

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board

12 January 2024

Agenda Item 7: Aylesbury link update

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Notes the summary of outputs of the Aylesbury Link – economic opportunities assessment study**
- b) Comments on the suggested next steps to progress work to further develop the case for the Aylesbury Link and associated improved rail connectivity**

1. Context

- 1.1. The Aylesbury link to Milton Keynes has been a longstanding priority for East West Main Line Partnership, England's Economic Heartland, Buckinghamshire Council and local MPs.
- 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. 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.
- 1.4. 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."
- 1.5. An important consideration is how the link can provide for delivery of wider rail accessibility alongside other planned and proposed rail investment, towards Milton Keynes/ Northampton in the north via East West Rail, and South Buckinghamshire/ North-West London in the south via the Aylesbury/ Princess Risborough line.

2. Outline of work undertaken

- 2.1. The Board agreed in March 2023 that further work by the Partnership should be focused on a strategic economic narrative which highlights the opportunities of better rail connectivity that the Aylesbury link would enable. The scope of work was agreed by the Board in June 2023, with consultants Cambridge Econometrics subsequently engaged to undertake the work. The project has been co-funded and cliented by Buckinghamshire Council, with an interim update given to the Board in October 2023.
- 2.2. Cambridge Econometrics reviewed how the link (and associated wider rail connectivity benefits) could support development of new and improved knowledge clusters, and enhanced linkages between and within business sectors and labour markets. This work builds on previous technical work that these consultants have undertaken for central government and others.

- 2.3. The scope of the Cambridge Econometrics work included a literature review, analysis of relevant economic data, and the synergies associated and between different knowledge clusters, business sectors and labour markets.
- 2.4. A reminder of the full study area is shown in Annex 1, which in summary encompasses the route of the existing Chiltern Line (High Wycombe- Princess Risborough-Aylesbury), the proposed new link to Milton Keynes via East West Rail, as well as potential links to Old Oak Common from the Chiltern line into London in the longer-term.
- 2.5. The study area included the Census Middle Super Output Areas (MSOAs) along the route, which are needed for data analysis, as well as the key stations, and their catchments. These catchments are based on the definitions for a 'wider catchment' from stations, as included within the previous East West Rail Strategic Narrative report published in December 2022.¹
- 2.6. The full detail of train services for a potential Aylesbury Link is not yet known, but for the purposes of this study, base level journey time savings (compared with existing rail accessibility) were taken from Network Rail's 'East West Main Line Strategic Statement' published in 2022. This used a previous configuration of EWR services which included an hourly service between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes (with on-ward rail connectivity from these stations).
- 2.7. The analysis by Network Rail calculated generalised journey times (a measure of the ease and attractiveness of making journeys by rail taking into account on-train time, the frequency of services, and the observed interchange penalty) with and without delivery of the Aylesbury Link as part of the wider EWR project. It is seen as a good measure of the likely rail journey time savings should the Aylesbury Link come forward.
- 2.8. It is also important to note that the work undertaken is not specifically part of formal business case, but could support this in due course.

3. Report Outputs

- 3.1. The full technical report has not yet been finalised, but annex 2 highlights key outputs from the mapping/analysis work undertaken by Cambridge Econometrics as part of their work.
- 3.2. Figure 1 shows a map output from the study, which gives an overview of the key business clusters (knowledge-intensive firms that are co-located, doing related activities) along the wider rail links that could link with those in the Aylesbury area, particularly the fast growing space cluster in Westcott, and a wider Agency Market cluster (marketing, advertising and creatives industries). This is given in more detail in Table 1, which shows the opportunities for these clusters to link with other related business clusters in the Milton Keynes/ Northampton and Cambridge areas, should the new rail passenger services come forward as a result of the Aylesbury Link.
- 3.3. The analysis undertaken shows that there are over 360 related businesses in the Milton Keynes/ Northampton area, and over 240 related businesses in the Cambridge area that could be better linked with businesses in Aylesbury by rail, including those involved in space manufacturing, optical technology companies, and software development.

¹ Report available at: <https://www.englandseconomicheartland.com/publications-and-responses/>

