



Strategic Transport Forum

14th May 2021

Agenda Item 4: East West Rail Consultation

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Forum:

- a) Note East West Railway (EWR) Company's non-statutory consultation**
- b) Provides a steer on the strategic issues within which a response is prepared**
- c) Agree that the EWR Consortium will develop the detailed response**
- d) Delegate approval of the response to the Chair of the Forum**

1. Strategic Context

- 1.1. East West Railway Company launched its second (non-statutory) consultation on the scheme on 31st March: closing date for responses is 9th June.
- 1.2. Key areas of focus for the consultation are: Oxford Station and its supporting infrastructure (including Oxford Parkway and Bicester Village stations); London Road level crossing in Bicester; how best to serve communities on the Marston Vale Line; options for improved stations in Bedford; and five alignment options for the section of new railway between Bedford and Cambridge.
- 1.3. Delivery of East West Rail connecting East Anglia, with central, southern and western England is the shared strategic ambition of the East West Rail Consortium and Forum. The delivery of East West Rail has been at the core of the region's strategic priorities for 25 years and is the single biggest opportunity for our region. Investment in a strategic railway will be at the heart of transforming what is currently a series of discrete functional economical areas and housing markets into a better-connected region, to the benefit of businesses and residents alike.
- 1.4. EEH is committed to working with the East West Railway Company as it develops these proposals further and welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation.
- 1.5. It is recommended that the Forum provide an initial steer on the strategic issues and then looks to the EWR Consortium to use its knowledge and expertise to prepare the detailed response.

2. Issues for Consideration

- 2.1. The strategic issues for consideration by the Forum have been separated by the sections of the railway they relate to.

3. Oxford to Bicester

- 3.1. In the west of the Company's scheme, demand for rail travel in Oxfordshire has grown rapidly and above the UK average. Oxford Station is by far the busiest of the Oxfordshire stations with 7.9 million journeys in 2017-18, an increase of 69% over ten years. The

success of Oxford and Oxford Parkway stations illustrate the impact of investment. The introduction of East West Rail services will deliver significant benefits to the Oxfordshire area but constraints on capacity will be experienced most severely at Oxford Station. It is essential that improvements to track capacity between Oxford station and Oxford North Junction (including a long-term solution to the Jericho Line) are delivered to enable a four train per hour service to run in each direction.

- 3.2. The Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study, funded in-part by England's Economic Heartland and the East West Rail Consortium, identifies the need to enhance platform capacity at Oxford Station to accommodate planned growth and enable East West Rail services to run beyond Oxford. The need for additional through platforms will support regional aspirations to provide direct services from Oxford through Swindon to Bristol and an additional one train per hour service between Oxford and Southampton. EEH will continue to press the case for East West Rail services to extend through to Didcot Parkway from 2024 and onward towards Swindon/Bristol and Southampton from Cambridge.
- 3.3. Oxford Parkway has shown significant growth since opening in 2016 and this growth is forecast to double by 2031 in a scenario where Didcot Parkway becomes one of seven growth hubs in Oxfordshire. The demand for rail services from Oxford Parkway has already placed significant pressures on surface parking. Local Plan housing allocations adjacent to Peartree junction and sites east and west of Oxford Road will create additional demand for rail travel. It is imperative that new development is connected to the station by sustainable modes of transport whilst expanding carpark provision to cater for those arriving from further away.
- 3.4. The expansion and frequency of services serving Bicester Village Station is crucial to improving connectivity across the region. It is important that the increase in demand generated by East West Rail services is managed to maintain local connectivity across the town and promote town centre vitality and accessibility. As identified in the consultation, London Road (Bicester) provides an important link for local traffic and an important route for local bus services. The increase in frequency of trains generated by the introduction of new East West Rail services will mean the level crossing located on London Road could be shut for 30 minutes per hour, increasing to 50 minutes per hour with the introduction of services from Cambridge.
- 3.5. EEH is concerned that the six potential solutions referenced in the consultation are predominantly car-based and do not identify the full suite of solutions that are needed to realise the needs of non-motorised users. The London Road Options Appraisal Report co-developed by Oxfordshire County Council, England's Economic Heartland and the East West Rail Consortium recommended that a package of sustainable transport solutions would most appropriately address severance issues caused by level-crossing downtime. A walking/cycling solution is the preferred approach and will form the basis of more detailed study work later this year. This work will explore the benefits of a non-motorised underpass and footbridge (including other active travel interventions) and subsequently options for a pedestrian underpass must not be discounted at this stage.

