

East West Mainline non-statutory Consultation Response, January 2025

Submitted by e-mail to: consultation@eastwestrail.co.uk

Summary

- The East West Main Line Partnership and its predecessor the East West Rail Consortium has worked to secure East West Rail and maximise its potential over the course of three decades. We therefore welcome the further development of the scheme.
- Local partners continue to champion the potential for the East West Rail core scheme to enable wider benefits such as delivery of coast-to-coast connectivity, and wider rail linkages through interchange with existing Main Line routes.
- The East West Mainline Partnership Board wants to ensure that the scheme is delivered for the benefit of communities along the route and more widely, recognising that this should include delivering a de-carbonised and 'digitally enabled' railway that complements regional and local economic, environmental and social objectives and plans.
- EWR should not just be seen as a rail project, but a catalyst for a lasting legacy that continues to provide local, regional and national benefits for many years to come.
- In this context, the remainder for the response gives more detail of comments against a number of core areas, with the following key points highlighted:
 - **Community Impacts and engagement:** East West Railway Company needs to be explicit in their commitment to working with stakeholders on design and development of the railway. This will ensure that decisions about the railway are made in a way that will bring benefits to the widest number of people and communities across the region. In particular, a better and more transparent process should be put in place to evaluate and report on the effectiveness of East West Rail Company's engagement approach as it takes place, both as part of formal consultations, but also in-between.
 - **Door-to-door connectivity:** Excellent door-to-door connectivity should be an embedded principle in support of the EWR scheme, given it will be critical to both the customer journey experience and success of the scheme. The East West Railway Company, supported by Government, needs to work with local authority partners to plan, secure funding and deliver relevant improvements alongside delivery of the core railway.
 - **Wider strategic benefits and on-ward links:** Key "secondary" and wider strategic benefits and onward rail connections must be given significant priority at all stages of the project, including as the detail of EWR service timetabling is developed.
 - **De-carbonisation:** We welcome the proposal to operate East West Rail under electric traction. However, more detail is needed on the preferred 'discontinuous' electrification option to understand if it can fully deliver decarbonised rail operations, including for freight and future through passenger services. If not, full-electrification should remain an aspiration for the longer-term operation and that delivery of any discontinuous electrification should be undertaken to take account of this aspiration.

- **Lessons Learnt:** Further assessment and consideration of lessons learnt should be a core approach for EWR Company as it plans the next phase of construction. A clear example of one lesson learnt from the previous stage of EWR is building in high quality digital connectivity alongside physical connectivity from the outset, but there are other areas like the planning processes and operational matters that are relevant.
- **Rail Freight:** We agree that East West Rail brings opportunities to better manage strategic freight movements. However, there are still many key points that need assurance to ensure plans to allow and manage rail freight movements that maximise benefits to the region and actively minimise the impact on local communities along the line.
- **Addressing these key points will ensure that East West Rail better maximises its potential.**

Introduction

The response is submitted by the East West Main Line Partnership, a partnership of local authorities which share the ambition for a strategic railway connecting East Anglia with central, southern and western England and into southern Wales, enabled through the delivery of East West Rail.

This response is intended to escalate some of the common themes that authorities across the route of the railway expect to be considered and reviewed as part of the current non statutory consultation for East West Rail and in advance of the formal statutory planning processes. The response does not seek to replicate, and particularly doesn't supersede individual local authority responses.

The overarching support of the East West Mainline Partnership for East West Rail similarly does not undermine the very significant considerations of individual local authorities, communities and residents along the route of the railway. It is through some of the 'themes' in this submission that we would hope to see some of these concerns addressed more effectively. We recognise in some local places, 'themes' for improved approaches and solutions will not address the issues.

Context

The campaign for an east-west railway has been led by local and regional business and political leaders over the course of three decades. The East West Rail Consortium (the former name for the East West Main Line Partnership) was founded in 1995 to advocate for the railway and it developed the initial business case for it. In 2022, as the scheme sought funding from Government to develop its next stages east of Milton Keynes, the East West Main Line Partnership produced *Building Better Connections* which highlighted the strong business voice for East West Rail.

