

**Report to:** Lead Member for Transport and Environment

**Date of meeting:** 8 December 2025

**By:** Director of Communities, Economy and Transport

**Title:** East Sussex Rail Strategy 2025 – 2050

**Purpose:** To seek approval of the East Sussex Rail Strategy 2025 – 2050.

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**RECOMMENDATIONS: The Lead Member is recommended to:**

- (1) note the outcomes of the stakeholder and public consultation undertaken in May and June 2025 on the draft East Sussex Rail Strategy;**
- (2) acknowledge the importance of the strategy in setting out the County Council’s key priorities for rail in East Sussex, which will place the Council in a stronger position to lobby for future funding and support the development and delivery of future investment in rail in East Sussex;**
- (3) approve the Rail Strategy, at Appendix 1, which is a modal strategy supporting the East Sussex Local Transport Plan 4, 2024 – 2050; and**
- (4) delegate authority to the Director of Communities, Economy and Transport to make future minor amendments to the strategy.**

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**1 Background Information**

1.1. The fourth East Sussex Local Transport Plan 2024 – 2050 (LTP4) was adopted by the Council at its Full Council meeting on 8 October 2024. It sets out how East Sussex County Council and partners will plan and provide transport for residents, businesses and visitors in East Sussex, now and for future generations. It plans for people and places by focussing on enabling and encouraging greater integrated journeys and reducing the need to travel through land use and planning policies that support sustainable travel.

1.2. A policy on Rail is included within the ‘Integrated and Accessible Transport for All’ chapter in the LTP4 and focusses on the opportunities for integrating infrastructure and services to improve all aspects of the public transport passenger experience to enable seamless and accessible journeys. The ‘Keeping East Sussex Connected’ chapter of the LTP4 also outlines the strategic connectivity rail priorities for the county that would deliver a more reliable, integrated, passenger-friendly rail network.

1.3 The draft East Sussex Rail Strategy, as outlined in Appendix 1, expands on the LTP4 policy and focusses specifically on the opportunities to support improvements to rail passenger transport. It is underpinned by an evidence base which considers recent data concerning:

- rail passenger service use and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic
- population and demographics;
- employment;
- the visitor economy;
- planned housing and employment growth;
- the planned expansion at Gatwick;
- devolution; and
- local, regional and national strategies.

1.4 It identifies the investment in infrastructure that the railway serving the county requires to meet the needs of East Sussex, setting out 6 major strategic priority rail schemes (in no particular order) for the area, all of which contribute to addressing the objectives in the East Sussex LTP4 and the evidence outlined in section 2 of the draft East Sussex Rail strategy at Appendix 1. These are:

- High Speed 1 to Hastings, Bexhill and Eastbourne – which includes Marshlink electrification and dual tracking or passing loops, (for more and improved connections to Europe via international rail services (once reinstated at Ashford International)
- Hurst Green (Oxted) - Uckfield electrification and dual tracking or passing loops,
- Uckfield - Lewes - Line reopening,
- Eridge - Tunbridge Wells railway line reinstatement (Spa Valley Line modern operations reopening),
- Direct rail services between Seaford, Newhaven and London. strengthening direct rail links to Gatwick Airport and for passengers connecting to and from the Newhaven Dieppe Ferry service, and
- Brighton - Eastbourne – Hastings: faster services.

1.5 The East Sussex Rail Strategy 2025-2050 (Appendix 1) sets out the future vision for the delivery of improvements to rail travel in East Sussex, specifically for passenger journeys, and focuses on 6 priority investment areas, which are:

- Accessibility of the rail network;
- Integration with other modes;
- Reliability and resilience;
- Decarbonisation;
- Journey time; and
- Customer experience.

1.6 Once adopted the East Sussex Rail Strategy 2025 – 2050, will replace the existing East Sussex Rail Development Strategy which was adopted in November 2013.

## **2 Supporting Information**

### Roles and responsibilities for rail

2.1 Whilst the County Council does not have a statutory responsibility for rail, the strategy highlights that the county's ambitions for rail will require partnership working to achieve its vision and objectives. Accordingly, the strategy recognises the different role and responsibilities across the industry between Department for Transport, Network Rail (NR) and transport operating companies (TOCs) who collectively are responsible for the funding, development and delivery of improvements. The strategy also acknowledges the planned establishment of Great British Railways (GBR), which will bring rail infrastructure and services together into one organisation.

2.2 The role of the County Council and Transport for the South East (TfSE), at a regional level, is largely focussed on lobbying for infrastructure and service improvements and providing support to the development and delivery of these with important input and insight from other local rail organisations, and commuter groups.

### Devolution, Local Government Reorganisation and other key strategies

2.3 The strategy embraces the establishment of the Mayoral Combined County Authority (MCCA) for Sussex and Brighton from May 2026, and recognition of local government reorganisation which will result in new unitary authorities across the West Sussex, Brighton & Hove and East Sussex geography from 2028.

