Two preferred corridor options have been brought forward offering the best value for money for the Central Section of the East West Rail project.

The options are: Corridor 1 - Bedford (Central or South) - Sandy- Cambridge and Corridor 2 - Bedford (Central or South)- Hitchin-Cambridge.

The East West Rail project, originally proposed and championed by the East West Rail Consortium and now fully supported by both the Department for Transport and Network Rail, has three sections:

- The Western Section: opening of the first phase from Oxford Parkway to Bicester is planned for October 26, while the stretch from Oxford to Oxford Parkway should follow next spring (RAIL 774, 777). By the early 2020s, the whole of this section westwards to Bedford should be complete.
- The Eastern Section: includes the existing lines from Cambridge to Ipswich and Norwich.
- The Central Section: linking the Western and Eastern sections, from the Bedford area to Cambridge. The construction of the East West Rail line was once the well-established ‘Vesuvius line’. However, building developments since the closures of the 1960s have made the task of re-establishing the line between the two university cities particularly challenging.

When RAIL reviewed the Central Section last September (RAIL 756), consultant Atkins had just completed a study indicating which journey pairs would make the best contribution to economic growth. Subsequent work by Network Rail suggested seven broad corridors for the new railway towards Cambridge. The aim was for more of these to three the three strategies, and finally down to a single preferred option for the route (RAIL 762).

Seven months on, and Network Rail has whittled its ‘three corridor’ list of broad corridors now remaining in the continuing, largely desk-based evaluation, each with the same variant within it.

Network Rail Principal Planner Graham Botham told RAIL that the Atkins report and other inputs from the East West Rail Consortium (EWR) ‘have really helped us identify the value of connecting various places, which was always going to be critical.’

‘He added: ‘We have all been very conscious not to start drawing lines on maps.’ Hence the two corridors that have now emerged are (at this stage) just that - broad corridors with no inference as to where the track will eventually go.

On developing the Central Section as part of a strategic rail solution, Botham told RAIL: ‘We started looking at key origins and destinations: what are the basic service concepts, and what would those do in terms of a broad geographical route area or corridor along which a line would proceed? And what of those would give the best value for money?’

NR Lead Programme Manager Erica Blamire explained how the original large list of corridor options was refined to seven and now to just two: “Criteria such as connectivity and route corridor infrastructure, and which services would work best in the corridor.”

The MML is already remodelled to be fully connected to Bedford, but the EWR has well-documented capacity constraints. ‘These aspects were all brought together. We have been focusing on what differentiates the various corridors - such as topography - which would impact on journey time or - as we have reduced the options to two,’ said Botham.

Self-evidently, all the evaluated corridors have somehow connect the EWR Western Section with Cambridge, although at this stage no evaluation is made of how the services would be catered for at Cambridge.

A fundamental change in the way the railway is regarded has emerged in the past few years, with the Government putting the railway at the centre of its key policy of encouraging economic growth across the UK. The wish of the Oxford-Cambridge corridor offers huge potential for the business, and business cases (at least initially).

Blamire noted that the next phase of work will probably look again at the rail freight services, ‘Given London’s role as a global city, it is likely that this will be a priority, and the MML is one of the corridors that currently doesn’t get the attention it deserves.’

While EWR as a whole has the potential to attract new freight traffic (the re-opened line from Oxford to Reading has been built to cater for the largest gauge), Botham pointed out that the rail freight traffic from Felixstowe Port will generally route via Peterborough on its way to the Midlands and the North. Hence it could be that in this regard EWR becomes the victim of its own probable success: the number of passenger trains that will be proposed for the route in the coming months may well exceed the available capacity.

The next task is to narrow the two possible corridors down to one, and then to start defining the line of route, with the overall aim to have sufficient information gathered as to properly inform the considerations for funding for Control Period 6 (for the five years from April 2019, for which the first phase is Network Rail’s Initial Industry Plan that is due to be published in autumn 2016). While the Central Section’s capital costs have yet to be established, let alone made public, there is a wealth of evidence and scope of such a major scheme once it is defined.

A large part of the cost will most likely come via the DfT’s five-yearly funding process. However, given the current economic situation, there will be strong pressure from Government for significant contributions from EWR members (and perhaps ‘earn back’ funding from generated economic growth, or other means. Botham explained how by the time of the initial Industry Plan “We will have a cost range based on our work, and will have demonstrated that the project offers good value for money.”

It will be a huge and challenging project to define and deliver. “Sustainable use is also being taken to ensure that no aspect has been missed - that we make as we move through the process, and we haven’t missed anything,” said Blamire.

The picture should be much clearer by this time next year. But in the meantime, the Central Section Consortium is certainly growing.