

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board

17 10 2024

Agenda Item 7: Maximising the wider service opportunities from East West Rail

It is recommended that the Board:

- a) **Notes the wider work being undertaken to continue to make the case for improved connectivity and services following delivery of the core East West Rail route**
- b) **Notes the update on planning for a new Oxford to Bristol service, including the business case work undertaken to date, which the Partnership part-funded**
- c) **Agrees a budget allocation contribution of up to £10,000 to continue to support progress of this proposal, in particular development of the case for investment**
- d) **Notes development of an 'investment brochure' setting out the case for delivery of the Northampton-Old Oak Common rail corridor (including the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link)**
- e) **Notes that the Eastern Section Board is also making progress on making the case for connections to Norfolk and Suffolk – the Board Chair will provide an update later in the meeting.**

1. Context

- 1.1. A key aspect of the Partnership's work (as articulated in Introducing the East West Main Line Partnership, published 2021) is using delivery of the Oxford-Cambridge railway to realise the ambition for a coast to coast main line towards Bristol and South Wales in the west, and East Anglia in the east. It has also long made the case for delivery of the East West Rail scheme in full, including the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link, which was not included in the funding for the western section of the route in January 2021.
- 1.2. The Partnership's agreed work programme set out in the finance paper to the July 2024 Board, included the following area of focus:
 - *Continuing to make the case for progressing coast to coast connectivity, enabled through East West Rail: Progressing the case for a coast-to-coast main line will continue to be important during 2024/25. This will include building on the business case work for a new Oxford to Bristol service (in collaboration with Western Gateway and Network Rail), as well as continuing to make the case for onward eastern connections to Norfolk and Suffolk (led by Eastern Section Board/ Transport East, contributing the £12,500 ringfenced carry forward money as appropriate). It will also include continuing to make the case for the Aylesbury Link building on existing evidence base work to produce a summary brochure which will be shared for review with local authorities along the route.*

- 1.3. This paper highlights EEH's technical work on identifying priorities for the region's main lines and how this supports the ambitions of the Partnership.
- 1.4. It then updates members on progress with making the case for the Oxford-Bristol; Northampton-Old Oak Common (Aylesbury link); and Eastern Section, including next steps for advocacy.

2. EEH Main Line Priorities study

- 2.1. Work being undertaken by England's Economic Heartland support the aims of the Main Line Partnership.
- 2.2. This includes the recently completed Main Line Priorities Study, endorsed by the EEH Board on 27 September. The study highlights the opportunity to improve passenger services as stages of East West Rail are delivered. In particular, the study identifies a number of investment packages for rail, with the following linking in particular with EWR:
 - Package 1: East West Rail: Full delivery of the core route between Oxford and Cambridge, recognising that alongside trains on the core route, this could enable new longer-distance passenger and freight services to come forward in the longer-term.
 - Package 2: Chiltern Transformation: A proposed major upgrade to the Chiltern service network, including bringing forward measures to enable decarbonisation of the route alongside delivery of new links, in particular development of a new corridor between Old Oak Common-Aylesbury- Milton Keynes- Northampton (linking with EWR at Bletchley/ Milton Keynes).
 - Package 3: Decarbonisation: Ensuring that EEH has a fully electrified network in time, including East West Rail.
 - Package 4: Main line Connectivity: Maximising the benefits from existing infrastructure commitments such as HS2, ensuring that services are developed to benefit from released capacity on the West Coast Main Line, including linking with EWR.
 - Package 6: Regional Connectivity: Maximising opportunities to improve wider rail connectivity across the area, including in particular between Oxford-Swindon and Bristol, linking with EWR at Oxford.
 - Package 7: New stations: Recognising the opportunity to deliver new stations, including those planned on the EWR between Bletchley and Cambridge.
 - Package 8: Hubs and Accessibility: Ensuring that station hubs are improved alongside an improved train service offer, including a number of key interchange hubs with EWR such as Bedford and Bicester.
- 2.3. The EEH Board agreed that it will need to continue to work in partnership with local authorities, rail industry and others to progress many of these investment priorities, and that further EEH work should focus on number of key areas, several of which are relevant to the priorities for the East West Main Line Partnership.

- 2.4. Firstly, it was agreed that further work is needed to set out expectations on how train services can develop as strategic rail investment comes forward, namely EWR and HS2. Also highlighted as important was continuing to make the case for key strategic rail investment across EEH that could transform connectivity, for example Oxford to Swindon and Bristol, and the development of new Chiltern links to Old Oak Common and Milton Keynes/ Northampton via the EWR Aylesbury link.
- 2.5. Several of these priorities fit with work already progressed and funded through the East West Main Line Partnership, including the Oxford-Swindon-Bristol service.

