

Transport Secretary launches £794m investment to boost rail links in North and South

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A £794m investment package to reopen two important rail routes closed more than 50 years ago has been announced today by Transport Secretary Grant Shapps.

The new funding includes £760m for the delivery of the next phase of East West Rail, which will create 1,500 skilled jobs and reinstate direct rail services between Bicester and Bletchley for the first time since 1968.

It also includes £34m to rapidly progress plans to reopen the Northumberland Line between Newcastle-Upon-Tyne and Ashington, which closed to passengers in 1964 as part of the Beeching cuts.

The Transport Secretary has also today called on local authorities, MPs and community groups to submit bids for a share of the third and final round of the Department for Transport's 'Ideas Fund', designed to encourage proposals to reopen railway lines, services and stations.

Today's announcement forms part of the Government's commitments to build back better from the Covid-19 pandemic and level up transport infrastructure across the country by investing in rail connections that will unlock new housing and create jobs and opportunity.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said: "Restoring railways helps put communities back on the map and this investment forms part of our nationwide effort to build back vital connections and unlock access to jobs, education and housing.

"Returning these routes to their former glory, and progressing work to reopen even more lines and stations, shows our commitment to levelling up journeys across the country as we build back better from the pandemic."

Simon Blanchflower, Chief Executive Officer at East West Railway Company, said: "We are delighted that the Government has shown a big commitment to East West Rail and the Oxford Cambridge Arc with today's investment decision. This funding will enable us to get on with the construction work that will connect communities who live on the East West Rail link.

"We are committed to improving connectivity across the Oxford-Cambridge Arc and fully recognise our responsibility to ensure that it is delivered in a way that minimises disruption, supports the regional economy, maximises benefits and supports jobs across the region."

Today's funding marks an important milestone in the delivery of East West Rail, which will provide better connectivity along the Oxford-Cambridge arc and shorten journey times between routes outside of London, stimulating economic growth and serving major new housing developments.

The works between Bicester and Bletchley are expected to create 1,500 jobs. This phase of the project will include the construction of a new station at Winslow as well as enhancements to existing stations along the route, including Bletchley. By 2025, two trains per hour will run between Oxford and Milton Keynes via Bletchley.

The investment on the Northumberland line will fund preparatory works, including land acquisition, detailed design work and early site works.

Northumberland County Council Leader Glen Sanderson said: "This is absolutely fantastic news and means we can now finalise our plans to deliver this transformational project for both Northumberland and the wider region.

"The Northumberland Line will bring a huge boost to the area in terms of economic growth, housing, employment and education opportunities, as well as providing a fast and efficient new transport link between the south east of the county and Tyneside."

Plans for the project include new stations at Ashington, Bedlington, Blyth Bebside, Newsham, Seaton Delaval and Northumberland Park, in North Tyneside, as well as upgrades to the track and changes to level crossings where bridges or underpasses may need to be built.

The latest round of the 'Ideas Fund' will run until 5 March 2021, with successful bids due to be announced later this summer.

David Clarke, Technical Director at the Railway Industry Association (RIA), said: "It is very positive to see progress from Government on East West Rail and the Northumberland line.

"East West Rail is a scheme that not only unleashes long term economic potential in the Oxford-Cambridge corridor but will also mean a welcome boost to jobs and investment in the railway industry, benefiting not just rail businesses all over the UK but also the post pandemic recovery more widely.

"However, whilst the line will have passive provision for electrification, and the main priority should be getting the project delivered so passengers, businesses and the wider economy reap the benefits as soon as possible, the Railway Industry Association would ultimately like to see East West Rail electrified, given – as RIA's Electrification Cost Challenge report shows – that this is the optimal form of train traction for intensively-used lines.

"The Government should look closely at how electrification of the line can be delivered to ensure it meets its goal of taking all diesel-only trains off the network by 2040, and of achieving Net Zero by 2050.

"RIA and our members look forward to working with the East West Rail team to get this essential scheme up and running, but to also help rail deliver on its decarbonisation agenda in the medium to long term too."

Richard Tunnicliffe, CBI East of England Director, said: "This welcome investment and continued Government support for East-West Rail can play a vital role in unlocking the economic potential of Oxford-Cambridge Arc and the wider East of England region.

"Restoring rail travel to communities after more than 50 years will create fresh opportunities and enhance lives, while opening new doors for business investment. The creation of 1,500 skilled jobs during the construction phase is also good news.

"Levelling-up regional infrastructure must continue to be a priority for this Government as the UK looks to bounce back from the pandemic and rebuild a fairer and greener future economy."

Photo credit: Department for Transport