



A Platform for Growth

Regional rail in the East Midlands



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Regional Rail in the East Midlands: A High Growth Opportunity

The East Midlands is home to 4.9m people and over 350,000 businesses. Over the last 20 years, economic growth has been in line with the UK average, whilst the population has been growing at a similar rate to London, and faster than the South East and the West Midlands.¹

Unfortunately, the rail offer in the East Midlands remains underdeveloped and has not kept pace with this growth, or with rail services elsewhere in the country.

Whilst improvements to inter-city journeys are underway, our regional rail network is sparse, infrequent, unreliable, and poorly used. The East Midlands has the highest share of road-based commuting and the lowest share of rail travel in the country.²³

It doesn't have to be this way.

Our evidence suggests there is a huge opportunity to grow the regional railway in the East Midlands for the benefit of our region, the rail industry, and the country as a whole.⁴

To do this, we need:

- A clear plan to develop a more competitive regional rail offer that reflects how people live now, growing services to levels consistent with the 2019 East Midlands Franchise Agreement and delivering improvements to our rolling stock;
- Higher performance standards and the means to make sure these are delivered whilst also growing the services; and
- An East Midlands voice in the new Great British Railways.

We need our regional rail network to...

Unlock potential

The UK has one of the most spatially unequal economies in the developed world, and the gaps are continuing to grow. Plans to improve productivity in this country have recognised the role of reducing regional inequalities.⁵

Over the last 20 years the East Midlands has been growing its economy, but only by growing its population – not by becoming more productive. This is not a long-term strategy for ‘levelling-up’ the region.

There is plenty of evidence showing that productivity can be boosted by high-quality transport connectivity. Just look at the success of London.

We have to improve our regional rail network in the East Midlands if our economy is to become more productive and provide the opportunities for our communities that others elsewhere already enjoy.

Generate more and better paid jobs

Analysis from the Centre for Cities⁸ and The Independent Transport Commission has shown that the East Midlands is home to high-value industries which generate better-paid jobs, that also have a high reliance on rail.

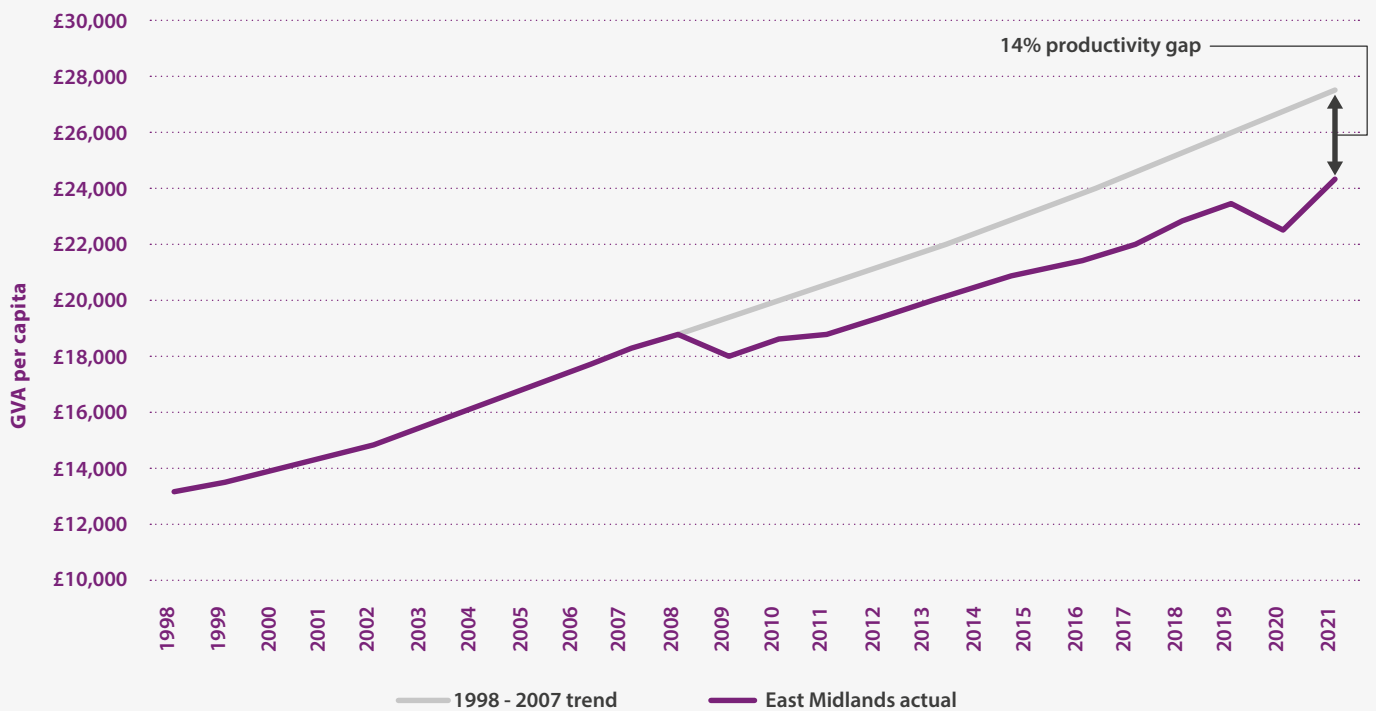
While the East Midlands hosts some of these industries in its biggest cities, more needs to be done to expand them and spread the benefits more widely.

