



**BEDFORD**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

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# A Rail Strategy for Bedford

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Updated May 2022

***“ We want Bedford Borough to thrive as a place, a location that people are proud of, want to live in and move to. To do this we need a growing and strong local economy and an active response to climate change.***

***From this foundation our residents will be able to thrive and realise their potential, supporting and celebrating our diverse and inclusive communities.”***

## ***Bedford Borough Council Corporate Plan 2022***

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# Why a Rail Strategy?

Our vision for Bedford Borough is for it to be a great place to live, work and visit. We also want to create a Borough that attracts local, national and international business and highly skilled jobs.

The importance of rail services in supporting economic growth and prosperity is well understood, allowing people to travel for work, to meet business customers or suppliers, or to make journeys for leisure or family reasons.

The pandemic resulted in a significant fall in rail travel in 2020-22, and there is uncertainty as to whether it will lead to more permanent changes in travel behaviour. However, the need for good quality connections is as important as ever as the Borough seeks to rebuild after the pandemic and public transport will play a key part in reducing carbon emissions to tackle the climate emergency. The Local Plan is likely to require 27,100 new homes between 2020 and 2040, and these will be focussed as far as possible on locations with good rail links.

The current rail connectivity of Bedford is poor, other than to London, but there are opportunities to build: East West Rail, electrification of the Midland Main Line and Wixams new station. Through making the most of these developments we can put Bedford at the centre of a hub of regional and national rail services.

To do this we need a clear set of priorities for what we want from railway services through the Borough, and where they should go. This document sets out those priorities and a plan to deliver them over the short, medium and long terms, updating the Council's first Rail Strategy published in December 2019.





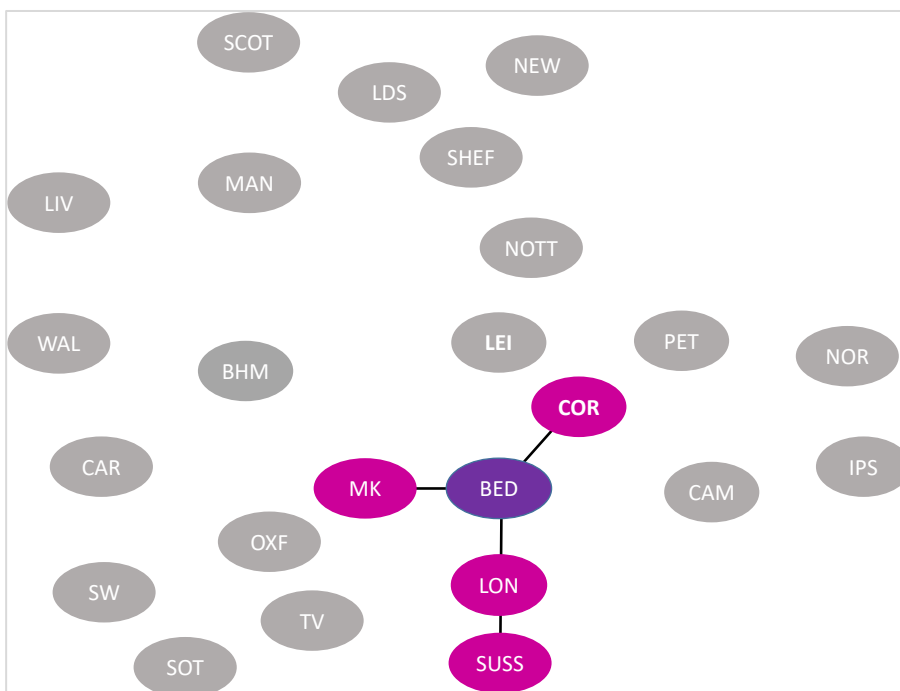
# The Current Position

In the year before the pandemic, over 4 million passengers used Bedford station, an increase of 36% over the previous 10 years. This was assisted by the transformation of Thameslink into a frequent metro service through the centre of London, with new trains and more capacity. There are now four trains per hour each way between Bedford, London St. Pancras International and locations south of London, including importantly Gatwick Airport.

However there has been a reduction in inter-city services calling at Bedford. East Midlands Railway introduced a new timetable from May 2021 that removed almost all the calls made by long distance services, replacing them instead with a half-hourly service between Corby and London. Bedford residents wishing to travel to the East Midlands now have to change trains at Kettering.

