

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board

7 December 2022

Agenda Item : Maximising benefits of investment in East West Rail

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Welcomes the government's commitment to East West Rail**
- b) Discusses how the region can leverage maximum value from the government's investment in East West Rail for the benefit of the region and UK economic growth**
- c) Notes the update on commissioning work on the case for the Aylesbury link**
- d) Notes publication of EEH's 'Introducing the Varsity Way' report which highlights opportunities to improve active travel to several East West Rail stations**

1. Context

- 1.1. In the Autumn Statement (17 November 2022), the Chancellor recommitted the government to 'transformative growth plans' for rail including East West Rail, adding that 'these will provide fast, more reliable services and connect people to new job opportunities'.
- 1.2. The announcement was welcomed by the East West Main Line Partnership and England's Economic Heartland as the right thing for the region and the UK economy.
- 1.3. The Chancellor's re-commitment to East West Rail followed a campaign by East West Main Line Partnership highlighting the business support for East West Rail to Bedford, Cambridge and Aylesbury.
- 1.4. There is now a need for local authorities and partners to work with the government to maximise the benefits of East West Rail. This includes continuing to make the strongest case for the link to Aylesbury, improving first mile, last mile connectivity and realising the ambition for seamless interchange and the wider, coast-to-coast East West Main Line.

2. Building Better Connections

- 2.1. 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.
- 2.2. A report to highlight the business rationale for East West Rail was therefore produced by East West Main Line Partnership with support from local authorities and LEAs. Testimonies from 15 businesses and organisations were secured for the brochure including AstraZeneca, KPMG, the Arc Universities Group, Silverstone Technology Cluster, Begbroke Science Park and Colworth Park.

- 2.3. The brochure, 'Building Better Connections' focused on the case for the section between Bletchley and Cambridge, alongside the Aylesbury link. However, it also highlighted the wider opportunities of the East West Main Line.
- 2.4. The brochure was launched in the run-up to the 'mini-Budget' on 23 September 2022 (in which East West Rail was featured in the Planning for Growth document). It was sent to ministers, MPs, businesses and media.
- 2.5. Its 'Westminster launch' took place at the House of Commons on 25 October 2022—the same day the new Prime Minister Rishi Sunak was formally appointed.
- 2.6. The event, in association with East of England APPG, was well attended by MPs, peers, businesses and Board members. The then-Rail Minister Kevin Foster attended the event and spoke positively about East West Rail.
- 2.7. Notes from the meeting are available in annex 1.
- 2.8. Following the event, the brochure was sent to relevant new cabinet members and ministers appointed by Mr Sunak.
- 2.9. Complementary to the business advocacy brochure is the strategic narrative developed by EEH and the East West Railway Company. The report was agreed by EEH's Strategic Transport Leadership Board on 30 September 2022.

3. Government's economic ambition

- 3.1. During the Autumn Statement the Chancellor included East West Rail as one of three major rail infrastructure projects the government was committed to delivering. He told Parliament: "Smart countries build on their long-term commitments rather than discard them. So today I confirm that because of this decision, alongside Sizewell C, we will deliver the core Northern Powerhouse Rail. HS2 to Manchester. East West Rail. The new hospitals programme. And gigabit broadband rollout. All these and more will be funded as promised, with over £600 billion of investment over the next five years to connect our country and grow our economy."
- 3.2. Elsewhere in his speech the Chancellor said he wanted to 'combine our technology and science brilliance with our formidable financial services to turn Britain into the world's next Silicon Valley' before listing 'our five growth industries: digital technology, life sciences, green industries, financial services and advanced manufacturing'.
- 3.3. Members will be aware that the National Infrastructure Commission had previously referred to the Oxford-Cambridge region as the next Silicon Valley. It is also noteworthy that areas covered by the East West Rail and the wider East West Main Line have world class strengths in digital technologies, life sciences, advanced manufacturing and green industries/ energy. It is therefore clear the area covered by the Partnership will be pivotal to the government's economic objectives, with East West Rail (and the wider East West Main Line) playing a crucial role in increasing economic output, productivity, labour supply, collaboration and innovation.
- 3.4. Following the Autumn Statement, the Chair released the following statement: "The Chancellor's announcement on the future of East West Rail is a huge boost for the region's residents and businesses, alongside the wider UK economy. East West Rail, delivered in full, will be a catalyst for economic growth and boost collaboration and innovation in our world class science and technology sectors. It will create new opportunities for our residents, with better access to jobs, education, training, tourist attractions and leisure pursuits. Their communities will be more sustainable, while East West Rail will support the regeneration of town centres. This is why East West Rail enjoys significant support from local authorities, businesses and residents right across the region."

