

TRANSPORT THEMATIC BOARD

30 August 2019

EAST COAST MAINLINE

Purpose of Report

This report updates the Board on issues concerning the East Coast Mainline, one of the two key inter-city rail lines linking Sheffield City Region to London, and a key link to Leeds, York, the North East and Scotland. It also seeks nominations for an SCR representative on the East Coast Mainline Authorities Consortium.

Thematic Priority

6. Secure investment in infrastructure where it will do most to support growth.

Freedom of Information

Not exempt

Recommendations

The Board is recommended to:

1. Agree that the Combined Authority and LEP should continue engaging with the rail industry processes and groups lobbying for improvements on the East Coast Mainline, recognising its vital importance to the economy of Doncaster, SCR and the wider east coast corridor.
2. Agree to the formation of a Doncaster Station Project Board to assist with engagement on these issues.
3. Nominate an SCR representative on the East Coast Mainline Authorities Consortium.

1. Introduction

- 1.1** The East Coast Mainline (ECML) is the key north-south inter-city rail line in the east of the UK, and links SCR to London, the east and south Midlands, Leeds, York, Newcastle and Scotland. Doncaster is the main ECML station within SCR and is an important rail interchange where a number of lines meet. Retford in Bassetlaw is also served by ECML trains and is another key interchange station within SCR.
- 1.2** This report provides an overview of the ECML and issues which SCR should be aware of and engaging in, including our involvement in the East Coast Mainline Authorities Consortium.

2. Proposal and justification

- 2.1** The ECML has generally been seen as the UK's flagship rail line, linking London Kings Cross to Yorkshire, the North East and Scotland. Due to its largely flat and straight topography it has the highest average line speed of all the UK's rail lines, and therefore some of the most competitive journey times. For example, the fastest trains link Doncaster

to London in 87 minutes, compared to Sheffield to London on the Midland Mainline in 120 minutes. Similarly, a journey between London to York can be done in 111 minutes, despite York being significantly further north than Sheffield.

- 2.2** Despite its status as the UK's flagship rail line, the ECML has suffered from a lack of investment in recent decades, and as a result it is failing to perform to its full potential. Major investment was made in the West Coast Mainline about 15 years ago to bring it up to modern standards and this has significantly improved capacity, line speed and journey times on that line. Similar investment is now required in the ECML to enhance its performance and maintain the key role it plays in the UK's transport network and economy.
- 2.3** Network Rail recently undertook a route study of the East Coast Mainline which was published in June 2018 as part of their approach to long term planning of the railway. This route study identified the key issues, constraints and areas requiring investment on the ECML over the period up to the 2040s and presented a number of 'choices for funders'.
- 2.4** The route study highlighted that a third of the UK population live within 20 minutes of an ECML station and together they produce 41% of the UK's GDP. It is a fast and high yield route with growing passenger demand and therefore profitable for train operators. Consequently, it is the only line in the UK that is currently served by 'open access' operators such as Hull Trains and Grand Central, with a further service between London and Edinburgh planned by First Group.
- 2.5** The study identified that the ECML infrastructure is ageing and much of it is at, or near, capacity. Investment is needed to create a resilient ECML that can accommodate growth in passengers and trains. The study covered all the differing markets served by the ECML, including the London commuter market, the regional market and the long distance inter-city market. It also took account of the needs of the rail freight industry, although freight was covered by a separate study.
- 2.6** The study considered short, medium and longer-term requirements for investment, taking account of planned schemes such as HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail and their impact on capacity and demand. It also referenced the increasing role of devolved transport bodies such as TfN and Midlands Connect, as well as combined authorities, and the changing funding environment for rail investment.
- 2.7** Doncaster is identified in the study as a major hub for local, long distance and freight trains. Cross Country services from the Midlands and South West, services from Manchester and Sheffield, Lincolnshire and Humberside, and West Yorkshire all converge here and join the ECML and mix to a greater or lesser extent with fast ECML services. This creates a major rail 'bottleneck' with many crossing moves and signalling and platforming constraints.
- 2.8** The Doncaster to Leeds corridor via Wakefield is identified as one where additional passenger capacity will be needed in the long term, to serve the growing Leeds commuter market. This corridor is served by a mix of high speed London trains, regional stopping trains and freight, which limits its capacity. The options are either to expand the railway to four track which would be an expensive and complex engineering exercise or make changes to train operations on the existing layout, for example using higher performing rolling stock for local services and reviewing stopping patterns.
- 2.9** Doncaster station is also identified as a constraint on the ECML, due to the number of services converging there, and limited platform and line capacity, especially where services cross the ECML from east-west. This leads to some services, such as Cross Country, often being held outside the station for up to 10 minutes waiting for a platform or path. This is currently being addressed by Network Rail through changes to timetabling. However, the study states that over the longer term, increased services into the west side of Doncaster station will need to be supported with additional platforms, greater

operational flexibility, improved track layouts and line speeds. A grade-separated flyover was considered but ruled out due to engineering challenges and value for money. In the shorter term, some stopping services that currently run between Sheffield and Hull / Scunthorpe are being terminated at Doncaster to reduce the conflicting moves across the ECML, requiring through passengers to change. This has been enabled by the construction of a new platform 0 at Doncaster.

