Strategic Transport Leadership Board

9 June 2023

Item 6: East West Rail

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Board:

a) Hears from representatives of the East West Railway Company regarding the route update and next steps

b) Discusses and agrees the proposed approach to ensuring East West Rail is creating a positive legacy for the region

c) Agrees to the developing of a 'legacy plan' for East West Rail, working with the region's universities and other partnerships in doing so

Purpose of paper

1.1. To update the Board on East West Rail's route options announcement and hear member views on the opportunity for a locally-led East West Rail legacy.

2. Key points

2.1. On 26 May the East West Railway Company published its route options report – key points are in annex 1. The Company's chief executive will be present at the meeting.

2.2. Given the progress on delivering East West Rail, alongside the £15 million capacity funding for local authorities announced by government in March, there is a timely opportunity for Board members to discuss the legacy it wants to see from East West Rail and how EEH can work with partners to achieve this.

2.3. Regional collaborations, including the recently formed Oxford-Cambridge Supercluster Board, the Universities group and the pan regional partnership should have collective ownership for the success of East West Rail, for the benefit of the region as a whole.

3. Context

3.1. Delivery of East West Rail between Oxford and Cambridge, and Milton Keynes and Aylesbury (and the subsequent opportunity for an East West Main Line from Norfolk and Suffolk through to Swindon, Bristol and South Wales) is an over-riding priority in England's Economic Heartland's transport strategy.

3.2. On 26 May, the East West Railway Company published its route update report which detailed its current position on East West Rail's alignment from Bletchley to Cambridge, alongside issues such as the London Road level crossing in Bicester and route-wide issues such as electrification and environmental mitigation.

3.3. This follows a consultation which was held by the Company in summer 2021.

3.4. During 2022, EEH worked with the East West Main Line Partnership to capture the business imperative for East West Rail. This was an important step forward in ensuring local communities and businesses were clear of the role the region expected East West Rail to play – providing the basis for a sustainable transport network across the region, connecting our communities and businesses with opportunities and skills. In November 2022, the Chancellor reconfirmed government's support for the scheme.

3.5. In March 2023, the spring budget set out the timeline for a route announcement between Bletchley and Cambridge. The government also pledged to provide up to £15 million 'local capacity funding to support local authorities along the East West Rail route to maximise economic opportunities'.

3.6. The publication of May's route update report was part of a wider announcement from the Chancellor on the government's support for the UK life sciences sector.

3.7. Also in May, the recently-formed Oxford-Cambridge Supercluster Board, which consists of the private sector, universities and LEPs, released its paper, 'East West Rail as a Catalyst for Turbocharged Economic Growth' which was commissioned by the East West Railway Company. The report highlights how East West Rail is key to 'unlocking the critical mass needed to accelerate the region's innovation economy' based on science and technology.

3.8. The Oxford-Milton Keynes section of East West Rail is due to open in late 2024 with the intention to run services to Cambridge by 2030.

3.9. EEH is supporting the East West Main Line Partnership and Buckinghamshire Council develop an economic narrative for the Aylesbury link – a potential supplier has been identified and work is due to start shortly.

4. Route announcement

4.1. The route options report details the East West Railway Company's current position on East West Rail's alignment from Bletchley to Cambridge.

4.2. Accompanying the government's announcement, Transport Secretary Mark Harper said: *"The cities of Oxford and Cambridge are renowned across the globe for their academic excellence - East West Rail will be vital in allowing them to thrive for generations to come and help to grow the economy. With the potential to unlock £103 billion of growth through new homes, businesses and job opportunities, this crucial line will also serve as a catalyst for development in one of Europe's most vibrant local economies while making travel quicker, cheaper and easier across the region."*

4.3. A summary of the key positions taken by the Company is in the annex.

4.4. East West Railway Company's chief executive, Beth West, will be at the Board to present an overview of the announcement and next steps.

4.5. East West Rail's delivery is a strategic priority for the region, supporting net zero, economic growth and acting as a catalyst for the improved provision of public transport and active travel.

4.6. EEH's statement, agreed by the Vice-Chair, reflected the strategic importance of the scheme and the need for it to create lasting legacy for the communities it serves.

