

TOURISM ON TRACK: NOTTINGHAM TO LINCOLN

UNLOCKING ECONOMIC GROWTH THROUGH THE VISITOR ECONOMY

October 2024

Foreword



"Investing in the Castle Line rail corridor will be a significant step forward for the East Midlands' visitor economy.

"By improving the speed and frequency of services between key destinations like Nottingham, Lincoln, and Newark, we will unlock new opportunities for tourism growth across the region.

"This investment would not only attract more visitors to our historic cities and market towns, boosting local businesses in hospitality and leisure, but also support sustainable travel options, reducing car use and enhancing the overall visitor experience.

"The East Midlands is rich in culture, history, and natural beauty, and better rail connections will ensure more people can enjoy everything we have to offer."



- **Claire Ward, Mayor of the East Midlands**



Foreword



As the MP for Lincoln, I wholeheartedly support Midlands Connect's outline business case for funding to improve the Castle Line from Nottingham to Lincoln, allowing for faster and more frequent trains along the route.

Lincoln has a lot to offer its visitors, with sites of major historic significance, as well as a bustling network of medieval streets, packed with quaint pubs and charming independent shops. But it is clear that the state of the city's rail links has become a barrier to Lincoln's growth as a competitive tourist destination.

Visitors are a major driver of our local economy, and by investing in the Castle Line rail upgrades - better connecting Lincoln to the wider Midlands and East Coast main line – we would support our tourism industry to flourish.

Midlands Connect's plans have my full support, and I hope to see the project progress.



- **Hamish Falconer MP, Lincoln**



1.0 Introduction

The Castle Line is an important rail line linking multiple key East Midlands tourist destinations: Nottingham, a business and nightlife hotspot, renowned for its historic ties to the legend, Robin Hood; Lincoln, a historic cathedral-city, and Newark, a quaint and historic market town.

Cavendish was commissioned by Midlands Connect to undertake qualitative research with key tourism stakeholders along the Castle Line to gain a deeper insight into how tourism, a key driver of the local economy, would thrive with investment in the rail line.

1.1 Overview

This report provides a summary of insights, including quotes, gathered from key stakeholders within the tourism industry, as well as on-platform discussions with tourists at Lincoln Railway Station in August 2024.

Through these discussions, we have gained insights into the challenges presented by the current service between Nottingham and Lincoln, and how investment could boost the tourism sector and unlock economic growth.

The research and interviews undertaken during August and September 2024 included:

Name	Role	Sector
Annette Thornley	Business Development Manager, Visit Nottinghamshire	Tourism Body
Laura Simpson	Visitor Economy Manager, Nottinghamshire County Council	Local government
Victoria Reeves	Chief Executive, National Justice Museum and City of Caves	Tourism Attraction
Stephanie Sirr MBE	Chief Executive, Nottingham Playhouse	Arts
Maria Palmer-Tabor	Experience and Engagement Lead, Nottingham City Museums	Tourism Body
Charlotte Goy	Chief Executive, Destination Lincolnshire	Tourism Body
Chris Baron	Chair of Destination Lincolnshire Board	Tourism Body

Laura Dunne	Chief of Purpose and Proposition Officer, Lincolnshire Co-op	Retail
Kimberely Vickers	Castle Manager, Lincoln Castle	Heritage
Samantha Mellows	Director of Visitor Experience and Enterprise, Lincoln Cathedral	Heritage
Lydia Rusling	Assistant Director of Economic Growth, South and East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership	Local government
Nicky van der Drift	Chief Executive, International Bomber Command Centre	Tourism Attraction

1.2 Key Findings

Through these discussions, the tourism stakeholders have outlined five consistent themes across the two cities visitor economies:

In Lincoln:

- Insufficient rail connections hinder Lincoln’s ability to compete with other well-connected cathedral-cities like Durham and York.
- Improvements to the rail line would drive local economic growth in Lincolnshire through its tourism, hospitality sectors.
- To reach Lincolnshire’s tourism potential, better connectivity must stretch to the coast.

In Nottingham:

- An improved rail service would enable Nottingham to maximise it’s offering as a hub for business and weekend tourism.
- Nottingham’s night-time economy is being held back by infrequent timetabling and a lack of evening services.

