

Draft East Sussex Coast and Marshlink Strategic Study

Response from TfSE

Transport for the South East welcomes the opportunity to comment on Network Rail's Draft East Sussex Coast and Marshlink Strategic Study. This is an officer response following TfSE's involvement as a stakeholder and attendance of study meetings at the Depot Lewes and over Teams.

TfSE is a sub-national transport body (STB) for the South East of England. Our principal decision-making body, the [Partnership Board](#), brings together representatives from our 16 constituent local transport authorities, district and borough authorities, protected landscapes, business representatives, Highways England, Network Rail and Transport for London. High-quality transport infrastructure is critical to making the South East more competitive, contributing to national prosperity and improving the lives of our residents.

TfSE have published a [Strategic Investment Plan \(SIP\)](#) to help both government and LTAs prioritise investment in our region. The packages detailed in the SIP address eight investment priorities aligned with the vision and strategic goals of the TfSE Transport Strategy and the wider regional and national policy context. It provides a framework for investment in strategic transport infrastructure, services, and regulatory interventions in the coming three decades.

The current SIP represents the culmination of five years of technical work, stakeholder engagement, and institutional development. It is underpinned by a credible, evidence-based technical programme that has enabled TfSE and our partners to:

- Understand the current and future challenges and opportunities in the south east.
- Identify stakeholder priorities for their respective areas of interest.
- Evaluate the impacts of a wide range of plausible scenarios on the south east's economy, society, and environment.
- Develop multi-modal, cross-boundary interventions.
- Assess the impact of proposed interventions on transport and socio-economic outcomes; and
- Prioritise the interventions that best address the south east's most pressing challenges and unlock the south east's most promising opportunities.

As we identified in our [Outer Orbital Area Study Options Assessment Report](#) and [Solent and Sussex Coast Strategic Programme Outline Case](#) (which form part of the evidence base for the SIP), east – west rail connectivity (journey times and frequency) is poor, especially compared to radial rail services. Rail capacity is insufficient to accommodate the needs of long-distance passenger, local

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passenger, and rail freight customers. The Marshlink railway is inadequate to meet future aspirations for stakeholders in East Sussex and Kent and is a key element supporting our vision.

The Marshlink railway currently faces constraints including limited capacity, lack of electrification, and relatively slow journey times. Operating services on this “island” of diesel operation is expensive and inefficient. The railway offers poor east-west connectivity for the communities it serves. It also contributes to the relative “isolation” of Bexhill and Hastings. Stakeholders believe this connectivity gap makes it harder to attract investment to these towns. There are aspirations to use this railway to run high speed services from London St Pancras to Hastings, Bexhill, and Eastbourne via Hastings. This would help develop Ashford as an international transport hub (and strengthen the case for the long-term sustainability of international rail services at this station). However, the quality (and traction) of this railway presents a significant barrier to this project.

We agree that there are also multiple issues with level crossings on strategic highways along the South Coast. The A259 between Hastings and Ashford (East Sussex/Kent) is particularly hazardous in places, as shown in Figure 2.29. There are several steep inclines, tight bends, and level crossings on this highway between Hastings and Ashford. These present significant safety risks for all users on this highway.

TfSE also name East Coastway Line - Faster Services as a scheme in our SIP (ref J6) which is supported by this strategy. We have cited the need for Increased line speeds on the East Coastway Line, to reduce journey times between Brighton, Lewes, Eastbourne and Hastings.

Are TfSE happy with the direction of the strategy?

TfSE has consistently highlighted the importance of enhancing rail connectivity along this corridor. This route is vital for regional economic growth, reducing social exclusion, and improving access to high-speed rail services. TfSE are happy with the direction the strategic study is taking and its alignment with TfSE’s Strategy and SIP. Our Vision is for the South East to offer the highest quality of life for all and be a global leader in achieving sustainable, net zero carbon growth. To achieve this, we will develop a resilient, reliable, and inclusive transport network that enables seamless journeys and empowers residents, businesses, and visitors to make sustainable choices.