4. Aylesbury, Bletchley and the Marston Vale Line

- 4.1. EEH recognises that careful decisions will need to be made regarding the future of train services on the Marston Vale Line. The existing infrastructure means that journey times between Bletchley and Bedford are slow and the user experience is also hampered by the lack of facilities many stations along the route offer. It is accepted that retaining existing stopping services may not maximise the full potential of East West Rail and/or provide value for money. Notwithstanding, it is critical that whichever station/stopping pattern concept is taken forward, investment in the Marston Vale Line is supported by local first/last mile connectivity to expand the reach of station catchments. Provision of sustainable access to stations will deliver health and environmental benefits and reduce the volume of vehicle traffic in local communities. It is also important that the alternative level-crossing access (i.e. new bridges) consider the needs of non-motorised road users.

- 4.2. EEH and East West Railway Company are taking account of first/last mile connectivity requirements necessary along the Marston Vale Line to support each of the train service and station concepts referred to in the consultation. The work is led by a consultancy team and overseen by a steering group consisting of local authorities whose administrative boundaries span this section of the railway. The report is due shortly and will recommend the packages of first/last mile interventions that can maximise the investment in a new Main Line and help realise the railway's full potential.
- 4.3. Each station and train service concept will trigger major engineering works. The construction impact of either proposal will be significant, and it is essential that lessons are learned and applied from the delivery of Western Section (Phase 2) currently under construction. At the last meeting of the East West Rail Consortium constituent local authorities presented some of the challenges they have faced during construction. These lessons have been logged and shared with East West Railway Company and it is important that they are considered and planned for ahead of future works on the Marston Vale Line.
- 4.4. The implication of new infrastructure and train line modernisation will necessitate a temporary closure of sections of the Marston Vale Line either through a series of short blockades or a prolonged blockade. When considered alongside the fact the A428 Black Cat to Caxton Gibbet scheme (10-mile dual carriageway and junction improvements) is at examination stage, there is a risk that two of the region's east-west travel corridors are disrupted concurrently. East West Rail should assess the impact of a prolonged closure of the Marston Vale Line (coupled with level-crossing closures) on the local road network and discuss the findings with interested parties.
- 4.5. EEH is very concerned with the lack of commitment afforded to the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link. The original East West Rail business case identified the strategic benefits of an Aylesbury-Milton Keynes service. It was included within the scope of the Transport and Works Act Order which was approved by the Secretary of State in February 2020. It is therefore disappointing that this link is now referred to as a 'potential future section of East West Rail'.
- 4.6. EEH via the East West Rail Consortium has pressed the case for investment in Aylesbury-Milton Keynes as a means of delivering the scheme's full transformational potential. Delivery of this link is a key policy of the region's Transport Strategy and provides a vital connection that will unlock access to jobs and education and supports current and future housing growth. Further, without such link the region fails to capitalise on opportunities to develop a new regional service linking Northampton-Milton Keynes-Bletchley-Aylesbury-High Wycombe and the economic opportunities at Old Oak Common (including access to Heathrow Airport). EEH urges East West Railway Company to confirm the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes service as soon as possible.

5. Bedford Area

- 5.1. East West Rail services calling at Bedford will ensure the town reaches its economic and social potential. The new railway will serve as the catalyst for the development of Bedford Station as a national and international interchange hub between East West Rail and the East Midlands. With respect to Bedford St Johns, EEH notes the need to relocate the station to either the west or south of its current location to accommodate the speed and turning radius of new East West Rail services. To develop a more detailed understanding of the implications of each of the options set out in the consultation, EEH is supporting Network Rail colleagues to develop a piece of strategic advice that will recommend the optimum interfaces between Bedford and East West Rail. This piece of work will report in autumn 2021 and inform EEH's response to East West Rail's statutory consultation.
- 5.2. It is encouraging that the consultation recognises the opportunity for improvements at Bedford Station to contribute positively to the regeneration of the town. EEH support local aspirations that seek to connect a newly regenerated station with economic and housing redevelopment opportunities nearby. East West Railway Company should

continue to work with partners in Bedford to ensure expansion plans at Bedford Station designed to accommodate new train services support the ambitions of Bedford Master Plan.