The Marston Vale Line between Bedford and Bletchley is set to become part of East West Rail, connecting Bedford directly with Bicester and Oxford. Parts of the route of the proposed East West Rail line between Bedford and Cambridge have been confirmed. In particular the line will serve the existing Bedford Midland station, which will be rebuilt to accommodate it, and create a catalyst for the regeneration of the station quarter and adjacent town centre. Protecting the interests of residents directly affected by this is an important priority for the Council.

The truth is that, other than to London, Bedford's rail connectivity is poor as shown on the map below.



BED	Bedford	NOR	Norwich
BHM	Birmingham	NOTT	Nottingham
CAM	Cambridge	OXF	Oxford
IPS	Ipswich	PET	Peterborough
LDS	Leeds	SCOT	Scotland
LEI	Leicester	SHEF	Sheffield
LIV	Liverpool	SOT	Southampton
LON	London	SUSS	Sussex
MAN	Manchester	SW	South West
MK	Milton Keynes	TV	Thames Valley
NEW	Newcastle	WAL	Wales

*Bedford's Connectivity by Direct Train – locations with direct trains to Bedford are shown in purple.*

# Our Priorities

The Council wants rail services to play their full part in its vision to make “the Borough an even better place to live, work and visit.” That means that services need to be easy to use, reliable, frequent and take people where they want to go. But it also means developing rail services so that they support the sustainable growth of the Borough.

In April 2022, the Council published its Local Plan. The Plan covers the period to 2040 and sets out how the council will meet the government’s requirement for 27,100 additional houses between 2020 and 2040, 13,000 of which are already committed. In addition, employment land is needed to support 26,700 new jobs in the same period.

The Plan focusses on building new houses close to railway stations, for example around Kempston Hardwick / Stewartby and the new East West Rail interchange station proposed for the East Coast Main Line south of St. Neots near Little Barford.

Rail-based growth is important to ensure that our new settlements are sustainable and that we play our part in delivering a decarbonised transport system.

Our rail strategy objectives are to:

Objectives
Promote rail services that maximise local, regional and long-distance connectivity for residents and visitors to support economic activity and growth
Promote rail service improvements that support the required new housing growth in the Borough
Promote sustainable living through use of public transport
Support decarbonisation of our transport system

These objectives have been used to inform a set of priority improvements we wish to see that directly affect the economic well-being of the Borough. These are summarised below and described in more detail in the sections that follow.

## **A Rail Strategy for Bedford**

### **Priority 1: Build a New Station at Wixams**

The new settlement at Wixams will have at least 6,000 houses once complete. A new station to serve the settlement was always part of the plan. The project involves several partners, and the Council is now taking the lead in developing the project, assembling the funding, and is now progressing with the design of the station with a view to opening in 2024.

### **Priority 2: Maximise the Benefits from East West Rail**

The East West Rail project will see a new railway built through Bedford, connecting Oxford with Bedford and with Cambridge for the first time since 1967. The plans are being taken forward by the Government-owned East West Rail Company.

The Council is committed to working to ensure that the benefits for Bedford are maximised and that the interests of residents are protected.

The Council is a member of the East West Mainline Partnership of local authorities and supports the wider vision of East West Rail as a main line railway beyond the Oxford – Cambridge section. The East West Mainline Partnership is a group led by interested local authorities established originally as the East West Rail Consortium in 1995. It is separate to and distinct from the East West Rail Company.

### **Priority 3: A New Interchange Hub for Bedford**

As part of the East West Rail project Bedford Midland station will need to be rebuilt, as the new tracks will pass through the site of the existing station building. The Council is keen to see the potential of the station maximised. In June 2018 the Council published a Town Centre Masterplan to establish how Bedford can continue to develop as a more dynamic economy, and the town centre as a vibrant hub of regional and national importance. The rejuvenation of the station and the area surrounding it are a vital part of this Masterplan. The station also has the potential to act as a major interchange hub between East West Rail and the Midland Main Line, but also as a gateway to the town, supporting the growth and economy of the town centre.

### **Priority 4: Maximising Wider Connectivity, Including to the East Midlands, and Internationally**

As has been shown, Bedford has poor rail connectivity regionally and nationally, other than to London. This connectivity has recently worsened since trains to Leicester and Nottingham no longer regularly call at the town. We have identified key geographies where we want to see an increase in Bedford's connectivity via the rail system:

- Across the economic arc between Oxford and Cambridge and beyond through the East West Rail project and East West Main Line vision
  - To the East Midlands
  - To the West Midlands
  - In the longer term to the North of England, including Leeds
-

# Priority 1: A New Station for Wixams

The new settlement at Wixams, two miles south of the town centre, will eventually have at least 6,000 houses. A new station has always been part of the concept.

