



## **East West Rail Consortium Strategic Board 12<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

### **Agenda Item 4: Central Section: Reviewing the Consortium's Position**

**Recommendation: It is recommended that the meeting:**

- a) Review the Consortium's position on the Central Section**
- b) Identify key issues that the Consortium would wish to take into consideration in anticipation of the next round of engagement**

#### **1. Background**

- 1.1. In the first half of 2019 the East West Railway Company undertook a non-statutory consultation on the route options for the Central Section.
- 1.2. The Consortium agreed its response to the consultation at its meeting in March 2019 – a copy of that response is attached as Appendix 1 for reference.
- 1.3. A number of individual members of the Consortium submitted their own responses to the consultation.
- 1.4. The East West Railway Company subsequently published their preferred route for the Central Section.

#### **2. Reviewing the Consortium's Position**

- 2.1. The East West Railway Company is anticipated to undertake a further round of engagement early in the new year.
- 2.2. In anticipation of that engagement the Strategic Board is invited to review the Consortium's position and to identify those key issues that the Board consider should frame the Consortium's consideration of any future engagement on the Central Section.
- 2.3. The proposal is that – as with the previous round of engagement – officers from the partners would work to produce an initial draft for consideration by the Strategic Board.

**Martin Tugwell  
October 2020**



**By e:mail**

**Dear Sir**

### **Central Section, Consultation Response**

This is the response of the East West Rail Consortium to the consultation by the East West Railway Company in respect of the Central Section. It was approved by the meeting of the Consortium held on 13<sup>th</sup> March 2019.

### **Background**

The strategic ambition defining the East West Rail Consortium is to promote and secure a strategic railway connecting East Anglia with Central, Southern and Western England, including a spur to Aylesbury.

Whilst the Consortium activities are grouped into Western, Central and Eastern Sections, its primary focus has always been on realising that strategic ambition in the round.

As with all aspects of the Consortium's work individual partners may well look to make their own representations in response to the consultation: the focus for the Consortium is on the broader strategic perspective, and in particular its collective ambition to see the overarching ambition for East West Rail realised at the earliest possible opportunity.

### **Overarching Context**

Delivery of the Central Section has been consistently identified as a regional priority for England's Economic Heartland – the Sub-national Transport Body for the region.

The vision for the overarching Transport Strategy for the region is 'connecting people and places with opportunities and services': the Strategy also has an ambition for the transport system to be zero carbon by 2050 at the latest. East West Rail is entirely consistent with both the vision and the ambition underpinning the Transport Strategy.

Both the Consortium and England's Economic Heartland welcomed the Secretary of State for Transport's desire to accelerate delivery of the Central Section in support of realising the wider ambition for the region identified by the National Infrastructure Commission.

The Consortium continues to support the Secretary of State in this regard. Where this response identifies issues or concerns that the Consortium considers need to be addressed, every effort should be made to do so whilst at the same time maintaining the overall programme of delivery for the Central Section.

In taking forward the work on the Central Section it is essential that decisions relating to the scheme enable it to:

- Contribute to improving connectivity so that existing businesses and residents are able to realise their full potential
- Support accelerated delivery of planned growth
- Allow local partners to use the certainty of infrastructure delivery to support additional growth in the longer term.

In addition, decisions relating to the Central Section must be taken in the context that the Central Section (infrastructure and services) forms part of a wider strategic piece of infrastructure.

At the same time decisions relating to the Central Section must look to contribute towards the ambition of achieving net environmental benefit across the region.

East West Rail – both in individual components and as a whole – represents a transformational investment in infrastructure and services, one that will provide users with new travel choices and opportunities – this applies equally for both individuals and freight.

By its very definition transformational infrastructure will change the nature and scale of travel demand moving forward. What are currently discrete housing market areas and functional economic areas will merge.

