

Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce Group

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The Rt Hon Heidi Alexander  
Secretary of State for Transport  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

Via Email to: [heidi.alexander.mp@parliament.uk](mailto:heidi.alexander.mp@parliament.uk)

28<sup>th</sup> February 2025

Dear Secretary of State,

### **Project Churchward**

We write in regard our support of Great Western Railway's (GWR) and Network Rail's (NR) 'Project Churchward.'

As the voice of business in the Thames Valley, we aim to drive better economic conditions and new opportunities for our members and the wider community. We represent businesses, from micro-businesses to multinational organisations across the geographies of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and your own constituency area of Swindon.

The Chamber wishes to express our support for this project because we believe it would help:

- Drive economic growth and future productivity gains across the Thames Valley and across the GWR network.
- Deliver increasingly frictionless travel across the Thames Valley.
- Demonstrate an ongoing commitment to environmental goals and delivering net-zero / decarbonisation targets.
- Provide greater access to international trade and the exporting capability of business (facilitated by improved connectivity to London Heathrow and the UK's regional airport network).
- Provide further impetus for the timely delivery of the Western Rail Link for Heathrow scheme (see [HERE](#)).
- Strengthen our aim to advance the Thames Valley's global reputation as a business location of choice, and an engine of growth for the United Kingdom (see our [2025 Business Manifesto](#)).
- Transform the quality, accessibility, connectivity, and capacity of rail services across the Thames Valley and beyond.

The project includes proposals to introduce zero-emission battery trains, while improving the quality, accessibility, and frequency of these trains, which we support.

We also recognise the need to limit the call on the public purse and, alongside our ambitions for the WRLtH scheme, support the plan to seek small capital investments, as part of Project Churchward, to deliver large-scale transformations to local train services across the region.

### [Why Thames Valley? – powering economic growth for UK plc](#)

The Thames Valley is the UK's fastest-growing, most productive economy outside of London. A proven location enabling new and expanding companies the potential for growth and success.

Our region is continually placed at the very top of many established, independent, locational, and business rankings. This includes [PwC's Good Growth for Cities report](#) (Swindon 4<sup>th</sup>, Reading 5<sup>th</sup> in the latest report), the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, EY's Regional Economic Forecast and the fDi European Cities and Regions of the Future Report, as well as the [University of Oxford](#), which is widely recognised as the best university in the world in global rankings.

Our proximity to London Heathrow – the UK's only international hub airport and our [largest port by value](#) are significant drivers of international trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) flows into the Thames Valley, and wider UK.

The Thames Valley is consistently one of the UK's top performing regions for attracting FDI with this Chamber directly involved in supporting government (DBT), over the past 10-years, in securing around £75bn worth of investment, securing many 1000s of new jobs into the Thames Valley.

We drive economic growth in the UK and are proud of our proven-track record as a place to invest and do business while delivering prosperity and opportunity for the rest of the country.

Access to talent, a highly-skilled, international, workforce, world leading universities and industrial clusters (the region is world leading in six of the growth-driving sectors identified in the Industrial Strategy) and IP-rich small and medium sized, spin-out and multi-national corporations as well as the connectivity of the region are significant factors in Why the Thames Valley is such an important asset to the UK and its ambitions for economic growth.

### [Project Churchward: promoting growth in the Thames Valley through improved connectivity](#)

As the largest and most influential business membership in the Thames Valley, and independent voice of business for the region, our mission remains to advance the Thames Valley's global reputation as a business location of choice, and an engine of growth for the United Kingdom.

For the reasons we outline above, we remain ambitious about the future economic performance of the Thames Valley and our ability to remain one of the UK's most productive, economically successful, regions and best place to help government deliver its number one ambition of economic growth.

