

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board

25 February 2025

Agenda Item 5: Programme update, including Spending Review and Oxford to Bristol service proposal

It is recommended that the Board:

- a) **Notes the EWMLP spending review submission**
- b) **Notes the update on planning for the Oxford to Bristol service and endorses the 'the Case for re-instating Oxford-Swindon-Bath-Bristol' narrative document funded by the partnership and as attached to this paper**
- c) **Notes the update on the Lessons Learnt project**

1. Spending Review

- 1.1. As set out to the Board in January submissions for the multiyear Spending Review call for evidence were due by 9 February. A response was submitted on behalf of the EWMLP Board in line with the themes agreed at the January Board meeting. The full response is in Annex 1, but in summary it highlighted the following key spending priorities:
- a) **Delivery of Oxford-Cambridge:** Welcoming the commitment to East West Rail, but highlighting that the Spending Review should provide funding to develop proposals for the Bletchley Northern Connection and North East chord, which would maximise the benefits of East West Rail for Milton Keynes.
 - b) **Coast to coast connectivity:** Revenue funding to develop the Strategic Outline Business Case for the 'Eastern Section' better linking Cambridge to Ipswich, Norwich and Colchester. A commitment to fund (in the single figure millions) new hourly services between Oxford and Bristol, a 'quick win' which could start within 12 months.
 - c) **North-south connectivity:** Funding to progress the ambitions for the Northampton-Old Oak Common rail corridor (including Aylesbury-Milton Keynes link).
 - d) **Interchange and strategic transport hubs:** Dedicated funding for local authorities to deliver high quality 'door to door' connectivity to and from East West stations, widening their catchment areas for communities and businesses.
- 1.2. **A 21st century main line:** Funding to build East West Rail next stages should include provision for lineside digital infrastructure benefiting passengers and nearby rural communities and businesses.
- 1.3. **Freight:** Funding to progress Ely and Haughley junctions, benefiting both freight and passenger services, and essential for services east of Cambridge.

- 1.4. The Board will be further updated on these priority areas as further spending decisions are made, including following the Spending Review event.

2. Oxford to Bristol service

- 2.1. As noted at the January board, in line with the Board priorities for work related to maximising the wider service opportunities from East West Rail an economic narrative/ advocacy brochure was produced in partnership with Network Rail and Western Gateway Sub-national Transport Body.
- 2.2. The document, attached as Annex 2 to this paper is called 'The Case for reinstating Oxford-Swindon-Bath-Bristol rail services,' and sets out the case for delivering a new daily hourly service between Oxford to Bristol via Swindon, Chippenham and Bath Spa.
- 2.3. The service represents a 'quick-win', which could be delivered within 12 months at very little Government expense.
- 2.4. There is no additional capital investment needed for this scheme to come forward. Indeed, a Saturday service using existing train rolling stock is currently being trailed by Great Western Railway. As additional train rolling stock is able to be freed up from wider fleet decisions, a daily direct service could then also come forward, if needed incrementally to build up to once per hour.
- 2.5. As set out in the document, the additional operational cost for the new service is in the single-figure millions, and would need to be underwritten by central government. However, based on the business case work to date its expected that this would more than be offset by increased revenue as new passengers are attracted to the enhanced service.
- 2.6. The document will continue to be used to make the case for this additional service to central government and others making decisions on development of the future rail network. In summary the document highlights that a new Oxford- Swindon to Bristol direct services would:
 - a) Reduce overall rail journey times on the route by c. 30%, with new journey times between Oxford and Swindon of just 30 mins.
 - b) Enable passengers using East West Rail from Milton Keynes in the short-term, and Bedford/ Cambridge in the longer-term access to major destinations in the west with just one single (easy) change at Oxford
 - c) Support a high growth economy along the corridor, worth £75.6 billion in 2022, and including extensive research and development intensive jobs such as in the life sciences
 - d) Help support sustainable housing growth along the corridor, alongside supporting development of a net-zero transport network by providing a better alternative to private car usage
- 2.7. Recently an Open Access rail service proposal came forward for a new service between London and Paignton from First Rail Wales and Western which would use capacity on a section of the Great Western Main Line where the proposed Oxford to Bristol service would also operate. Along with partners Western Gateway STB, Swindon and Oxfordshire, EEH were able to write to the Office of the Rail and Road outlining concerns that this proposal would impact on the ability of the Oxford to Bristol service to come forward, using the narrative document to highlight its benefits. It is understood that the impacts of this proposal on capacity and performance are currently being further considered by Network Rail and the ORR.

- 2.8. EEH officers in the Board secretariat will continue to work with partners to plan for a new regular Oxford to Bristol service, recognising the significant benefits that this service could bring and supporting the ultimate ambition for a direct coast-to-coast East West Main Line.
- 2.9. In addition, the Board will wish to note that EEH, working with Oxfordshire and Worcestershire county councils, have also produced a narrative document summarising the benefits of improved rail connections on the North Cotswold Line between Oxford and Worcester. This document builds on previous business case work, highlighting the economic and social benefits of investing in this line to increase train service frequencies. It is noted that such services would, like services towards Bristol be linked to East West Rail at Oxford.

3. Lessons Learnt project

- 3.1. Following agreement at the last Board to contribute funding to progress the Lessons Learnt project, EEH officers are engaging with potential suppliers with the necessary expertise to undertake the work. Key to the project will be the need to conduct qualitative interviews and synthesise this into an impactful report with recommendations for future stages of the East West Rail scheme and nationally around major infrastructure schemes.
- 3.2. EWR Company have indicated that they are supportive of this work and EEH officers will further review with them how the project could be included as part of any learning legacy initiatives for the scheme (or similar).

4. Consultation Response

- 4.2 Following feedback at the last partnership meeting in January, the consultation response to the East West Rail non-statutory consultation was completed and agreed by the Chair and Deputy Chair for submission. This is attached at Annex 3.

James Gagg and Adam King
East West Main Line Partnership Secretariat
February 2025