

Strategic Transport Priorities for The Marches



Midlands Connect
Transport | Investment | Growth

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Working with the Marches and Welsh Government

Since its inception in 2014, Midlands Connect has been in discussions with the Local Enterprise Partnership, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin and the Welsh Government on projects to the west of our region, ensuring that priorities are aligned on both sides of the border. Access to and from Mid-Wales is key to the economy of the Marches Region and hubs such as Hereford and Shrewsbury form major commercial centres serving communities within both England and Wales.

With a population of almost 700k, and a contribution of £14.3bn to UK plc, the Marches makes up a region in the ascent with growth of over 5% per annum. To keep up with this growth its residents and business need to have access to a wider region. By determining the strategic transport priorities required for growth, we can ensure a bright future for

the region. Looking West the Marches is within easy reach of the West Midlands conurbation and to the West - Mid Wales, where vital connections can be poor.

Home to over 205,000 people, Mid-Wales has significant sectoral strengths in agriculture, food, tourism, manufacturing and defence; with the economy on the whole contributing around £3.6bn GVA to the UK economy.

With focus now on the Government's Union Connectivity Review (UCR), this document highlights some of the current work being undertaken by Midlands Connect, also discussing the strategic issues that Midlands Connect, the Marches Authorities and the Welsh Government will pursue together.

Midlands Rail Hub

Midlands Rail Hub is Midlands Connect's flagship rail scheme and is at the forefront of Midlands Engine Rail – a portfolio of rail schemes designed to complement and build on HS2, spreading the benefits to the whole of the Midlands, adding east-west links, making new connections into the high-speed network and exploiting the capacity HS2 releases for new passenger and freight services.

The arrival of HS2 to Birmingham will not only increase capacity for more local and regional services, but when complete, will provide a gateway to those travelling North from the South West and Wales.

Looking from Birmingham to the South West, Midlands Rail Hub will introduce additional services including:

- +1TPH Birmingham Moor Street to Hereford – with a journey time around 15 minutes faster than today
- +1TPH Birmingham Moor Street to Bristol Temple Meads
- +1TPH Birmingham Moor Street to Cardiff Central (via Gloucester)

TPH = Trains per hour

The trains to Hereford (for connections into the Marches Line) and Cardiff Central will provide a doubling of frequency on the respective corridors. The largest single infrastructure change required by Midlands Rail Hub is in Birmingham, with further infrastructure improvements needed at numerous locations between Birmingham and Hereford.

Network Rail has developed an Outline Business Case for Midlands Rail Hub, with oversight provided by the Department for Transport (Client) and Midlands Connect (Client Partner). The Outline Business Case was submitted to Government in December 2022, with a request being made for funding for the next stage – the Full Business Case.

The scheme has strong support within the Midlands Connect partnership and from neighbouring transport bodies, with Western Gateway strongly endorsing the additional services to Bristol and Cardiff, and Transport for Wales providing strong support for the Cardiff service. Cross-boundary support of this nature will be invaluable when the submission of the business case is made, demonstrating to Treasury that the outcomes of the scheme extend far beyond the immediate Midlands Connect geography.



Union Connectivity Review (UCR)

Midlands Connect has been highly supportive of the UCR, along with more widely recognised links into North and South Wales, we were keen to show the importance of the need for improved connectivity into Mid Wales. Our evidence was brought together by a consortium of leaders and officers from both sides of the border and highlighted:

- 1 The importance of both rail and road links for health, education, work and tourism.
- 2 Difficulties that can be faced with differing organisations, priorities and regimes either side of the border.
- 3 The hinderance of rurality to these cross-border areas.
- 4 The importance of the A5 in accessing international ports.

Once the Government has responded to the review we will look to fast-track the recommendations to encourage investment as soon as possible.

Union Connectivity Review – rail study

In advance of the Government response, we are working to provide evidence for the rail elements promoted by the UCR. Midlands Connect aims to understand the current socio-economic challenges faced by the region, building on previous evidence bases. This is being done through the development of a Case for Change Report.

The report looks at current rail usage, journey patterns across the regions and the role of interchanges in modal shift. It identifies the interventions required on the Marches, Cambrian, Heart of Wales, and Shrewsbury to Chester lines. It includes planned and aspirational changes in wider transport, land use and business/industry that might change the way rail is being used (with valuable input from partners and stakeholders). The outputs from the Case for Change report will be used to inform on potential workstreams and aspirational plans that may be developed, pending funding.

