



An East Anglian Regional Rail Company

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“Never let a crisis go to waste” goes the old expression. The new and overdue national consensus that we need a ‘rebalanced economy’, shifting from over-dependence on the City to a more sustainable model of development based on exporting goods and services in the real economy, opens huge opportunities for us here in Norfolk.

As we set about trading our way out of the debt crisis by selling to the fastest growing nations on earth, Norfolk's strengths in key sectors like agriculture, energy, biomedicine and high performance engineering represent huge opportunities for a lasting recovery. But we won't do it without investment in the skills and infrastructure to exploit them internationally.

Communications infrastructure is absolutely critical to achieving this vision. To unlock the potential of our county and create a vibrant economy which is sustainable we need to repair the historic underinvestment in our infrastructure. Broadband, mobile telecoms, and fast road, rail and air links are key to drawing investment and talent into Norfolk. At the heart of the ‘Norfolk United’ approach of the new Norfolk MPs is a core message: “Norfolk doesn't want a hand out. We want a way in and a way out. Give us the tools and we'll deliver your rebalanced economy.” But let's not ‘develop’ Norfolk in a way that damages what makes this such a special place. Let's combine our traditional way of life with new economic opportunities. Let's develop Norfolk ‘the Norfolk way’, with a renaissance of small high growth businesses run by people working from or closer to home in a vibrant rural county.

Rail infrastructure is particularly critical to modern economies. Nowhere is the woeful neglect of Norfolk's infrastructure more obvious than in our creaky rail network. The stark truth is that we are trying to build a 21st century economy on 19th infrastructure. But we don't just need rail improvements to ease conditions for London commuters, we also need investment in East coast freight links to get more lorries off the road, and better regional links between Cambridge and Norwich - the knowledge economy ‘clusters’ which are driving the new businesses and jobs.

The Government has rightly identified rail infrastructure as a key priority and is thinking radically about how to tackle the challenge. But what is the right model for the railways of tomorrow? We need coherent track and train management, the ability to plan long term investment, the integration of development planning with transport, and a commercial vehicle capable of generating a return. And above all we need bold leadership and joined up thinking.

We had a structure like this once before. It worked for the Victorians. They were Regional Rail Companies and successfully raised the equivalent of billions needed to build the thousands of miles of track which made up our original rail network. They achieved this by having the freedom to raise funds, acquire land, and harness the planning gains created along the track to fund the infrastructure.

So why don't we be bold and create an East Anglian Rail Company to do the same for our area? Imagine a company which controlled the track and trains and stations, with a long term franchise and able to attract the very best management, secure the billions of new finance we need to fund new rail, train and station infrastructure, and had the necessary planning powers to develop a coherent model of sustainable development along our rail corridors. Imagine if we the rail users and taxpayers of East Anglia had a stake in it? Wouldn't you want to invest your savings or pension in a local businesses which was investing in your quality of life and local economy? And it would be far better for the local economy than investing it in Icelandic banks.

An East Anglian Rail company could unlock the billions of new investment we so desperately need, and make East Anglia a model of the high skill and high quality of life model of sustainable development we want for Norfolk. After decades of underinvestment it's difficult to imagine what a world class fast rail network would do for our area. Imagine commuters being liberated from the traffic jams and being able to get from say, Wymondham, to Cambridge in 30 minutes. Imagine refurbished stations with great facilities, shops, fast broadband and wireless. Imagine the effect on young, working and retired people in rural villages of Mid Norfolk if it was easy and affordable to get around. Imagine the impact on our town centres, tourism and heritage with fast rail access to towns like Wymondham so visitors could get to our town centres easily without a car. A fast rail network would also cut car journey times and help ease the burden of rural fuel costs.

This week the Government is considering its response to the McNulty Review of our rail network, and the need for fresh thinking to unlock new investment and leadership.

That's why I'm leading the charge for a bold new approach - urging the Government to look at the idea of an East Anglian Regional Rail Company. We won't rebalance the economy without massive investment in new rail infrastructure. But we know the Government can't pay for it. So I say: give us the tools to do it our own way. The East Anglian Rail Way.