



Transport & Infrastructure Committee

4 November 2024

Title:	Wisbech Rail (also known as March to Wisbech Modal Appraisal)
Report of:	Matthew Lutz, Transport Programme Manager
Lead Member:	Cllr Anna Smith, Chair of Transport and Infrastructure Committee
Public Report:	Yes
Key Decision:	No
Voting Arrangements:	No vote required.

Recommendations:

A	To note the Wisbech Rail project and the Network Rail Strategic Option Appraisal Report.
B	To agree the Committee's preferred next steps.

Strategic Objective(s):

The proposals within this report fit under the following strategic objective(s):

X	Achieving good growth – Wisbech Rail aims to facilitate growth within both March and Wisbech
X	Increased connectivity – Wisbech Rail will increase the connectivity between March and Wisbech

1. Purpose

1.1	To give an update about the Wisbech Rail project following the completion of the Strategic Option Appraisal Report by Network Rail.
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2. Proposal

2.1	To note progress on the project and offer feedback on the improving the connectivity between Wisbech and March.
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3. Background

3.1 Background

The railway from March to Wisbech was originally opened in 1847 under the Eastern Counties Railway, later becoming part of the Great Eastern Railway in 1862. Constructed as a double-track railway, it was designed primarily to serve the Port of Wisbech, with the line eventually extending to Watlington Junction, linking it to the Ely to King's Lynn route. Officially known as the Wisbech Goods Branch (Engineer's Line Reference WIG), the line runs from March East Junction to its nominal terminus at Wisbech.

Passenger services on this line were discontinued in 1968, and significant portions of the track, particularly beyond Weasenham Lane level crossing, have since been removed. However, the remaining section of the rail corridor is still under the ownership of Network Rail.

Originally built as a twin-track railway, the line was reduced to a single track in 1972. From that point until 2000, it was used exclusively for freight, serving key industrial sites such as Metal Box and Purina, located south of Wisbech. The section closer to March continues to be operational, primarily supporting shunting activities and providing access to Whitemoor Yard via the chord line from March West Junction.

Operations on the line were conducted under the "One Train" principle (OTS), meaning only a single train could operate on the line at any given time. Since 2000, the line has been classified as "Out of Use (temporarily)" in Network Rail's Sectional Appendix. Despite its inactive status, the line has not been formally closed nor removed from the National Rail network through a Network Change process, leaving open the possibility of future reactivation.

3.2 Work Completed to Date

The Combined Authority previously commissioned Mott MacDonald to explore options for establishing a transport link between March and Wisbech. This resulted in the production of numerous documents designed to inform the development of the proposed transport link. In 2020, key documents were updated and reissued to reflect the latest findings and insights.

From 2021 to 2022, Network Rail's Design Delivery team conducted a comprehensive feasibility review of the proposals developed by Mott MacDonald on behalf of the Combined Authority. This review drew on nine essential documents and other relevant supporting information. The Network Rail Light Rail Knowledge team evaluated various options for implementing suitable light rail technology and operational solutions, working without the constraints of current national rail design and operating standards, except where interfacing with the existing rail network.

3.3 Scope of current work

In alignment with previous representations made to the TIC, the Combined Authority engaged Network Rail to conduct an Options Assessment Report.

This report evaluates all available on-rail modal options, focusing on the potential introduction of a shuttle passenger service between March and Wisbech. This initiative aims to enhance transport connectivity and improve access to local commuting markets, supporting job opportunities and fostering economic regeneration in the region. The primary objective is to achieve an appraisal of the four potential rail options that would facilitate a passenger service centred on a shuttle service.

Network Rail's Engineering Services team collaborated closely with the Light Rail Team to identify the necessary infrastructure enhancements for the proposed project. This collaboration resulted in the development of a comprehensive Strategic Option Appraisal Report.

Furthermore, the insights and findings outlined in this report would play a crucial role in guiding Network Rail's Sponsorship team if they were minded to develop a Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC), as it would form the baseline for detailed cost and economic analyses.