A station at Wixams will deliver connectivity to residents of the development, and, in addition, its proximity to the important A421 trunk road will mean it will also act as a strategic parkway and means of access to the railway network for passengers across a wider area. Before the pandemic the car park at Bedford Midland station was full by the end of the morning rush hour.

The provision of a station at Wixams is key to the sustainability of the new settlement. It will also act as an enabler for the growth of the Oxford – Milton Keynes – Bedford - Cambridge arc.



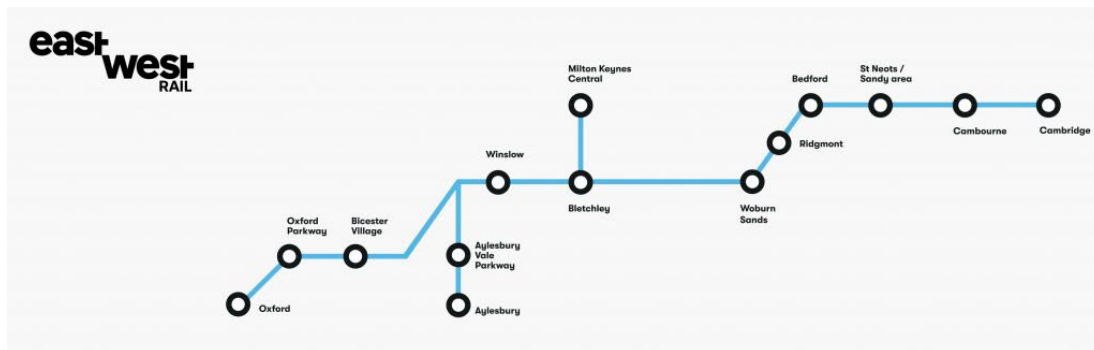
The Council is leading the development of the station, including design work and seeking agreement from the various rail industry partners, including Network Rail, the train operators and the Department for Transport. The concept under development will result in four Thameslink trains per hour each way calling at the station, with opening targeted for 2024.

The new station is being funded by a mix of Section 106 contributions from developers and Council borrowing.

# Priority 2: Maximising the Benefits from East West Rail

The East West Rail project is an exciting opportunity to link Bedford by fast, regular train services to Oxford, Bicester and Cambridge, putting Bedford at the centre of the technology arc. It will put the town in an ideal position to maximise its economic and social potential.

The first phase of the project, the Western section between Oxford and Bletchley is now underway. Key decisions on the route and timing of the Central section will be made by the Government in 2022. Already announced is that the route will serve Bedford Midland station



We will continue to lobby for:

- The Western section to be completed as soon as possible, with a new train service between Bedford and Oxford (and beyond).
- A new “hub” station to be built in the Kempston Hardwick/Stewartby area to serve the existing communities and the new development there.
- A rebuilt station at Bedford St. John’s closer to the hospital and with better quality facilities.
- A new station at Bedford Midland that supports regeneration of the town centre and as a catalyst for the development of the station as a national and international interchange hub and as a high-quality gateway to the town.
- The sufficiency of four tracks north of Bedford, rather than the six proposed by the East West Rail Company.
- A solution that minimises the impact on residents of Bedford Borough, and good compensation for those directly affected. The Council supports retaining the existing four tracks north of Bedford Midland Station.



## A Rail Strategy for Bedford

- A new “hub” station to be built in the Little Barford area to support development there if this site is chosen through the Local Plan process.
- Electrification of the railway from Day One as the way of maximising its contribution to decarbonisation of our transport system.
- Extension of the East West Rail services at either end as part of the East West Main Line vision, linking Bedford with the Thames Valley and the South West in the West and Norwich and Ipswich in the East.

At the time of publication, there have been increasing delays from the East West Rail Company in responding to the 2021 consultation.

The council believes that the delay in the East West Rail Company making further announcements and proposals, particularly in relation to the parts of the route that impact people's homes, is not acceptable, and that residents should not be treated in this way.

We will continue to lobby for East West Railway Company to release these proposals without further delay.