6. Bedford to Cambridge

- 6.1. Each of the five different route alignments proposed between Bedford and west of Cambridge benefit from a shared movement corridor with the A428. Aligning both rail/road infrastructure in this way will ensure new housing and communities are brought forward with the certainty of multi-modal transport connections. It is noted that work is ongoing to consider the benefits of the new alignment serving either a station at Tempsford or St Neots South. Timetabling and station design must facilitate frictionless interchange between the new station and East Coast Main Line services. This will enable better rail access to the Heartland's key regional destinations (eg, Peterborough) that are not located along the railway's core.
- 6.2. As the consultation focuses eastwards on the approach to Cambridge, it is important that proposals for four-tracking between Shepreth Junction into the city integrate with proposals for the new Cambridge South Station. Delivery of Cambridge South Station is a regional priority and EEH supports the delivery of a new station opening by 2025 and East West services calling there. EEH urges the Company to work with promoters of Cambridge South and the South East Transport project to ensure opportunities are aligned.
- 6.3. East of Cambridge, the Passenger Rail Study taken forward jointly by England's Economic Heartland and Network Rail identified that improving connectivity from Cambridge to East Anglia (Ipswich and Norwich) will unlock regionally significant economic benefits. These benefits could be achieved either through journey time reduction or an additional direct service between Cambridge and Norwich/Ipswich. An Eastern Section pre-SOBC is being developed by East West Rail Consortium. The work is testing the benefits and implications of several new service options that provide enhanced connectivity to Ipswich and Norwich from Cambridge and further west. The findings of the pre-SOBC have confirmed that the Eastern Section has a strong strategic and economic case and extending East West services provides value for money. The true transformational benefit of East West Rail will not be felt until the country has coast-to-coast, through connectivity from East Anglia to the South West. Through the work of the East West Rail Consortium, Sub-National Transport Bodies Western Gateway, England's Economic Heartland and Transport East will work together to continue to make the case for this investment.

7. The Customer Experience

- 7.1. EEH recognises that a customer's experience is shaped by their end-to-end journey; not only how they feel whilst on-board the train. The aspiration for consistent, clock-face timetabling is well-received and a helpful reminder of the ways improvements to public transport are as much about social needs as physical ones. In this vein, EEH encourages East West Rail in its role as Shadow Operator to embrace and/or pioneer anticipated changes to ticketing that better reflect changes in working patterns and other exogenous factors that have arisen in recent years.
- 7.2. The stations served by East West Rail will influence users' level of satisfaction. The opportunity provided by building and expanding stations presents a chance to put the user needs at the heart of new infrastructure. EEH expects at a minimum that each station will provide a rich blend of future proofed facilities and new technology to make journey's simpler and more comfortable. We invite East West Railway Company to consider the ways the design of new stations and the public realm in which it is located prioritises walking and cycling needs over vehicles. This extends beyond accessible routes to the station and must consider the ways vehicle drop/off pickup and parking is kept out of sight from the main station frontage, ensuring that where practical those using the station entrance/exit are met with streetscapes that are not interrupted by motorised transport.

7.3. The need to plan for a safe and inclusive transport system is a principle that underpins the region's Transport Strategy. Station design, including from street to platform and from platform to train, must be completely accessible for all. Empirical research undertaken by the EEH Business Unit has demonstrated that users with impaired mobility are less likely to use stations that do not have level-boarding between platform and train when compared with stations that provide both ramp provision and level boarding. It is essential that a 21st century railway meets the needs of modern travellers and accessibility should ideally be accommodated by improved platform and rolling stock rather than manual ramp provision.

8. Decarbonisation

8.1. The imperative to decarbonise the transport sector is now front and centre of transport policy. Overhead electrification offers a significant opportunity to make progress towards national net-zero carbon obligations. As set out in the Transport Strategy, EEH will continue to make the case that East West Rail is electrified as a means of offering the only realistic traction technology capable to support freight flows or long-distance high-speed passenger services that will be using the railway. An electrified East West Rail would enable most rail services operating in this region to operate a fully decarbonised service; enabling freight services using the line to take full advantage.

9. Next Steps

9.1. Following discussion of the key strategic issues at this Forum it is recommended that the Forum looks to the East West Rail Consortium to develop the detailed response. A final copy of the response would be delegated to the Chair of the Forum to agree and sign.

Antony Swift
Project Lead

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