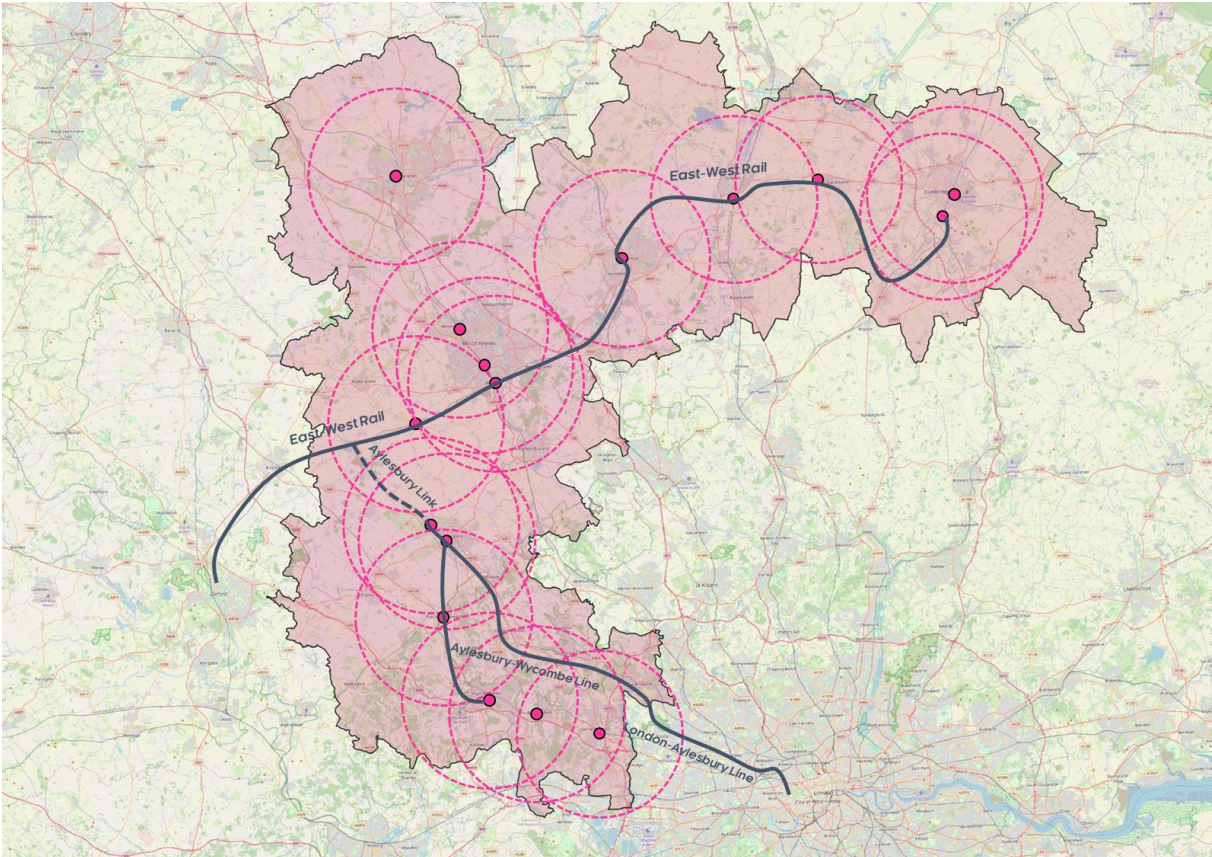
3.4. The analysis indicates that in general there is a surplus of skilled, knowledge-intensive workers within the Aylesbury area, recognising that many people chose to live in the area given the variety of housing options and wider facilities available. However, in other areas that could be connected by rail through the Aylesbury link, there are often deficits in key occupation sectors. Improved rail connectivity could therefore help give better employment choice to residents, allowing them to access wider job opportunities through more sustainable transport options. With significant plans for jobs growth in and close to Aylesbury this relationship is also expected to be reciprocal, allowing those residents from other areas to access job opportunities in and around Aylesbury. New train services will help promote a more connected, sustainable and flexible employment market across the wider area.

4. Next Steps

- 4.1. The analysis undertaken by Cambridge Econometrics helps to strengthen the strategic economic case for better connecting settlements by new rail services enabled through the Aylesbury Link.
- 4.2. Once this work has been completed, EWMLP will work with Buckinghamshire Council to agree next steps. This will also allow for consideration of the recommendations of EEH's Northamptonshire-Thames Valley connectivity study, due to go to EEH's Board in spring.
- 4.3. For example, this may include producing a short advocacy brochure (modelled on the success of Building Better Connections), which summarises the Cambridge Econometrics work, while also considering other benefits including for leisure travel (which has become significantly more important since the pandemic) and the wider transport network.