As part of the 'spine' linking the region East West Rail has a critical role in enabling the wider ambition for the region to be realised. However in order to realise its full potential it is essential that in making the commitment to deliver the Central Section a commitment is also made to investment in the infrastructure and services that will connect the 'spine' to the rest of the transport system

A further key consideration throughout the decision making process needs to be that of affordability – not just in terms of the cost of the Central Section itself, but also that consequential investment in connecting infrastructure and services.

In taking a view on the preferred route it is also necessary to take into account the need for other strategically significant investment – East West Rail is but one component of a wider programme of strategic investment in infrastructure and services.

The overarching Transport Strategy being prepared by England's Economic Heartland as the Sub-national Transport Body will provide the regional policy framework, including the investment pipeline for strategically significant infrastructure and services that is needed to deliver the Strategy.

In order to give greater certainty to investors and residents alike, the Heartland is also promoting the concept of a geographically specific National Policy Statement for Strategic Infrastructure. Such an approach will help ensure that investment in strategic infrastructure investment is aligned across policy sectors in support of the shared ambition.

In developing the detail of the Central Section proposal it is important that the supporting business case takes into account the linkage with enhancements being promoted to the Eastern Section being delivered ahead of the Central Section.

Technical work commissioned by the Consortium has identified the opportunity for the Eastern Section to improve the business case in support of the Central Section. The Consortium's view is that the Eastern Section could be, and should be delivered in advance of the Central Section.

This reflects the Consortium's collective view as to the importance of realising the overarching strategic ambition for East West Rail – namely achieving a strategic railway connecting East Anglia with Central, Southern and Western England, including a spur to Aylesbury

### **Issues Requiring Attention**

The Consortium acknowledges the stage in the development of the Central Section that this consultation relates to: it also acknowledges that as the proposal is taken forward so the East West Railway Company will undertake more detailed assessments as part of the business case.

However, at this stage there are a number of issues that the Consortium is highlighting as requiring more immediate attention before a decision on the preferred route is taken later this year:

- The Consortium has concerns regarding the costings set out in the consultation material – more specifically it is concerned as to whether the cost estimates have been prepared on a consistent basis. Consortium partners have raised these concerns directly with the East West Railway Company – at the time this report was prepared those queries have yet to be answered
- The Consortium is concerned at the lack of transparency with regards the assumptions made about future levels of growth – both economic and housing; Consortium partners are seeking clarification as to the assumptions used and the degree to which the selection of a preferred route might be sensitive to those assumptions.
- The Consortium acknowledges that the project will continue to be the subject of assessments consistent with the requirements of the relevant environmental legislation. However it is currently unclear from the consultation material as to what extent consideration of environmental issues (both natural and historic – and including the Cambridge Green Belt) might influence the selection of the preferred route.

It is expected that in order to prepare the consultation material the East West Railway Company will have access to more detailed information, some of which may address the issues raised above.

The Consortium therefore requests that the Company engage further, with both with the Consortium and individually with partners, in order to consider the issues raised in more detail as part of the on-going process of assessment **before** a recommendation is made as to the preferred route.

Both the Consortium and England's Economic Heartland have a strong working relationship with the East West Railway Company and this provides the basis on which to address the issues raised by the Consortium.

As noted previously, the Consortium and its members remain committed to working closely with the Company in order to maintain the overall delivery timeline for the Central Section.

### **Key Principles for Determining the Preferred Route**

Building on the Consortium's strategic ambition the following have been identified as the strategic key principles that the Consortium consider should be used in determining the preferred route:

- The Central Section is an agreed regionally significant investment priority for the region, and its delivery should be achieved at the earliest possible opportunity
- Delivery of the Central Section is important to support existing communities realise their potential: in determining the preferred route it is therefore important to address both existing constraints within the rail system that currently serve to suppress patronage, as well as seeking to provide new travel choices and opportunities
- The planning certainty that will be provided by the identification of a preferred route is welcomed enabling as it does, local planning authorities to take its availability into consideration as part of the future plan making process – it is important in this context to bear in mind that it is the combination of infrastructure and services that need to be considered by local planning authorities
- The Central Section must be designed and delivered in a way that is consistent with the Consortium's strategic ambition for East West Rail; i.e. it must be planned and delivered in such a way as to achieve improved connectivity across the project as a whole (including Phase 2 of the Western Section and the Eastern Section)
- The Central Section must be designed and delivered in a way that enables it to accommodate strategic rail freight movements – both existing flows and potential flows