The East Midlands is also home to some of the best universities in the country, which can help grow the high-value sectors of the economy. However, the region has struggled to retain highly skilled graduates, with just 40% of people who attend university in the region choosing to settle and work here.⁹

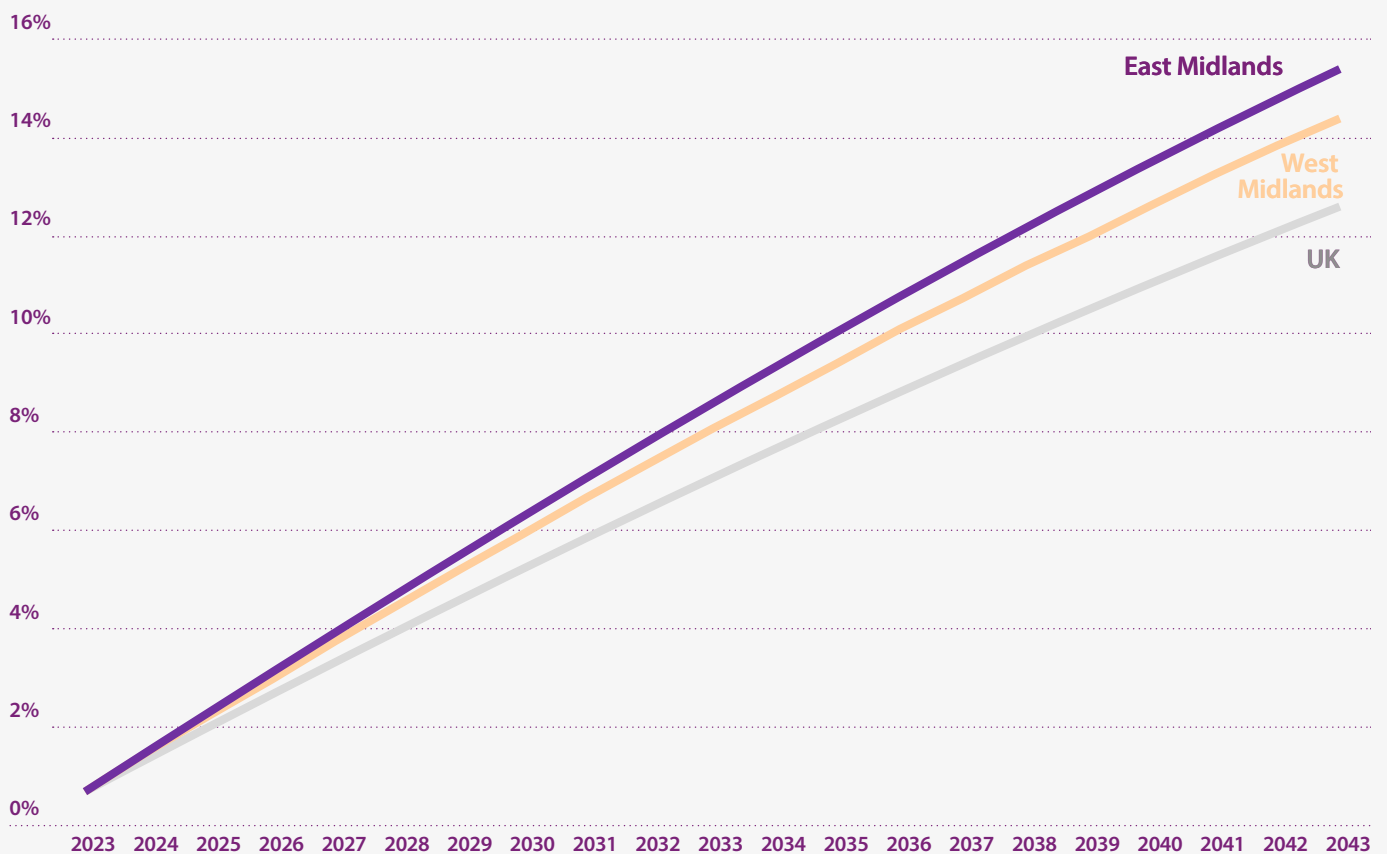
If the East Midlands economy can become more productive, there will be a cascade of benefits, including a raised standard of living and opportunities for people at all levels.

Developing a frequent, reliable, and attractive rail network is a vital first step.

