



Strategic Transport Leadership Board

01 March 2024

Agenda Item Number 5: East West Rail Update

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Strategic Transport Leadership Board:

- a) Notes the update on East West Rail (EWR) related workstreams, including those related to delivery of the next stage of EWR between Oxford and Bletchley/ Milton Keynes.**
- b) Receives a presentation by East West Railway Company, updating on their Door to Door strategy development in particular, raising any queries on this work.**
- c) Agrees that the next phase of work for the Door to Door Strategy should be developed as a collaboration with local authorities and that, EEH business unit should work with the Department for Transport and other government departments to advocate the need for investment in door to door solutions to complement integration with East West Rail.**
- d) Notes progress with the EWR legacy project, identified by the EEH Board in June 2023 as a key factor in ensuring the long term success of East West Rail.**

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1. The paper gives an update on workstreams related to East West Rail development, particularly those which relate to maximising opportunities and benefits associated with connecting East West Rail stations to their surrounding communities.

2. Key points to note

- 2.1. East West Rail between Oxford and Milton Keynes will open next year, with the rest of the line to Cambridge completing at the turn of the decade.
- 2.2. It's important the project benefits the communities it will serve, reflecting local priorities for supporting sustainable growth, as well as maximising use of the line through providing high quality local transport access to stations.
- 2.3. The East West Railway Company has recently completed a 'door-to-door strategy' aiming to improve connectivity to and from stations.
- 2.4. Work made possible by £15 million funding from DfT is also exploring various opportunities around stations on the line, alongside creating a narrative for the 'legacy' of East West Rail.
- 2.5. The East West Railway Company will give a presentation on their work to the Board.

3. Context

- 3.1. The transformational East West Rail project is one of the core schemes in EEH's transport strategy and indeed one of the biggest infrastructure schemes currently being delivered in the UK. It is being developed and delivered in different stages.

- 3.2. The first stage was between Oxford and Bicester, as part of development of a new line between Oxford and London, and under the lead of the Chiltern train operator. This opened in 2016.
- 3.3. The second major stage is providing onward rail connectivity to Bletchley/ Milton Keynes via Winslow, led by the East West Rail Alliance (a partnership of Network Rail and private sector contractors). Track laying between Bicester and Bletchley is now complete, and the project is on schedule to be 'infrastructure ready' by late 2024, with services starting in 2025. Remaining work this year is focusing on completing the installation of railway systems equipment, testing and commissioning, the construction of Winslow station car park, completion of Winslow station and landscaping.
- 3.4. Engagement and details on services, rolling stock and the publicity regarding the line's opening can begin once the train operator for this section has been announced by government.
- 3.5. The last part of the core East West Rail scheme that would see trains operating onto Cambridge is being developed by the East West Railway Company, an organisation set up by Department for Transport in 2018. As well as their focus on developing the core scheme through the statutory planning stages towards delivery, the Company also oversees a number of workstreams related to maximising the connectivity and economic opportunities associated with East West Rail. This is seen as key to supporting the case for full delivery of the scheme, as well as importantly ensuring that East West Rail provides benefits to communities at stations along the route. The full line should complete around the turn of the decade.
- 3.6. EEH and the East West Main Line Partnership continues to press the need for delivery of East West Rail in full, including the link to Aylesbury. The link was part of the original plans for East West Rail and remains integral to maximising its benefits, both for the Aylesbury area but also the wider Northampton-Milton Keynes-Aylesbury-Wycombe-Old Oak Common corridor.
- 3.7. EEH and the East West Main Line Partnership also continue to advocate for a coast-to-coast main line from Norfolk and Suffolk in the east through to Swindon, Bristol and South Wales in the west. There is a real possibility that rail services could start operating between Oxford and Bristol as early as 2025, seen as a first step in securing direct East West Rail services west of Oxford. The East West Main Line Partnership has helped fund work by Network Rail to support the strategic narrative for this intervention.