2.0 Interview Analysis

Respondents represented a wide array of interests within the visitor economy in Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire, including perspectives on traditional tourism, hospitality, retail and the arts.

2.1 Insufficient rail connections hinder Lincoln's ability to compete with other well-connected cathedral-cities like Durham and York.

Tourism stakeholders in Lincolnshire outlined their perception that rail links have an impact on Lincoln's ability to compete with other cathedral-cities such as Durham and York.

For **Charlotte Goy, Destination Lincoln**, a lack of main line rail connections to Lincoln mean it is more challenging to attract visitors:

"The main challenge is that Lincoln is not on a main line like other cathedral-cities. Where York is on the East Coast Mainline, it gets all the marketing attention and profile that comes with this."

"Branch lines don't get the attention or level of investment that other main lines get and this can be a blocker of growth opportunities."

Samantha Mellows, Lincoln Cathedral, agreed, suggesting that improvements to transport connections would help the cathedral to attract visitors and compete with other heritage attractions:

"There are 42 cathedrals in the UK, and we would be considered in the top ten in terms of scale, size and importance. Yet our visitor numbers do not sit with the other major cathedrals. The likes of York and Durham are far outstripping us, part of that is about getting people here."

"We have quite a hefty events programme and again we are a little bit limited by a relatively local audience because we just can't get other people into the city. We are trying to widen the net out from a local domestic audience, but it is a struggle."

"The lack of rail access and late-night trains is impacting our ability to get people here. If you're Newark based and you don't want to drive, you just aren't going to bother coming."

Kimberly Vickers, Lincoln Castle, echoed that sentiment, saying it would be difficult to introduce nighttime events with the current rail links:

"We did make steps towards hosting a number of evening events at the Castle, but the reality was that we just were not getting the visitor take up that those events need in order to generate income."

"It's partly about improved connections, a bigger audience to pull from would provide greater opportunities for us to generate income."

Local tourism stakeholder, **Chris Baron, Destination Lincolnshire**, also noted that Lincoln will not be on the radar for people looking at taking a domestic short break because of its poor connectivity.

"More and more people will look at places that are easy to get to, and as soon as you put barriers up in the way of that decision, people will just take the easier option. Will I go to Lincoln or York? Well, definitely York, as I can guarantee I'll get there."

2.2 Improvements to the rail line would drive local economic growth in Lincolnshire through its tourism, hospitality sectors.

Stakeholders felt that greater connections to the East Midlands would expand Lincoln's visitor base, shifting the demographics of visitors and moving them out of their cars. In doing so, Lincoln would be able to benefit from weekend trips and grow its tourism and hospitality sector.

Charlotte Goy, Destination Lincolnshire has suggested that Lincoln's tourism sector critically needs this investment for it to grow further:

"I just think at the moment there isn't government backing. That's where destinations like ours are really let down and left behind. There's only so far we can take Lincoln without the investment we need."

"How do we get high spending people into Lincoln without over saturating the limited car parking we've got? The only option we really have is rail. Our rail station is in the middle of the city, which is quite rare for the modern city, this should be something we can really capitalise on."

Laura Dunne, Lincolnshire Co-op, overseeing the regeneration of the Cornhill

Quarter, agreed that the train station was well-placed for tourists and that better connectivity could attract people from Nottingham:

"Whatever you fancy in central Lincoln, you can do it all from getting dropped off right in the centre. You can start your experience the minute you arrive in Lincoln day or evening."

"Across the East Midlands, traditionally Nottingham has been looked to for opportunity, but I think we've got an offer that is different. We have begun to see evidence that people from Nottingham see us as more of an alternative, as a nice, smaller city which is a bit more historic. Line improvements would allow both cities to benefit from each other's offering."

Nicky Van Der Drift, International Bomber Command Centre, spoke of the typical visiting demographic saying:

"Tourists to Lincoln tend to be of an older demographic, often this can be due to the wonderful hills and countryside of Lincolnshire combined with the historical attraction of Lincoln."

Charlotte Goy, Destination Lincolnshire, noted that the city can diversify the demographics it attracts with rail improvements:

"The majority of our visitor economy is made up of country loving traditionalists. But the growth market for us is the slightly younger visitor, such as families from further across the East Midlands. However, Lincoln and Lincolnshire are mostly accessible by four wheels."