East Midlands GVA per capita, actual and historic trend ⁶



Forecast population growth ⁷



Improve social mobility

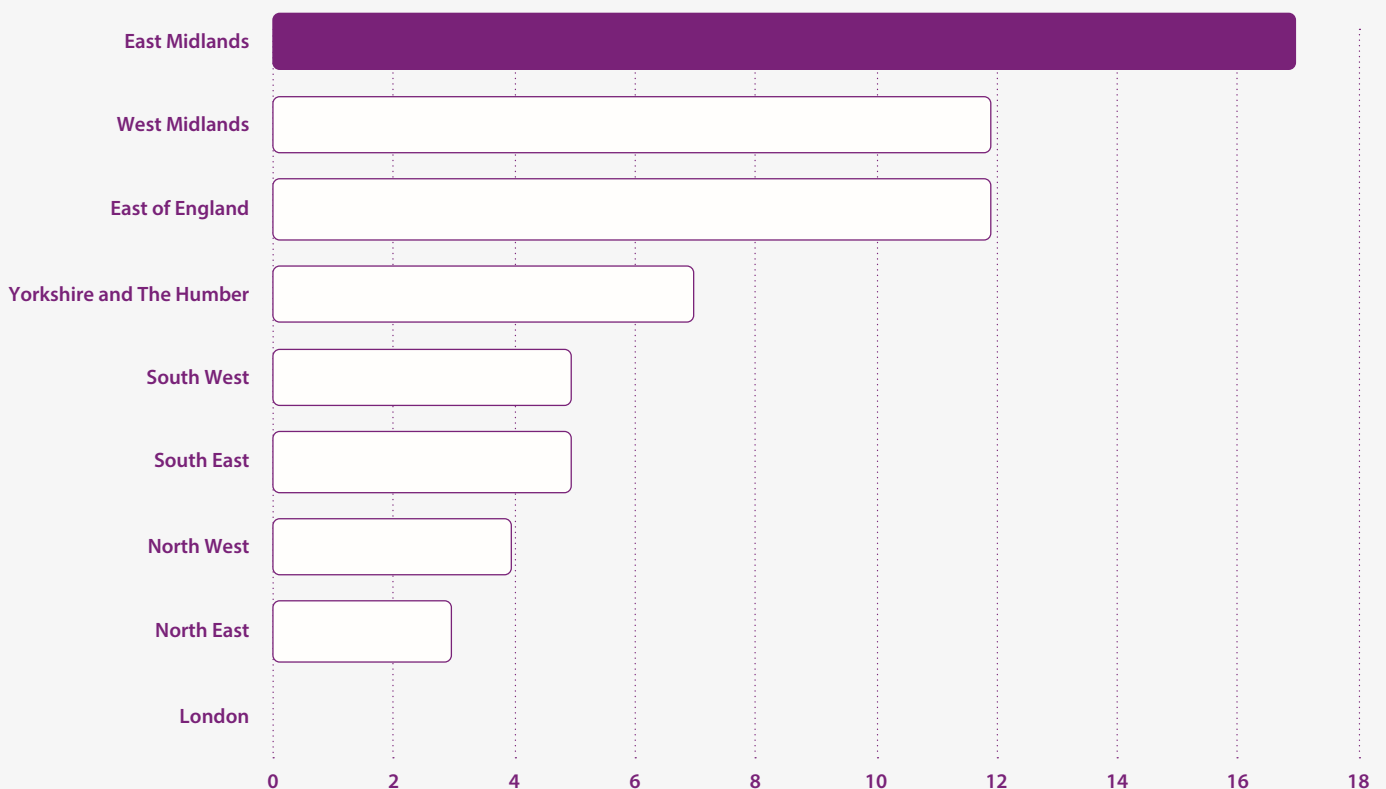
Alongside broad economic measures of regional performance, we can sometimes forget what improved connectivity means for people. We need our railway to support thriving, vibrant communities that enable people to live, learn, work and play.

Evidence from the Social Mobility Commission shows that someone born into a disadvantaged community in the East Midlands is less likely to do well at school, find a good job, and enjoy a high standard of living than in other parts of the country.¹⁰

The East Midlands has the most social mobility 'coldspots' of all regions in England, including some of our biggest urban areas: Chesterfield, Nottingham, and Derby.¹¹

These patterns of deprivation are long-standing and have proved difficult to change by conventional policy approaches. A high-density, affordable rail network can provide access to opportunities across the region to a group of people who might otherwise be excluded.

Number of social mobility coldspots by region¹²



And decarbonise

Travelling by train is a low-carbon form of transport. Even travelling on a diesel train has a far lower carbon footprint per passenger than travelling by car.¹³

Previous work undertaken by Midlands Connect showed that most carbon emissions come from infrequent but longer car journeys.¹⁴ These are exactly the kinds of trips where rail can provide a viable alternative.

Where our railway provides a good service, it is successful. For example, rail sustainably carries around 48% of all journeys between Nottingham and Leicester in the morning peak, but this modal share is very much the exception.¹⁵

Image Credit: East Midlands Councils



Image Credit: Jayne Wingad, Lincolnshire County Council



The State of Rail in the East Midlands

There is a huge opportunity to enhance regional rail services, making rail a viable alternative to the car - for the benefit of our businesses and communities, the rail industry, and the country as a whole.