4. Door to Door strategy

- 4.1. An important current workstream is the Door-to-Door Connectivity Strategy. This aims to set out proposals to maximise the use of East West Rail as part of door-to-door journeys by ensuring that connectivity by all modes of transport to stations is maximised. East West Rail Company wish to work with partners, particularly local authorities, to understand and plan for improvements, and ensure that delivery of the core scheme does not preclude delivery of wider transport links to stations.
- 4.2. The strategy is being developed in two stages. The first phase of work has been completed largely by East West Railway Company with limited engagement with local partners.
- 4.3. The initial stage of work has identified a number of principles that are seen as needed to guide more detailed planning. This includes principles on giving customer choice for travel to stations, building on best practice from elsewhere, mitigating the impact of any severance associated with the project, delivering value for money, and planning for futureproofing in the scheme.
- 4.4. The first stage of work has been endorsed by East West Railway Company board and DfT's internal client board. This formed the trigger for developing stage two which will consider in more detail at connectivity at stations along the whole route of EWR.



- 4.5. The second phase of work is the key point for East West Railway Company to strengthen engagement with local partners. Board Members will want assurance, given the significant role that local transport authorities have in enabling integration, that the second stage of the project will be co-created.
- 4.6. In parallel, Board Members will want assurance that EEH and the Company are advocating the need for investment in local transport so that the Door to Door strategy can be truly realised.
- 4.7. At present there is funding to develop the strategy, but no clear or obvious funding to deliver measures. This is particularly challenging for schemes expected to be outside of the EWR core boundaries, as these are unlikely to be funded directly as part of the scheme. The Company has noted that they are keen to work with local authorities to look for funding solutions and delivery options. However, the Board will wish to strengthen their position; reflecting the case for funding in the absence of any certain local transport funding in the EEH region.
- 4.8. The Board will also want to reflect that the Company's work on connectivity to and from stations must consider measures which can be implemented in the short-term (ie, for those stations between Oxford and Milton Keynes which will have services from next year), and longer-term (ie, for the whole line between Oxford and Cambridge).

5. East West Rail Legacy

- 5.1. In June 2023, the EEH Board agreed that it was essential that East West Rail was designed in a way that brought a lasting legacy to communities across this region.
- 5.2. EEH Board members were clear that while EWR will inevitably deliver significant economic growth benefits for the region and the UK as a whole, there should be an equal (if not greater) focus on maximising East West Rail's benefit to local communities and businesses. The best way of ensuring this is through a locally-led approach to creating a legacy for East West Rail.
- 5.3. By working with partners such as the Science Supercluster Board and Universities group, as well as the Pan Regional Partnership, and East West Railway Company, EEH (and the East West Main Line Partnership) is in an ideal position to lead work to ensure the government's commitment to East West Rail is focused on leaving a legacy for communities across the region.
- 5.4. Further work is underway to define what the legacy will look like. EEH business unit will engage with individual local authority partners in the intervening period before providing a fully considered proposal to the Board in May 2024.

6. Varsity Way

- 6.1. It will be important as the planning for East West Rail continues that relevant strategies and plans take into account wider work on developing sustainable transport improvements, both at a local authority level, as well as regional work being progressed by England's Economic Heartland. An important example of this is development of the Varsity way cycle and active travel route.
- 6.2. The context for this proposal is set out in the EEH transport strategy, which supports maximising the potential of an Oxford-Cambridge Varsity Way as a 'green spine' across the Heartland: 'one that can act as a focal point for developing a region wide network of greenways across the region'.
- 6.3. Following identification in the strategy, EEH subsequently worked with the sustainable travel charity Sustrans, partners and stakeholders to undertake a high-level options assessment of the route, spanning from Oxford to Cambridge. The conclusions of this were presented and launched at our conference in 2022.
- 6.4. The options assessment provided a starting point to work with partners on realising the potential of the Varsity Way as an east-west active travel route, with the potential to build a network of active travel routes and the opportunity to provide a legacy for East West Rail.



6.5. During the development of the options assessment, there was stakeholder support to investigate wider scale re-alignment of the route in the Marston Vale area, to align with communities and Marston Vale rail stations more closely. Funding for feasibility work to support this was included in EEH's work programme 23/24 and we have been working with partners to identify how to take this forward.

7. Next steps

- 7.1. EEH will continue to engage with core East West Rail companies, supporting and representing partner interests as relevant workstreams are progressed. This includes its on-going role in facilitating the East West Main Line Partnership Board, ensuring that the core scheme is a catalyst for improving wider rail connectivity.
- 7.2. The EEH board will continue to be updated as progress of East West Rail workstreams progresses.

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