"The majority of our visitors do come from the Midlands, so actually the line has been taken for granted a little bit. We want to aim for more sustainably minded tourists, who might not want to come by car, or simply don't own one."

Charlotte also went on to outline how rail would support visitors to come for longer, and spend more:

"Outside the Summer High Peak season, rail can support businesses and economic growth by bringing people to Lincoln for a short break, you know in Easter or

September or October. Rail would be another string in the bow for getting more people into Lincoln."

"We predominantly have day visitors, and through rail we can begin to transition into more short break visitors. The overnight visitor can spend three to four hundred pounds, compared to the day visitor's £50. We need a programme, product and marketing which encourages people to stay longer. It's not a volume message, it's a value message."

Laura Dunne, Lincolnshire Co-op, agreed and pointed to Lincoln's offer for families:

"We have got a much more eclectic offer now. We've got something for families, and the historic and heritage side. We have got an improved shopping offer. It's not Nottingham, but we've got lots of independent shops and it's probably an easier place to walk around for visitors."

Samantha Mellows, Lincoln Cathedral, supported these comments and suggested that better rail connections could also help attractions hit sustainability targets that they currently struggled with:

"Lincoln is a difficult place to have sustainability targets, as you can imagine. But we do try to encourage sustainable travel because we don't have any parking. We try to encourage people not to park and therefore to use different variations of public transport as much as possible".

2.3 To reach Lincolnshire's tourism potential, better connectivity must stretch to the coast.

Some respondents felt that although investment in the Castle Line was welcome, tourism in the rest of Lincolnshire, particularly the coast, also suffered from poor connectivity.

Nicky Van Der Drift, International Bomber Command Centre, suggested:

"The biggest hold back to Lincolnshire's development in total is its infrastructure. There's not enough promotion of how you use the train network to, and within, Lincolnshire."

Chris Baron, Destination Lincolnshire, and **former Resort Director at Butlin's Skegness**, agreed, pointing out fundamental issues with the county's internal connectivity:

"Skegness is the 4th busiest seaside resort in Britain and probably doesn't even rank in the top ten in connectivity."

"It's about internal connectivity within Lincolnshire, we have two hero brands for the visitor economy in Lincolnshire, that's Lincoln and the coast of Skegness. But there is no rail connectivity between the two."

"There'll be some misspent opportunities there as well because Lincoln doesn't appear on people's agenda. If I I'm coming on holiday by train to Skegness, I won't be going to Lincoln as part of my holiday."

Lydia Rusling, South and East Lincolnshire Councils Partnership, pointed out that in the Midlands, the Lincolnshire Coast was second in the number of visitors it attracts. Rail could increase these numbers in a sustainable way:

"If you look at the Midlands Engine research that has been done around the visitor economy, the Lincolnshire Coast is second only to Birmingham in terms of the number of visitors that it attracts."

"When you look at the future of tourism, being able to access any destination by rail is imperative. This is due to the shift from using cars and looking at a greener future. Being a responsible tourist is gaining significant momentum worldwide."

"Part of my job is diversifying our offer, but equally, we still want to retain a healthy visitor economy. As rail was fundamental to tourism's inception, it is also fundamental to its future and its sustainability."

2.4 An improved rail service would enable Nottingham to maximise it's offering as a hub for business and weekend tourism.

Local tourism stakeholders were keen to outline Nottingham's credentials as a hub for national and international business events, being located in the centre of the United Kingdom, with **Laura Simpson, Nottinghamshire County Council**, saying:

"Talking to different event hosts that go to Manchester, or Leeds, or Birmingham, many will never consider Nottingham, despite its connection to London via the M1. Partly they will not consider Nottingham as a venue due to its poor rail links."

Other respondents agreed, with **Annette Thornley, Visit Nottinghamshire**, suggesting:

"When we bring large conferences and events to Nottingham, businesses expect to be able to get to into the city quite quickly. These business tourists tend to spend three times more than a day visitor to Nottingham, so those are the highest spending tourists that we want to attract."

"If we had a better rail service, connections and quicker rail times, we would be much better equipped to attract these visitors."

"At the moment, people are very much looking at their carbon footprint and are making sustainable decisions around travel. A strong railway can support that sustainable travel and presents an opportunity for us to promote that to businesses looking at hosting events."