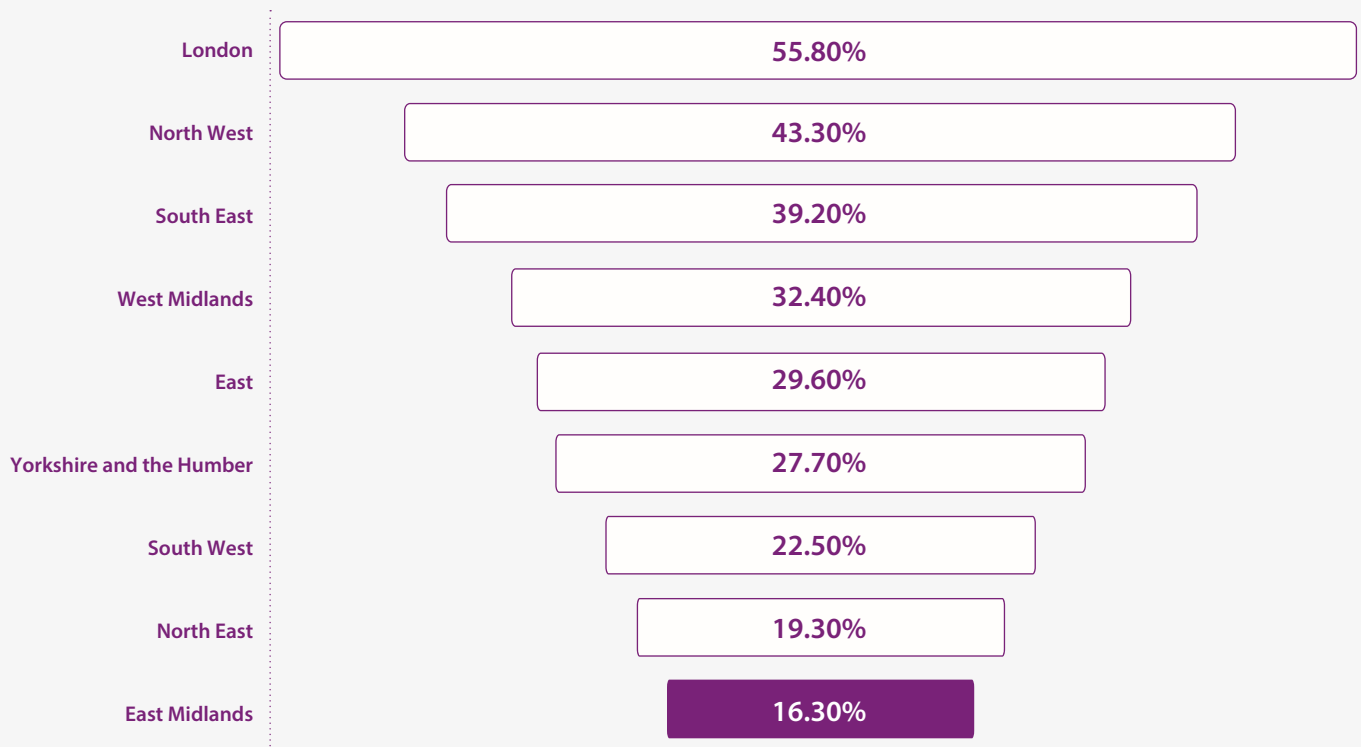
However, our evidence shows we are starting from a very low base.

At present, the regional rail network in the East Midlands is...

Sparse

The East Midlands has just 108 rail stations serving a population of almost five million people. As a result, the region has the lowest proportion of people who live within a five-minute drive of a station¹⁶ - equivalent to a 15 -20-minute walk or a 10-minute cycle ride - in England.

Proportion of population within a five minute drive of nearest rail station¹⁷



Many rail journeys between our towns and cities are slow compared to the car and often require passengers to change trains. Almost three-quarters of rail journeys between the 30 largest towns and cities in East Midlands involve an interchange.

For example, journeys between Worksop and Chesterfield, Mansfield and Newark, and Melton Mowbray to Loughborough. These pairs of towns are less than 30km away from each other - but between them, they generate fewer than 1,000 rail journeys per year.¹⁸

Some major towns in the East Midlands have no passenger rail service at all, such as Coalville, Louth and Swadlincote.

Infrequent

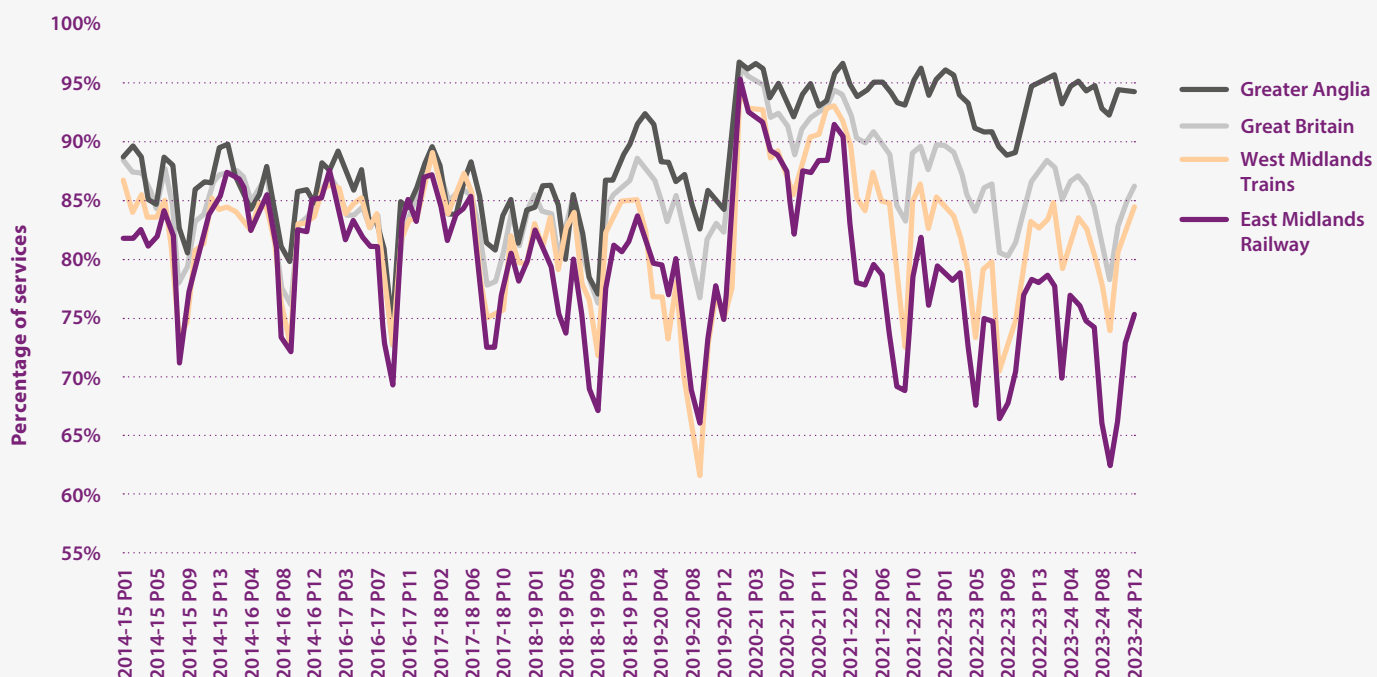
Around 75% of stations in the region are served by just one train per hour or fewer, with even lower levels of service levels on Sundays and increasingly overcrowded trains on Saturdays.¹⁹

