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**‘Reopening N2MH is more than just about restoring a historic transport link—it’s about investing in the future, enhancing mobility, economic opportunity, environmental sustainability, and optimising health for generations to come.’**

# How Rail Links Can Transform Health

A reopened 15-mile rail link between Northampton and Market Harborough could transform regional connectivity, says **Andrew N. Williams**

**T**he genesis of this article would at first seem atypical for a former children’s doctor. However, health is more than just about the absence of disease or serious illness. It is about creating and then sustaining an optimum political, social, economic and physical environment for all to experience the best lived quality of life. A great deal of money has been spent by the state educating and medically supporting my former now adult patients, far too many of whom lack opportunities for employment.

Northampton is the second largest town in the UK and currently has direct rail services to only four cities: London, Birmingham, Milton Keynes, and Coventry. A reopened Northampton to Market Harborough (N2MH) rail link would provide fast connections to Leicester, Loughborough, Derby, Nottingham, and Sheffield, and an opportunity for London to Edinburgh services via Northampton and Leicester. After the reopening of the Milton Keynes to Oxford line in 2025, N2MH would offer fast links from the East Midlands to Oxford via Northampton.

Currently, the 15-mile rail journey from Market Harborough to Northampton takes over two hours and 25 minutes with three changes, making commuting unrealistic. Similarly, the 31-mile journey from Northampton to Leicester, takes over 100 minutes by rail with two changes. (It takes over 90 minutes by bus). A 2020 Network Rail report on reopening N2MH gave the following figures.

A Northampton to Market Harborough journey time of under 18 minutes (with two stops) and a Northampton to Leicester journey of 34 minutes. A non-stop Northampton to Market Harborough

service would only take ten minutes. N2MH would also transform journeys between Northampton, Kettering, and Corby, with a journey from Northampton to Kettering achievable in under 18 minutes.

Although the track was lifted in the 1980s, N2MH is still largely in existence as the Bampton Valley Way. The 2020 Network Rail report on reopening N2MH was encouraging but incomplete. It needs to be updated. Passenger estimates were calculated but not released on ‘commercial grounds’. A Freedom of Information Act Appeal by the British Regional Transport Association (BRTA) was unsuccessful on those very same ‘commercial grounds’.

All major UK railway openings have far exceeded their most optimistic pre-opening estimates, so a Network Rail estimate can be considered the best professional guess. In the absence of these published figures, the BRTA projects that four million passengers would use the N2MH service annually within five years of reopening. This BRTA calculation estimates changes in car commuting either by reducing the presently significant traffic into Northampton, but also in realistically opening up commuting from Northampton to access Leicester and beyond.

In February 2025, England’s Economic Heartlands and the East West Main Line Partnership publicly made the case for constructing a new major rail corridor between Northampton and Old Oak Common. If opened, this line would address longstanding West Coast Main Line capacity issues south of Northampton and make Northampton a major rail hub. As N2MH joins directly onto this proposed new corridor, the BRTA believes that there are strong synergistic benefits particularly with

faster rail access to Leicester, Nottingham and beyond. The BRTA would welcome a recalculation of passenger and freight estimates should the Northampton to Old Oak Common project proceed.

There is undoubted demand for a Nottingham to West of England service. In April, the rail consultancy firm SLC submitted for consultation a new, frequent, direct Nottingham to Bristol service. The route passes via Leicester, Kettering, Bedford, Bletchley, Oxford, Swindon, and Bath. The BRTA welcomes this proposal but believes that if N2MH were available, the Nottingham to Bletchley journey time could be reduced by at least twenty minutes, making commuting from Nottingham and Leicester to Oxford far more practical.

Subsequently, it became clear that this SLC route would also feed into the recently announced Universal Theme Park in Bedfordshire, which is anticipating 8.5 million annual visitors and 26,000 jobs, 80 per cent of which will be sourced locally. Should this major project happen, there is a huge opportunity for rail. N2MH would allow a separate Nottingham to Oxford commuting service, and if aligned to a reopened Northampton to Bedford line, additional rail capacity to supply the theme park for visitors and staff.

Poor air quality is a significant health threat in West Northamptonshire. In 2017 the British Heart Foundation attributed one in twenty deaths in Northampton to air pollution and predicted 1,700 potentially preventable deaths in Northamptonshire before 2030.

The A508 between Northampton and Market Harborough is congested particularly during rush hours, the 18-mile journey taking between 45 – 90 minutes. When also taken in the context of securing a car parking space, a ten or indeed 18-minute journey time offered by N2MH becomes very attractive. N2MH by providing a faster and more efficient transport option between Northampton and Market Harborough would stimulate economic activity by improving transport links for businesses and commuters.

N2MH would significantly contribute to reducing carbon emissions by shifting commuter reliance from road to rail and by

NEWS IN BRIEF

ARRIVA GROUP APPLIES FOR OPEN ACCESS RAIL CONNECTIONS IN YORKSHIRE AND THE HUMBER

Arriva Group has notified Network Rail that it is submitting an open access application to the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) for direct services between Cleethorpes, Grimsby and London, making use of Grand Central's existing open access route to Doncaster and the new service to

decreasing vehicle pollution, improve air quality.

Reopening the N2MH line aligns with national and regional government transport strategies that aim to improve rail connectivity, reduce congestion, and support sustainable development. N2MH is an ideal candidate for Invest 2035, the UK's modern industrial strategy. As Invest 2035 states, 'a resilient, safe, and secure transport network provides access to social and economic opportunity and is fundamental to business investment and location decisions'.

Despite the strong arguments for reopening, challenges remain. In 2019 the Northampton Gateway rail depot which promises 7,500 jobs was approved by the Transport secretary on the grounds of 'national significance' in spite of the overwhelming opposition of Northamptonshire Authorities. The 2024 nationally reported and successful '1,000 voices' campaign forced the Northamptonshire Authorities to finally start to begin to address the findings from the British Heart Foundation report. Other issues include maintaining the integrity of the Bampton Valley Way, and ensuring that the Northampton and Lamport Heritage Railway, which runs along part of the original trackbed, is preserved.

Securing investment for the project would require collaboration between local authorities, government agencies including England's Economic Heartlands, and potential private stakeholders. Public support is crucial. The BRTA believes that passenger operations should be started on the very first day of N2MH reopening. The Climate Change Act 2019 compels any new infrastructure to be greener at the end than at the outset. This affords a wonderful opportunity to offer registered voters in Northamptonshire and South Leicestershire the chance to decide what to do with the required carbon offsets.

This could include some reforestation, but my personal choice would be to enhance the experience of the Bampton Valley Way by including several sensory gardens with changing and parking facilities. Members and families of the SEND community, a highly disadvantaged group, can benefit as well as the wider community.

Reopening N2MH is more than just about restoring a historic transport link – it's about investing in the future. N2MH could once again serve as a vital transportation corridor, enhancing mobility, economic opportunity, environmental sustainability, and optimising health for generations to come. 