Today, the East West Mainline Partnership has six key areas of interest:

- Oxford-Cambridge sections: Working with our partners to support delivery at the earliest opportunity
- Coast-to-coast connectivity: Realising opportunities east of Cambridge to Norwich and Ipswich; and west of Oxford to Swindon, Bristol and South Wales
- North-south connectivity: Including the Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link and opportunities for new journeys using intersection with radial main lines
- Interchange and strategic transport hubs: Frictionless interchange, including with other modes
- A 21st century main line: Ensuring East West Rail supports the environment and the communities it serves. This includes making it electrified and 'digitally-enabled' from the start (providing digital connectivity to nearby communities). It must also be built with communities at its heart – with appropriate mitigation during construction, and quality local connectivity to stations when it is opened
- Freight: Ensuring East West Rail contributes to the requirements of the national rail freight strategy, while minimising its impact on local communities. Part of this is also making the strongest case for prioritisation of the Felixstowe-Nuneaton corridor.

The work of the partnership is overseen by a strategic board of elected local authority representatives who guide and agree priority areas of focus. This response has been endorsed by the Board and follows review of all key documents within the consultation, assisted at a technical level through engagement of specialist consultants SLC Rail. A member engagement session was held in November 2024, and there have been three officer level virtual engagement sessions undertaken in December and early January to ensure this response is as representative of the views in the region as possible.

Legacy of East West Rail

One of the core principles of the partnership and England's Economic Heartland is that East West Rail must be designed in a way that brings a lasting legacy. While EWR will inevitably deliver significant economic growth benefits for the UK, there should be an equal (if not greater) focus on maximising East West Rail's benefit to local communities and businesses.

The best way of ensuring this is through a locally-led approach to creating a legacy for East West Rail. By working with partners such as the Science Supercluster Board and Universities group, local authorities through EEH and the Pan Regional Partnership and East West Railway Company, the region can ensure the government's commitment to East West Rail is focused on its legacy for communities.

This can be achieved through a sustained commitment to investing in four key themes:

1. **Business Investment and Knowledge** - using a spatial understanding of the innovation ecosystem in the region, identifying where investment will be most useful and where knowledge clusters or gaps exist.

2. **Skills and Learning** – ensuring East West Rail is part of the solution to enable better collaboration so the region has the talent pipeline and upskilling needs to meet future regional and industry needs.
3. **Quality of Life, Place, Heritage and Culture** – mapping ‘quality of life’ across the region and identifying where to prioritise incentives in response to local community and business needs. This will consider social infrastructure provision; heritage and culture; leisure and retail; green space and the natural environment.
4. **Connectivity** - acting as a catalyst for excellent door-to-door connectivity with the railway, increasing access to jobs alongside leisure, health and educational facilities. Making our existing places more sustainable and livable.

The East West Rail ‘legacy project’ is a vital part of its success. Sustained investment in it is essential if the scheme is to be able to deliver far reaching and sustainable benefits. It is on the expectation that the legacy project will continue to be supported that this response has been drafted.

Response to EWR non-statutory consultation

The partnership welcomes further development of the East West Rail (EWR) project, including the commitment by central government to progress the scheme between Oxford and Cambridge. East West Rail will transform the way people can sustainably access jobs, skills, leisure and housing across the region. The region’s world class universities, science parks and knowledge-intensive businesses will be linked together, fuelling the economic potential of this unique part of the UK through: innovation, attracting inward investment, creating prosperity and boosting economic growth for the UK as a whole.

Overall, the scheme must be developed and delivered as a future east west main line. It must be integrated into the wider rail network and developed for the benefit of, and in collaboration with, communities along and beyond the line, maximising the wider strategic, connectivity, economic, social and environmental benefits of the scheme providing a lasting legacy for the region and beyond. In this context, the partnership has identified a number of areas for review in respect of the current EWR non-statutory consultation that relate to its key areas of interest. These are as set out below and guide the structure to the partnership response:

- Community impacts and engagement - how the scheme is being developed to benefit communities along the line and mitigate the impact of any severance, ensuring appropriate and timely engagement as the project develops.
- Door-to-door connectivity - how the scheme is being developed to maximise connectivity and integration into the wider transport network, in particular sustainable transport links from stations to nearby communities.

- Wider strategic benefits - how the proposals as set out enable wider economic, social and environmental benefits to the population along the route, as well as provide links (through interchange) to the wider strategic rail network.
- Decarbonisation - how the proposals support strategic and legislative objectives to deliver a de-carbonised transport network.
- Lessons Learnt - How the lessons learnt from delivery of the previous stages of EWR, and other major transport projects, including in relation to digital provision, should inform development and delivery of the next stages of the project.
- Rail Freight - how the proposals support the strategic benefits of taking freight by rail whilst also mitigating against any potential local impacts.

