

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board

6 October 2022

Agenda Item 5: Making the case for East West Rail

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Board:

a) Notes the update

1. Context

- 1.1. The desire to secure government commitment to delivery of East West Rail from Bletchley to Cambridge and the Aylesbury link has been a long-standing commitment of the East West Main Line Partnership.
- 1.2. In order to support the case for investment, it was agreed by this Board and England's Economic Heartland's Board that a single set of clear narratives about the role of East West Rail was essential.
- 1.3. Government announcements around levelling up and investment priorities in the North, as well as the general squeeze on public sector finances, and the changed position of the government on its appetite for a 'top down' approach to the Oxford-Cambridge Arc had collectively reinforced the need for continued emphasis of the benefits of investing in East West Rail. This was particularly pertinent to the next phases of works between Bletchley and Cambridge, including the link to Aylesbury, for which funding is still yet to be confirmed.
- 1.4. In September 2022, the new Chancellor's Plan for Growth 2022 included East West Rail as one of a number of schemes identified for delivery as soon as possible. While this is welcome, it didn't give an explicit commitment to delivery of East West Rail in full, namely between Bletchley and Cambridge and in due course the Aylesbury link.
- 1.5. Members will be aware that a further fiscal event is planned by government for 23 November 2022.

2. Business imperative for East West Rail

- 2.1. In March the Partnership agreed to fund work to demonstrate the business imperative for East West Rail.
- 2.2. Strategic engagement and communications consultancy, Seven Hills was commissioned to produce the report. With the support of LEPs and local authorities, testimonies from 15 businesses and organisations were secured.
- 2.3. This includes AstraZeneca, KPMG, the Arc Universities Group, Silverstone Technology Cluster, Begbroke Science Park and Colworth Park.
- 2.4. A workshop held with LEPs, alongside interviews conducted with many of these businesses led to three key messages being developed through which the business brochure is structured:
 - Economic growth and innovation
 - Connecting skills and talent
 - Boosting global investment

- 2.5. The brochure, 'Building Better Connections' focuses on the case for the section between Bletchley and Cambridge, alongside the Aylesbury link. However, it also highlights the wider opportunities of the East West Main Line.
- 2.6. The brochure (in annex 1) was launched in the run-up to the 'mini-Budget' on September 23.
- 2.7. The brochure has been sent to ministers, MPs, businesses and media, and presented in both the East West Main Line Partnership and England's Economic Heartland's newsletters.
- 2.8. It will have a 'Westminster launch' at the House of Commons in October (see below).

3. Strategic narrative

- 3.1. Complementary to the business advocacy brochure is the strategic narrative developed by EEH and the East West Railway Company.
- 3.2. A copy of the draft report is attached at Annex 2 – the report is due to go before EEH Strategic Transport Leadership Board on 30 September 2022.
- 3.3. The report, commissioned from Steer, provides a high-level overview of the strategic rationale for East West Rail, consolidating evidence from several sources, while also including new evidence following discussions with local authority officers and the creation of East West Rail catchment maps.
- 3.4. It provides the rationale behind East West Rail as being needed to support the region's economic growth capabilities and to ensure as many communities as possible are able to benefit from it.

4. Westminster event and other communications activity

- 4.1. In the lead up to the government's fiscal plan on 23 November, EWMLP is hosting an event for MPs, businesses and members at the House of Commons on 25 October. It will be an opportunity for MPs to hear from business leaders on the importance of East West Rail and discuss any issues they may have.
- 4.2. The event is being run in association with the East of England APPG (but covering a wider geography). Cambridge MP Daniel Zeichner and Milton Keynes MP Iain Stewart have agreed to chair the event.
- 4.3. The Chair of EWMLP will also be on the panel, alongside the CEO of East West Railway Company and business representatives.
- 4.4. Following the Mini-Budget, a statement was released from the Chair welcoming the inclusion of East West Rail within the Plan for Growth document (<https://www.eastwestrail.org.uk/2022/09/23/reaction-to-september-2022-mini-budget>). A rebuttal letter was also sent to Bedfordshire press in response to a story that suggested East West Rail lacked political support (<https://www.bedfordindependent.co.uk/letters-east-west-main-line-partnership-continues-to-support-east-west-rail-in-full/>).
- 4.5. In addition a blog from the EEH Chair on the importance of investment in infrastructure, including East Rail, was placed on the EEH website, social media and shared with trade press (<https://www.englandseconomicheartland.com/news/chairs-view-investment-in-our-region-can-deliver-new-governments-economic-objectives>).

5. Updating the business case for the Aylesbury link

- 5.1. In June 2022, the East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board agreed to work updating the business case for the Aylesbury link.

- 5.2. The delivery of an East West Rail link to Aylesbury has been an integral part of the East West Rail scheme for over a decade. Its delivery has been a longstanding priority for the East West Main Line Partnership, England's Economic Heartland and Buckinghamshire Council. The link would unlock economic opportunities and support sustainable growth in the town, while also providing strategic benefits for the wider region, including improved north-south rail connectivity.
- 5.3. Aylesbury Station and Aylesbury Vale Parkway Station were included within what was previously named the 'western section' of the route, proposals which also included Bicester to Bedford. The Transport and Works Act Order for the western section was approved by the Secretary of State in February 2020, including in it the Aylesbury link.
- 5.4. However, East West Rail capital funding announced in January 2021 only covered parts of the original Western Section Phase Two – the section between Bicester and Bletchley. Therefore, it was agreed that work to revisit the existing EWR business case, updating it with the specific benefits that the link to Aylesbury would bring, be undertaken.
- 5.5. The agreed works will explore how the Aylesbury link can:
 - Contribute to the business case for the overall scheme
 - Improve the local and regional transport system
 - Facilitate economic growth and jobs creation
 - Act as a catalyst for the further regeneration of Aylesbury town centre
 - Support current and future housing growth
 - Reduce reliance on the car
 - Contribute to a net zero transport system
 - Identify any wider opportunities to improve rail connectivity such as Northampton to Old Oak Common
 - Could, with the right interventions, also improve connectivity westwards to Oxford.
- 5.6. Officers are now taking this work through procurement.

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