## Priority 3: A New Interchange Hub for Bedford

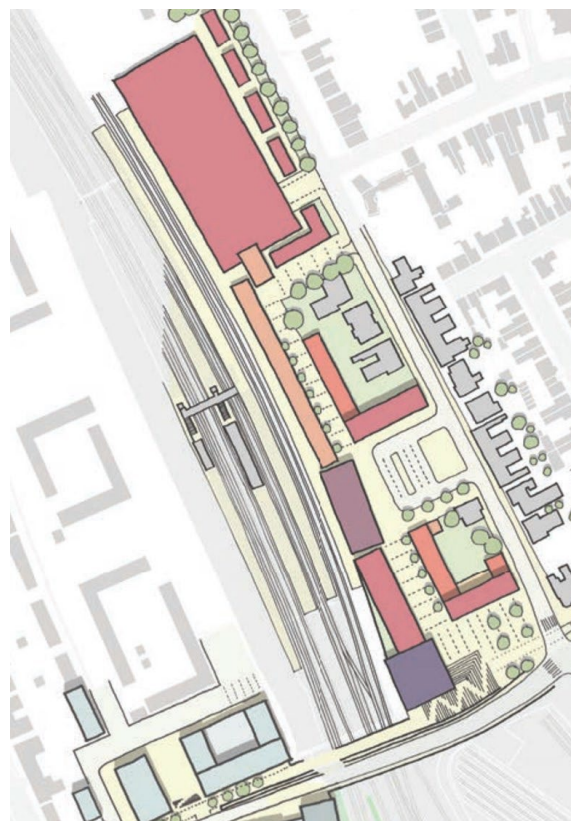
Bedford has the opportunity to be a national and international hub for business, with rail connectivity being the key to unlocking future potential and prosperity.

New and better connectivity through East West Rail will make Bedford Midland station a key hub. It will support interchange between journeys from as far afield as Reading, Oxford, Cambridge, Leicester and Nottingham. It will also support end-to-end journeys within the Bedford area, including by taxis, buses, cycling and walking.

It will provide the catalyst for the regeneration of the town centre, boosting jobs and the local economy, as well as creating an attractive location for people to meet, relax and do business.

The routing of East West Rail through the station unlocks this opportunity, as two new platforms on the east side of the station will be needed. To enable this the existing dated station building will need to be demolished, and the area around the station re-modelled, creating a public transport interchange, supporting sustainable travel, and with improved parking. The Borough Council is an active participant in the redevelopment of the station and the area around it to support the creation of the hub.

“Bedford benefits from a great strategic location both in terms of its links to London, but also as part of the Oxford-Cambridge Corridor. Unlocking the potential of the dozens of sites in and around the town centre and the station as well as transforming our streets and spaces capitalises on this opportunity. It will help to support the vitality of our town centre, support high quality jobs and improve the quality of life for existing residents.” - Mayor Dave Hodgson in the Town Centre Masterplan.