There are few trains serving even our larger urban areas: only four stations within 20km of Nottingham and serving the city centre have two or more trains per hour.²⁰

Unreliable

Rail services in the East Midlands have worse punctuality than the national average. Fewer than 75% of our trains arrived on time in 2022/23, undermining public confidence in the network.²¹

T-3 punctuality comparison²²



Cancellations have also been increasing in recent years, limiting travel options for passengers.²³ Taking punctuality and cancellations together, overall reliability in the East Midlands has been declining.²⁴

Under funded

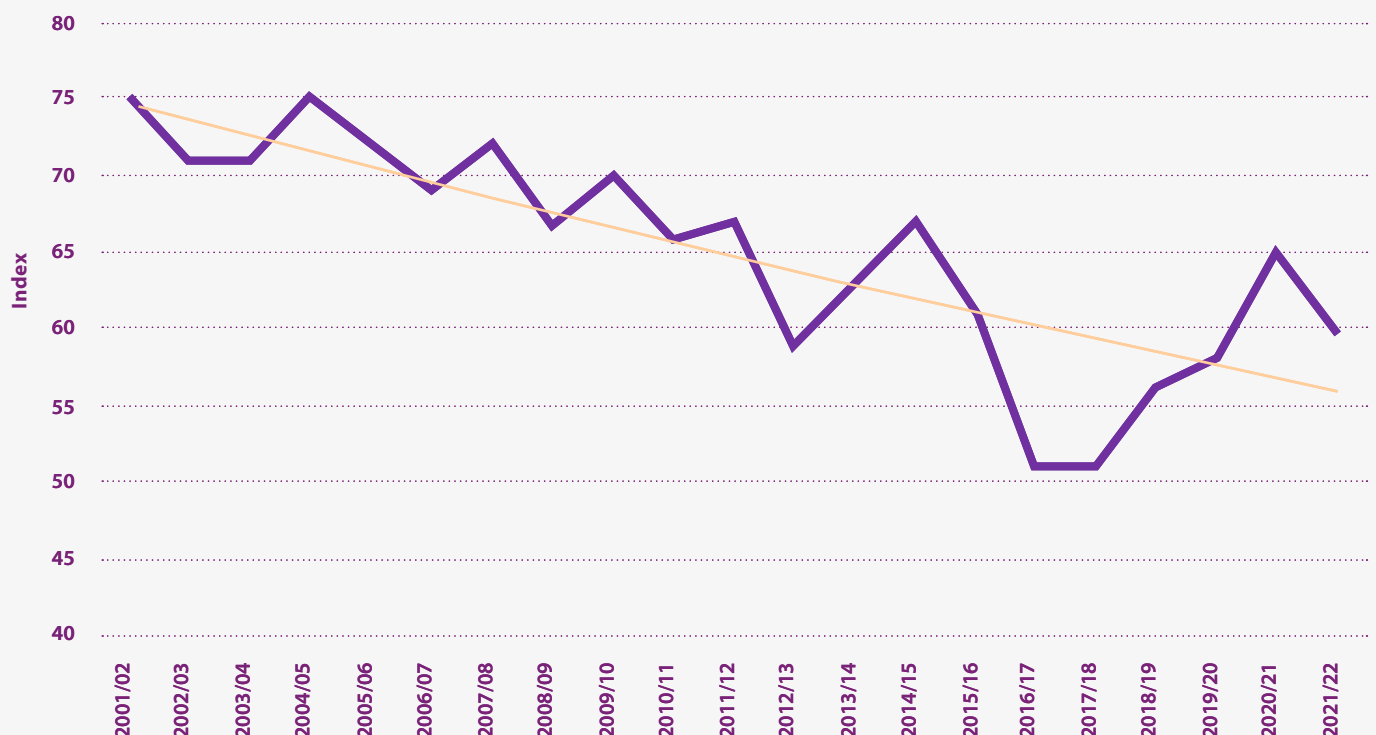
Treasury statistics show that the East Midlands has consistently received the lowest level of spend per head on all transport (and rail) of any UK region or nation for the past 25 years.²⁵

In 2022-23 East Midlands Railway (EMR) received less net-subsidy per passenger km than the GB average - and less than half compared to West Midlands Trains or South Eastern.²⁶

The most recent 2021-22 statistics show that we received just 4% of the overall national rail spend for our 8% of the national population.