- 3.5. The statement added: “This announcement must lead to greater clarity for residents who may be impacted by East West Rail’s construction and operation as soon as possible, including on how the East West Railway Company has addressed feedback from its 2021 consultation.”

4. Maximising investment in East West Rail

- 4.1. The government’s recommitment to East West Rail provides fresh impetus for the Partnership to continue to champion the strategic ambition for the project.
- 4.2. Over the next year, there will be a need for the Partnership, local authorities, sub-national transport bodies, government departments, East West Railway Company, Network Rail, transport operators and others to focus on maximising the economic opportunities from investment in East West Rail. This includes:
- Ensuring there is seamless interchange and appropriate first mile, last mile connectivity to East West Rail stations to ensure it unlocks economic opportunities for as many residents, businesses and inward investors as possible. This includes bus services and active travel (on 16 November England’s Economic Heartland published a report on the Varsity Way cycleway which would provide improved cycle access to several EWR stations. This is in annex 2).
 - Encouraging government to work across departments, including Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to maximise the impact of their investments.
 - Ensuring government remains committed to delivering the East West Rail Aylesbury link, which has always been an integral part of the ‘western section’ project (see section below).
 - Progressing the East West Main Line: Continuing to make the case for the line to be extended to west of Oxford and east of Cambridge, alongside exploring the potential for direct services which combine East West Rail with existing radial lines.
- 4.3. It is likely that, subject to funding, these three themes are likely to be a focus for the Partnership’s work programme moving into 2023/24.

5. Aylesbury link

- 5.1. 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.
- 5.2. 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.
- 5.3. 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.
- 5.4. There is local support for the Aylesbury link to East West Rail. In May 2021, Rob Butler MP (Aylesbury constituency) and Greg Smith MP (Buckingham constituency) expressed support in a House of Commons Adjournment debate. In July 2021, Buckinghamshire Council agreed a motion that the Leader and Cabinet continue to urge Government to commit to building the Aylesbury link.
- 5.5. In February 2022, Mr Butler presented a petition to Parliament calling for the Aylesbury link to be constructed. This petition achieved more than 2,000 signatures.

- 5.6. Therefore, earlier this year 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.
- 5.7. The government's Autumn Statement recommitment to East West Rail did not define the scope of the commitment, particularly whether the connection to Aylesbury has been included.
- 5.8. While clarity is sought from Government, it is prudent for the Partnership to continue to plan for the need to update the business case for the Aylesbury link. 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
 - Focus on places, not just railways, including better connectivity from Aylesbury to Milton Keynes, Northampton, High Wycombe, West Midlands, as well as core EWR destinations (Bedford, Cambridge, Oxford)
- 5.9. Officers are in discussion with EWR Company to agree the scope and scale of the commission as this is dependent on the level of rail demand modelling, previously undertaken by the Company.
- 5.10. To inform the commission further Network Rail, have provided additional requirements to the commission to further enhance the business case for the Aylesbury link.
- 5.11. In the meantime, a route to procurement, has been agreed and once the modelling queries have been clarified by the East West Railway Company the commission will begin as soon as possible.

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