Community Impacts and engagement:

The East West Main Line Board is clear that the East West Rail project should be developed with communities at its heart. This means a commitment to effective and on-going engagement and collaboration is critical to the success of the scheme. Part of this engagement is ensuring local communities and local partners are able to actively work with East West Rail Company to ensure that local impacts are managed and mitigated as much as possible. Another key area will be working closely with local planning authorities to understand how delivery of East West Rail can complement and support delivery of development allocated and proposed within local plans to ensure local ambitions are enabled.

The last summary of engagement is given in the reports on the 2021 consultation published in 2023 alongside the route announcement, which includes a summary of engagement undertaken between 2021 and 2023. This report includes an analysis of comments given at the 2021 and responses to these points. A summary of engagement undertaken between the route announcement in 2023 and this consultation is not provided. The current non-statutory consultation is expected to be the last prior to commencement of the statutory planning stage.

The partnership welcomes the East West Railway Company's commitment to on-going engagement. However, it is not fully clear on-going engagement with communities and strategic partners, and previous consultation responses are actively shaping and influencing the detail of the EWR proposals. There may be successful examples along the route but for the scheme to achieve its full potential, this approach must be consistent across the Board. The summary of engagement (including responses to the points made by consultees) for the 2021 consultation was published in 2023 alongside the route announcement. However, a summary of engagement undertaken between the route announcement in 2023 and this consultation is not provided.

East West Rail Company should capture feedback from partners to improve its proposals. This is particularly important where it is clear from the extent of the land safeguarded there will be direct impacts on existing properties, such as in Bedford. It is also the case that in

many locations there is still uncertainty regarding the design of the project and hence how it may impact on surrounding communities. Examples of this include the following identified issues and locations:

i) Severance of road, active travel and public transport links:

The new rail infrastructure to be constructed will sever existing active travel and road links in certain locations, including several rights of way. This is a key issue between Bedford and Cambridge where the new line is to be constructed, but also on existing lines to the west of Bedford, particularly on the Marston Vale line, where changes are proposed to enable more trains to operate than at present. The detail of impacts, including extent of works, and planned mitigation, such as new bridges and associated travel links, must be reviewed with impacted communities. Along existing lines, the planned increase in number of trains will reduce access across the line, for example at existing level crossing locations such as London Road, Bicester, or Bow Brickhill on the Marston Vale Line. Alternatives to these crossings must be developed in detail with the relevant local authority and, as much as possible with local communities.

ii) Impacts and links to strategic road and rail links:

At present, there are still options open at several locations on how EWR will interface with existing or planned wider strategic links. In Central Bedfordshire, for example, there are still two options for routing close to the A421 Black Cat to Caxton Gibbet improvements that are currently being constructed by National Highways. Whilst one option is noted as preferred as more affordable, and with less impact on the A421 scheme and existing land-uses, the alternative option is noted as better aligned to proposed development. The decision on where the railway is built should not be a decision for East West Rail Company alone: wider economic, social and environmental factors (and opportunities) – as defined by local stakeholders – should be given material consideration. Similarly, further clarity is needed on how East West Rail would link to wider improvements being planned in local areas, for example how plans in Oxford would relate to the proposed delivery of new services to Cowley.

iii) Existing and planned stations:

There is still a lack of clarity around the details for both enhancing existing stations and plans for new stations along the EWR line. For example, on the Marston Vale line, the role and catchment of different stations will be impacted by the train service patterns chosen, whilst for many stations, for example in Bedford, there is lack of detail on how they will be developed to enable all modes of transport access. At Cambourne, a critical consideration will be how the station needs to be planned to complement and link with delivery of new local plan development. Communities and local authorities need to be recognised and supportive partners from the outset of these considerations to ensure stations are accessible and fully integrated with the wider existing and planned communities that they will serve.

Given the uncertainties identified above and elsewhere along the line, and the need for further work on the run up to statutory consultation, the partnership believes that the East West Railway Company needs to be explicit in their commitment to working with stakeholders on design and development of the railway. This will ensure that decisions about the railway are made in a way that will bring benefits to the widest number of people and communities across the region. In particular, a better and more transparent process should be put in place to evaluate and report on the effectiveness of East West Rail Company's engagement approach as it takes place, both as part of formal consultations, but also in-between. This will ensure that decisions, for example on design, can clearly demonstrate how they have been shaped by meaningful engagement. Without full engagement of communities and authorities to help actively guide development of the scheme, opportunities to improve it will be missed and the full benefits of East West Rail will not be realised.