The East Midlands would have had £965m to spend on our rail network in 2021-22 if funded at the English average.²⁷

Transport spend per capita in the East Midlands, 100 = UK average ²⁸



Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/public-expenditure-statistical-analyses-2023>

State subsidy as a share of total income by train operating company ²⁹

Year ● 2018-19 ● 2022-23



And poorly used.

Because our regional railway is sparse, infrequent and unreliable, it is also the least used of all regions in England.

On average each person in the East Midlands uses the train around 7 times per year, in the West Midlands this is nearly 15, in the East of England it is around 22. The East Midlands has the lowest rate of station usage per head in England.

Rail only has a small share of the regional travel market and 80% of commuters in the East Midlands go to work by car.

For example, only 1% of journeys between Beeston and Nottingham are by rail, and just 2% between Long Eaton and Derby.³⁰

But still vitally important!

Even in its current state, our regional rail network has a critical role in supporting our people, our economy and reducing the impacts of travel on the environment.

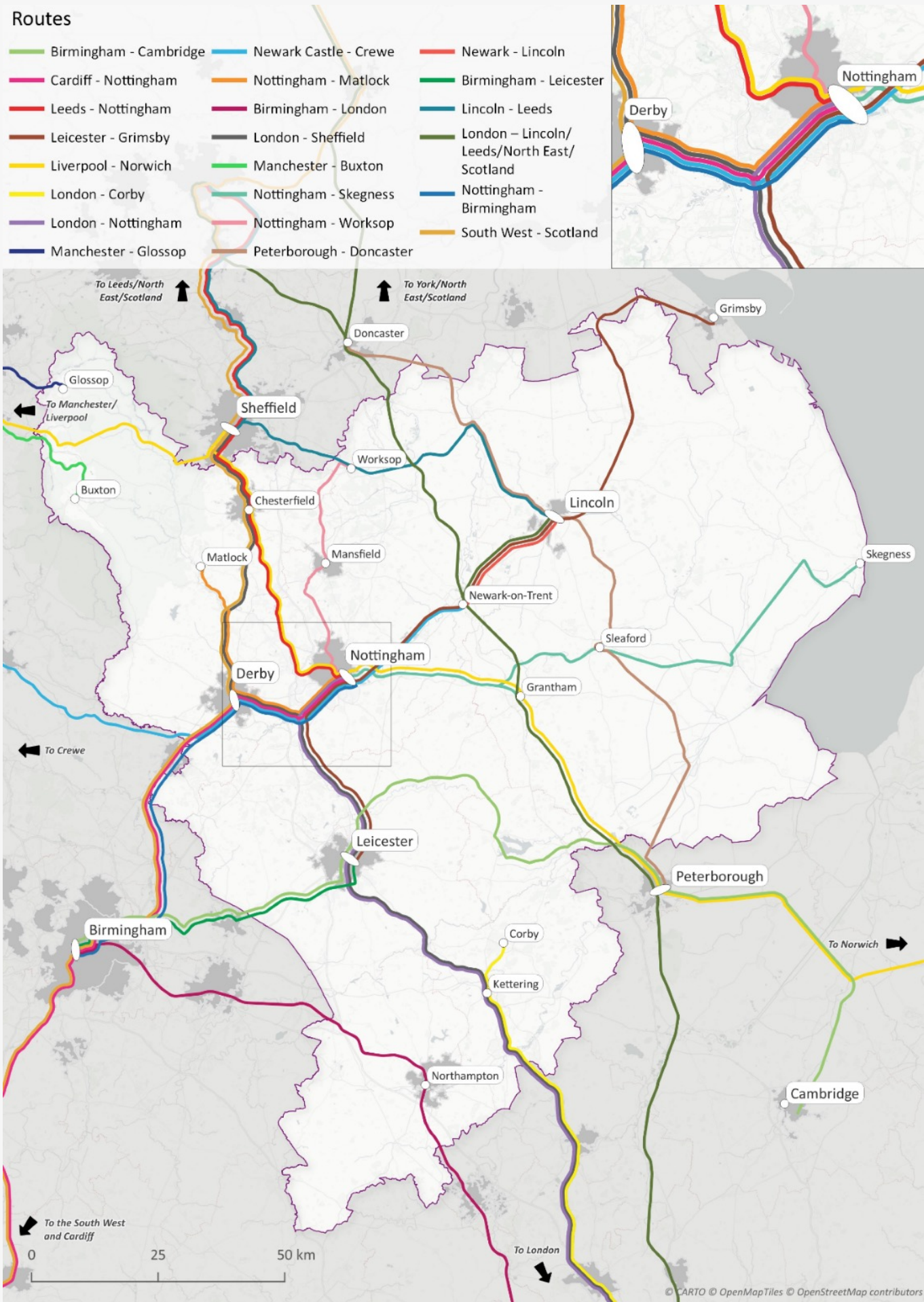
Our evidence suggests that rail services in the East Midlands are directly worth around £356 million per year to our regional economy - including the time it saves people who may otherwise drive.³¹

To this should be added the £5.8 billion per year that the Rail Delivery Group estimated rail services and users generated for the East Midlands through wider economic activity.³²

Station usage per capita by region ³³



Passenger services and major stations in the East Midlands



Opportunities for improvement

So, what can be done to improve the situation?

