

East West Main Line Partnership Strategic Board

23 July 2026

Agenda Item: 6 Meaningful Engagement

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Board:

- a) Sets the expectation that EWR should be an exemplar for major infrastructure development schemes**
- b) Approves the revised Lessons Learned report for the planning, construction and engagement stages of CS1**

1. Purpose

- 1.1. This paper presents the opportunity for EWR to be an exemplar in its approach to meaningful and informed engagement, building on its 'pathfinder' status and through embedding lessons learned from CS1.

2. Context

- 2.1. Secondary legislation for the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 has been laid, bringing key reforms into effect on 24 July 2026, alongside supporting guidance: [National Infrastructure Planning Guidance Portal - GOV.UK](#). One of the reforms is the removal of statutory consultation previously required under the Planning Act 2008.
- 2.2. East West Rail has been deemed a 'pathfinder' for the new processes under these reforms. This presents an opportunity for the scheme to be an exemplar in major infrastructure development.
- 2.3. Meaningful, informed engagement forms a key part of being an exemplar scheme. Its importance is reflected in the Lessons Learned report for CS1 – and there is an expectation that these lessons should be embedded in the engagement and communications approach for the remainder of the EWR scheme.

3. Streamlining Infrastructure Planning

- 3.1. Government has published a suite of secondary legislation and supporting guidance for key reforms to streamline infrastructure planning. These will come into effect on 24 July 2026.
- 3.2. Within the Government response to the "streamlining infrastructure planning" consultation, East West Rail is specifically referenced as "already benefitting from the new flexibility and amending its approach to consultation and examination".
- 3.3. These reforms include the removal of the statutory consultation ahead of submitting the DCO application for NSIPs, with the guidance calling for a proportionate pre-application strategy based on four principles: prioritising front-loading; proportionality; openness and transparency; and timeliness.
- 3.4. It is worth noting this wording: "It is for applicants to judge how best to approach any pre-application engagement and/or consultation, but it is recommended that this is proportionate to the scale and nature of the proposed development and timed to enable meaningful feedback. For larger or more complex projects, early engagement on project principles, options and emerging issues could be followed by consultation, at the applicant's discretion, when the proposals and supporting information have developed sufficiently for meaningful feedback."

- 3.5. Importantly, the pre-application engagement with local authorities is “without prejudice” to views later expressed in the DCO application process, with an expectation that authorities will “engage constructively” in technical discussions. The guidance also encourages applicants to “consult local authority officers about how best to seek the input of Elected Members and keep them informed and updated on the development of a DCO application during pre-application.”
- 3.6. It is worth noting that the guidance encourages submission of Local Impact Reports (LIRs) or draft LIRs during the pre-examination phase, so that the Examining Authority can use these to inform the Initial Assessment of Principal Issues (IAP) for the examination. This is earlier than the current advice to invite local host and neighbouring local authorities to submit their LIR during the examination stage.
- 3.7. In addition, cost recovery by host local authorities will be allowed from 8 June 2026 under the Infrastructure Planning (Fees) (Amendment) Regulations 2026. Guidance on cost recovery has been published by the Planning Advisory Service – available here: [NSIP Cost Recovery Guidance & Toolkit | Local Government Association](#).

4. EWR as a Pathfinder

- 4.1. The changes under the new Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 aim to speed up the process of consenting for major infrastructure, however, this should not be at the expense of local authorities and communities having the opportunity to feed into and help steer and shape development in their area.
- 4.2. The East West Rail scheme is deemed a ‘pathfinder’ for the new process, so this is an opportunity for East West Rail Co. to demonstrate high standards in meaningful and informed engagement which Local Authorities are actively encouraged to support. As an exemplar project, East West Railway Company should aim to go above and beyond than simply an adequate discharge of legal responsibilities.
- 4.3. It is welcomed that East West Railway Company have established the EWR Local Authority Pathfinder Forum, which includes representatives from EEH and MHCLG alongside local (host) authority officers.

5. Lessons Learned report

- 5.1. 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. The first draft of this report came to the EWMLP Board in February 2026.
- 5.2. Following feedback from Members, the Secretariat have engaged with Cllr Peter Martin, Deputy Cabinet Member for Transport (HS2/EWR & Public Transport) for Buckinghamshire Council to further strengthen the findings around the impact on residents and the need for open communication with local authorities and communities.
- 5.3. This also highlighted the need for an additional lesson: “cumulative impacts must be properly assessed and managed”. This recognises the need for coordination in the construction phase between major developments/infrastructure schemes, given that multiple construction projects within the same locality (planned, in progress or recently delivered) can lead communities to be more wary of further development.
- 5.4. 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.
- 5.5. However, given the importance of working with host authorities, it is suggested that for EWR to be an exemplar, these lessons should be embedded within the scheme’s approach to engagement, planning, construction, communications and eventual operations. This would support a positive change in the wider discourse and practice of NSIPs – for which there is appetite for EWR to be the trailblazer.

- 5.6. Subject to the Board's approval, the Lessons Learned document will be typeset and shared with officers, including via the EWMLP and EEH websites.

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(on behalf of) East West Main Line Partnership Secretariat
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