As part of this workstream, Midlands Connect are working jointly with Transport for Wales and the Welsh Government to gather robust evidence on cross-border movements, to better understand the role our networks provide.



Birmingham – Black Country – Shrewsbury rail line improvements

In August 2022, we submitted our Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) to improve journey times on the corridor by speeding up the line to 90 mph from Shrewsbury to Wolverhampton. This scheme requires minimal infrastructure intervention in the form of minor track alignment in two locations and some re-signalling improvements on the line. The SOBC analyses five different options, with some giving a Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR) of over 16. The capital cost of the scheme is estimated at £15 million with

no additional operating costs assumed. Funding is being sought from the DfT through Rail Network Enhancements Programme (RNEP) to develop the Outline Business Case once it has gone through the Midlands Connect governance. Any improvements to Shrewsbury will have a knock-on effect and improve travel time between the Midlands and Wales along the Marches, Cambrian and Heart of Wales Lines, to towns such as Aberystwyth.

A5 and Pant - Llanymynech

Following the announcement in the 2018 budget that the Pant-Llanymynech bypass would be looked at within the RIS 3 timeframe, National Highways have been looking at the scheme in more detail. As part of this, National Highways have been working with local stakeholders and the Welsh Government to build a

case for investment in the network. This ties in with the investment needed in the A5, not just to improve local safety, but to enhance the longer distance role played by the A5 in connecting England to Holyhead and beyond.

Access to rail

This project aims to identify key areas of work that will encourage train and multi-modal transport use. Three initial workstreams have been identified which are:

- Station classification
- Research into the barriers preventing people from using the rail network
- Best practice for multi-modal rail interchanges

This work will aim to improve rail access both across the Midlands and beyond, working with the Welsh Government to ensure best practice and consistency. We will look to potentially trial innovative concepts on some of the routes with Wales.



A49 corridor

The A49 is the backbone to the Marches and a key link, not just between Hereford and Shrewsbury, but between North and South Wales. The road connects not just communities along its length but is essential for both freight movements and visitors to the region.

Over the years there have been several studies along the route, some focussing on local safety, some on the commercial impact of closures and diversions and some on specific schemes, most recently the need for intervention in Hereford.

Moving forward, with National Highways we will think about the role of this road, alternatives (both modal and geographical), and how it serves its many purposes. Given its role in moving people and freight in and out of Wales, we would see this as a joint area of interest.

Alongside the route of the A49 runs the Marches rail line. We will look at this route to consider its role and operation for both local and strategic users as well as safety issues at some of the level crossings along its length.

Technology and innovation programme

Alongside our traditional focus on road and rail, Midlands Connect is undertaking a number of projects which will be of interest across the partnership. These include:



Electric vehicles (EV) and their associated infrastructure



Decarbonisation



Technology on MRN Routes



A new way to look at freight



Alternative fuels for freight

EV charging infrastructure and other alternative fuels

In 2021/22 we began working on the EV charging programme including research to understand the current position of EV charging across the region and what we need to deliver to align with net zero goals. This is set out in the [Supercharging the Midlands](#) report. We also developed and began testing an EV infrastructure planning tool which will help partner authorities to develop and plan for their local infrastructures.

We are now supporting local authorities with practical implementation so they can fulfil the statutory obligations which OZEV began to map out in their recent infrastructure strategy. A Centre of Excellence for EV has now been established which includes regular workshops along with content which will be generated and published in our knowledge hubs. The aim is also to use this forum to look at areas such as developing commercial business cases, procurement processes as well as bringing together key stakeholders in the region to solve common challenges.

Midlands Connect recognises the role that Hydrogen may be able to play within the UK's Net Zero future. Our work in exploring alternative fuels for the freight industry has exposed the challenges presented by decarbonisation and the Net Zero target for 2050. The need to consider alternatives to electric vehicle batteries for powering the heaviest of HGVs has brought about the investigation of hydrogen's potential.

The outputs of our work have also informed initial investigations of potential Energy SuperHub sites across the Midlands to help decarbonise the transport network. Through this we are also enabling a UK-wide consistent approach to assessing the need for alternative fuels infrastructure.





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