Annette Thornley added that international businesses, particularly from America, may look to other European cities given rail network issues:

"The United States is one of our biggest audiences in terms of looking at the website for information to travel to Nottingham from the United States, and there was a big news piece in the US around coming to Nottingham. However, the piece noted that our trains weren't very good."

"If they were to go somewhere in Belgium, or anywhere in Europe pretty much, they are much less likely to have to think about these issues."

Maria Palmer-Tabor, Nottingham City Museums noted that once visitors are in Nottingham, it is a very accessible place, the challenge is getting them to the city:

"There's great tram links and bus networks within the city, but the issue is getting to Nottingham from other cities."

"Nottingham is seen as a bit of a 'sub-hub', Birmingham and Derby are more centrally prioritised. Nottingham seems to be just sandwiched between more connected cities."

Local tourism stakeholders also noted that better rail services would allow Nottingham to improve its offering as weekend tourist destination. **Laura Simpson, Nottinghamshire County Council** noted:

"At the moment, Nottingham is not a week-long destination. We are not York or Edinburgh, but we know we can set our own plan. In the short break market, we can collectively do more as a city to help develop the visitor economy."

For **Annette Thornley at Visit Nottinghamshire**, rail improvements would mean that the visitor economy can work together to form package trips for those spending a weekend in the city.

"We can create packages with itineraries that include rail travel. It would be a real opportunity to work with rail companies, hotels and destinations to market the city."

2.5 Nottingham's night-time economy is held back by infrequent timetabling and a lack of evening services.

Many of the local tourism stakeholders referred to Nottingham's local and national reputation for its night-time economy.

However, with many local rail services ending before evening venues shut their doors, Nottingham's nighttime economy, including its first-rate theatres, bars and restaurants, miss out on spending. **Stephanie Sirr MBE, Nottingham Playhouse** theatre stated:

"The majority of the audience that come to Nottingham Playhouse specifically travel from outside the city, around 75% of our audience. However, only 3% of the total audience come by rail."

"We've even started some of our shows early, at 6.30, to allow those using rail to get home."

"Often you can't get anywhere after 10:45 in the evening by rail, not Lincoln or Birmingham. We do have people that are passionate about theatre, who will look up trains to Nottingham and think 'no, I'm not going to pay £30 for parking and sit in traffic'."

Victoria Reeves, National Justice Museum, noted that the lack of late-night rail services means that taxi services are often the preferred transport option for customers:

"We host several crime clubs and corporate events at our location. At the moment conversations around these evening activities often centre around people using taxis."

"If train networks are safer and run later then it would encourage more footfall into the city. Some big concert venues will run into the night and rail networks will be missing out on this business, as most people will get into taxis and coaches."

Annette Thornley, Visit Nottinghamshire, pointed out that local people from Newark that drive to Nottingham for an evening are much less likely to spend time and money in the night-time economy:

"With the last train back to Newark being around 10 o'clock, if you're going to the theatre, you won't have time to watch the performance, go and have a drink, then get the train back."

"We lose the additional spend, as people who have to drive in can't go and have a drink afterward and will just go straight home. I think later trains would really work for the city."

"If people could get from Newark to Nottingham on the train and stay after a performance and enjoy a drink or two, that is already boosting the night-time economy."

Maria Palmer-Tabor, Nottingham City Museums, suggested that there is much better tram connectivity later into the night:

"The railways aren't considered to be an option in Nottingham, whereas the tram network into wider Nottinghamshire is. The rail connections to other towns, like Derby, Lincoln, and Sheffield, aren't there. Those people tend to drive."

"This is another slight barrier for people coming for evening events and staying on for dinner or overnight."

For **Stephanie Sirr MBE, Nottingham Playhouse**, the overreliance on cars poses a potential threat to the theatre and the wider night-time cultural sector of Nottingham:

"Not many young people can afford a car, so where are audiences in five and ten years going to come from? They're not."

"Over 1,000 people are employed directly in culture in Nottingham, and at some point, with the current environment situation, people are going to wake up and refuse to use the car. If we aren't going to make big decisions around transitioning to more sustainable transport, places may have to shut."

"I don't think there can be any other core city with less connectivity than Nottingham."

