



## **Fenland District Council Overview and Scrutiny Meeting**

**9 November 2020**

### **Wisbech Rail**

#### **Purpose**

To provide the Overview and Scrutiny Committee of Fenland District Council with an update on progress in the development of Wisbech Rail

#### **Background**

At its meeting on 28 November 2018 the Combined Authority Board commissioned a Full Business Case (FBC) and Governance for Railway Investment Projects (GRIP) 3b Study for Wisbech to March rail and potential onward connections to Cambridge and Peterborough.

Wisbech, which lost its passenger rail network as part of the Beeching cuts, is widely recognised as the one of the largest towns within England without a rail link to the main rail network. This negatively impacts the potential economic and housing growth of the town. Improving connectivity to Cambridge offers the opportunity to transform Wisbech as a place for inward investment and provide much enhanced accessibility to key services and employment opportunities for its residents.

The FBC builds on an Outline Business Case (OBC) completed in 2015, by further developing options and recommending a preferred single option. The FBC reflects the outcomes of the rail scheme feasibility and design which is commensurate with Network Rail's GRIP 3b. Further GRIP stages would need to be undertaken to fully develop elements of the business case.

#### **Current Progress**

The key outcomes of the draft FBC were presented to the Combined Authority Board on 3 June 2020. The complete FBC and GRIP 3b were presented at the Transport and Infrastructure Committee on 8 July.

The FBC concludes that the most commercially viable solution is a heavy rail service serving a station centrally located within Wisbech. A two trains per hour service should run between Wisbech and Cambridge to reach the highest Benefit Cost Ratio (BCR). There is also a strong business case for a service between Wisbech and March only, although this provides less value for money than a direct service to Cambridge.

The Board agreed to continued engagement with the Department for Transport, and other central government departments to explore the future funding of this project through the Restoring Railways Fund.

In June the Mayor met with Chris Heaton – Harris, Minister of State for Transport, to highlight the importance of both Wisbech Rail and Ely Area Capacity Enhancement. The Mayor and Minister agreed that further work would take place between Combined Authority officers and departmental

officials. The Mayor and the Minister are expected to meet again following that engagement between the Combined Authority and the Department for Transport (DfT)

The completed FBC and GRIP 3b has been presented to representatives of the Restoring Railways Fund from DfT, Office of Rail and Road (ORR) and Network Rail. There has also been engagement with DfT's Better Value Rail workstream.

Among other issues, these meetings have discussed the linkage between the Wisbech Rail scheme and Network Rail's ongoing work on capacity at Ely North Junction. The Ely Area Capacity Enhancement project provides the additional train paths necessary to achieve the optimum option of a 2 trains per hour direct service from Wisbech to Cambridge.

In the meantime, The Combined Authority has made representation to the Treasury as part of the Spending Review 2020 submission. This includes a case for funding Wisbech Rail as a priority.