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TfSE is committed to supporting strategic interventions that align with our long-term transport vision and missions set out in our new Transport Strategy. The Study is aligned with our strategy Missions of:

- Strategic Connectivity
 - Realistic consideration of reduced journey times along this important coastal corridor.
 - Reduction/improvement of the road/rail interface
 - The inclusion of Rail Freight connectivity and provision for the study area.
- Resilience
 - Consideration of coastal erosion between Eastbourne and Bexhill
- Inclusion and Integration
 - Consideration of ease of interchange at various stations along the route
- Decarbonisation
 - Consideration of the impact on climate change on the study area
 - The inclusion of ways to increase modal share to the train including through ticketing and Mobility as a Service through the Plus Bus service
- Sustainable Growth
 - Direction to make service more attractive to non-rail passenger and bring new markets to rail
 - Consideration of the future infrastructure requirements for the study area

We have identified in our Strategic Investment Plan (SIP) as part of our High Speed Rail East package for Kent, Medway, and East Sussex, proposal T2 - High Speed 1 / Marsh Link - Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne Upgrade which identifies the need for new high speed services to Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne via High Speed 1 / the Marshlink Line to markedly reduce journey times between these locations and London.

While we acknowledge the current constraints around delivering high-speed services via the Marshlink Line, we welcome innovative approaches that could address these barriers over the long term which are set out in the report. TfSE are keen to continue collaboration with Network Rail and other partners to explore opportunities for accelerating the development and delivery of strategic solutions in this corridor, consistent with the objectives set out in our Strategic Investment Plan. The Strategy looks at the entire line and we support the approach of looking at the six listed options and the proposition of options to resolve them:

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- Demand for additional trains
- Demand for faster journeys
- Improvements to interchange stations
- Aspirations for new and virtual stations
- Hampden Park level crossing issues
- Highspeed to Bexhill and Eastbourne.

TfSE are keen to engage further with Network Rail over the scheme/s and next steps as we refresh our SIP and draft our Rail Strategy for the TfSE area (both taking place this year). This provides us the opportunity to align our expectations and plans while supporting each other's priorities.

How would TfSE prioritise the investment in the Study Area?

TfSE supports the proposal of an incremental approach to delivery. Prioritisation of the easiest to deliver elements with greatest impact would be a sensible approach for early intervention. The approach should be mindful of current national funding constraints and the evolution of the planned rail reform and creation of Great British Railways. Local government reorganisation and devolution should also be a consideration as from May 2026 Sussex and Brighton will be a mayoral combined county authority and then Unitary Authorities will come into being from May 2027.

Alignment with the upcoming Integrated National Transport Strategy should be a consideration of the strategic study and its prioritisation. Continued alignment with the priorities outlined in our new Transport Strategy and the emerging TfSE Rail Strategy and SIP refresh would be precedent to TfSE and we are happy to collaborate as needed with Network rail to ensure we remain aligned. We would also state the importance of alignment with LTP's published by the relevant LTA's.

We would like to understand what can be delivered without majorly disrupting services while improvements are made and if changing scheduling can improve disruption. It would be disadvantageous to encourage modal shift away from rail through lengthy works and then encourage them back when complete.

How detailed should the strategic study be?

This would be dependent on the proposed audience and how the strategic study is planned to be used and what next steps get laid out as recommendations in the final study report. We would encourage you to tailor the report in the way the Gatwick study was done so that we (TfSE, KCC, East Sussex,) know what tangible action could be taken in partnership with Network Rail to support progress toward assessing the business case for the line speed improvements to facilitate further improvements in frequency. This could help

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us assess whether there is anything TfSE can do to support further progress of the scheme.

We would encourage caution and discretion over the elements of the study that can raise expectations through their resurrection when they have failed to materialise in the past. While we support the approach Network Rail are taking to improve services for passengers, the Willingdon chord and some of the new stations are examples of elements that were not included in our SIP after consultation with stakeholders. TfSE are happy to collaborate moving forward to maintain alignment of our plans with yours and manage expectations of stakeholders.