- Where the Central Section intersects existing main line corridors (largely radial and centred on London), the aim must be to achieve an attractive interchange between services operating on East West Rail and services on other main line corridors – interchange being encouraged through a combination of the physical layout and facilities at the interchange and the timing of services themselves
- In addition, the function of these regionally significant interchanges between East West Rail and the other main line rail corridors must be supported by investment in infrastructure and services that facilitate first/last mile connectivity with the surrounding areas. The inherent locational advantages of regionally significant interchanges as areas of economic opportunity should be reflected in future growth plans developed at the local level.
- Whilst cost rightly needs to be a consideration in identifying the preferred route for the Central Section, this needs to also be set in the context of the affordability of the overall investment programme for the region – the most affordable solution for the Central Section may not be the most preferable if as a consequence the consequential cost of connecting infrastructure and services is unaffordable.

### **Westward Connections – to Milton Keynes and the Western Section**

Milton Keynes is a key regional economic hub whose longer-term potential requires continued investment in improved connectivity with both the surrounding area and the rest of the region. In addition, development opportunities in/around Bletchley will be enhanced as a result of the improved connectivity provided by East West Rail.

Some minor improvements to the existing rail corridor between Bletchley and Bedford are proposed as part of the Western Section. These will in part support growth opportunities already identified for the Marston Vale in the Central Bedfordshire Local Plan.

However, even with these improvements there will be a marked difference in the standard and capability of the infrastructure between Bletchley and Bedford when compared with the rest of East West Rail.

The Consortium is of the view that the differential in standard on the Bletchley to Bedford section of East West Rail must be addressed if the full potential of East West Rail overall is to be realised. This will require further enhancements to the Marston Vale Line.

It is understood that the East West Railway Company have commissioned further work to assess the scale and cost of the additional improvements required.

As part of that work, an assessment should be made as to whether there is a broader benefit to be realised if the works proposed as part of the Western Section are integrated into, what is likely to be more substantial works, required to meet the overall ambition for East West Rail.

The need to ensure that the Bletchley to Bedford section is fit for purpose also serves to emphasise the importance of delivering the eastern entrance at Bletchley Station at the earliest opportunity.

Any assessment of the long-term infrastructure requirements for the Bletchley to Bedford section must take into account the opportunities to reallocate existing capacity on the West Coast Main Line following the opening of HS2.

England's Economic Heartland is involved in the work being led by Network Rail to look at the best use of released capacity on the West Coast Main Line. It is acknowledged across the rail industry that this study provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity to fundamentally review the allocation of capacity on the West Coast Main Line.

England's Economic Heartland is pressing for the work associated with the West Coast Main Line to consider the opportunity to develop:

- a) Direct services on the Northampton – Milton Keynes – Aylesbury – High Wycombe – Old Oak Common axis

b) Direct services between Milton Keynes to Bedford as part of providing wider connectivity on the West Midlands/Northampton and Cambridge/East Anglia axis.

The work looking at the future use of capacity on the West Coast Main Line will need to take into consideration requirements for both passenger and freight.

Both Milton Keynes and Bletchley Stations should be viewed as regionally significant interchanges, with priority given to ensuring connectivity to/from the stations is integrated with the rail services.

## **Central Section**

### *Regionally Significant Interchanges*

Investment in the Central Section will create opportunities for regionally significant interchanges between East West Rail and other main line corridors – in particular the Midland Main Line, the East Coast Main Line and the West Anglian Main Line.