Door-to-door connectivity:

For most potential users of East West Rail their journeys will include travelling to or from a station at each end by another mode of transport. Door-to-door connectivity is critical to the success of the rail line and therefore, needs to be an integral part of the scheme- not a bolt on.

We are pleased to note that East West Railway Company has acknowledged this in the consultation documentation with a 'fact sheet' on door-to-door connectivity setting out some of the key principles, as well as a short summary of some examples including at Bletchley, Camborne and Oxford Parkway. In the main consultation document, there are also references to door-to-door connectivity at certain existing/ planned stations, including Tempsford and Bedford. However, the detail on exact proposals to be integrated into the scheme for improving door-to-door journeys is not yet included, with reference to '*an emerging approach to door-to-door connectivity*' at several stations¹, and text noting uncertainty around funding for certain key schemes that could improve door-to-door journeys for many, such as the Bletchley Eastern entrance.

We recognise that the East West Railway Company has been developing door-to-door strategy, and engaging local authorities within this process. However, we believe that work on these plans must be significantly enhanced and accelerated so each station (both existing and new or re-located) along the line can be planned as part of a genuine integrated transport system from the outset. **For this to succeed the work must be completed prior to the commencement of statutory consultation. Importantly, this should include detail on how improvements can be delivered and funded alongside and in tandem with delivery of the core EWR rail scheme.** It will also need to take account of final decisions on station location, particularly on the Marston Vale Line. This should include details on active travel, public transport and micro-mobility links, alongside provision for access by car and taxi where this is appropriate and required. A focus on customers should be at the heart of

¹ Referenced in the main consultation document on pages 90, 94, 97 in respect of stations on the Marston Vale Line

proposals, for example considering opportunities for branding both at stations and on trains where this will help customers, including those with particular accessibility needs, as well as how to enable through ticketing and alignment of public transport timetabling between rail and bus.

Importantly, as well as being informed by more detail being developed by East West Railway Company - for example on station catchment assessments, the work should also be developed in the context of wider evidence base work and best practice. This includes local, regional and national guidance, policy and evidence base. At a national level, the emerging Integrated National Transport Strategy is vital: with East West Rail providing a rare opportunity for the principles of the newly formed Integrated National Transport Strategy to be embedded from the outset of the scheme. It would be inconceivable that a scheme of this opportunity would not be developed in line with these principles. The rail industry also produces guidance on station development and design.² At a regional level, the evidence base produced by England's Economic Heartland (EEH) sub-national transport body will be relevant, including those setting out proposals for a Heartland bus network, and further development of the Varsity Way active travel route.³ At a local level, new Local Transport Plans and their priorities will be important, as well as any supporting strategies, for example the transport hub strategy produced by Oxfordshire.⁴

We believe that the following principles developed by EEH can also help guide further detailed development of the door-to-door offer at each station:

- Ambitious – to maximise the potential of the middle mile solution
- Innovation led – so that provision for first mile last mile is future-proofed and enabled through forward thinking design and planning
- Customer led – to meet the unique needs of the region's business sectors and communities
- Integrated – to provide seamless end-to-end journeys
- Safe, easy, secure and accessible – so as many people as possible can access the first mile last mile options. This includes the timetable patterns of public transport
- Reflect local and customer needs and opportunities – recognising local needs should be met as well being part of a recognisable network
- Good practice – Draws on good practice of known successful examples of first mile last mile solutions
- Strategic network – Should be part of a wider network (such as the Heartbeat network) as well as providing local solutions.

In summary, the partnership believes that planning for excellent door-to-door connectivity should be an integrated part of the EWR scheme, given it will be a critical to both the customer journey experience and success of the scheme. The East West Railway Company,

² [Buildings and Architecture design guidance - Network Rail](#)

³ [Publications - England's Economic Heartland](#)

⁴ [Local Transport and Connectivity Plan | Oxfordshire County Council](#)

supported by Government, needs to work with local authority partners to plan, secure funding and deliver relevant improvements alongside delivery of the core railway.

Wider strategic benefits and on-ward links:

As noted above, a key area of focus for the East West Main Line Partnership Board is maximising the wider benefits and opportunities of rail connectivity between the east and west of the country enabled through full delivery of the East West Rail project between Oxford and Cambridge. We believe that only by reviewing these wider opportunities will the full economic, social and environmental benefits of the scheme be enabled, providing a lasting legacy for the region and beyond.

