

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board

14 June 2023

Agenda Item 6: Aylesbury link update

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Notes the latest position on East West Rail and the Aylesbury link**
- b) Notes and agrees the updated proposal for work in support of the Aylesbury link**

1. Context

- 1.1. The Aylesbury link to Milton Keynes has been a longstanding priority for local MPs, East West Main Line Partnership, England's Economic Heartland Strategic Transport Leadership Board and Buckinghamshire Council.
- 1.2. The link will unlock economic opportunities and support sustainable growth in the town, whilst also providing strategic benefits for the wider region, including improved north-south rail connectivity.
- 1.3. The link was originally included in the Transport and Works Act Order for the western section of East West Rail approved by the Secretary of State in February 2020.
- 1.4. 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, with funding for Aylesbury link not included.
- 1.5. In March 2023, the Board agreed that further work focussed on a strategic economic narrative which highlights the opportunities of better rail connectivity to Aylesbury Partnership would add the most value at this stage. Up to £30,000 of funding towards work on the Aylesbury link had already been supported by the Partnership in 2022/2023.
- 1.6. Since this time, the route announcement for the remainder of the core EWR scheme has been made, with several reports published on 26 May 2023. In respect of the Aylesbury Link, the main 'Route Update Report' has little reference to the Aylesbury Link, with the main route plan showing the link as a 'potential future section of EWR.'
- 1.7. The supporting 'Economic and Technical Report' gives more details on the outcomes of the 'Affordable Connections Project' which assessed how EWR benefits would be realised at lower costs. The report does give some further context on review of opportunities/ options for improving for connectivity to Aylesbury, but also notes the following: 'Although solutions addressing connectivity with Aylesbury, which does not lie on the core EWR alignment continue to be considered, they are not addressed in this report and do not form part of EWR Co's preferred route alignment.'
- 1.8. The report concludes that 'Aylesbury should continue to be viewed separately from the core scope of EWR.' The report further notes that 'conventional transport modelling analysis continues to suggest that the benefits of extending EWR services to Aylesbury do not justify the costs,' but further acknowledges that, 'there are local aspirations for an Aylesbury service connecting to EWR and the possibility remains that a strategic case could be made, should a case for growth be identified.'

1.9. On 7 June 2023, the Deputy Prime Minister, Oliver Dowden MP provided further clarity on progress with the Aylesbury link stating to Aylesbury MP Rob Butler: "*I can assure him that the Department for Transport is working with Network Rail and East West Rail to consider the feasibility of lower-cost railway links on the Aylesbury spur*". See annex 1 for the full question asked in Parliament.

2. Proposed scope of work

- 2.1. Given the points noted above, including the context given on the Aylesbury link options within the route announcement reports, it is proposed that further work is undertaken, as planned, on supporting the strategic economic narrative for the Aylesbury Link.
- 2.2. The detailed scope of this work is currently being confirmed between officers at EEH and Buckinghamshire Council. It is expected to be undertaken by specialist economic consultants over a three-month period, commencing shortly. The work will be completed by this autumn.
- 2.3. The work is expected to assess how the Aylesbury Link would help support wider economic benefits, enabled through the wider strategic rail connectivity given to the North (Milton Keynes/ Northampton) and South (South Bucks/ North London). In particular, it would present data and analysis on how the link (and associated wider rail connectivity benefits) could support development of new and improved innovation clusters, and enhanced linkages between and within business sectors and labour markets.
- 2.4. The work would present results in a summary report and supporting visuals such as maps which would be presented back to the Partnership Board later in 2023. It is also expected that it would support development of more detailed business case work for the Aylesbury Link in due course.

James Gagg
Technical lead
June 2023

Annex 1 – Parliamentary Question on Aylesbury Link, 7 June 2023

Rob Butler (Aylesbury): The latest route update for East West Rail has recently been published and unfortunately the link to Aylesbury is still just a dotted line on the map. I have raised the need for this vital link on several occasions in the House, because it would cut congestion on our roads, stimulate the economy and reduce air pollution. Each time, I have been asked to work with stakeholders to reduce the cost, and I am pleased to say that we have managed to do that. A much cheaper proposal is now on the table, so can my right hon. Friend change that dotted line into a solid line and give my constituents the railway they want?

Oliver Dowden (The Deputy Prime Minister): I know that my hon. Friend is a tireless campaigner for this project, and I can assure him that the Department for Transport is working with Network Rail and East West Rail to consider the feasibility of lower-cost railway links on the Aylesbury spur. I know that he will continue to make that case vigorously.