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Technical lead
January 2024

Annex 1 – Study area map



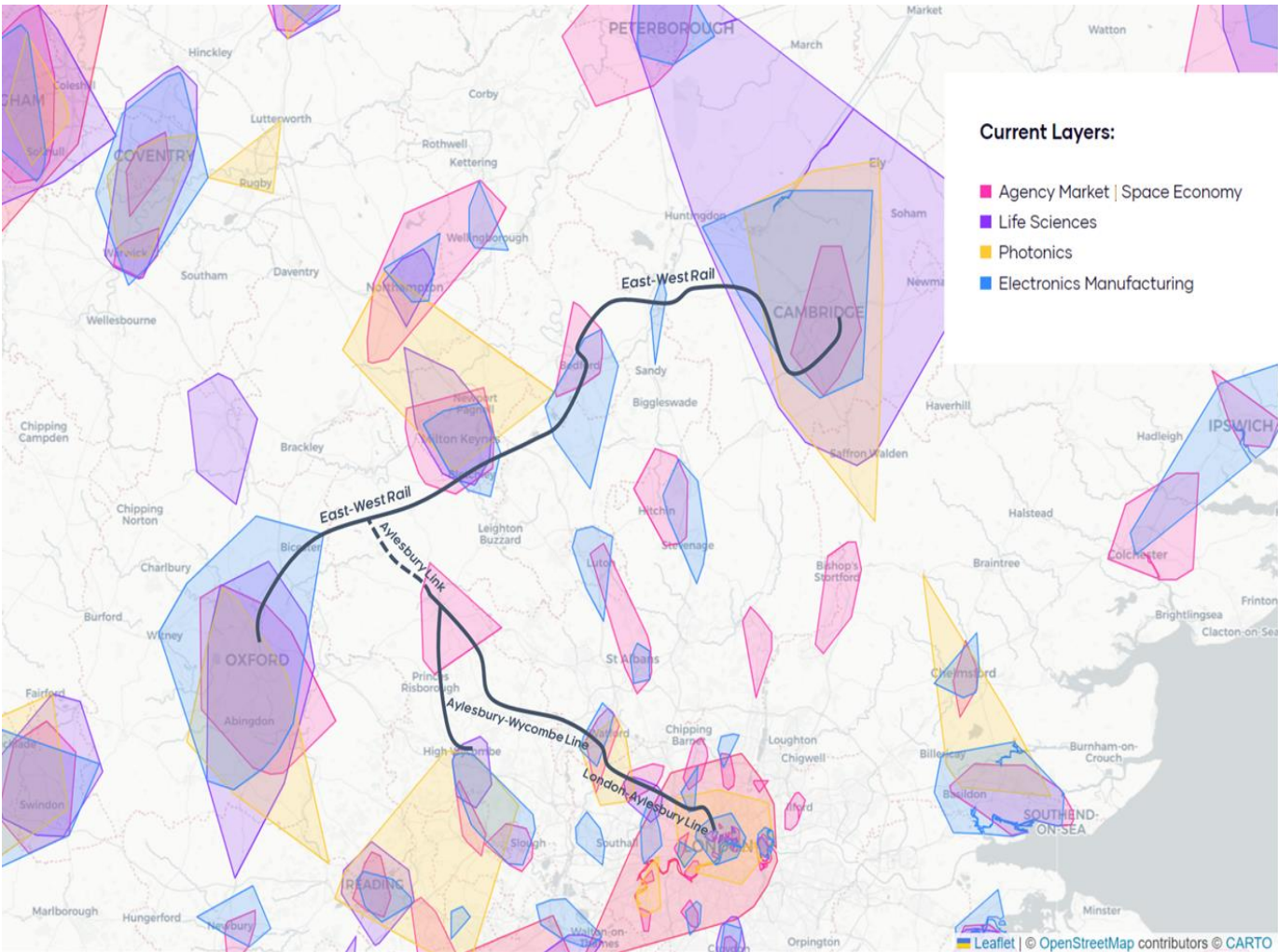
Notes:

Buffer areas around stations are 10km in radius, based on a definition of catchment (use of car, bus or shared mobility modes) identified in the East West Rail: Strategic Narrative report, Dec 2022.

The Census Middle Super Output Areas (MSOAs) along the route have been identified as this supports economic data analysis.

Annex 2 – Outputs from the study:

Figure 1: Key Business clusters across the study area that could benefit from greater connectivity offered by the Aylesbury Link



Notes: Sectors shown include:

Agency Market: Companies providing marketing, advertising and product promotion and sales services.

Life Sciences: Companies involved in life sciences research and commercial opportunities

Photonics: Companies involved in designing, manufacturing and using advanced optical technologies.

Electronics Manufacturing: Companies involved in the design and production of electronic products and micro-electronics (e.g. circuit boards)

Agency Market Cluster shown around Aylesbury also includes Space Economy cluster located at Westcote Business Park (see detail in table 1 below).

(full sector definitions (Real-time Industrial Classifications) available at: <https://thedatacity.com/rtics/>)

Table 1: Business Cluster linkages from Aylesbury to other areas that would benefit from improved rail connectivity from the Aylesbury Link

Vale of Aylesbury to/from >				< Milton Keynes-Northampton		< Bedford-Cambridge	
Estimated Generalised Journey Time saving (and % difference from current) from the Aylesbury Link connection to East-West Rail				155 minutes (-69%) to Milton Keynes	103 minutes (-41%) to Northampton	133 minutes (-56%) to Bedford	99 minutes (-40%) to Cambridge
Knowledge cluster	Location	Key cluster stats	Complementary knowledge cluster(s)	Clusters in catchment	Firms in catchment	Clusters in catchment	Firms in catchment
Space Economy	Westcott	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20+ businesses • 250+ employees • £39m turnover 	In-Orbit Space Manufacturing	1	39	2	42
			Photonics	1	38	1	73
			Advanced Manufacturing	2	292	1	127
Agency Market	Aylesbury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40+ businesses • 40+ employees • £2m turnover 	Agency Market	2	301	2	186
			Digital Creative Industries	1	182	1	120
			Software Development	2	178	2	132
			Software as a Service (SaaS)	1	73	1	63
			E-Commerce	3	107	1	39

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