3.4	<p><u>Progress to date</u></p> <p>The first phase is represented by the Strategic Option Appraisal Report, produced by Network Rail's Engineering Services and Light Rail Knowledge teams. Four options were considered with the aim to develop enhanced infrastructure requirements contingent on future funding decisions. By focusing solely on core requirements, the minimum credible infrastructure solution for each option can serve as a baseline. This approach balances Capital Expenditure (CAPEX) with Operational Expenditure (OPEX), allowing for the development of identified 'non-core' elements upon the approval of further funding.</p>
3.5	<p>The four core options considered in this report are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Option 1: Provision of a heavy (conventional) rail transport link; • Option 2: Provision of a tram-train (hybrid heavy/light rail) transport system, including sub-options for connectivity with existing local systems; • Option 3: Provision of a tram (light rail) transport system; and • Option 4: Provision of a very light rail (VLR) transport system.
3.6	<p>These options take into account stakeholder aspirations for uninterrupted connectivity to the wider mainline rail network and integration with local infrastructure, all within the context of local environmental characteristics and potential impacts. Significant considerations include the interfaces between rail and highway corridors, rolling stock, and future maintenance and operation.</p>
3.7	<p>In early June 2023, a joint site visit was conducted, allowing Network Rail to observe the corridor firsthand, including the station interface at March and key structures along the route. Several points of interest were identified, facilitating informed discussions on-site. Attendees included representatives from the sponsorship team, light rail team, and engineering services. Points of note identified include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interaction with March Station: Potential termination, connection, and stabling facilities. • Norwood Road Bridge: A rail overbridge (road over rail) located just outside the curve north of March station. It is a bi-directional single carriageway currently restricted to single lane working (traffic controlled). The steep incline of the approaches constrains options, necessitating further consideration of its interface with proposed rail modalities. • Level Crossings: Numerous interfaces between a new or re-established rail corridor and the local road network (adopted and local farm access) are present. The Engineering Services level crossing team is collaborating with the Light Rail and Knowledge team to assess these interfaces and their usage in any future scheme. • Chain Bridge and Level Crossing: A significant river crossing with an adjacent level crossing on a busy local road. • Wisbech Bypass Level Crossing: Interfaces with busy highways. • Weasenham Lane Level Crossing: Interfaces with heavy/haulage traffic, situated near a potential employment zone identified by the local authority. • Traffic Weight Restrictions: Influence traffic flow to level crossings in Wisbech. • Integrity of Support Structures: Consideration of collision protection against derailed rolling stock and errant road vehicles is essential. • Bridges and Culverts: All identified overline and underline structures, including culverts, will require assessment as part of the reinstatement of the line, potentially involving extensive strengthening or reconstruction work. Under-bridges are assumed to be designed for heavy rail rolling stock, requiring capacity assessment and remedial work.
3.8	<p>The Strategic Option Appraisal Report provides essential core information, supplemented by elements of the broader scheme plans. The outputs from this report are intended to contribute to the sponsorship team's overarching report, offering critical insights for further development.</p>