Stephanie Sirr MBE, Nottingham Playhouse, went on to emphasise the importance of sustainability for Nottingham's tourists:

"As a business we're more predisposed, I think, to have people who would like to operate in a way that is carbon neutral or carbon considerate at least."

"And when we survey our audiences, they say they really care about our carbon ambitions for the company, and they care about the fact that we've massively cut our carbon footprint as a company over the last 10 years. Then we prevent them reaching us in a sustainable way, forcing them into cars which is off putting and completely at odds with Nottingham's Carbon Neutral ambitions as a city."

3.0 Speaking to tourists on the Castle Line

On Friday 9th August, Cavendish travelled on the Castle Line to speak to tourists about their visit and their experience with the local rail service.

Rail customers spoke highly of Lincoln as a visitor destination, with its historic tourism, hospitality and retail offer. However, they noted challenges with the rail service, outlining that the service is infrequent, crowded and slow. Multiple rail users suggested that they would visit Lincoln more often if the service was improved.

"We love visiting Lincoln, but the train schedules are awful. If there were more frequent trains on more days, we'd definitely come more often." - **George and Lily, who came into Lincoln for shopping.**


"I brought my kids to see Lincoln Castle. We were looking forward to it but the long train journey from Beeston was too long for them. There were too many stops. Quicker journeys would make it much easier." - **Natasha, visiting Lincoln with her children.**

"I often come to Lincoln, but the limited train options make it tricky. A lot of the trains only have two carriages, so overcrowding is a big issue. I am still concerned about Covid so too many people in a small train puts me off coming. Improved rail services would encourage me to visit more." - **Mark, a regular visitor from Leicester.**

"We decided to spend the day in Lincoln, but the two-carriage train from Nottingham was very slow and crowded. We don't think we'll be back unless the situation with the trains change. Quicker, more affordable and less crowded services are needed." - **Emma and James, visiting from Nottingham.**

"Lincoln has so much to offer, but the poor rail connections are a real drawback. If the trains were quicker, more frequent and had more carriages I'd visit much more often with friends and my family." - **Sarah, visiting Lincoln's historic sites.**

"I came to Lincoln for a meeting, but I stayed to have coffee with a colleague in the city. Better train services would make me want to come back with my partner and children on public transport, but right now the train is too slow for me to bring my kids." - **David, from Loughborough.**



"We love the restaurants and shops in Lincoln, but the train journey from Derby is too long. Improved rail connections would make our visits much more enjoyable." -
David and Andrea, visiting for a day out.

4.0 Conclusions

Midlands Connect has submitted an outline business case to Department for Transport proposing upgrades to the Castle Line. These include:

- **The core option recommended will deliver an increase in line speed from predominantly 50 mph to 75 mph.**
- **The long-term aim is to double the frequency of services along the route in future.**

Tourism stakeholders in the East Midlands outlined concern that the current rail provision between Lincoln and Nottingham is presenting a challenge to the tourism and hospitality sectors in both cities.


This sentiment was reinforced by the on-platform discussions, with rail customers referencing issues such as slow, crowded and infrequent trains, affecting the appeal of using the trains for tourism.

Tourism stakeholders felt an improved rail line would support Lincoln to compete with other tourist destination cathedral-cities, like Durham and York, that benefit from main line connections. They also felt it would help the city to attract different tourism demographics and retain visitors in the city for longer.

However, stakeholders outlined that while investment in the Castle Line is critical, it would require better connections to the Lincolnshire coastline for the economic potential of the county's tourism to truly be unlocked.

On the other end of the line, tourism stakeholders felt poor rail connectivity is holding Nottingham's tourism sector from achieving its potential. They feel that an infrequent timetable, and a lack of evening services, is impacting its famous night-time economy, with one stakeholder fearing key attractions would be forced to close if rail accessibility is not improved.

Located centrally in the UK, Nottingham has potential to be a hub for business and event tourism. Local stakeholders feel that an improved rail service would enable the city to maximise its offering in this sector, attracting high spending visitors and more weekend tourism that would drive economic growth.



Tourism stakeholders in the East Midlands are clear that investment in the Nottingham to Lincoln rail corridor is an imperative next step for attracting visitors, increasing local spending, and boosting the region's economy.