In taking forward the development of the Central Section it is essential that the preferred route selected enables these opportunities to be realised at the time of the opening of the Central Section.

In identifying the detailed requirements for the preferred route at these interchanges particular emphasis should be given to ensuring the infrastructure provided is capable of accommodating services that will improve connectivity to/from international gateways, as well as improving connectivity with adjoining regions (not just limited to the London market).

Technical work undertaken by the Consortium has highlighted the potential for East West Rail (as a whole) to improve connectivity (through interchange) with Stansted Airport, Birmingham Airport and Heathrow Airport.

Of particular significance is the interchange between East West Rail and the Midland Main Line, providing as it does the opportunity to improve connectivity to Luton Airport - a key international gateway within the region for scheduled air services, as well as being in the top three business aviation hubs in Europe.

The interchange between East West Rail and the East Coast Main Line should look to deliver connectivity between East West Rail services and both outer-suburban and inter-city services.

In order for the regionally significant interchanges to realise their potential there will be a need to ensure co-ordination of services on the two main lines, and for each interchange to have facilities that provide a good user experience. In addition there will be a need for investment in infrastructure and services that provide a high level of connectivity, in particular investment in first mile/last mile infrastructure.

England's Economic Heartland has identified the need to commission a 'connectivity study(ies)' for the area to the east of the M1 corridor. This will provide the opportunity to work with local partners to identify an appropriate package of connecting infrastructure and services.

### *Other Strategic Transport Infrastructure*

In determining the preferred route it is essential to consider how investment in the Central Route relates to other strategic transport investments – both investment in infrastructure as well as services, either programmed or identified as being regionally significant priorities.

Of particular significance are:

- *A428 Black Cat to Caxton Gibbet* – a committed scheme within Highways England's Road Investment Strategy (RIS), an announcement on the preferred route was made in February 2019: work on the scheme is being taken forward for delivery in next RIS period, with opening currently scheduled for 2025 (slightly ahead of the Central Section)

- *A1(M) corridor* – identified in the first RIS as a corridor of strategic significance, addressing the constraints on this corridor has been consistently identified as being of regional significance. Investment in re-routing the A1(M) is likely to unlock opportunities for additional growth to be identified,
- *The CAM* – identified by the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority as an investment priority for the sub-region, delivery of this proposal will improve public transport connectivity along the A428 corridor, in particular improving connectivity to Cambourne initially, and St Neots in the longer term.

Determination of the preferred route for the Central Section must take place in the context provided by these proposals – and vice versa. Opportunities for the Central Section (and through it East West Rail) to complement other strategic investments should be prioritised: in particular there will be a need to consider the extent to which it is possible to co-ordinate investment in regionally significant infrastructure in such a way as to create multiple corridors of opportunity.

#### *Access to Cambridge*

A key consideration in determining the preferred route is the need to provide for and enable connectivity to/from the Eastern Section, including Norwich and Ipswich and other locations to the east of Cambridge, as well as enabling improved connectivity to the west.

The Eastern Section prospectus – recently published by the Consortium – sets out the case how improved connectivity will support high value growth within, and beyond the Cambridge housing market area.

In determining the preferred route there is a need to take into account operational factors in/around Cambridge Station and the implication these have on the choice of a preferred route. In addition there is a need to take into account the added value of the Central Section directly supporting the nationally significant cluster at the Biomedical Campus on the southern side of Cambridge.

Once again, there is a need to consider how the CAM and other investments in transport infrastructure and services might complement the Central Section in support of the delivery of planned growth.

#### **Eastwards Connections – to Ipswich and Norwich**

The Consortium has recently published its prospectus for the Eastern Section of East West Rail.

As previously noted, the Consortium’s view is that improvements to the Eastern Section can be, and should be delivered in advance of the Central Section.

Work commissioned by the Consortium indicates that the business case for the Central Section will be enhanced by the early delivery of the Eastern Section and the connectivity this will provide across/through Cambridge.