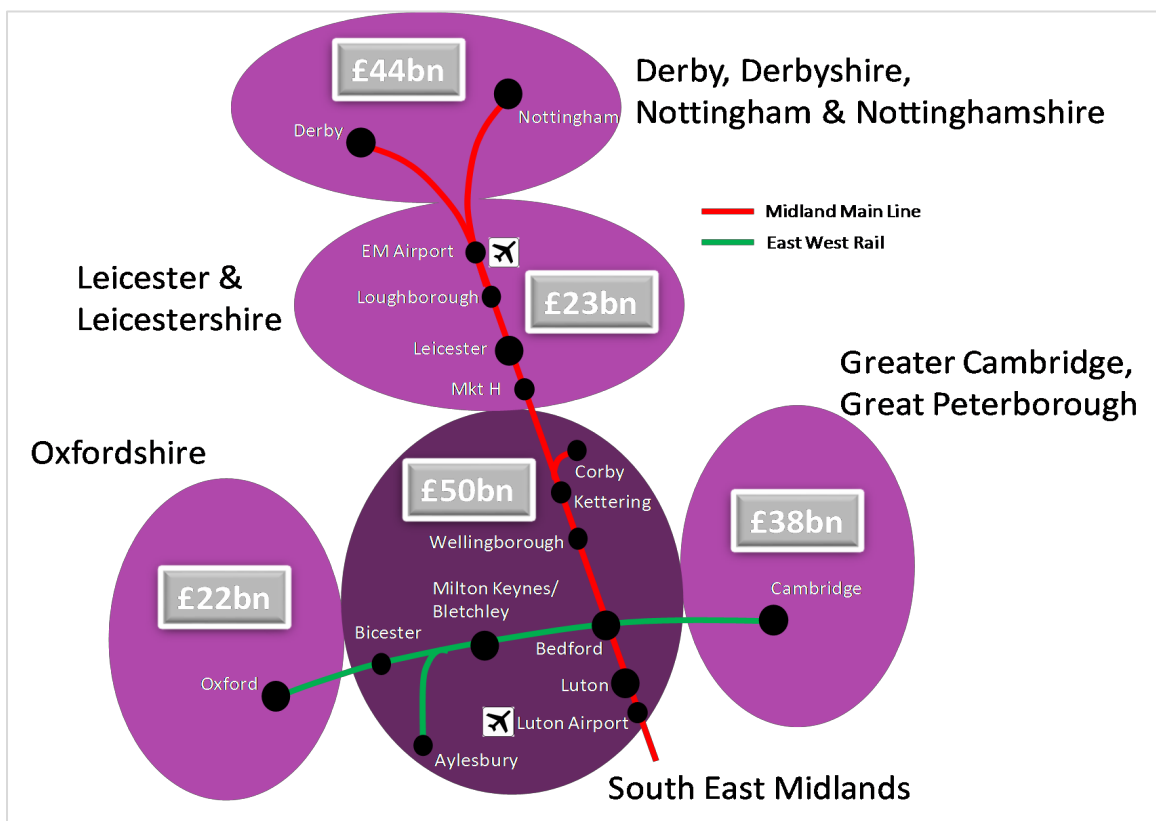


# Priority 4: Maximising Wider Connectivity

## The East Midlands

There are important economic links between Bedford, the wider arc between Oxford and Cambridge and the East Midlands. Both areas have many similar types of business, for example in professional, science and technology-based industries, and rail is well suited to support these. The same is true of links between universities.

The Western and Central Sections of East West Rail will transform connectivity within the arc, and growth in housing and business activity will only increase the importance of links to the East Midlands. The diagram below shows the economic size of these linked economies (divided by Local Enterprise Partnership areas), with the Midland Main Line and East West Rail overlaid.





## A Rail Strategy for Bedford

For the first time since the railway opened there are almost no direct services between Bedford and the East Midlands. This came about due to Government decisions to prioritise faster journeys between London and the East Midlands over intermediate links.

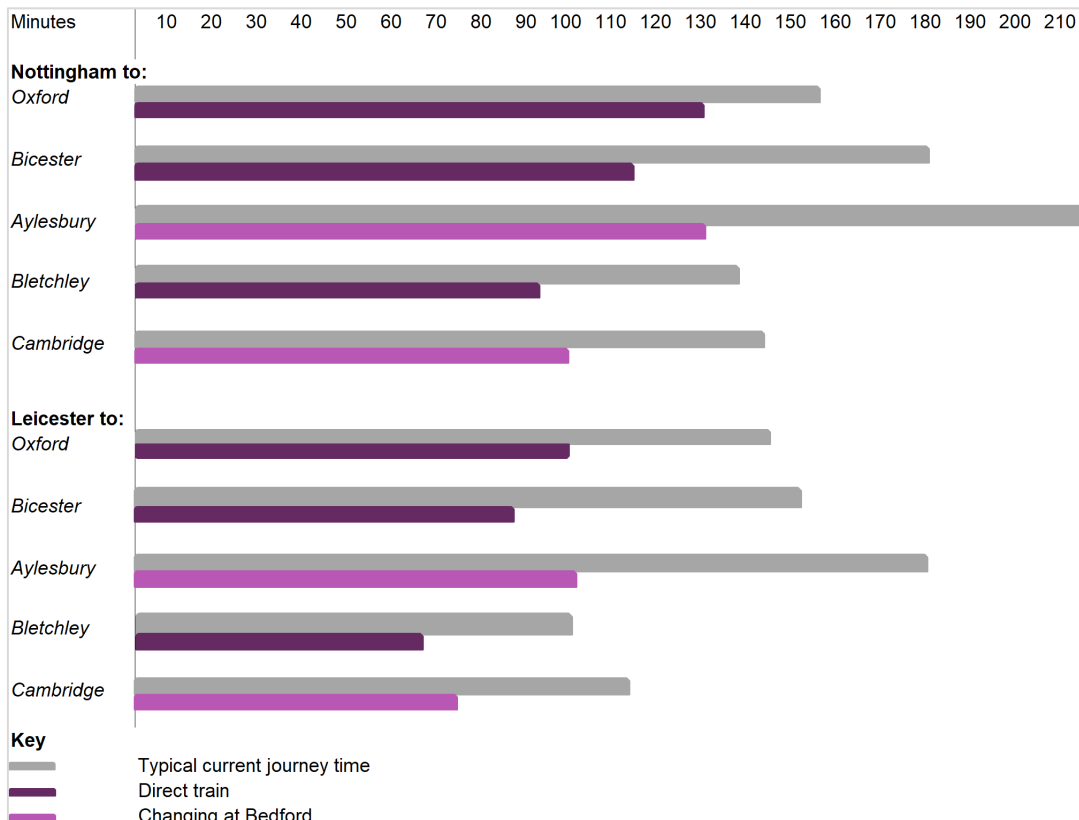
East West Rail brings with it the opportunity for direct services from East Midlands cities such as Nottingham and Leicester to Oxford and the South West via Bedford. The Council is working with Midlands Connect and England's Economic Heartland to promote the delivery of this service as a wider benefit from East West Rail.