4.7. "Today's announcement helps bring clarity to residents, businesses and local authorities along the route of East West Rail. With EEH's support, our local authority partners can now work with their communities to understand the detail of the plans.

"East West Rail is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to transform the way we travel across the region and indeed the country – providing an attractive and sustainable alternative to the car which is crucial to achieving our net zero ambitions, while supporting economic growth and jobs creation for the benefit of the UK.

"A priority for EEH is ensuring East West Rail creates a positive and lasting legacy for the places it serves. This means continuing to press for the full electrification of East West Rail to ensure it maximises opportunities to decarbonise our transport system. We must ensure it increases the quality and sustainability of our places by acting as a catalyst for better bus and active travel journeys. That it supports the sustainable growth of our globally renowned science and technology sectors. And we must ensure East West Rail unlocks new jobs and leisure destinations for our residents and greater access to skilled labour and suitable premises for our businesses: spreading economic opportunities beyond the cities of Oxford and Cambridge."

5. Working with regional collaborations

5.1. EEH's remit is to plan and secure investment in strategic transport and connectivity priorities for the region. By working in partnership with other regional collaborations, EEH is much better able to lever the maximum impact in terms of outcomes and investment for communities and businesses across the Heartland region. This will be particularly true when planning for East West Rail.

5.2. The science supercluster board is chaired by Dr Andy Williams of AstraZeneca, based in Cambridge. It is made up of representatives of the private sector, universities and LEPs.

5.3. The supercluster board has identified the role that East West Rail has in supporting the supercluster's full economic potential by:

- Enhancing regional economic spillover: expanding economic benefits to a wider catchment, with benefits for the region and the UK economy as a whole.
- Leverage the interdependencies within region: Connecting other towns across the region will create new linkages and interdependencies.
- Enabling wider employment growth: With additional critical mass within clusters and through spillover into connected towns.
- Maintaining the appeal of place with growth: Including infrastructure (such as EWR) to extend city hinterlands, as well as intra connectivity within clusters.

5.4. The region also has a well-respected coalition of universities who have been collaborating together for some time under the title of the Arc Universities Group. The group, chaired by Professor Alistair Fitt, Vice Chancellor, Oxford Brookes University brings together nine universities across the region leveraging an expansive capability and expertise on which the region can draw.

5.5. As well as expertise, the universities group provides a vital link between the region's commercial ambitions and the continuous need for further skills and innovative thinking across sectors if it is to achieve its full potential.

5.6. In January 2023, the Oxford Cambridge Pan Regional Partnership received formal recognition from the government. The focus for the partnership is to secure inward investment and supporting the region's expectation that economic growth should be achieved in an 'environmentally sustainable and inclusive' way.

5.7. In May 2023, the partnership announced commencement of its inward investment atlas. Recruitment is currently underway for an independent chair for the partnership.

6. East West Rail – a lasting legacy for the region

6.1. While the government's commitment to East West Rail is to be welcomed, it is essential that the scheme is designed in a way that brings a lasting legacy to communities across this region.

6.2. EEH Board members will recognise that there is an expectation that East West Rail will support growth in the region, however there should be an equal (if not greater) focus on maximising East West Rail's benefit to existing communities and businesses. The best way of ensuring this is through a locally-led approach to creating a legacy for East West Rail.

6.3. EEH – working with the East West Main Line Partnership, local authorities and partners such as the supercluster board and universities group, as well as the pan regional partnership, DfT and East West Railway Company – is in an ideal position to lead work to ensure the government's commitment to East West Rail is focused on leaving a lasting legacy for communities across the region.

6.4. The £15m local capacity funding is held by DfT. It is intended to support local authorities along the route of East West Rail to realise its benefits and provides the opportunity to focus on the legacy that Board members will want to see.

6.5. EEH officers will now work with local partners, the Department for Transport and East West Railway Company to ensure that the East West Rail scheme, and the supporting local capacity funding, is invested in a way that will support a lasting legacy for East West Rail in the region.