Further work is required to develop detailed proposals that will see the ambition set out in the Eastern Section prospectus realised, in particular the need to achieve improved connectivity across the project as a whole: however that does not need to be completed before determining the route for the Central Section.

#### **Other Strategic Considerations**

##### *Freight*

The key driver behind the Government identifying England’s Economic Heartland as a national priority is the ambition to realise the economic potential of the region. At the same time there is a commitment to ensure that that ambition is realised in a way that achieves a net environmental benefit for the region.

The two ambitions are challenging individually; in combination they require an approach that is not business as usual.

It is in this context that the Consortium decided to co-fund the work commissioned by England's Economic Heartland that has looked at future freight and logistics requirements. The output from this work is scheduled to report by the end of March 2019: as such it offers the potential to provide added insight into what provision needs to be made for rail freight.

Any consideration of rail freight needs to take into account two issues:

- a) Existing rail freight flows – this includes consideration of flows that are using existing strategic corridors, in particular Felixstowe – Nuneaton, and the North London Lines. England's Economic Heartland has supported the ambition of the London Mayor for through rail freight on the North London line to be diverted to alternative corridors, thereby allowing the paths released to be used for additional passenger services. Such an approach represents a public sector policy requirement and as such would require an intervention by the public sector to enable it to happen given the access rights for existing rail freight movements.
- b) Additional rail freight flows – the technical work commissioned in respect of future freight and logistics requirements will identify the potential for additional freight flows. England's Economic Heartland and the Consortium will look to work with both the East West Railway Company and Network Rail's System Operator function to identify an appropriate approach to planning for provision for future freight flows.

Where investment in new infrastructure is being delivered as part of the East West Rail project this should be designed to the same freight clearances as that provided for the rest of the project; specifically Route Availability 10 and W12 gauge clearance, and with capacity to accommodate freight services up to 775m in length.

#### *Service/Operational Planning*

As noted in a number of places, East West Rail is a transformational piece of infrastructure. Delivery of the infrastructure will provide opportunities to offer travel choices and opportunities that currently don't exist: realisation of those opportunities will be dependent upon service patterns not only on East West Rail but the rest of the national network too.

The potential to travel direct from Oxford to Cambridge in just over an hour (compared with the current 2.5 hour plus journey via London with a number of interchanges) is indicative of how the project will transform the socio-economic geography. This will in turn be reflected by changes to individual travel patterns and/or step changes in the level and nature of future travel demand

Whereas the region currently comprises a number of discrete strategic housing market areas and functional economic areas, upon completion of East West Rail the region will increasingly become a single housing and economic geography.

England's Economic Heartland has identified that changes in travel patterns – in particular new opportunities possible through a single change at one of the regionally significant interchanges – makes it essential to adopt a new approach to the planning of future services.

It is therefore important that in developing future service proposals the East West Railway Company actively engages with both the Sub-national Transport Bodies and Network Rail's System Operator.

An approach that builds on the current grouping of services (as reflected in the current franchise boundaries) may no longer be the most appropriate. By its very definition transformational infrastructure will lead to changes in travel patterns as a result of changes in socio-economic geography.

England's Economic Heartland's initial submission to the Williams Rail Review sets this argument out in more detail.

As a truly transformational piece of infrastructure it is absolutely essential that those opportunities – which will extend beyond the core East West Rail infrastructure – are planned and delivered at a network level.



### *Place-Making*

Investment in strategic infrastructure (such as East West Rail) needs to take account of both the current planning framework and acknowledge that by its very existence it will begin to shape longer-term thinking.

Notwithstanding the collaborative work that takes place at the local level between local planning authorities, the lack of an overarching spatial strategy makes it difficult for partners (locally, regionally and nationally) to take an informed view as to whether delivery of strategic infrastructure – like East West Rail – might lead to adjustments in the scale and distribution of growth at the local level in the short to medium term.