3. Update on planning for an Oxford to Bristol service

- 3.1. An Oxford to Bristol service (via Swindon) is seen as an important first step to achieving improved high quality western connections, whilst recognising that the long-term aspiration is for through trains to serve stations on the core EWR route.
- 3.2. Following delivery of the next stage of EWR a new service would, for example, enable rail travel from Milton Keynes to Swindon and Bristol with only one interchange at Oxford, greatly reducing current journey times by rail via Birmingham. It would also reduce current 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) by c. 30%, a threshold deemed to be 'transformative' in terms of rail services.
- 3.3. An important development since the Board update in January is Great Western Railway's decision to trial a limited direct Saturday service between Oxford and Bristol. This commenced in September, and includes 2 direct services each way, calling at Swindon alongside Chippenham and Bath Spa. This initiative is very welcome, and it is hoped that lessons learnt from passenger take-up can be used to help shape the plans for a more regular daily service.
- 3.4. Following the update report in January 2024, the Partnership board agreed to contribute £10k from the 2023/2024 budget towards development of the business case for a new regular Oxford to Swindon service, in particular giving the opportunity to enhance the case with wider economic analysis.
- 3.5. This work has now been completed by consultants engaged by Network Rail, alongside development of a strategic case, which has had input from officers from both England's Economic Heartland and Western Gateway sub-national transport bodies. The business case has been made based on an hourly Oxford to Bristol (and Bristol to Oxford) service via Swindon. Further details on this are given below, with a presentation from Network Rail to also be given at the meeting.
- 3.6. Key conclusions from the strategic case include that delivery of a new regular Oxford to Bristol service would:
 - Fit well with wider local, regional and national policy and strategy priorities and objectives.
 - Support a strong and growing economy along this corridor.
 - Build on and continue to support growth in rail travel across the area.

- Support wider transport objectives to tackle congestion through providing new sustainable transport options that can provide a better and quicker alternative to road travel between major settlements.
- Support access to education and employment for those who may do not currently have the travel options available.

3.7. Key conclusions from the economic case include:

- There is strong economic case for delivering a new regular service between Oxford and Bristol, with the assessment indicating a high or very high value for money assessment (with several demand/operational scenarios undertaken)
- In particular, there are quantified benefits mainly from improved journey times for passengers (valued at c. £94 million), and increases in revenue (valued at c. £70 million)
- In addition, wider benefits indicated include an estimated reduction of 3.5 million km of car miles.

3.8. Further work is now needed to progress the operational case for the service, in particular working with Great Western Railway and Network Rail to understand how required rolling stock can be made available for the new service. It is expected that this will happen alongside wider network changes following securing of additional trains for the Great Western network. However, this process is complex, and requires agreement at a national level. At this stage it is unclear when additional trains can be secured.

3.9. As set out above, the strategic and economic case for delivering a new regular Oxford to Bristol service (via Swindon) is very strong. However, there is still some uncertainty when a regular new service may be possible, in particular given the complexities of planning for new rolling stock needed to enable the service to come forward. Further details on options for this will be given by Network Rail at the meeting.

3.10. In the interim, it is proposed that key aspects from the strategic and economic case work is clearly set out, alongside highlighting stakeholder support for this route. This will act as a key advocacy document and ensure that all decision-makers, including central government, are aware of the importance and benefits of a new Oxford to Bristol service as more detailed planning continues, such as in relation to new trains.

3.11. The advocacy document would be produced in partnership with Network Rail and the two STBs, England's Economic Heartland and Western Gateway. A joint officer group is proposed that will work to pull text and structure together, with production undertaken by graphic designers already engaged by EEH. Costs for production of this document are expected to be under 10K, proposed to be funded by the part of the partnership budget already focused on supporting coast to coast connectivity. The document is expected to take around four months to produce.

3.12. It is also worth noting that the link is also featured in EEH's new 'Connecting Economies' brochure for Swindon-Didcot-Bristol (see annex). These brochures showcase the economic rationale for investment along the corridor, alongside a compendium of priority interventions. The brochures are being shared with government, MPs and private sector.

4. Northampton-Old Oak Common

- 4.1. As referenced above, the EEH Main Line Priorities Study identified improvements to the Chiltern line, including the opportunity of the Northampton-Milton Keynes-Aylesbury-High Wycombe-Old Oak Common strategic rail corridor.
- 4.2. Progression of the corridor, including delivery of the rail link between Aylesbury and Milton Keynes (an integral part of the original East West Rail proposal), is a key priority for Partnership and EEH.
- 4.3. EEH and the Main Line Partnership, working with Buckinghamshire Council and other partners, is developing the 'Global Britain Rail' investment brochure which provides a strong narrative to Government for exploring the opportunity of the corridor in significant detail.
- 4.4. It includes economic analysis provided by Cambridge Econometrics, building on the content used for EEH's Northampton-Buckinghamshire-Thames Valley Connecting Economies brochure.
- 4.5. The document is being planned for publication in mid-late November, subject to final clearances.

5. Eastern Section

- 5.1. Work on making the case for eastern connections from Cambridge to Norfolk and Suffolk is now commencing, with an update from the Eastern Board on this to be given at the Main Line Board meeting.

James Gagg
Technical lead
October 2024