We note that the current non-statutory consultation documentation has a focus on the scheme design and delivery, while also including a number of strategic objectives and outcomes which the project is expected to enable. We welcome many of these, for example those related to supporting the economic growth of the region, enhancing employment and skills opportunities for our communities, as well as those related to our priority environmental and community benefits. However, the detail of benefits, for example specific metrics, are not included in the consultation documentation. Where figures are quoted, for example journey time benefits, it is not exactly clear on what basis comparisons between EWR and other modes of transport are made. Further details of benefits need to be made available to support the next stage of scheme development, for example the wider economic benefits, as well as demonstrating that the scheme has a net benefit for the environment, positively managing ecological and carbon impacts. We note that scoping for the Environmental Impact Assessment has now commenced, but the Board is keen to work with East West Rail Company to plan for how the scheme can deliver and extend Biodiversity Net Gain targets across the region, in particular through the legacy programme.⁵

Another area identified as important in terms of strategic objectives is the opportunity for EWR to provide wider rail linkages, with the consultation noting that EWR could *'contribute to improved journey times and inter-regional passenger connectivity by connecting with north-south routes and routes beyond Oxford and Cambridge.'*⁶ This ambition should not be a possibility, it should be a central and core priority of the scheme. East West Rail has the potential to transform journeys across much of England, from the west coast right through to east coast. It will make many east-west journeys possible without the need to travel through London. Given the significant level of investment Government is committing to East West Rail, it is vital that its benefits are maximised as far beyond the route (and region) as possible. It is an area which the partnership believes requires significantly stronger analysis and emphasis from the Company, working in partnership with the EWMLP, England's Economic Heartland, Network Rail and Shadow GBR.

⁵ <https://national-infrastructure-consenting.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/TR040012/documents>

⁶ Main EWR consultation document, page 18.

Funding was recently committed by the partnership board to work with partners to develop the business case for both onward western connections from Oxford towards Bristol, and eastern connections from Cambridge towards East Anglia.

The link between Milton Keynes and Aylesbury, part of the Transport and Works Act Order for the East West Rail 'western section' must be delivered. East West Railway Company must actively take account of these opportunities when planning the core scheme, including the timetabling of services. Interchange with existing lines will also be critical, with opportunities identified as follows:

Oxford – for links on to rest of Oxfordshire through existing and proposed new local services such as on the Cowley branch line, as well as regional services towards Swindon and Bristol and the Cotswolds and Worcester.

Bletchley and Milton Keynes- for onward long-distance services to the North West, and regional links to Northampton, and south to Buckinghamshire when the Aylesbury link comes forward. An important consideration here will be understanding how EWR can better link to Milton Keynes as a key interchange hub both from the west and east through future infrastructure improvements between Bletchley and Milton Keynes as previously identified as beneficial in national and regional strategic studies.

Bedford- for future long-distance links to Northamptonshire, the Midlands and the North, as well as to the south from Luton and Luton Airport.

Tempsford area- links to the East Coast Main Line enabled through a new interchange station, in particular linking with services to Peterborough and beyond to the north, and Hertfordshire stations to the south.

Cambridge-for links to the rest of Cambridgeshire, and onwards to East Anglia including Norwich and Ipswich (potentially via a new station to the east of Cambridge).

Many of these opportunities have already been identified within strategic planning documents, such as the strategic advice produced by Network Rail, and regionally by EEH, including the on-going Main Line Priorities Study work.⁷ East West Rail should be further developed in the context of maximising these opportunities, not just focusing on services on the core route only.

When planning for onward linkages key stations must be developed to improve and provide for seamless interchange for rail passengers, for example through provision of high- quality information, customer facilities such as toilets, and improvements to ease access through the station such as lifts and overbridges. It will also be important that stations are developed to enable operation of future trains, for example ensuring the right platform capacity and lengths. Timetabling of EWR and main line services will also be critical to ensure customers do not have to wait long for their onward connections, recognising that passengers using existing services should not be adversely impacted.

⁷ Studies available at: [Long-term planning - Network Rail](#) and [Publications - England's Economic Heartland](#)

The partnership is seeking assurance that key “secondary” and wider strategic benefits and onward rail connections must be given significant priority at all stages of the project, including as the detail of EWR service timetabling is developed.

