

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board

26 February 2026

Item 5: Lessons Learned from Oxford to Milton Keynes

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Board:

a) Agrees the draft report on Lessons Learned from Oxford to Milton Keynes

1. Purpose

1.1. This paper sets out the context and key findings of the Lessons Learned from Oxford to Milton Keynes project and asks the Board to approve the draft report for publication.

2. Key points to note

- 2.1. The EWMLP and EEH jointly commissioned independent consultants to undertake a series of qualitative interviews to learn lessons from the planning, construction and engagement stages of Connection Stage 1 (CS1) of the East West Rail scheme.
- 2.2. There was a particular focus on the local authority perspective.
- 2.3. The construction and engagement stages were predominantly undertaken by the EWR Alliance, led by Network Rail.
- 2.4. It is recognised that the planning, construction and engagement of the full East West Rail scheme continues. This is being led by the East West Railway Company. Given the focus on CS1, the report does not consider this ongoing engagement directly.
- 2.5. However, it is hoped that this report and its lessons can be used to support collaborative working on the remaining stages of the East West Rail scheme and that they are transferable to interfaces with other major infrastructure schemes.

3. Context

- 3.1. The EWMLP Board previously agreed a joint (with EEH) commission to capture insights from local authorities of their experiences of the East West Rail scheme, during the planning and construction phases, up to nearing mobilisation for passenger services Oxford – Milton Keynes.
- 3.2. The findings from these interviews alongside recommendations have then been synthesised into a draft report (see Annex 1) consisting of 15 lessons across six learning themes.
- 3.3. This is accompanied by a history of the East West Rail scheme: how the initial vision was secured; reflections on the delivery/construction phase of CS1; and findings on the transition to operations.
- 3.4. By putting the local authority experience at the heart of this work, we have sought to highlight the wider impacts and opportunity that major strategic infrastructure schemes present. This a lens that is not widely considered within the major infrastructure projects discourse.
- 3.5. The aim of the report is to share learning from East West Rail's first phase so that they may be applied to future infrastructure projects, including (where applicable) future sections of East West Rail.

4. Learning Themes and Lessons

- 4.1. From the interviews, 15 lessons have been identified across six learning themes (4.2-4.7).
- 4.2. Working together to mitigate construction impact:
 - Apply joint responsibility, and swiftly acknowledge and resolve issues, to maintain community trust.
 - It is helpful to have a single point of contact or liaison officer for each organisation, and to bring them together to undertake joint planning.
 - There is a need for consistent monitoring and communication around agreed traffic management mitigations e.g. of HGV movements to/from sites.
 - Set up collaborative good practice with construction partners.
- 4.3. Role of local authorities:
 - Local authorities should have a defined role within major infrastructure scheme governance which recognises their role in delivering place-based benefits to maximise the socio-economic impact.
 - Avoid ambiguity: Binding consent conditions and local requirements embedded within the DCO are crucial for safeguarding local benefits and ensuring local authorities have the appropriate leverage to control the impacts on their communities.
 - Local contributions to EWR, in the form of Work in Kind agreements, framed local authorities as partners in the scheme.
- 4.4. Power of the region speaking with one voice:
 - Forming a collective, consistent voice strengthens the positions of local authorities in negotiations and in managing handover from the project.
- 4.5. Ensuring continued focus on places:
 - It is critical to understand what the core requirements of a scheme are to successfully balance the tension between local needs across multiple local authorities, strategic rail needs, and the Government's wider priorities.
 - Aligning social value fund deployment with local plans can maximise their impact.
 - To enable effective integration of EWR, the future operator for CS2 and CS3 needs to be involved early.
- 4.6. Communications:
 - The most powerful narratives about EWR were those that focused on place-based benefits (growth, jobs and housing) – not just on rail journeys.
 - Open communication has a role to play in helping communities have a balanced understanding of a scheme.
- 4.7. Building collaboration, capability and capacity:
 - Consider a planned, collaborative and coordinated approach to sharing capability and capacity – whilst also recognising the need to safeguard local accountability.
 - Apply technical expertise and local understanding to shape decisions together.

5. Next Steps

- 5.1. Subject to the Board's approval, the Lessons Learned document will be typeset and shared with officers, including via the EWMLP and EEH websites, and EEH's 'Knowledge Hub'.
- 5.2. East West Rail is a Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project (NSIP) and, as such, will need to apply for a Development Consent Order (DCO). This process has been reformed under the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 with changes to the legal consultation and engagement requirements.

- 5.3. The East West Railway Company is being treated a “pathfinder” by central Government for the new, revised process, and have revised their approach to community engagement, in particular. This presents an opportunity for local authorities to set expectations around meaningful engagement for NSIPs.
- 5.4. Given the clear interest in the streamlining infrastructure planning consultation at the last meeting, which included consideration of new guidance about consultation and engagement following the removal of statutory pre-application consultation requirements, the EWMLP Board may wish EEH, as the EWMLP Secretariat, to explore opportunities to work with MHCLG further.

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