2.4 The establishment of the MCCA for Sussex and Brighton will result in devolved powers and funding for strategic planning, transport and economic growth from central government, resulting in the transport priorities for the wider Sussex geography being eventually set by the new Mayor through the development of a joint Local Transport Plan. This draft Rail Strategy focuses on the types of measures that key strategic and local partners, alongside working with the County Council can develop and deliver. This will ensure that the Council is in a stronger position to respond to any changes in local powers and enable the Council to confidently set out priorities for rail to the Mayor and lobby and apply for future funding from the Sussex and Brighton MCCA and central government.

2.5 The Rail Strategy also supports other strategies covering local, regional and national geographies. A non-exhaustive summary of these strategies is presented section 3 of the Rail Strategy with a succinct overview of how each strategy links to the Rail Strategy. These linkages show that the strategy has strong connections to the economy, environment, visitor sector and

spatial planning. There will also be benefits to other important sectors such as public health, which will become clearer as interventions are developed in more detail and ultimately delivered.

### Engagement and Consultation

2.6 Significant engagement took place with stakeholders in the development of the draft rail strategy with focused stakeholder engagement meetings with key strategic partners, such as NR and the TOCs, other rail organisations, and commuter groups.

2.7 A stakeholder and public consultation was held between 6 May and 30 June 2025. As a result, 70 responses were received via the East Sussex consultation online portal, and 8 responses via e-mail. The responses received were from across the rail industry, including key strategic partners as well as local rail groups. The Council also engaged with young people in a bespoke event. A consultation summary report set out at Appendix 2.

2.8 Arising from the consultation, the key outcomes were:

- Strong support for the strategy, particularly around accessibility, decarbonisation, and infrastructure upgrades;
- Agreement with the defined rail roles, but clarity required of the role of the County Council in bringing measures forward within the priority investment areas;
- Broad support for the proposed schemes and associated policy references across all 6 priority investment areas, but with suggestions for other strategic schemes;
- Need for being clearer about the evidence that is driving the inclusion of the strategic schemes and priority investment areas; and
- Re-balancing the strategy for both commuters and leisure travel.

### Updates to the strategy following consultation

2.9 In consideration of the points raised as outlined in paragraph 2.8, the key changes to the strategy include the following: -

- strengthening of the evidence base – specifically the strategic case for the investment priority areas referring to key data sets and a new section on local, regional and national strategies;
- clear demonstration of the role of the County Council in bringing measures forward within the priority investment areas (i.e. where the Council can - lead, advocate (project partner) and support (as a stakeholder));
- clear demonstration of rail priorities for East Sussex within the strategy and how the Council will seek to achieve them, in a manner that can be easily transitioned to wherever the decision making, planning and policy sits within the forthcoming establishment of the Sussex and Brighton MCCA and local government reorganisation;
- a new policy on reinstatement of the Eridge-Tunbridge Wells line;
- reference to the opportunities for the Willingdon Chord scheme north of Eastbourne;
- more emphasis on the need for value for money and affordability regarding fares, and
- a new policy on the need for additional nighttime rail services to cater for evening leisure and entertainment.

### Equalities Impact Assessment (EqIA)

2.10 There were a small number of responses to the EqIA for the draft Rail Strategy. These comments contained the inclusion of socio-economic disadvantage following feedback in the survey. These amendments will be incorporated into the significant update to the East Sussex LTP4 EqIA that will be published in Spring 2026.

## **3 Conclusion and Reasons for Recommendations**

3.1 The ambition for rail in East Sussex is focussed on the opportunities for integrating infrastructure and services to improve all aspects of the public transport passenger experience to enable seamless and accessible journeys. This aligns with the East Sussex Local Transport Plan 4 (LTP4) adopted by the County Council in October 2024 and will also align with the other modal strategies being developed or updated post publication of the LTP4.

3.2 Significant evidence gathering, stakeholder engagement and consultation has been undertaken which has constructively shaped the draft East Sussex Rail Strategy. As outlined in paragraph 2.8, the outcomes of this engagement and the public consultation identified that there was strong support for the strategy. As set out in paragraph 2.9, the draft final strategy has been updated to reflect some of the key consultation comments received. Consequently, the 6 priority areas for investment set out in paragraph 1.4 have been identified as part of this process.

3.3 The strategy has been developed for the County Council to demonstrate its priorities for rail, how the Council can achieve them and how progress can be made on these in the short term, whilst also taking full account of the forthcoming changes arising from devolution and local government reorganisation.

3.4 The Strategy will be a live document, and therefore adaptable to reflect the impending changes.

3.5 It is recommended that the Lead Member for Transport and Environment note the responses from the stakeholder and public consultation undertaken on the draft East Sussex Rail Strategy earlier this year, as set out in the consultation summary report at Appendix 2, and approve the Rail Strategy, as set out in Appendix 1, as a modal strategy supporting the East Sussex Local Transport Plan. The Lead Member is also recommended to acknowledge the Strategy's importance in setting out the County Council's key priorities for rail in East Sussex given the forthcoming devolution of powers to the Sussex and Brighton MCCA as well as changes arising from local government reorganisation.

#### **RUPERT CLUBB**

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#### **LOCAL MEMBERS**

All Councillors

#### **BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

Consultation Responses

[Equalities Impact Assessment for the draft Rail Strategy](#)