The good news is that rail travel in the East Midlands bounced back strongly after the pandemic, indicating that people are keen to use the train more if they can.

Moving forward there will be some significant long-term investments required to create the kind of transformation the region needs.

But there are also many smaller, incremental improvements which can be delivered in the short term - and fortunately, some of these are already underway.

To improve our regional railway, we need...

Trains that run on time, without new service detriments

If the network we have provided a consistent and reliable service, there would be significant benefits for passengers and local communities.

Our analysis suggests that reducing the amount of delay in the East Midlands by half could attract an extra 600,000 passengers a year - an increase of 8%.³⁴

There are recent examples of initiatives to improve punctuality and crowding in the round by reducing services for communities in the East Midlands - but these customer trade-off choices in isolation are not representative of the vision that TfEM share for delivering a growing railway.

We observe impediments to the track through increased flooding, high winds, and embankment erosion as reasons for disruption in this region. In December 2023, the region experienced a peak period of this, where EMR alone were affected by seven separate 12 hour route closures due to weather related incidents.

Investment in this infrastructure is essential to make our railway more resilient – but it is not clear that the level of capital spending available over the next five year control period will be enough to even maintain current performance.

Operational issues, for example a lack of trained drivers, have been observed as causes for cancellations on some routes in recent years. Although this issue has not been uniformly experienced across the network it should be addressed by train operating companies to ensure the trains we do have do run.

Flooding on the railway in the East Midlands



The East Midlands operates a high number of short trains on regional services, and also observes ‘short-forming’ of trains, where a service runs but with fewer carriages due to maintenance or other issues, causing or exacerbating passenger crowding.

A full timetable

The reduction in passenger numbers immediately post-Covid also resulted in an agreement with the Government that train operators could reduce the number of services they run.

Despite patronage now exceeding pre-pandemic levels, we have fewer services in the East Midlands than were promised in the 2019 East Midlands Franchise Agreement.

Our analysis suggests that if the full planned franchise timetable was fully implemented and run on time, it would generate an additional half a million rail trips a year, £3m of extra revenue and £11m of direct economic benefits.³⁵

Making full use of the trains we have now have would be a great start.

There are opportunities to reduce overcrowding by improving or extending services, and by running more of a ‘seven day’ railway to reflect the way that people live their lives today.

Places like Worksop, Spalding, and Syston currently have no EMR Sunday services. There are no Sunday services operating on the full line between Peterborough, Lincoln and Doncaster, or to directly connect Leicester, Lincoln and Grimsby.

Even where they run, Sunday services often start later and finish earlier than during the week. For example there are no Sunday services heading west from Derby on to Stoke and Crewe until after 14.30.

Better quality trains

Operating more comfortable, modern, and attractive trains across the network is key to enticing more people from cars and generating much-needed passenger revenue.

EMR's new Aurora (Class 810) rolling stock coming to the Midland Main Line in 2025 will be the most advanced intercity trains in

the country ³⁶ - although delivery has been heavily delayed. The new fleet will also bring many more seats to overcrowded services, and because they are electric/diesel bi-mode, they will be far greener than the current diesel-only trains.

There are committed plans by CrossCountry to refurbish their 'Voyager' and 'Turbostar' trains and to increase the number of seats on some busier services, replacing capacity lost through the retirement of even older rolling stock.³⁷

There are similar plans to refurbish EMR's regional (Class 170 and Class 158) diesel trains, and electric (Class 360) commuter trains, which will transform the passenger experience over the next few years.³⁸

However a number of these trains can be assumed to be approaching the end of their planned operational lives.

EMR train maintenance facility



We would like to see a clear strategy now to upgrade and grow rolling stock in the East Midlands from 2030 onwards with more efficient and less polluting trains that can carry more passengers.

This may require advancing plans for the introduction of more modern trains as part of a wider national cascade, further investment in electrification and potentially deployment of new technologies such as electric battery power.

A more competitive rail offer

Whilst we may be able to improve some things with relatively modest changes and investments, we still need action to make rail in the East Midlands fundamentally more competitive with the car. This will take investment in:

- **Better network integration**

We need to make better use of the network we have by integrating our stations into the wider transport network, enabling easier access to rail for communities through measures such as smart ticketing, park and ride, and improved local bus services. Our transport network needs to come together as a whole, with stations better integrated into the places they serve – like the exciting plans to improve Leicester Station now underway.

