

East West Rail Consortium Board 30th January 2020

Agenda Item 7: London Road Level Crossing, Bicester

Recommendation: It is recommended that the meeting:

- a) Welcomes the progress made on scoping the next stage of work associated with London Road Level Crossing, Bicester**
- b) Reaffirm the commitment to use Consortium funds to enable the work to be commissioned**

Background

- 1.1 East West Rail will increase the number of trains operating through Bicester which will have impacts on the operation of the level crossing on London Road close to the centre of the town (and just to the north of Bicester Village station). It is forecast that once trains are operating to Milton Keynes and Bedford, the crossing could be down for nearly half of any hour when trains are operating, and that this time will increase when additional trains operate through to Cambridge.
- 1.2 Whilst Bicester will benefit from the improved connectivity that further stages of the EWR project offer, the increasing crossing down-time will have implications for those traveling in/around Bicester town centre that needs careful consideration. This includes access from major new development areas in Bicester including Graven Hill, a site of up to 1900 homes currently being build out in stages (annex 1).
- 1.3 Improvements to the crossing signals are planned to be carried out to help mitigate impacts prior to completion of the next stage of East West Rail, but although welcome these will have relatively small benefit on overall forecast crossing downtime. Concerns from stakeholders therefore remain regarding increased severance associated with the proposed additional train services, meaning that there is a need to look at solutions to help tackle this.
- 1.4 There have been a number of studies of alternative access options to that provided at the level crossing completed over the last few years. A short update presentation was given at the last EWR Consortium Strategic Board in September 2019 regarding the latest position with these, but in summary work so far has in the main focused on review of highway schemes, including underpass or bridge options in the vicinity of the current level crossing. Whilst these options would provide a near direct replacement to the level crossing, enabling it to be closed, they are forecast to be high cost and have potential impacts on surrounding properties and their access. Given these points, it is considered important that any such interventions are reviewed in the context of the latest policy position, and other potential solutions in Bicester that could improve accessibility.

2 Next Steps

- 2.1 It is recognised that any major transport intervention for London Road is likely to require significant funds, and hence government funding would be required as part of any funding package. Bids for transport scheme funding would require a strong business case to be demonstrated, developed following central government guidance on transport scheme appraisal as set out in the Transport Analysis Guidance (TAG), (Webtag).¹
- 2.2 TAG sets out a step by step process to development of a business case over 3 stages, with guidance on Stage 1 firstly setting out the need for an assessment of options, against a clearly defined set of options and backed by relevant evidence. This initial work can be encompassed in an Options Appraisal Report (OAR), allowing for an understanding of priority option (s) to take forward to the more detailed appraisal stage. Experience at Oxfordshire from work on development of other business cases has shown that an OAR is a key document, demonstrating the justification for taking forward any preferred options.
- 2.3 It is therefore proposed that the next stage for assessment of interventions to tackle forecast increased severance at London Road is to undertake an OAR. The OAR can enable a fresh review of the various more direct highway options that have already been considered, but will also need to consider whether investing in other wider highway solutions in the town would deliver equal or more benefit. It will also consider whether there may be a sustainable transport solution, using developing evidence base work such as the Bicester Local Cycling and Walking Investment Plan and the EEH First Mile/ Last Mile Study to inform this. These options will be assessed against a common set of objectives, and transport modelling is also proposed to be undertaken to help evidence impacts of options on the Bicester wide transport network.
- 2.4 Development of the OAR objectives will allow for consideration of the wider policy context, including at an Oxfordshire and England Economic Heartland, level. In particular, this will help consideration of options against an increased focus on development of a transport system that both looks to decarbonise and promote active and healthy lifestyles, whilst also supporting growth in housing and jobs. The OAR will also allow for the assessment of identified options against national criteria through use of the Department for Transport Early Assessment and Sifting Tool (EAST).

3 Timescale and Financial Considerations

- 3.1 The East West Rail Consortium considered its priorities for 2019/20 at its Annual General Meeting held on 13th March 2019.
- 3.2 That meeting identified the need to support work to identify a solution to London Road Level Crossing as a priority for the Consortium as a whole given the potential for it to influence the ability of East West Railway to realise its full potential in the long term.
- 3.3 The meeting identified that it would support use of Consortium funds to fund work in support of finding a solution. The Consortium agreed at its meeting on 17th September that it would support, in principle, the allocation of £25k of Consortium funding to that end.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/transport-analysis-guidance-webtag>

- 3.4 The EWR Consortium officers have worked with officers from Oxfordshire County Council to develop a detailed brief for the work to prepare the OAR.
- 3.5 It is proposed that the OAR work is undertaken over the next 5 months, reporting back on conclusions to the EWR Consortium in summer 2020.
- 3.6 A review of procurement options was undertaken, and a combination of Oxfordshire County Council internal staff expertise and external consultancy support for transport modelling work was found to offer the best value for money to undertake this work. The budget required to produce the OAR is £25k.
- 3.7 Further funding at a local level is expected from next financial year to help take forward the business case for any preferred option (s).
- 3.8 Officers from the EWR Consortium will liaise with Oxfordshire officers throughout the work to ensure that linkages with other rail related activity are maintained.

4 Stakeholder Engagement

- 4.1 It will be important that the OAR work considers and takes account of both local and wider stakeholder views.
- 4.2 It is therefore proposed that the work includes a stakeholder workshop later this spring to which Network Rail, EEH and Cherwell District Council representatives will be invited, as well providing updates to local councillors through the Oxfordshire locality meetings and the Bicester Strategic Delivery Board.
- 4.3 It will also be important for the work to be cognisant of wider parallel work streams, in particular development of the Oxfordshire Local Transport and Connectivity Plan, the Oxfordshire Rail Corridor Study and the EEH draft Transport Strategy.

5 Conclusions and Next Steps

- 5.1 The production of the OAR for London Road, Bicester will ensure that an objective and evidence based approach is taken to assessment of options to address the concerns regarding severance resulting from the forecast increase in number of trains on the EWR route. It will also be a key part of the business case for any resulting preferred interventions.
- 5.2 On that basis it is proposed that the EWR Consortium endorse taking forward production of an OAR as the next stage in this work.

January 2020

Annex 1: Bicester context map