3.9	<p>The final Network Rail report encompasses a balanced modal appraisal of all rail options based on stakeholder aspirations, cost planning, economic considerations, and the benefits and differences identified for each option. The Network Rail report, includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outputs from the Strategic Option Appraisal Report; and • Cost planning and economic analysis for each modal option. 																														
3.10	<p>Network Rail was tasked with delivering a comprehensive appraisal of all proposed options, without recommending a preferred option for progression. The responsibility for selecting the option to advance to the next stage of business case development will rest with the Combined Authority through TIC.</p>																														
3.11	<p>A key output of the Network Rail study is the Overview of Modal Options Comparison Cost Advice & Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR), which is summarised in the table below.</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Modal Option</th> <th>Key Considerations</th> <th>Cost Advice Range AFC (Based on 1Q 2024)</th> <th>BCR (Core Results)</th> <th>Unassured cost estimates sensitivity test</th> <th>BCR (using unassured costs)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Option 1 - Provision of Heavy Rail System</td> <td>Delivers a service between March and Wisbech. Provides opportunity for future connection to the main line, should capacity become available. There are significant risks with the highways interfaces such as at the A47 crossing that require mitigation by complex, high-cost infrastructure.</td> <td>£189-230m</td> <td>0.10</td> <td>189-230m</td> <td>0.10</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Option 2 – Provision of Tram/Train (Hybrid Heavy Rail/Light Rail) System</td> <td>Delivers a service between March and Wisbech. Provides opportunity for future connection to the main line, should capacity become available. Plus, the potential for an on-street section to Wisbech’s Horsefair bus station. The cost-effective management of the rail / highway interfaces is enabled by the application of light rail operating principles which minimises infrastructure requirements.</td> <td>£147-179m</td> <td>0.18</td> <td>£122-148m</td> <td>0.22</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Option 3 – Provision of Light Rail System</td> <td>Delivers a service between March and Wisbech only. Plus, the potential for an on-street section to Wisbech’s Horsefair bus station. 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The BCR is only part of the Business Case we also need to consider the strategic case and wider economic benefits.</p> <p>In light of the BCR analysis for the proposed scheme, it is evident that the project has a very low BCR of between 0.10 and 0.27, dependant on the preferred option. This figure falls well below the threshold typically required to justify investment in transport infrastructure, where schemes with a BCR of 1.5 or higher are generally considered more viable. To put this into context, other rail projects, such as the Northern Powerhouse Rail scheme has a BCR of around 1.3, reflecting a much stronger economic case for funding. Similarly, the Thameslink Programme, which had a BCR of approximately 2.0, demonstrates the level of economic return expected for rail infrastructure projects of this scale.</p> <p>Given this significant disparity, it is clear that the current proposal is unlikely to be supported through standard funding channels. Therefore, we must be realistic about the position and reconsider the approach, whether by exploring alternative funding sources, revisiting the scope of the scheme, or redirecting efforts towards projects with stronger economic justifications. Any further investment in this scheme without a clear path to improving its BCR would be challenging to defend in the face of competing priorities for rail infrastructure funding.</p>	Modal Option	Key Considerations	Cost Advice Range AFC (Based on 1Q 2024)	BCR (Core Results)	Unassured cost estimates sensitivity test	BCR (using unassured costs)	Option 1 - Provision of Heavy Rail System	Delivers a service between March and Wisbech. Provides opportunity for future connection to the main line, should capacity become available. 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3.12	<p>Ahead of the discussion at this TIC meeting, officers from the Combined Authority and Network Rail presented the key findings to members of FDC on 1st October 2024. This engagement ensured that locally elected members had the opportunity to review the findings and provide considered feedback. Below is a summary of the key points raised by FDC members:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preference for Train-Tram and Conventional Rail Solutions: The majority of members expressed a preference for train-tram and train options, with several noting that while the BCR is an important consideration, it should not be viewed as the sole determining factor. Additionally, some members raised concerns over the financial inefficiency of the train option, advocating for the train-tram alternative to be prioritised. 																														

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service Extension Proposals: Members suggested that the service should be extended to Ely and Cambridge, with strong opposition to a shuttle service as a viable option. There was also some discussion around the potential for further extending the service to King’s Lynn. • Station Location Considerations: It was recommended that the station be situated in the centre of Wisbech, despite the additional costs this would incur over Option 1. There was consensus that a station located at Horsefair would offer greater advantages than one within Wisbech’s existing train station footprint. • Funding and Strategic Commitment: Funding for the project has been identified within the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP), and members emphasised the need to maintain this allocation to support continued development of the Wisbech to March scheme. • Support for EACE Initiative: The Ely Area Capacity Enhancement (EACE) received unanimous support from members, who acknowledged its significance in contributing to the wider rail network and driving improvements across the region. • Consideration of Housing Growth and Economic Benefits: The Chief Executive highlighted that the District Council may wish to reassess housing growth figures to enhance the project’s economic feasibility, possibly leveraging land value capture. Furthermore, the committee was urged to consider the broader economic benefits, particularly if commercial and industrial land in Wisbech could be unlocked through enhanced east-west connectivity.
3.13	<p><u>Alternatives</u></p> <p>The Combined Authority has also investigated alternative options, including autonomous vehicles, which could present an innovative and potentially cost-effective substitute for traditional rail-guided solutions between Wisbech and March. These autonomous systems could offer a faster, more affordable, and improved service compared to existing transport solutions.</p> <p>Furthermore, there is considerable potential to extend these options beyond the March to Wisbech corridor, enhancing rural connectivity to other towns and cities in Fenland. This approach could provide a sustainable transport solution for urban centres such as Ely, Peterborough, and Cambridge, representing a significant advancement in both rural and intercity connectivity. By prioritising these innovative transport options, the Combined Authority aims to create a more integrated and efficient transport network that meets the diverse needs of the region.</p>
3.14	<p>Following the outcomes of the Network Rail report, there are three potential options for next steps (which are not mutually exclusive) that would benefit from member feedback. The Transport and Infrastructure Committee (TIC) is asked to provide input on the proposed programme of work aimed at further developing public transport connectivity between Wisbech and March. Specifically, feedback is requested on the following:</p> <p><u>Further Investigation into Advancing Option 2 (and Potentially Option 1):</u></p> <p>Additional work is necessary to explore how Option 2, and possibly Option 1, can be advanced. This would involve developing more comprehensive and robust evidence of the benefits, particularly in terms of enhancing east-west connectivity, increasing ridership, and identifying strategies to generate additional revenue streams.</p> <p><u>Consideration of Interim Measures for Connectivity Improvements:</u></p> <p>While the long-term options are being further developed, it is crucial to explore interim measures that could enhance public transport connectivity both within Wisbech and to surrounding areas. This should include efforts to improve local bus services and assess alternative transport options that could offer more flexible and efficient solutions in the short to medium term.</p> <p>Member feedback on these options will be instrumental in shaping the next steps toward developing a sustainable and effective transport strategy for Wisbech and March. The direction chosen, whether advancing specific options, implementing interim measures, will provide a critical foundation for future planning. However, whichever course of action(s) is preferred; this will be subject to rigorous evaluation through the Single Assurance Framework process, ensuring that all proposals meet the required standards for transparency, value for money, and alignment with broader strategic goals. This approach guarantees that any decisions taken are both well-informed and accountable.</p>

