, the enhancements will also help protect the environmentally sensitive environs of the Cotswolds and Malverns by enabling more people to sustainably access them.

## **Integrating transport networks**

Increasing frequency on the North Cotswold Line will also help with developing a core rail network in Oxfordshire based around core interchange hubs to the north and south of Oxford. Likely to be developed as Oxfordshire Metro in the Oxon Rail Strategy, but this is still in development.



# Strong support from partners

There is strong political and business support for the North Cotswold Line enhancements.

The North Cotswold Task Force, chaired by Lord Faulkner of Worcester and managed for its partners by SLC Rail has promoted the scheme for several years, including the commissioning of the Strategic Outline Business Case which was submitted to government in 2020. Over the years the task force's membership has included:

- Oxfordshire County Council
- Worcestershire County Council
- Warwickshire County Council
- Gloucestershire County Council
- Herefordshire Council
- Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership
- Gfirst LEP (Gloucestershire)
- Coventry and Warwickshire LEP
- Worcestershire LEP
- The Marches LEP

- Cotswold Line Promotion Group ((of which Lord Faulkner of Worcester is president and vice-presidents include Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton; Lord Adonis, Nigel Huddleston MP and Layla Moran MP).

The scheme is also included within England's Economic Heartland sub-national transport body's investment matrix for the region. It is featured in its Connecting Economies report highlighting strategic priorities which will unlock economic growth. EEH's recent study on main line connectivity highlighted the opportunity for the enhancements, as does Oxfordshire's Rail Corridor Study.

The East West Main Line Partnership also highlights the importance of Oxford Station as a regional hub for onward services on East West Rail. In its response to the East West Railway Company's 2025 consultation, it referenced the opportunity for improved connectivity on the North Cotswold Line as a way of maximising the value of Government's investment in East West Rail.





**Cllr Liz Leffman, Leader of Oxfordshire County Council, said:**

“ Despite welcoming more passengers than before the pandemic, the North Cotswold Line’s potential is severely constrained by the limited frequency of services. Improving this would enable the line to support sustainable economic and housing growth within an environmentally-sensitive area.

It would sustainably connect people to an area of outstanding natural beauty, while also creating new opportunities for businesses and the labour market by better linking the historic cities of Hereford, Worcester and Oxford.

Indeed, with Oxford becoming a key interchange station for services on East West Rail to Milton Keynes, Bedford and Cambridge, the North Cotswold Line can play a key role in improving connectivity from the Welsh border and West Midlands right across to East Anglia. ”

**Cllr Liz Leffman**



**Councillor Simon Geraghty, Leader of Worcestershire County Council, said:**

“ The improvements to the North Cotswold Line are imperative to support the growth of Worcestershire’s local and visitor economy by supporting sustainable travel by rail.

Over the coming decades, the county is set to see its biggest development in recent history with a new town being proposed, based around the successful Worcestershire Parkway station; a station that that has exceeded all expectations. There are up to 10,000 homes planned for the new town, and a further 5000 homes in nearby Pershore, along with more associated developments along the line such as Shrub Hill Quarter.

As Worcestershire is a growing county, the improvements would provide enhanced connectivity through more frequent and quick services to key destinations along the line, improving connectivity, to and from, destinations such as Oxford and London. ”

**Cllr Simon Geraghty**