The Government's Integrated Rail Plan published in November 2021 describes a strategy that could eventually lead to better intermediate journeys on the Midland Main Line following the opening of HS2 as far north as East Midlands Parkway. However, this could be 20 years away. Improvements are needed earlier.

One of the problems is that the tracks at Bedford Midland station are laid out in such a way that there is a time penalty for inter-city trains to London calling at the station. The rebuilding of the station for East West rail creates the opportunity to review this layout. In particular, the Council wants to maximise the advantage of this redevelopment to include the missing "Up Fast" platform to facilitate that increased connectivity to / from the North on the inter-city network.

Electrification of the Midland Main Line is again being planned. The Council fully supports this and would not want to see any further delays or cancelling of this work.

When East West Rail opens, the changes in journey times between the East Midlands and the Arc could be transformative, as shown below.





## A Rail Strategy for Bedford

### The West Midlands

Connectivity between Bedford and the West Midlands is poor. A journey from Bedford to Birmingham, for example, involves a journey of between 2 hours 15 minutes and 3 hours with changes at Kettering and Leicester, a slow journey via Bletchley or an interchange in London. By car, the journey is 1 hour 30 minutes.

The Council is lobbying on two solutions to this problem:

- A new chord off the East West line at Bletchley to connect it to the West Coast Main Line. This would enable through trains from Bedford to Milton Keynes and potentially Northampton, Rugby, Coventry, the HS2 Interchange station and Birmingham. It would also be a much shorter route between the West Midlands and Cambridge than the current circuitous route via Leicester and Peterborough. The Council is working with other Local Authorities to lobby for this.
- The reopening of the old railway between Bedford and Northampton under the Government's 'Restoring Your Railways' process. This would enable through journeys between Bedford and the West Midlands. It would also bring particular advantages to Northampton – Bedford connectivity.

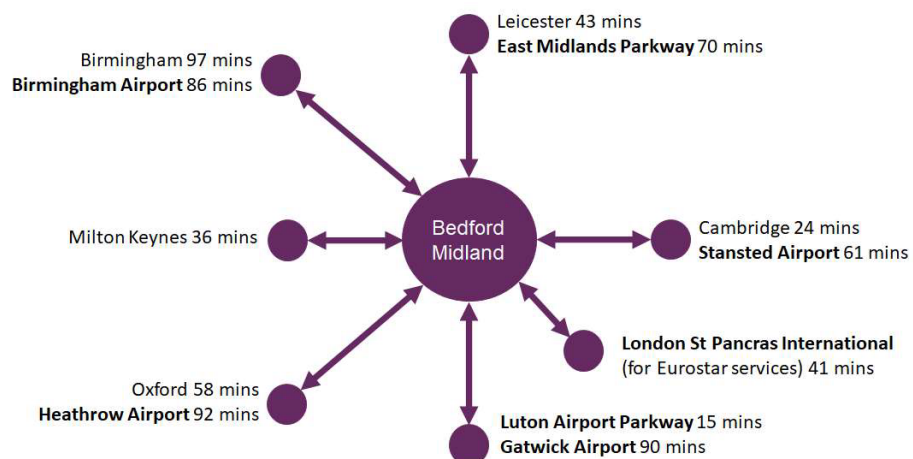
These options are not mutually exclusive and could, in tandem, bring wider cumulative benefits.