This serves to illustrate two key considerations – both of which relate to work underway at the Arc level in relation to place-making:

- The extent to which additional freedoms and flexibilities for partners at the local level might improve the use of existing plan making processes in support of achieving the overarching ambition for the region.
- The extent to which it is appropriate and/or necessary to review the scale and distribution of future growth as a result of having greater confidence in the delivery of regionally significant infrastructure (such as – but not only – East West Rail)

These are matters more appropriately considered as part of a wider discussion on place-making. They are matters that need careful consideration at the earliest possible opportunity.

### *Alternative Traction*

The vision for the overarching Transport Strategy has an ambition for the transport system to be zero carbon by 2050 at the latest. The rail sector, through the leadership of the Department for Transport, is actively encouraging the removal of diesel powered services by 2040.

Provision has been made within the Western Section Phase 2 for electrification of the route. Without seeking to prejudge the most appropriate long term solution for traction on East West Rail, at the very least a similar provision should be made for the Central Section.

### *Digital Infrastructure*

The construction of the Central Section will provide a new strategic corridor across a significant part of the Heartland. Every opportunity should be taken to include, as an integral element of the design of the Central Section, provision for the corridor to be built as a 'digital corridor'.

Provision of digital infrastructure is identified as a strategic priority by England's Economic Heartland – reflecting the critical importance of this infrastructure to enabling the strategic ambition for the region to be realised.

### **Summary**

Based on the considerations set out above the Consortium's response is as follows:

- a) The Central Section is an agreed regionally significant investment priority for the region, and its delivery should be achieved at the earliest possible opportunity
- b) Delivery of the Central Section is important to support existing communities realise their potential: in determining the preferred route it is therefore important to address both existing constraints within the rail system that currently serve to suppress patronage, as well as seeking to provide new travel choices and opportunities
- c) That the strategic significance of Milton Keynes as a key economic hub is reflected in determining the preferred corridor for the Central Section – in particular the importance of ensuring that the Marston Vale Line is fit for purpose as part of a new strategic rail corridor.
- d) That the opportunities presented by the reallocation of capacity on the West Coast Main Line to provide the opportunity to develop

- Direct services on the Northampton – Milton Keynes – Aylesbury – High Wycombe – Old Oak Common axis
  - Direct services between Milton Keynes to Bedford as part of providing wider connectivity on the West Midlands/Northampton and Cambridge/East Anglia axis.
- e) The role of Bletchley as a regionally significant interchange must be taken into consideration, including the need to deliver a new 'eastern entrance' at the earliest possible opportunity
  - f) The Central Section will create opportunities for regionally significant interchanges between East West Rail and other main line corridors – in particular the Midland Main Line, the East Coast Main Line and the West Anglian Main Line. In taking forward the development of the Central Section it is essential that the preferred route selected enables these opportunities to be realised at the time of the opening of the Central Section.
  - g) In determining the preferred route it is essential to consider how investment in the Central Route relates to other strategic transport investments – both investment in infrastructure as well as services, either programmed or identified as being regionally significant priorities.
  - h) A key consideration in determining the preferred route is the need to provide for and enable convenient connectivity to/from the Eastern Section, including Norwich and Ipswich and other locations to the east of Cambridge, as well as enabling improved connectivity to the west.
  - i) In determining the preferred route there is a need to take into account operational factors in/around Cambridge Station, as well as the added value of the Central Section directly supporting the nationally significant cluster at the Biomedical Campus on the southern side of Cambridge.
  - j) Proposals for the Central Section must give full consideration to making provision for rail freight – both existing rail freight flows (including flows that use existing strategic corridors: Felixstowe – Nuneaton, and the North London Lines), and additional freight flows
  - k) In developing proposals for service patterns the East West Railway Company must actively engage with the Sub-national Transport Bodies and Network Rail's System Operator to ensure that the full potential of the infrastructure to support planned growth is realised.

The Consortium looks forward to continuing to work closely with the East West Railway Company as it develops the proposal for the Central Section to the next stage in the process.