Connectivity, including surface access to Heathrow, and equitable access to transport services are important to the future success of the Thames Valley. However, our region continues to rely on an ageing diesel rolling stock, and parts of the rail network remain unelectrified. This affects the quality, certainty, and connectivity of the rail service. There is still much to do to aid the flow of goods, talent and skills, across the Thames Valley, through solutions that address high levels of road congestion, enabling increased access to a skilled



workforce, increase the frequency and quality of public transport, and strengthen existing rail services to meet future demand. The expectations of business are high and the levels of business-use of rail, and wider transport, services need to improve.

GWR's and NR's joint-mission to introduce a new fleet of zero-emission battery trains across the Thames Valley, known commonly as Project Churchward, would help deliver benefits that directly support the safeguarding of future productivity while addressing long-standing challenges linked to regional connectivity.

Despite our relative prosperity, there are still key challenges faced by businesses across the region linked to transport, congestion, and access to a wide, internationally mobile, talent pool.

- In places like Marlow, Buckinghamshire home to the Globe and Cressex Business Parks, the lack of frequent rail services, coupled with local planning challenges preventing further car park expansion, limit the ability for businesses to grow, and attract a wide talent pool. These challenges also restrict the overall prosperity of a local area, driving up inter-regional competition.
- Elsewhere, in areas with high concentrations of business parks near to the railway, like Winnersh Triangle and Wokingham, Berkshire the currently infrequent service poses similar challenges around access to talent, while promoting continued reliance on the private car. We are also keen to see investment come forward, as part of Project Churchward, which propels key growth sectors forwards.
- We are encouraged by proposals, for example, to transform rail services in Oxfordshire, and deliver a step-change in connectivity to better connect businesses right across the county in the rapidly growing life sciences, technology, innovation and AI sectors, and to exploit further onwards connectivity through the East West Rail link (for which we have been a longstanding supporter).
- Meanwhile, improving and enhancing connectivity to other parts of the rail network, alongside delivering the Western Rail Link to London Heathrow scheme, will not only support access to the Thames Valley from other UK regions but also strengthen the ability to import and export skills and goods right across the world.
- Rail improvements, along the GWR line, including electrification will also help bring Swindon to within the 'magic' one-hour of London Heathrow and Paddington.

Within Project Churchward we support the specific proposals to:

- Improve the Thames Valley's access to Surrey and London Gatwick through a strengthened North Downs Line, replacing rolling stock [Class 165 trains] approaching 35-years old that no longer meets modern business and leisure passenger requirements, while improving the service level as well as the timetable.
- Enhance connectivity to Marlow and Bourne End, removing the need to make two changes from Maidenhead in the peak and increasing overall frequencies thereby making rail a more desirable way to commute to local business parks and centres of employment in south Buckinghamshire.
- Decarbonise the branch line, linking Slough and Windsor, and a major tourist gateway, with provision to uplift services in the future while taking traffic away from local roads.
- Invest in rail services across Oxfordshire, transforming county-wide connectivity while replacing ageing rolling stock and unlocking wider regional priorities, including:
  - Improving rail access to locations that are identified as key drivers of economic growth (e.g., [Culham](#), Didcot and the Science Vale) and major housing (e.g., Oxford, Heyford, Bicester and Banbury)
  - A permanent Oxford-Bristol service, with the opportunity to extend the service further in the future.

- Improving access to Oxfordshire through enhanced regional connectivity for the North Cotswold Line.

We are encouraged by the way GWR, and the wider rail industry, is looking outward, and focusing on articulating the benefits of rail travel to customers, businesses and the wider region, to enable UK government to meet its growth ambitions and the rail industry look ahead and deliver a truly great rail service.

With thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above.

Yours sincerely,



**Paul Britton**  
**Chief Executive Officer**

### **About the Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce**

The Thames Valley Chamber of Commerce (TVCC) is one of the largest accredited Chambers within the UK and the only accredited Chamber of Commerce for the Thames Valley region. The Chamber is a proven centre of excellence for trade and inward investment services and represents the views of over 5,000 businesses in the Thames Valley.