Artist's impression of Leicester station redevelopment



- **More stations**

In the last 20 years, only three new stations have been opened in the East Midlands: East Midlands Parkway (2009), Corby (2009) and Ilkeston (2017). There are two well-advanced 'Restoring Your Railway' schemes, which, if funded, would see new stations open on the Ivanhoe Line between Burton and Leicester and the Barrow Hill line between Chesterfield and Sheffield. In addition, high-level analysis by Steer for TfEM has identified several other places where new stations may be viable, subject to further analysis.³⁹

- **Reduced journey times between major centres**

We need to look for opportunities to reduce journey times and improve direct connectivity between our major centres where rail only has a small market share.

For example, just 7% of people use the train between Lincoln and Nottingham and just 3% between Leicester and Coventry. There are potential schemes that could improve these journeys by speeding up trains and introducing new services - but we need to see them delivered.

Image Credit: East Midlands Railway - Steve Cadge, Senior Conductor



Image Credit: Jayne Wingad, Lincolnshire County Council



What we'd like to see happen next

It is clear that things need to change – and we cannot just wait for big infrastructure investments which may take years to deliver. There must be action now to start transforming the East Midlands regional railway.

Whilst we do have the least used railway in England, this can only be seen as a platform from which to grow. We have major population growth forecast and exciting local plans for many new jobs and homes.

Our immediate asks are...

A clear plan for growth

The pandemic led to the early termination of the 2019 East Midlands Franchise Agreement before most of our regional rail service uplifts that other regions had already received were delivered.

Since then, all rail services across the country have been constrained by affordability concerns and subject to an annual business planning process.

But the rail industry cannot 'cut itself' to financial sustainability – it has to grow patronage to survive, and the East Midlands is a great place to start.

To do that we need to see a longer term plan to grow our regional rail services, improve our rolling stock and develop a fundamentally more competitive rail offer.

Whilst this should include a long-term pipeline of committed rail investments which are delivered, not 'paused', delayed or cancelled; an initial ambition is for operators to make full use of the trains they have now.

Higher performance standards - that are delivered whilst also growing services

Our rail network is under performing against our expectations and aspirations across a number of measures, which we believe contributes to undermining public confidence and patronage.

Passengers, local communities, and businesses expect more. We need to see performance standards set higher and to ensure they are delivered, backed with the necessary infrastructure and operational investment, and also to mitigate growing challenges like climate resilience.

Improving performance should not be set against maintaining or improving service levels. The East Midlands should not be presented with proposals to run fewer trains, skip stops or even slow trains down on a sparse regional network, especially if such changes are made in isolation. The performance targets that are incentivised to drive industry behaviour should be set higher, but will need to recognise regional differences and unlock necessary improvement investments into the East Midlands. This is another reason why a clear vision and delivery plan for improved services and performance in the round is necessary to put the East Midlands on a shared footing for growth.

An East Midlands voice in Great British Railways

As things stand, the key decisions on rail priorities and investment in our region are made in Westminster and Whitehall. It is widely acknowledged that the current system has led to fragmentation and poor outcomes for passengers.

Derby will be the new home for Great British Railways, the emerging 'guiding mind' for the railways in this country. It's fantastic to see that organisation based in the East Midlands.

But we need a voice in that new structure to deliver the change we need, and a single point of accountability for the East Midlands.

Building on the existing TfEM/DfT Rail Collaboration Agreement⁴⁰, the emergence of two new County Combined Authorities in the East Midlands offers opportunities to deepen collaboration to include the use of local assets, regeneration and integrated local transport systems.

Endnotes

- 1 Population and household estimates, England and Wales - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)
- 2 Transport Statistics Great Britain: 2022 Domestic Travel - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
- 3 Regional rail usage (orr.gov.uk)
- 4 Research undertaken for TfEM by Steer available at: <https://www.emcouncils.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/TfEM-Regional-Services-Technical-Annex-Final-v2.00.pdf>
- 5 Levelling Up the United Kingdom White Paper (publishing.service.gov.uk)
- 6 ONS Regional gross value added (balanced) per head and income components
- 7 ONS population statistics
- 8 For the purposes of this analysis 'high[1]value' jobs are those in sectors identified as 'high-skilled exporters' in Appendix 2 of: Opportunity knocks? Economic outcomes for low-skilled people in cities, Centre for Cities
- 9 The Great British Brain Drain, Centre for Cities
- 10 State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain (publishing.service.gov.uk)
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- 21 Source: <https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/media/2231/east-midlands-railway-key-statistics-2022-23.pdf>
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- 23 <https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/media/2231/east-midlands-railway-key-statistics-2022-23.pdf>
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- 28 HMT Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses (PESA) - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)
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- 30 Research undertaken for TfEM by Steer available at: <https://www.emcouncils.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/TfEM-Regional-Services-Technical-Annex-Final-v2.00.pdf>
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- 37 Bigger fleet, more seats: CrossCountry reveals plans to transform customer experience by May 2025 | CrossCountry (crosscountrytrains.co.uk)
- 38 The Big Regional Refurb: EMR announce start of £60 million project to revamp regional fleet (eastmidlandsrailway.co.uk)
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<https://www.emcouncils.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/TfEM-Regional-Services-Technical-Annex-Final-v2.00.pdf>
- 40 More information available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/greater-voice-for-rail-passengers-in-new-collaboration-between-government-and-east-midlands-transport-leaders>

A Platform for Growth: Regional rail in the East Midlands