### Leeds and the North

Transport for the North (TfN), had proposed to Government a direct link between Bedford and Leeds with a journey time of 1 hour 40 minutes. In the Government's Integrated Rail Plan, the Eastern Leg of HS2 is not to be constructed north of East Midlands Parkway. This puts at risk the opportunity for fast links to the north from Bedford. However, the Plan also announced a review of how Leeds should connect to HS2. The Council will work with TfN and other Authorities to keep connectivity options under review and respond as appropriate as the Government's plans evolve.

### International Connectivity

In addition to the substantial national and regional connectivity that would be available through interchange at Bedford, the station would serve as a hub for access to six international airports, and to Eurostar services, creating a wide range of international journey opportunities across the region as shown below. In turn, this would attract international business to Bedford.

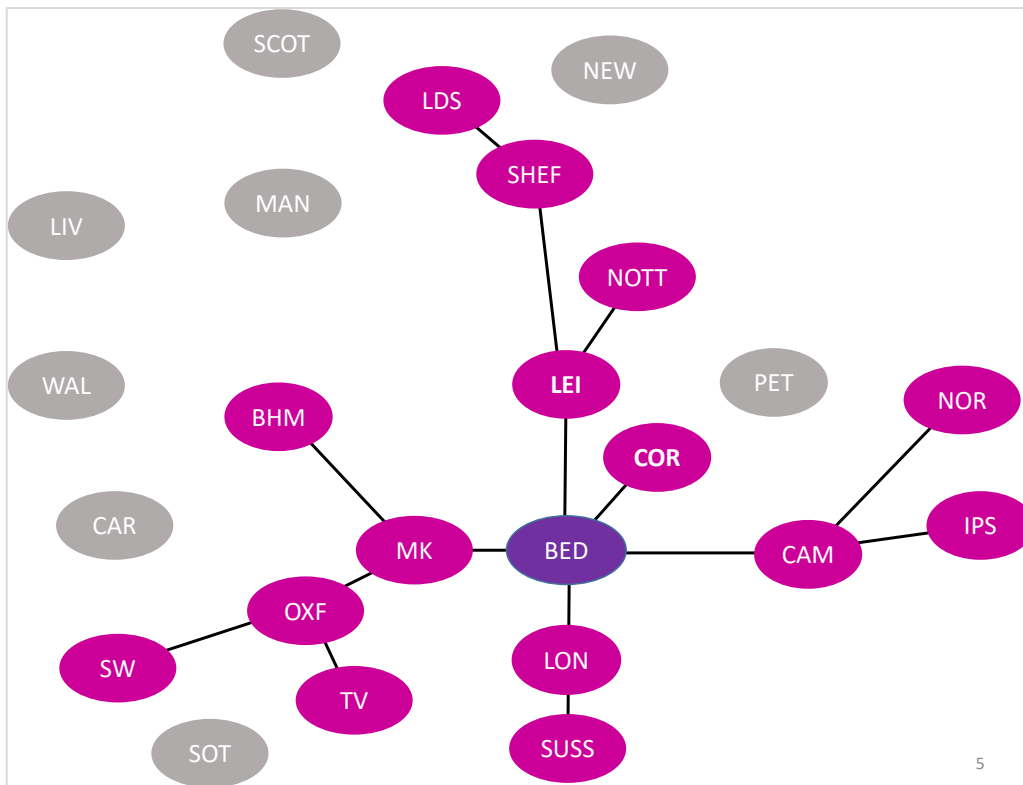


# Summary

Taken together –

- the Wixams new station
- maximising the benefits of East West Rail
- a new interchange hub for Bedford
- new and better connectivity

are all key priorities for the borough, and form the core of our Rail Strategy. The map below, compared to the one on page 4, shows how Bedford’s connectivity could be transformed, and how this transformation would support Bedford Midland becoming a vital and important interchange hub.



BED	Bedford	NOR	Norwich
BHM	Birmingham	NOTT	Nottingham
CAM	Cambridge	OXF	Oxford
IPS	Ipswich	PET	Peterborough
LDS	Leeds	SCOT	Scotland
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