Decarbonisation:

One of the partnership principles is that the East West Rail should be planned to be future facing, with an important aspect of this being that it should be developed in line with net-zero carbon policy priorities. We are therefore pleased that the consultation documents now give more detail on plans for electrification of the route, which would reduce the need for fossil fuel traction and give the opportunity for trains to be powered by electricity generated by renewable power. We note that use of trains powered by electric traction has the secondary benefit of improved air quality at stations and other key locations along the line as emissions from diesel engine trains are eliminated. However, we note that at present there are still two main electrification options being considered: full electrification and ‘discontinuous’ electrification. The Company’s preference is for ‘discontinuous’ electrification due to it being ‘more affordable’ due to less need to change existing structures such as bridges.⁸ We also note that power supply options are being considered in more detail, and that in the short-term diesel operation will be brought in for Oxford to Milton Keynes and probably for Oxford to Bedford as well in advance of the full scheme to Cambridge.

Overall, the partnership believes that it is critical that East West Rail is developed in line with decarbonisation principles. We are not yet clear from the information presented that EWR will be delivered to be a net-zero carbon project, highlighting the following key points on the proposals to date:

- Whilst we recognise that the Company is reviewing innovative train traction solutions to deliver decarbonised services at the earliest opportunity, we note that hybrid battery -electric trains are at an early stage of development and deployment in the UK. Further detail is therefore needed to understand how their use on EWR would be enabled- for example in relation to maintenance and operations.
- We are also not yet clear if the current preferred plans for ‘discontinuous’ electrification will allow for decarbonised operation of other services, for example freight trains and any future through passenger services from other main lines. We believe that the traction plans for the core route should be reviewed in the context of the potential for operation of such wider services in a decarbonised way, for example towards Norwich and Ipswich in the East and Swindon and Bristol in the West, recognising that further electrification infrastructure is likely to be needed to enable this. Without more detailed assessment and clarification, we believe that full electrification is likely to be more flexible and fit with allowing for operation of longer-distance services as EWR becomes part of the wider regional and national network.

⁸ Consultation document, page 34.

- Should a decision be made to continue with the discontinuous electrification option in the short-term given wider considerations such as affordability, impacts on communities and deliverability constraints, we would request that this is delivered in the context of 'future proofing' for potential delivery of full electrification in the longer-term- for example in relation to power supply options chosen.
- Further detail is needed on timing and phasing of electrification given the expected need to operate diesel trains on part of the route in the short-term. This will need to include understanding of the detail of plans for providing for electrification on each section of East West Rail, including Connection Stage 1. Confirmation on these details will allow for greater understanding of how the trajectory towards delivery of a net-zero carbon railway can be enabled.
- The decision to support electrification, including discontinuous electrification, is likely to bring additional impacts to communities – not just between Bletchley and Cambridge but on the line that is shortly to be opened west of Bletchley. The impact on communities of returning to this part of line to undertake further retrospective construction can not be underestimated and must be managed carefully, and in partnership with the relevant local authorities.
- Finally, we are not yet clear how the carbon impacts of the scheme delivery will be mitigated and when and how these will be off-set by use of the zero-carbon operated railway in time. This should be set out in more detail in the environmental work at the next stage of scheme development.

The partnership welcomes the proposal to operate East West Rail under electric traction. However, we believe that more detail is needed on the preferred 'discontinuous' electrification option to understand if it can fully deliver decarbonised rail operations, including for freight and future through passenger services. If not, we believe that full electrification should remain the preference for longer-term operation, and that delivery of any discontinuous electrification in the short-term should be undertaken to take account of this aspiration

Lessons Learnt:

The East West Rail project is being delivered incrementally, with the first stage of the route delivered in 2016 with the opening of the new Oxford to Bicester line (as part of a new route between Oxford and London), and the next stage (referred to as Connection Stage 1) currently being delivered between Bicester and Bletchley/ Milton Keynes. It is understood that the subsequent stage (Connection Stage 2) will deliver services on to Bedford, with the final stage (Connection Stage 3) delivering services on to Cambridge. The current consultation largely covers the route proposals between Bletchley and Cambridge, but does also include planned changes between Oxford and Bletchley to enable operation of further passenger and freight services.