- 2.10** In the longer term, Doncaster will be served by Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) trains between Sheffield and Hull, and a service from Manchester Airport to Cleethorpes, which will replace the existing services on these routes. However, these will be longer trains and require greater platform capacity and priority crossing the ECML. It is also proposed to provide three tram-train services per hour to Doncaster as part of NPR and these will require additional platform capacity.
- 2.11** In the shorter term, from 2021, the existing East Midlands Trains service between Doncaster and Lincoln will be increased in frequency from 5 trains per day to 1 train per hour. This will put further pressure on platform capacity at Doncaster. SCR has suggested extending this service to Leeds via the Knottingley Line which could then serve a potential new station at Askern, for which a feasibility study has recently been carried out.
- 2.12** Alongside these enhancements, SCR, along with Doncaster MBC, has an aspiration for a new rail link and station to serve Doncaster Sheffield airport. A feasibility study has also been carried out on this and concluded that a loop off the Lincoln Line linking back onto the ECML, is the preferred option. This could be served by local trains as well as ECML inter-city trains and could also potentially relieve some of the pressure on Doncaster station. Further work is currently being undertaken to decide on the best way to progress this scheme, which is likely to involve a phased approach.
- 2.13** Following the publication of the East Coast Route Study, Network Rail moved on to a new approach to long term rail planning called Continuous Modular Strategic Planning (CMSP), which is intended to be a more agile and on-going process reflecting current funding and planning structures. As part of this CMSP process, a number of 'hotspots' have been selected for early studies to address 'strategic questions'. Sheffield has already been the subject of such a study (to be reported to the next Transport Board), and Doncaster to Leeds is being looked at as part of the next study. SCR and DMBC are closely involved in this process.
- 2.14** HS2 Phase 2b, when it opens in 2033, will reduce the need for some existing inter-city ECML services between London and Leeds, the North East and Scotland. This could free-up capacity for alternative services on the ECML, serving additional stations and destinations. It is important that Doncaster continues to be served by high-speed services to London and the North East, while stations such as Retford could benefit from an improved service pattern. Work is needed now to develop proposals for the post-HS2 ECML services.
- 2.15** At present, high-speed services serving Doncaster are quite 'bunched' close together in each hour, which reduces the effective frequency or choice of service. However, the LNER timetable is currently being reviewed for 2021 following the introduction of the full fleet of 140mph Azuma trains, and there may be an opportunity to achieve a better spacing of trains. Doncaster also benefits from the two 'open access' operators Hull Trains and Grand Central stopping there, providing some fare competition with LNER.
- 2.16** Given the range of interlinked issues which affect the ECML, this is something the SCR Integrated Rail Board will have to consider in future meetings. However, to assist with this it may be worth considering the introduction of a dedicated project board which focusses upon the required improvements at Doncaster Station. This should be led by DMBC in collaboration with SCR.

2.17 Sheffield City Region has recently become a paying member of the East Coast Mainline Authorities (ECMA) consortium, which acts as a co-ordinating and lobbying body for authorities along the whole of the ECML. DMBC is also a paying member and is represented at political and officer level. This body does some valuable work to raise the profile of the ECML in parliament and within the rail industry, and it is important that SCR continues to engage with this group. As such we would like to seek nominations for an SCR political member of ECMA, who will be required to attend quarterly consortium meetings in York, and occasional parliamentary receptions. This should ideally be a member of the Transport Board, who can then report back to the Board on ECML issues.

2.18 ECMA has recently commissioned a report from consultants SYSTRA on the Benefits of Investment in the ECML which is a useful summary of all the current issues facing the line, setting out the case for investment and benefits it will generate in each region.

3. Consideration of alternative approaches

3.1 The alternative is not to engage with any of the rail industry processes and lobbying groups on the ECML, which could lead to SCR missing out on much needed investment.

4. Implications

4.1 Financial

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report.

4.2 Legal

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

4.3 Risk Management

There are no direct risks arising from this report.

4.4 Equality, Diversity and Social Inclusion

Improving the ECML and trains serving it will enhance the travelling experience for all, including persons with reduced mobility and other disabilities, and those who do not have access to a car.

5. Communications

5.1 There may be opportunities for communications and corporate affairs engagement in raising the profile of SCR's asks for the ECML and engaging with politicians to gain their support.

6. Appendices/Annexes

6.1 N/A

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