4. Appendices

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| 4.1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appendix A - Strategic Option Appraisal Report• Appendix B - Cost Advice• Appendix C - Socio-Economic Appraisal Options Indicative Report |
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5. Implications

Financial Implications

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| 5.1 | <p>Funding to date for this study has been allocated from the Department for Transport's (DfT) Transforming Cities Fund (TCF), with an estimated £1.9 million to be utilised by the end of the 2024/25 financial year. There is a further £5 million earmarked over the next two financial years, subject to approval in the Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP), for continued development work.</p> <p>However, given the current BCR of 0.27 and the relatively weak strategic case, it is unlikely that this project will successfully pass through the Single Assurance Framework, which prioritises schemes with a strong economic and strategic rationale. With such a low economic return, even with additional funding, the project is unlikely to justify further financial support. Therefore, it is essential that we take an approach focussed on the connectivity outcome, recognising the challenges ahead and considering the appropriate avenues for delivering those intended outcomes.</p> |
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Legal Implications

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| 6.1 | <p>There are no legal implications at this stage.</p> <p>A key objective of the Single Assurance Framework is to support the Combined Authority in making judgements about the Value for Money (VFM) of potential investment and projects etc. All business cases seeking approval are assessed through the SAF process are evaluated against the HM Treasury's 5-case business model highlighted within The Green Book (2022).</p> <p>Section 5.5 of the SAF sets out the Business Development requirements and Section 5.6 of the sets out business case approvals phase.</p> |
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Public Health Implications

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| 7.1 | <p>A transport link between March and Wisbech could have public health implications by improving accessibility to healthcare, employment, and essential services, thereby enhancing the overall well-being of the population. Enhanced connectivity between the two towns would reduce travel barriers, making it easier for residents to access medical facilities, particularly in more rural or underserved areas.</p> <p>Additionally, improved public transport options could alleviate social isolation and support mental health by enabling greater community interaction and access to social opportunities. Overall, this transport link could contribute to a healthier, more connected, and resilient population.</p> |
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Environmental & Climate Change Implications

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| 8.1 | <p>The construction of a sustainable transport link between Wisbech and March could reduce carbon emissions associated with travel between the two towns. However, as the project advances, careful consideration will be given to minimising the embedded carbon involved in any construction. This would mean evaluating the materials, processes, and energy used in the development and operation of any scheme to ensure that it aligns with broader sustainability goals.</p> <p>Additionally, comprehensive strategies will be implemented to mitigate any potential environmental drawbacks, ensuring the project not only reduces emissions in the long term but also minimises its immediate ecological impact. This holistic approach aims to deliver a transport solution that is environmentally responsible at every stage, from construction through to operation.</p> |
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Other Significant Implications	
9.1	N/A.
Background Papers	
10.1	Wisbech – March Rail drawing (October 2023) Wisbech March drawing.pdf