6.6. In seeking to achieve this, the EEH Board will likely have the following key principles:

a. **Supporting environmental outcomes**: a realistic attractive alternative to the car, contributing to lower emissions and ensuring East West Rail itself is powered by clean energy. East West Rail must also be an exemplar for minimising its impact on the environment during construction and operation.

b. **Improved connectivity across all sections of the route**: Acting as a catalyst for wider improvements to public transport and active travel, increasing access to jobs alongside leisure, health and educational facilities. This includes better bus services (including to rural areas); better cycling and walking access; and ensuring the opportunity is taken for a digital spine to be installed along the route.

c. **Unlocking economic opportunities**: unlocking opportunities for our residents and businesses beyond the cities of Oxford and Cambridge, providing employment opportunities for people within a short journey of their homes, including in more deprived areas, and increased access to educational facilities.

d. **Bringing benefits to areas in the region not directly on the East West Rail line**: notably those places within a short distance of an East West Rail station, for example, Northampton, Luton, Wellingborough, Peterborough and Stevenage.

e. **Place-making**: Making our existing places more sustainable and liveable. Where determined by local planning authorities, creating sustainable well-planned new communities which have public transport and active travel at their core.

f. **Delivering the benefits of the full East West Mainline, including the link to Aylesbury**: the link is an essential part of the scheme and its delivery must be prioritised, realising benefits not just for Aylesbury but the wider Northampton-Milton Keynes-Buckinghamshire-Old Oak Common corridor.

6.7. Subject to Board Members agreeing the principles for a legacy for East West Rail, EEH will work with partners including the universities group on the development of a legacy plan, seeking a small contribution from DfT's capacity funding to support this.

6.8. The legacy plan will provide a broader framework on which individual local authority proposals for the capacity funding can be based. The plan will build on, and not duplicate, work completed to date and it is likely it will cover opportunities including:

- Transforming places – how people might use the rail line in their daily lives. How will it affect access to jobs, services and activities, and how might it influence people's social interactions and relationships? What opportunities exist for world-leading innovation in the way we support communities?
- Creating clusters and harnessing spillovers – how East West Rail can better embed clusters across the region and with other clusters and hot spots beyond its borders.
- Innovation Economy skills – ensuring East West Rail is part of the solution to enable better collaboration so the region has the talent pipeline and upskilling needs to meet future regional and industry needs.

Naomi Green
Managing Director
June 2023

ANNEX: East West Rail route options summary

The following are extracts from the East West Railway Company's Route Update Report, published on 26 May 2023.

The first section is on route preferences and towards the bottom route-wide matters (including power mode and freight) are discussed.

ROUTE PREFERENCES

Increasing rail capacity between Oxford and Bicester

Oxford station does not yet provide enough capacity to accommodate the full set of planned EWR services. Network Rail is already planning work at Oxford station both in the short and medium term, and we're working with them to ensure an integrated solution that both supports EWR services and wider growth ambitions in the area. To be sure that EWR could operate should the full Network Rail schemes not be completed as expected, we're also working with them on a number of EWR specific enhancements as a contingency. At Oxford Parkway and Bicester Village stations, we're exploring whether further work would be needed to accommodate EWR services.

Maintaining connectivity at London Road in Bicester

London Road level crossing in Bicester is a vital route for people to get into the town centre on foot, by bicycle, public transport and car. Once all EWR services are introduced on the line, the barriers are expected to be down for a significant portion in every hour. At the 2021 consultation we suggested six concepts, and thanks to the feedback we received and ongoing work, we've been able to rule out five of these. We've yet to confirm a preferred solution as we're continuing to consider options for the crossing that keep the town connected and minimise inconvenience.

As part of this, we're considering how the crossing could be safely kept open for local traffic. For pedestrians and cyclists, we're giving further consideration to either a bridge or underpass close to the existing crossing. For motorists, building a new road bridge in a town centre location is not straightforward, so finding the right location for a new road bridge which enables easy access to the town centre is our priority for the next stage of design work.

Aylesbury [note: the following extract comes from the Economic and Technical Report which accompanies the announcement]

Reconsidering Aylesbury connections did not open up more affordable solutions for EWR, and conventional transport modelling analysis continues to suggest that the benefits of extending EWR services to Aylesbury do not justify the costs. As such, Scheme Options serving Aylesbury were not progressed further under the ACP [Affordable Connections Project]. Notwithstanding this conclusion, there are local aspirations for an Aylesbury service connecting to EWR and the possibility remains that a strategic case could be made, should a case for growth be identified. EWR Co continues to review the potential for such a service as a separate proposal.