Whilst the current consultation builds on the previous non-statutory consultations in 2019 and 2021, and the route announcement in 2023, it is essential that East West Rail Company

captures lessons learnt from the development and delivery of previous stages of EWR and indeed other major transport projects. For example,

- Are there any key points of relevance from the previous Transport and Works Access Order processes that are relevant to the proposed Development Consent Order process for the next stage, or are there lessons learnt from plans for entry into service processes that could help with planning for new services?
- What are the key lessons learnt from the delivery of previous stages of East West Rail about how best to manage and communicate shorter-term impacts on communities such as construction traffic on local roads?
- What lessons have been learnt around programming and delivery of the overall project between Oxford and Cambridge? For example, in the current consultation there are additional works proposed through Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire on the line recently constructed including passing loops and electrification of the route which could lead to disruption of communities that suffered previous disruption from the recently completed scheme. This does not fit with the principle of a 'disrupt once only' approach to scheme delivery which we consider should guide development of further sections of EWR.

The partnership is now undertaking further work on reviewing lessons learnt from delivery of the previous section of EWR and we would expect EWR Company to work collaboratively with the Board to ensure this work is used to shape its future approach.

Another key area for consideration is how delivery of a railway can provide benefits for wider communities over and above improved rail connectivity. The partnership has already considered examples from elsewhere on the realisation of benefits such as regeneration associated with new rail lines, but another example is helping enable improved digital connectivity. For Connectivity Stage 1 the partnership worked with central government, England's Economic Heartland and local authorities to secure funding to deliver the 'Connecting Heartland' project which will enable 5G connectivity along the line for both passengers and surrounding communities.

Given the relatively small costs involved, we believe that digital infrastructure which benefits passengers and nearby communities must be installed as standard during the construction of the next phases of East West Rail.

However, the current consultation gives little detail on any plans for wider digital connectivity apart from noting that telecommunication masts for train operations '*could potentially be used by mobile operators.*'⁹ Digital infrastructure along the line should be a clear priority, building off plans being delivered at present- passengers travelling between Oxford and Cambridge should expect to be able to access 5G as default along all the whole of the line, with communities also benefiting where there is a good case for enhancements.

⁹ Technical Report, page 421

The partnership believes that further assessment and consideration of lessons learnt should be a core approach for EWR Company as it plans the next phase of construction. A clear example of one lesson learnt from the previous stage of EWR is building in high quality digital connectivity alongside physical connectivity from the outset, but there are other areas like the planning processes and operational matters that are relevant.

Rail Freight:

It is understood from the consultation documentation that the main focus of the current EWR project led by the EWR Company is to enable passenger trains to operate between Oxford, Milton Keynes, Bedford and Cambridge and provide benefits to communities in-between. However, the consultation does also include further detail on the opportunity to provide for rail freight along the line, with figures given on the number of daily freight train paths that could be enabled through the scheme, including a significant increase of freight train paths planned on the 'western section' between Oxford and Bletchley/ Milton Keynes and enabled through further works such as a number of train passing loops on this section.

Planning for appropriate use of freight on the line fits with the principles of the partnership and wider strategic policy priorities. However, based on the information contained within the consultation documentation, there a number of key areas needing clarification prior to considering the overall potential benefits of rail operations:

- Whilst the consultation does include some facts on how rail freight using East West Rail could reduce carbon emissions, boost business productivity and take HGVs off the road, it does not give full detail of where those benefits would be felt, particularly at the local or regional level. The partnership seeks greater clarity on the economic and environmental benefits of freight using EWR in more detail.
- As the detail of timetabling and planned freight gauge clearance are not included in the consultation, it is not clear whether the full benefits of providing for freight on EWR are being maximised. This is further complicated by the uncertainty around the plans for electrification on the route. For example, has there been any allowance for potential future opportunities to operate services from the east on to the West Coast Main Line should capacity enhancements come forward between Bletchley and Milton Keynes, or have the assumptions taken into account other wider planned improvements such as at Ely and Haughley junctions? This detail will also be key to understanding the operating assumptions underpinning the proposed rail passing loop locations.
- Finally, and importantly, considerations about freight operations must prioritise the minimisation of its impact on surrounding communities, for example potential emissions and noise at passing loop locations and ensure necessary mitigation to address these impacts is developed in partnership with local authorities and delivered as a matter of priority.

Whilst the partnership therefore agree that East West Rail brings opportunities to better manage strategic freight movements, there are still many key points that need assurance to ensure plans to allow and manage rail freight movements maximise benefits to the region and actively minimise the impact on local communities along the line.