Improving services and reducing disruption along the Marston Vale Line

At the 2021 consultation we explained that it's not possible to introduce a fast and frequent service between Oxford and Cambridge without making a significant investment in the Marston Vale Line (MVL). Also, the current infrastructure has not had significant upgrades for decades, which has affected reliability. The communities it serves have grown considerably over time2 and lack the reliable connections they need to centres of education and employment in Bedford, Milton Keynes and beyond. We've looked further at the potential number of passengers that could use stations on the MVL and we believe that three trains per hour (tph) would meet this need, rather than the four to five tph that we set out previously.

At the next stage we'll consider all three services together in identifying the best timetable and stopping pattern for communities along the line of the railway. This change in frequency allows us to maintain the benefits of EWR, and requires less construction work to upgrade the line, which would reduce disruption to local communities and passengers, as well as reducing cost. We're also suggesting capping the line speed below the 100mph originally proposed, but above the current speed of 60mph. This would reduce disruption in residential areas, but still provide a faster service than currently available. Combined with our updated view on frequency, the lower line speed means that some level crossings – for example at Woburn Sands and Lidlington – could still meet the appropriate safety standards and so could be retained. This would be one of the many ways we'd maintain local connectivity across and between communities. The reinstatement of the second track at Fenny Stratford is still required, as is the short length of additional track to dual track the railway in the Bedford St John's area.

A new station for Bedford Hospital

The railway at Bedford St Johns is unable to accommodate the proposed EWR train services, as there's only one track on this part of the railway and only one platform at Bedford St Johns station3 , which limits capacity. The track is also on a very tight curve, limiting the train speed to 15mph. We propose to relocate the existing Bedford St Johns station closer to Bedford Hospital. This would provide a better location that's more convenient for patients, hospital staff and visitors, while also allowing us to improve the alignment of the railway into Bedford station.

Serving central Bedford and connecting with the wider rail network

Bedford station is already an important transport hub for the region, providing a gateway into the town centre and easy connections to Thameslink and East Midlands Railway (EMR) services on the Midland Main Line (MML). Introducing EWR services would strengthen the hub and support local aspirations4 for more jobs, prosperity and growth. Improvements to Bedford station would contribute to the regeneration of the area immediately around the station, as well as the centre of Bedford. We looked again at alignments that pass to the south of the town or re-use parts of the former alignment of the closed Varsity Line, but these alternatives have significant environmental impacts and cause loss of public open space. For example, a route re-using the former Varsity Line in Bedford would pass through Priory Park, which has protected status.

Therefore, we've concluded that the preferred alignment from the 2021 consultation, passing through Bedford station and to the north of the town along the MML, remains the best option for Bedford. We propose to redevelop the station to take account of the required capacity and new infrastructure needed for EWR services and in doing so help support the local authority's plans for regeneration in the Station Quarter. After extensive work5 to test whether we can run services on the existing MML without building additional tracks, we've concluded that we need an additional two tracks north of the existing Bedford station. This is to ensure EWR could provide a reliable service which does not conflict with other trains. To construct these new tracks, we'd need to acquire some properties near the current railway boundary.

At the last consultation we thought we might need to acquire up to 97 residential properties, but we've continued to challenge the design in this area and believe this figure is now reduced by a third, to 65. Even though we've reduced the number of impacted properties we continue to look for ways to further limit the impact of EWR in this area, and we're launching a scheme to help homeowners in this area with immediate effect. Further information on the Proposed Need to Sell Property Scheme can be found in chapter 8 of this report and full eligibility criteria can be found at: eastwestrail.co.uk/needtosell

Connecting Bedford and Cambourne

To deliver a service between Bedford and Cambourne, we would need to build a new railway in this section. In the 2021 consultation we presented a range of possible route alignment options for where the railway line could be located. Using feedback from the last consultation and further studies, we've concluded that one of our emerging preferences in 2021, Alignment 1 (see Figure 15), provides the best option for the majority of its length. We believe the identified environmental impacts can be mitigated and that this alignment would have the least visual impact for local communities. It would also serve a new station at Cambourne North, maximising economic opportunities for the town.

Our analysis also showed us that a station near Tempsford (part of Alignment 9 (see Figure 15) would have greater advantages compared to a station at St Neots South (part of Alignment 1).

A Tempsford station would be better located to enable a new community to grow, including opportunities to improve biodiversity and give more people access to green spaces. There would also be more opportunity at Tempsford to design the railway so that it could be at the centre of the local travel network including good walking, wheeling for those using mobility aids and cycling routes. Considering the above points, we've concluded that the best option is to follow the route of Alignment 1 for most of the route, but we have an emerging preference for a local variation so we can provide a new station at Tempsford. We refer to this new route as Alignment 1 (Tempsford variant).

Connecting more people with opportunities in Cambridge

At the last consultation, we expressed our preference for a southern approach into Cambridge, serving the Cambridge Biomedical Campus via the new station at Cambridge South. We've looked again at this approach and compared it with a northern approach and one that serves Cambridge North station. We've been able to make meaningful improvements to the northern option which we previously considered, particularly in terms of reducing the need for two additional tracks on the existing railway, which would significantly reduce its cost.

We've also been able to make material improvements to the impact of the southern approach, by reducing the need for and height of embankments and viaducts through South Cambridgeshire. We've concluded that, despite the northern approach potentially being a cheaper option than the south, it doesn't deliver the same economic benefits. Life sciences have grown around the world at an unprecedented rate over the past two decades, and Cambridge Biomedical Campus is a driver for economic growth, creating high value jobs and attracting investment. It brings together that 'triple helix' of the public and private sectors, combined with academia, which characterise the most successful life sciences clusters around the globe. It's also part of a wider life sciences cluster growing south of Cambridge. These circumstances aren't matched in the north.

In addition, there are three times as many jobs within walking distance of Cambridge South station compared to Cambridge North. The existing transport network is also more congested in the south, making it harder for existing employees to get to work, and limiting further job creation. We considered whether it would be possible to serve Cambridge South station taking the northern approach but concluded that this would reduce the frequency of trains and extend journey times, including likely requiring passengers to change trains, to an unacceptable level. It would make it harder for people living in Bedford, the Marston Vale or near St Neots/Tempsford to access the jobs at the Biomedical Campus – and therefore it wouldn't deliver the economic opportunity that underpins the case for EWR. Having reviewed all the consultation feedback and following this extensive further study our conclusion remains that approaching Cambridge from the south is the best solution for the city, the region and – given the global opportunity at the Biomedical Campus – for the whole of the UK too. Approaching Cambridge from the south also means that EWR does not take up the existing capacity on the rail network north of the city, leaving this option available for others in the future.

ROUTE-WIDE MATTERS

Reducing the impact of embankments and viaducts

During the 2021 consultation, we presented outline details about where the new railway might need to be 'on embankment/viaduct' along its southern approach to Cambridge and presented the 'reasonable worst case' scenario. Our work since the consultation has helped us to identify potential opportunities to reduce or remove viaducts and embankments. We believe we could remove or reduce the height of approximately half the embankments or viaducts (by length) compared to what was shown at the consultation. This work will be developed further and we'll provide details for comment at the statutory consultation.

Powering the trains

We're focused on delivering a net zero carbon railway. We're continuing to evaluate a range of technological solutions for powering our trains and we'll share more information at the statutory consultation.

Considering freight

EWR's primary purpose is to support economic growth as a passenger railway – to connect lives and unlock opportunities. Alongside this, and noting that some freight already runs on sections of our route, we're considering whether EWR might also support new freight opportunities as part of delivering wider economic growth. These opportunities would need to be balanced against the required investment and also the impact to local communities. When it opens, our railway is likely to enable up to two additional freight trains per day in each direction from Oxford to Bletchley, and another two from Cambridge to Oxford. This would take nearly 70,000 HGV journeys off the road each year, and the volume of additional freight trains would be unlikely to exceed this level without significant further investment, both on EWR and elsewhere on the rail network.